

A Mystery Story For Boys

The
Black Schooner

Roy J. Snell

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Title: The Black Schooner

Date of first publication: 1923

Author: Roy J. Snell (1878-1959)

Date first posted: April 9 2013

Date last updated: April 9 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130411

This eBook was produced by: Stephen Hutcheson, Rod Crawford, Brenda Lewis & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Mystery Stories for Boys

The Black Schooner

By
ROY J. SNELL



The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago
1923

Printed in the United States of America

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CONTENTS

<u>I A STRANGE COMMISSION</u>	7
<u>II IS THIS THE MYSTERY?</u>	15
<u>III THE SPLIT ROCK</u>	22
<u>IV A MYSTERIOUS LITTLE BROWN SQUIRREL</u>	27
<u>V A TREE-TOP LOOKOUT</u>	34
<u>VI ATOP THE WORLD</u>	41
<u>VII THE MARK OF THE BLACK SCHOONER</u>	49
<u>VIII THE SPLIT ROCK MYSTERY</u>	56
<u>IX A MAGNIFICENT BATTLE</u>	65
<u>X MYSTERY NUMBER FOUR</u>	75
<u>XI A STRANGE WATCH-TOWER</u>	83
<u>XII "JOHNNY, I'M NOT AFRAID"</u>	91
<u>XIII "SHE'S A SCHOONER ALL RIGHT"</u>	99
<u>XIV A MYSTERY THAT GETS A LAUGH</u>	105
<u>XV EIGHT SMOKES</u>	119
<u>XVI AN INTERRUPTED MOVE</u>	128
<u>XVII FLAMES FROM THE SEA</u>	133
<u>XVIII FIRE FIGHTERS</u>	140
<u>XIX THE MASKED MAN</u>	148
<u>XX FIRES THAT GLEAM IN THE NIGHT</u>	157
<u>XXI THE LIGHT THAT FAILED</u>	162
<u>XXII A MYSTERIOUS POWER</u>	167
<u>XXIII THE SAFE IS GONE</u>	177
<u>XXIV "THEY'RE CHOPPING AT OUR TREE"</u>	182
<u>XXV TOTTERING TO A FALL</u>	188
<u>XXVI WHIRLED THROUGH SPACE</u>	196
<u>XXVII A CLUE GIVEN</u>	205
<u>XXVIII A STARTLING REVELATION</u>	215
<u>XXIX THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OF THE ICE FLOES</u>	223
<u>XXX NOW I AM TO KNOW ALL!</u>	228
<u>XXXI SECRETS REVEALED</u>	235
<u>XXXII OTHER MYSTERIES UNCOVERED</u>	247

The Black Schooner

CHAPTER I A STRANGE COMMISSION

“The thing I like about it,” said Pant, squinting his eyes as if in anticipation of events of absorbing interest, “is the straight out-and-out mystery of it.”

Eager for the story which he had crossed the continent to hear, Johnny Thompson, lightweight champion boxer and hero of many thrilling adventures, leaned forward in his chair.

“Oh, there’s no story yet,” smiled Pant, “but unless I miss my guess, there’s going to be; and you and I are going to have a hand in it.

“You see,” his eyes narrowed again, “this Colonel Remmington owns about all the country on both sides of the Katekomb River, which is twenty miles up the bay from here. It’s timber—the most wonderful you ever saw—big yellow pines eight feet through and all that. He’s just beginning to log it. Been holding it for the wonderful boom in lumber prices that has just arrived.

[8]

“But that,” Pant put two fingers solemnly together, tip to tip, “that hasn’t got a thing to do with the mystery as far as I know. In fact nothing has. It’s just a step out into the dark.

“You see,” he grinned, “this Colonel Remmington meets me in the lobby of the hotel, and he says right away, ‘You’re the boy they call Pant. I’ve heard a lot about you.’

“‘Huh,’ I grunts, not knowing what else to do.

“‘Yes, I have,’ he insists, as if I’d denied it. ‘I’ve heard how you and Johnny Thompson got the best of those Russians when they tried to make away with the gold you had mined, and how you outwitted the Bolsheviki spies. There was some stunt in a circus, too, and this last thing—helping that professor save his priceless medicine from the wreck—and about that Dust Eater of yours. That was a great invention. I shouldn’t wonder if you’re going to need that Dust Eater on your next adventure.’

[9]

“‘I see you’re a fortune teller,’ I says, smiling right at him. ‘If you can tell the future as well as the past, I’d be obliged to you if you’d reel off the next twenty years of my life.’

“‘I can’t do that,’ he laughs, ‘but I think I can tell you about the next twenty days, or even as many as forty. But as far as the past is concerned, that’s all been written down. Yes, and printed. Half the boys in the country have read about your adventures, and the other half are going to soon.’

“‘I stared when the colonel said that.

“‘You didn’t know it?’ he smiled. ‘Well, perhaps that was best. Perhaps I’ve made a mistake in telling you now. Many a good football game has been spoiled because the players remembered that the game would be written up in the paper next day. Wanted to do something spectacular, you see, the players did; then their names would be in the paper. That made monkeys of them and they lost the game. Think you can forget that fellow that writes you up if I let you in on this new thing?’

[10]

“‘I can tell you better when I know what it is,’ I grinned back. ‘I think I might stand the shock though. Johnny Thompson and I get more fun in hooking a big bass and landing him in the boat than we do in talking about it afterward. It’s pretty much the same way with our adventures.’

“‘You’ll think it strange,’ the colonel said, sort of hitching his chair up close to mine and dropping his voice to a whisper as if he was really going to tell me something, ‘but the truth of the matter is, I’m not planning to tell you anything about the case in advance. I am just going to set you down in a certain spot with your eyes and ears open and ask you to make a record of the things you hear and see.’

“‘Where’s the spot?’ I sort of gasped.

“‘Not too far from here,’ he flashes back. ‘Question is, do you take the job? You’ll be paid for the information you bring me. If you bring me nothing, you get nothing, except your board and lodging. If you deliver valuable information you will be liberally rewarded.

[11]

“‘You see,’ he went on as I sort of hesitated, ‘I’m not a boy any more. I’m sixty and I’ve been living all the time. Naturally, I’ve had other things I’ve wanted to find out. I’ve generally managed to find them out, but my experience has been that if I told the fellow who went after the facts just what he was to look for, he kept seeing it every way he turned and more than half the time it wasn’t what I was looking for at all.

“‘Now this thing I’m looking for up there at the mouth of the Katekomb River is a big thing and very unusual too. Unless I miss my guess, you and that pal of yours, Johnny Thompson, will know it when you see it, so there’s no use my telling you what to look for. In fact, I’d better not tell you; you might go blundering right in and spill the beans before they’re half soaked.’

“Well, Johnny, when he’d told me that much,” Pant’s eyes were mere slits by now, “I was awfully interested, for there’s no mystery like a mystery without a tail to it. That’s the kind of mystery this one is.”

[12]

“What did you say to him?” Johnny asked.

“I said, ‘What do you want us to do?’ and here’s his answer: ‘There’s a sort of shack close to the mouth of the Katekomb River. It’s well back in the pines where no one will see you unless you have a light, and you must not have one. I want you and Johnny Thompson to go up there and shack it for a while. I’ll give you an order on my company store at Wall’s End for all the supplies you need. There’s an abandoned salmon cannery which belongs to me, four miles down the coast in a little, land-locked bay. It has a pair of big double doors, opening right out over the water; used to run schooners in there to unload them. Since the Dust Eater is a seaplane, she ought to run in there without a bit of trouble. You can tie her up there, like a fire engine in its house, ready for any emergency.

“‘You’ll find a clinker-built rowboat in there. You’d better use that for going to the mouth of the river. You can draw it clear up to the cabin when you’re not using it. There’s nothing tells stories quicker than a boat left on the beach. What say? Is it a go?’

[13]

“‘That depends on Johnny Thompson,’ I answered back. ‘If he’ll come in, I’m for it. Looks like a good outing, anyway.’

“‘It’ll be that,’ he says. ‘The river is full of fine fish and there’s no harm in your rowing about in the river in the daytime. Go as far as you like. Night is when you must keep your watch on the woods, river and bay.’

“‘I’ll wire Johnny,’ I says.

“And you did,” smiled Johnny.

“I did, and here we are. Are you sorry?”

“Sorry!” Johnny sprang to his feet. “When do we give the Dust Eater her next breakfast?”

“To-morrow morning if you say so.”

[14]

“I say so. Mystery at night and rainbow trout in the daytime. Who could ask for more?”

Johnny sprang forward to drag his partner across the floor in a wild Indian war dance.

“But this fellow that’s writing us up,” he panted as he dropped into a chair. “I—I sort of hope we don’t disappoint him—give him something more worth telling.”

He need not have worried along that line. The adventure upon which they were about to enter was destined to be well worthy a place beside the Panther Eye, the Crimson Flash and the White Fire of other days.

CHAPTER II

IS THIS THE MYSTERY?

Two nights later Johnny Thompson found himself lying flat on his stomach where a bed of pine needles, mosses and decaying ferns gave him a soft and silent watching place. Not ten feet before him a steep, shelving bank brought the forest to an abrupt end. Through a thin fringe of ferns which concealed him he could catch a glimpse of the onrushing river, while the bay into which it flowed, like the inside of a horseshoe, lay spread out before him. Nothing of importance could pass out of that river without his knowledge and nothing could enter the river from the bay. To watch was his task. To lie there and wonder just what it might be he was watching for was his privilege. And wonder he did.

It was ten o'clock. The moon was just rising. At a certain spot, like black pearls, a line of dark spots lay stretched across the water.

[16]

“Salmon trap out there,” he told himself. “Sockeye salmon are running. Wonder if someone is stealing the salmon from the trap? Wonder if we’re hired just as guards to that trap? Don’t seem probable. Just any old chap could keep such a watch. You can’t tell though. You never know what these rich fellows will do. They think some of their little affairs are mighty important. Look at the money they pay dog doctors to see that their favorite poodles don’t go to the happy hunting ground.”

His thoughts strayed to a certain spot in the stream where, two hours before, he had seen a trout cut a graceful arc out of the sunset-lit bay.

“Bet he was a rainbow. Bet he weighed twenty pounds. Bet I could get him. And bet I will,” he told himself.

The moon was rising higher. Here and there he caught a straight silver line which cut squarely across the moonbeams.

“Bits of slab,” he told himself. “Big sawmill up there somewhere. I’ll have to row up some day and have a look. Wonderful things, these Pacific Coast mills, they say. Wonder if we’re here to spot some crookedness connected with that mill. Wonder—”

[17]

His wondering was cut short. His eye had been arrested in its wanderings by some dark object in the river.

For a half hour he studied it, but with no result.

“Give it up,” he told himself at last. “Looks like there were two others over to the right and one to the left. They might be

big sawlogs. But who would be fool enough to turn 'em loose to ride the tide? And how could they possibly escape from a boom at this time of year when the water's low and there's not been a rain for a month. Might be—"

Again his thoughts were arrested. He looked. He stared. He rubbed his eyes to look again.

Yes, it was true. His eyes had not deceived him. A long, black streak was thrusting its way down the river at terrific speed.

"Like a torpedo," he told himself. "Forty miles an hour, and no sound, no smoke. Just like it had been shot from a gun."

[18]

So low did the thing lie in the water he was unable to discover what type of craft it was, nor whether indeed it was a craft at all. Now he saw it and now it was gone. The darkness which hung over the bay had swallowed it.

"Oh, glory!" he whispered, propping himself up on his elbow. "Was she beast, bird or fish, or was she a craft of some sort? If a craft, what kind of power did she use? There was no smoke from coal and no noise from a gasoline engine. And yet she went at terrific speed.

"Tell you what; I'll name her and find out what she is later. I'll call her 'The Black Schooner.'"

Three hours longer with eyes fixed on that dark stretch of water he lay there waiting the return of the mysterious object.

At the end of the third hour, he rose and stretched himself.

"Might have been mistaken," he murmured. "Could have been some creature of the sea. But only a whale is as big and black as that, and what would a whale be doing up there in fresh water?"

[19]

His reflections were cut short by the appearance of Pant. As he came creeping through the ferns he whispered:

"Twelve o'clock and all's well."

"All's well," Johnny repeated. "Sit down; I want to tell you something."

Listening attentively to his account of the night's happening, Pant now and then gave forth a grunted, "Oh! Ah!" When the tale was finished he said with a chuckle, "Looks like a job for one of my old tricks."

"How's that?"

"Schooner passes in the dark, doesn't she?"

"Sure does."

“Then how about the Panther’s Eye?”

“Grand idea. See in the dark, eh? But can you see that far?”

“Think I can.”

“Got—got the—” Johnny was stumped for a way to finish his question. He had known Pant in Russia, as you will remember, he had known that Pant at that time possessed the power of seeing in the dark, but just how he accomplished that mysterious feat, he had not been told.

[20]

“Why, yes,” said Pant, sensing his companion’s embarrassment, “I can rig her up again. It’s absurdly simple when you know how. A Swiss watchmaker discovered the trick and taught it to me. You know the old saying, ‘The hand is quicker than the eye’? Well, so is the eyelid. You wear a pair of heavy glasses and a cap to conceal your instruments. You fix a small but very powerful flashlight behind one corner of the right lens of your glasses. You connect this with batteries inside your cap. You cut in a switch and connect this to a small cord as a cut-out. You glue one end of this cut-out to your left eyelid and you are all set. When you suddenly wink your left eye the light flashes on for the least fraction of a second. You are looking for it and get the full benefit of it. You see what you want to see in the place you are looking for it. Other persons are not aware that anything is going to happen, and because the eyelid is quicker than the eye, they see nothing, do not even realize that a light has been flashed, no, not even when the light falls directly upon them. Great, isn’t it?”

“Great!”

[21]

“But simple. All inventions and discoveries are simple. Think I can get it going in a day or two. Then, if our black friend returns, we’ll see what we see.”

“Perhaps that Black Schooner is hiding the secret we’re after, the mystery we are to solve.”

“Perhaps. But you can’t be sure.”

“Might be smugglers. Canadian line is only a few miles up the coast.”

“Might.”

“Might be bootleggers.”

“Might be anything. Only way we can do is to wait and see.”

[22]

CHAPTER III

THE SPLIT ROCK

In spite of the fact that he had not crept into his blankets until one o'clock, Johnny was up and away again before Pant had come in from his turn at watching.

Tossing his cap into the clinker-built rowboat, he shoved her off and laughed in the face of the sun, which was just climbing over the fringe of timber. The lure of the woods and river was upon him. It had been many months since he had enjoyed the out-in-the-open or answered the call of still shadows and rippling streams.

The experience they had just embarked upon promised to be all that a boy might desire. There were mysteries to be attended to at night and what red-blooded boy does not love the baffling challenge of a real mystery? In the daytime there was the call of the rainbow trout, the whirr of the pheasant, the long-drawn whistle, the chatter, the cooie-cooie and the hundred other challenging calls of creatures of the forest.

Just at present he was thinking of that rainbow trout he had seen flash for a fly the night before. Morning is a good time to fish. Who knows what a rainbow trout will rise to before the sun is high?

[23]

So with a fly glittering at the point of his steel rod and with his supple arms bending the stout ashen oars, he shot out into the river and upstream toward that deep pool where at least one speckled beauty rested.

He had scarcely sent his fly dipping down upon the still surface of the pool than, flooie! out of the dark waters there came a flash of foam, a steel-blue gleam and his reel sang.

The strike, coming all unexpected as it did, caught him unprepared. The reel, entirely out of his control, spun around like mad. In vain he attempted to regain control of it. Only when the entire fifty yards had spun out and the rod had been all but torn from his fingers, did he succeed in checking this master fish's mad career.

"Right for swift water," he groaned as he strove madly to lift his anchor.

[24]

"Line's a good one, but it can't—"

Giving up his attempt at the anchor, he gripped the handle of the reel and attempted to turn it.

"Might as well be hooked to a dock," he whispered.

Then of a sudden his hope rose; the fish had swerved. He gained a dozen turns of the reel.

Now the fish appeared to give in. A good twenty yards were added to the gain.

But sudden as a gleam of light, the trout leaped clear of the water; a full four feet he flashed.

“Man! Oh, man! What a fish!”

He leaped again, and yet again. The third time Johnny’s fingers slipped. The reel was slack for an instant; one instant was quite enough. The next instant Johnny was quite free to reel in his line at his leisure. The fish was gone.

For a moment, quite speechless, he stood in the boat. He was staring at the spot where the fish had vanished, as if contemplating a dive in pursuit of him.

[25]

“All right,” he murmured hoarsely, “all right for you. But that’s only the first round. This is a twenty round battle and I’m not knocked out yet; I’ll not quit until I get a decision.”

After that he reeled in his line, then paddled to a point just above the master-trout’s lair.

“I thought so,” he murmured, as if speaking to the fish. “You’ve got a cozy home down there with a shady porch to it, a big boulder in fifteen feet of water. That’s the kind of place a retired champion like you usually chooses for a home. And the rock’s split, split from end to end; a two foot crevice, I’ll be bound. Extra fancy, I’d say.

“All right, old fellow, I know you’re not connected in any way with the mystery we’ve been hired to unravel, but all the same I’m going to lay for you. And I’ll get you. I’ll get you.” Whereupon he dipped his oars in the water and continued his journey upstream.

[26]

Strange as it might seem, Johnny’s remark about the master-trout and his split rock home not being connected with the big mystery was not quite true. They were destined to be connected with it in a very real way, as you shall see later on.

For the present Johnny was headed upstream. He was bent upon a day of pleasure on the river. If the distance did not prove too great nor the current too strong, he meant to have a look at the sawmill up the river.

[27]

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERIOUS LITTLE BROWN SQUIRREL

Johnny's rod and reel netted him two trout that morning, rainbows both of them, the first weighed three pounds and the second, five.

He fished only when he had grown weary of rowing. At noon he dragged his boat up on an inviting bank and, having dressed his smallest fish, cut it in long strips. These he lashed to a broad bit of slab-wood. Having set this slab on end he built a fire before it and ere long was enjoying a feast fit for a king: planked trout.

It was just as he was devouring the last morsel that he heard strange sounds back in the forest. Every now and again something bounded down upon the leaves with a thud that was greater than would be made by a squirrel or any other small creature he knew of.

"Might be a deer," he told himself in a whisper.

[28]

He found himself creeping away from the river and into the timber. From time to time he paused to listen. Twice more he heard the sound, then all was silence. Still he crept on, "for," he told himself, "the creature, whatever it is, may have lain down to rest, and I might get a sight of him yet."

His guess was correct; the creature had come to rest. However, it was such a creature as he had not dreamed of.

Having crept forward a full hundred yards without catching another sound, he at last gave up the quest to throw himself flat upon his back. There, half buried in a soft bed of pine needles, staring up at a fallen giant of the forest which at an angle of fifteen degrees lay propped upon its branches above him, he had all but fallen asleep, when of a sudden some object struck with a dull thud upon his chest.

Doubling up with the speed of a new jack-knife, he stared all about him, then up at the tree. A chance glance at his side showed him a green pine cone.

[29]

"Huh!" he grunted. "Probably a squirrel dropped it."

Again he settled back for his after-dinner nap. Again he had all but drifted into dream-land when a ruder shock brought him to a sitting position. This time a cone had landed squarely on his nose. At the same time he was conscious of having heard a strange hissing noise which turned rapidly into a gurgle.

“That,” he told himself, “is a little too much.”

However, he told it to himself in a whisper. As far as outward appearance went, he was quite calm. He settled back on his bed of pine needles as if nothing had happened and apparently closed his eyes.

They were not quite shut. He could see all that went on above him. He was resolved to get even with those squirrels. Just how he was to do it he did not know, but first he must see them.

Imagine his utter astonishment at seeing, three minutes later, a wealth of brown hair, a fine white forehead and a pair of hazel eyes move out from over the edge of the giant’s trunk.

[30]

Startled, he gripped his muscles to hold them quiet.

“A girl,” he whispered, yet his lips did not move.

He next saw a very small, very well proportioned hand come out to the right of the face. In it was a pine cone. For a second it poised above him. Then the cone dropped.

That instant he was on his feet.

“Ah-ha! I caught you,” he shouted.

There followed a little muffled scream. The next instant he was looking at only the fallen yellow pine tree.

“Aw! C’m’ on down,” he coaxed after a moment’s watching.
“C’m’ on down, little squirrel, I’ll forgive you.”

After five minutes of coaxing, he saw the child, for she was little more than that, a girl of sixteen and very slightly built, step out among the branches of the fallen tree. She was fairly thirty feet above him. Dressed as she was in a brown waist and brown corduroy knickers, she resembled a brown squirrel among the green branches.

[31]

“Truly will you be good to me?” she wavered.

“Truly.”

“Well—”

“Where do you belong, little brown squirrel?”

“My father’s boss at the big mill up yonder.” Her hand pointed up the river. “Sometimes I come down to this valley of giants to think. ’Tain’t the real Valley of Giants, of course. I read about the Valley of Giants in a book but I love to call them that and to come here to think. Not very happy thoughts to-day, though—thoughts about my dad.”

Johnny’s eye swept the forest about him. Truly it was a

[32]

wonderful sight. From this ridge not a tree had been cut. Yellow pines and fir trees, six and eight feet thick and towering a hundred and fifty feet above him, stood like giant guards of the river which gleamed in the distance.

“They are truly wonderful,” he murmured. “But say, little brown squirrel, how do you go to that mill of your father’s?”

“Do you want to go there?”

“Very much. I never saw one. I was going up the river.”

“Oh, the river? You’d never make it that way. River’s too crooked. There’s a short way through the forest. I—I’ll show you.”

Johnny grinned his delight.

“Oh, will you? That—why—that will be darby!”

Light as a real squirrel, the girl came tripping down the tree-trunk.

Johnny gave her his hand for the final leap to the ground and together they laughed as if they had been friends for a lifetime.

“I’ll have to make sure my boat’s safely aground,” he said with a smile.

[33]

“I’ll help you drag it up,” she laughed, and together they raced away through the ferns to the brink of the river.

[34]

CHAPTER V

A TREE-TOP LOOKOUT

Johnny Thompson was far from being one of those unfortunate beings known as a “ladies’ man.” You will know that if you have read the other books of this series. A splendid swimmer, a hiker with a long-distance record, a hard worker, a thorough student and a champion lightweight boxer, he was the type of boy that our country has needed and always will need. Yet he was not the sort of fellow who would ignore a girl.

Truth is, the girl he was now with was not the kind of girl that any real fellow would want to neglect. With face and arms browned by the sun, with every muscle alert as a clock spring, she inspired Johnny at once with the thought, “She’d make a wonderful chum.”

When the boat had been drawn high on the river’s bank, she led him straight away through the forest. The trail was not blazed, yet she hesitated not for a moment.

[35]

“Knows it like a book,” he whispered to himself in admiration.

Stooping a bit forward, her shoulders drooped, her arms hanging loose and free, her feet making long rapid pit-pats, she led on like a professional woodsman. As he followed in silence Johnny’s fancy set him dreaming. In the dream he saw himself not a white boy but an Indian, and this brown girl before him was his mate. They were alone in a vast wilderness. The boat on the bank of the stream was a birch-bark canoe, the fish he had caught that morning their only food. When night came they would erect a shelter of pine boughs and sleep on a bed of dry ferns and pine needles. For the moment they were going forward on a reconnoitering expedition to discover if possible the camp of the nearest rival hunters.

“Watch out.” The girl’s words shattered his dream. “You have to cross this stream on this fallen tree-trunk. If you don’t mind your step you’ll fall in. Give me your hand.”

[36]

Johnny gripped her solid little palm and together in silence they crossed the stream which, gurgling over rocks and half-decayed tree-trunks, made its way to the river.

“Fish in there, I’ll bet,” he suggested.

“Lots of them. Brook trout. Do you like to fish?”

“You bet.”

“Sometime I’ll show you where the best holes are.”

“Thanks, little squirrel. That will be fine. What’s your name, little squirrel?”

“Nelsie—Nelsie Andrews.”

“That’s a fine name; little bit of Nellie, little of Elsie. Mine’s Johnny.”

“Thanks, Johnny.”

“What’s this you tell me about being worried about your father, Nelsie? Does he drink too much?”

“Of course not,” she turned to face him, a glint of anger in her eye.

“Oh!” he said, “Excuse me. A lot of lumbering people do drink too much, you know.”

[37]

“But not bosses of big mills,” she smiled forgivingly.

“I suppose I oughtn’t to tell you,” she went on after a moment, “but I guess you’re all right. You see, my father’s afraid he’ll lose his job. The mill isn’t making any money, and it ought to. The people that own it say there is a leak somewhere. They can’t find out where it is and they blame my father for it. They think he is wasting lumber, letting good timber go over into the scrap pile or something. But he isn’t. He’s awful careful and he knows his business. Indeed he does. He’s been a sawmill boss for twenty years. So you see it would be awful hard if he lost his job now.”

“I see,” said Johnny thoughtfully.

Then a sudden inspiration seized him.

“By hemlock!” he exclaimed, “that must be why we were sent —”

He did not finish. A sense of caution had crept over him. When one goes out solving mysteries, he does not begin by telling everyone he meets about it.

[38]

“What must be?” she asked quickly.

He did not answer her question.

“Do you happen to know whether or not a rich man by the name of Remmington holds an interest in your mill?” he asked.

“Yes, I think I have heard my father speak of him.”

“Then perhaps that explains—”

“Explains what?”

“I can’t tell you just now, little brown squirrel. Sometime I

will. All I can say now is that I'm going to help your father if I can."

She turned and flashed him a smile. Then again they tramped on in silence.

The forest was still as a cave. Here a tiny bird flitted noiselessly from twig to twig, there a huge butterfly drifted across their path. Other than these, everything was still. Even their own footsteps over the heavy carpet of nature made no sound. Again Johnny took up his dream of an Indian youth and his mate.

"Did you say you just wanted to see the mill, not go through it?" the girl asked.

[39]

"I wouldn't have time to go through it," he said.

"You can see it from up there. It—It's wonderful!" She pointed to the top of a giant fir tree which, towering above its fellows, appeared to reach to the very dome of the sky.

"Yes, I suppose so," he smiled. "And it would be especially wonderful from the moon."

"But I'm not joking."

She led him around the tree, to point out a rustic ladder fastened to the tree-trunk. The ladder reached up to the first limb, some forty feet above.

"It's my lookout," she explained.

"Did you put that ladder up there?"

"Sure. A little piece at a time."

"And do you dare climb it?"

For answer she sprang away up the tree-trunk.

"C'm'on," she trilled, tossing a look of daring back at him.

Johnny was twice her weight. He knew what a fall might mean, yet he could not refuse the dare of a girl.

[40]

Putting out his right hand, he gripped the side of the ladder and began to climb.

It was with a distinct sense of relief that he at last dragged himself to the sitting position on the first limb of the tree.

The girl was seated on the second limb, smiling back at him. As he looked he could not help but think how well knickers suited her. Her muscles were as hard as his own; the tight knit fingers and her solid little cheeks showed that.

“Made for the woods and the tree-tops as the squirrel is,” he told himself.

“All right,” he smiled after he had regained his breath. “I don’t see any mill from here; only the tops of trees. Where do we go from here?”

“Up,” she breathed, twisting herself into a standing position and gripping the limb above her.

CHAPTER VI

ATOP THE WORLD

After Johnny left him at midnight, Pant sat for a long time thinking and looking away at the bay. He was wondering whether the black streak which Johnny had seen passing across the water could, after all, have anything to do with the mystery they had been set to solve.

“If it has,” he told himself, “and it is truly a black schooner, then that Panther Eye trick of mine will come in handy. Crimson Flash and the White Fire might turn a trick or two also, but that’s not so probable. One uses them when he is in danger, not when he is tracking someone in the dark. I’ll have to drop round at the old fish-house and see what I can find in the locker of the Dust Eater.”

The Dust Eater, you will remember from reading the book, “White Fire,” was a seaplane with a marvelous motor, a motor which used coal dust for fuel instead of gasoline.

[42]

“It will take two powerful lenses for the lamp,” Pant went on thinking to himself. “Have to have some special high power batteries and a mess of fine wire. Guess I’ll find it all on the Dust Eater. I may have to connect small batteries in a series to get the power, but I can wear them on my belt. No need to carry them in your cap in a case like this.”

He had thought all these things through and was experiencing great difficulty in keeping awake, when of a sudden he sat up straight and stared. A vision of white foam was driving in from the sea. Hardly had he concluded that it was some rich man’s racing motor boat than he noted that no sound came up to him from it.

“Silent as the night,” he murmured, “The Black Schooner.”

Hardly had he whispered the words, when the thing veered sharply to the right, revealing a dark oblong shape, then shot straight up the river.

[43]

“That’s her!” he murmured excitedly. “Wonder what she is and where she’s been. Wonder what her name is and whom she belongs to. Must have a nest up the river there somewhere. I might find her if I took a trip up there in the daytime. Might not, too. A thousand rocky coves up there probably; the mouth of some little stream would be a safe hiding place for her. The thing to do is to rig up old Panther Eye and just lie here and watch. I’ll go up to the Dust Eater for the parts as soon as I’ve had breakfast and ten winks.”

Pant would have been much surprised had he been told that he would, later in the day, discover at least one of the places the Black Schooner had visited that night.

* * * * *

The feats of Tarzan were mere child's play when compared to the gymnastics performed by Johnny Thompson in climbing the remaining seventy-five feet of that giant fir tree. Time and again, in some dizzy corner with the next safe branch far above him, he was tempted to admit himself defeated. Yet the fact that the squirrel-like creature, that girl, was above him and still climbing, spurred him on.

"Can't be beaten by a girl," he mumbled, as he set his teeth hard and, reaching for the limb above him, pulled himself by sheer strength of arm toward the next position.

[44]

Blessing the father who had trained him in ways of keeping fit, thankful for every hard muscle, every supple joint in his body, he struggled ever upward until at last with a sigh of relief he dropped into a crow's nest seat. Woven by the girl out of limber branches and hung from two limbs, this seat offered scant room for two, but for them it had to suffice.

"Hard?" she smiled.

"A little—no, a lot," Johnny frankly admitted.

"New things are always hard. It will be easy after awhile."

"You think I'm going to do this often?"

"You can't tell. I do. It's grand. Listen."

[45]

For the first time Johnny was conscious of a medley of strange sounds drifting up to him from somewhere. It was strangely musical, yet one could scarcely think how such music might be made. He had once been connected with a circus, as you will remember in the days of Crimson Flash, and the circus had a steam calliope. This was like that, only different.

"What is it?" he breathed.

"It's what Dad calls the song of the saws."

"The song of the saws?"

"Yes, all of the saws singing together. He says it's like a selection played by a great orchestra. Can't you hear the parts? That thundering sound comes from the big band saws. They're the basses. There are trombones and cornets, too—the small crosscut saws and the planers. The tongue-groovers and moulders are the trap drums. You don't get them all, I suppose, for you haven't heard the saws all your life as I have.

“And see!” she cried suddenly, putting out her hands and parting the branches as she might have a curtain. “See! There’s the picture.”

[46]

For a full five minutes Johnny sat there silently studying the scene that was spread out before him. It was as if he were seeing a moving picture thrown upon a huge screen. In the foreground were groups of sun-browned houses, homes of the mill hands. Flitting back and forth among these were, like white dots, the women and children. In the background were many long, low sheds and behind these a pond filled with great logs. The sheds were the mill; the pond, which was but a bit of still back-water of the river, walled in on one side by a log-boom, was the millpond. Thick as bees about a hive, men worked about this mill. Every now and again a log rose as if by magic from the pond and moved into the mill.

“It’s like a child’s play-world,” he murmured at last.

“It’s a long way off and we are very high up,” she smiled, much pleased by the spell her magic music and her picture had woven about him.

[47]

“But supposing,” he said thoughtfully, “suppose this tree should be suddenly uprooted as that one was which you were sitting on a short time ago? And supposing we were up here at the time? What then?”

“Oh!” she laughed, “that one fell during a terrific gale. If there was a gale, we wouldn’t be here. See, there isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

All the same, almost in spite of himself, Johnny found himself studying through the possible actions of one who found himself a hundred and fifty feet in air atop a tree which was trembling for a fall.

“I wonder if it would work?” he asked himself.

He was thinking of a time when as a small boy he had climbed with his cousin to the upper branches of willow trees that were being felled by his uncle, and had ridden down upon the branches on the upper side of the tree.

“That was only twenty feet,” he told himself, “and this is nearly a hundred and fifty. Yet I believe it might be done.”

[48]

This thinking things through for a possible emergency was a valuable trait of Johnny’s mind. It had saved him from disaster more than once and was destined to in this case. But that is another part of our story.

Johnny was astonished at the time that had passed when he at last looked at his watch.

“Five o’clock,” he exclaimed. “I must hurry back.”

After a hasty scurrying down the tree they shook hands. Johnny pledged himself to help her all he could in solving her father's problem; she promised him an opportunity to see the mill close up in the very near future; then each hurried on the way home.

CHAPTER VII

THE MARK OF THE BLACK SCHOONER

In the meantime, Pant had not been idle. By taking a winding trail across the point and down the beach, he could reach the little harbor and the abandoned salmon fishery where the Dust Eater had been stored. After an early lunch he took this trail and, two hours later, found himself before the door of the fish-house. This door opened out upon the dock. The padlock was turned with the keyhole against the wall. He was about to flop it over when he suddenly uttered a low whistle of surprise.

“Somebody’s been foolin’ with that lock,” he muttered. “Had it off, too. Must have a key. I left it with the keyhole side out and now it’s just the opposite.”

Hastily unlocking the door, he peered within. Everything was apparently just as he had left it. The Dust Eater was rising and falling with the gentle wash of water; the place was as fishy and as silent as ever.

[50]

“It’ll pay me to look it over carefully,” he told himself.

He did look it over carefully, but found nothing disturbed or missing.

After stuffing his pockets with lenses, small batteries and wires, he stepped once more into the sunlight, closed the door gently and snapped on the lock.

“Wonder if that fellow was a land-prowler, or did he come from the sea.” He walked to the land end of the dock. There he examined the soft earth for footprints.

“Nothing here,” he told himself. Then he retraced his steps. Coming once more to the seaward end of the dock, he began walking along its edge, examining every plank and pile as he went.

“Ah-ha!” he exclaimed suddenly, “I thought as much. Some sort of schooner or tug. No row boat.”

What he had discovered was a whitish circle about one of the age-browned piles. He began a careful examination.

[51]

“She’s been tied up here,” he told himself. “Ought to find something more.”

Presently he did. Stooping down, he examined the edge of the dock. At first he discovered nothing, but at length his search

was rewarded. Scraping the edge of a plank with his knife he brought away a dark substance which was not decay.

“Paint,” he murmured. “Rubbed it off as she chafed the side of the dock. Real paint it is too, a sort of hard and crusty enamel, not the coal tar stuff used on tug-boats. This one’s a real schooner. And by the Great Horn Spoon I’ll wager she was no less a craft than our old friend the Black Schooner.

“So that chap’s doing a little detective work of his own,” he murmured thoughtfully. “All right, old chap, welcome to our city. We’ll see who’ll be the first to get something on the other.”

With this challenge thrown to the wind, he turned and hurried toward his cabin.

[52]

That night as Johnny Thompson lay in his patch of ferns by the river’s high bank, he saw the black streak once more emerge from the river.

“Here she comes,” he murmured. “I only wish Pant had that ‘see-by-night’ affair of his rigged up. But what’s this?” he exclaimed suddenly. “She’s slowing down, going to stop. I may get a good look at her yet.

“No such luck,” he whispered a moment later; “she’s going to anchor up the stream, just about where my big spotted beauty is waving his fins and smiling a fishy smile over the way he fooled me a few hours ago.”

As he watched the mysterious craft, he saw her circle about as if seeking a safe landing place.

“Going ashore for something,” he told himself.

Much to his surprise, the schooner, after making six complete circles, did not put her prow upon the shore. Instead she came to rest several yards from the bank.

[53]

“Probably doesn’t care to risk a landing. May have a dory,” he told himself.

At that point he resolved upon a bold stroke; he would leave his point of watching. By skulking along up the river bank he would be able to come quite close to the schooner. He would be able to form a better idea of what sort of craft this was which traveled like a mad racer and without either smoke or noise.

The brush and fallen timber was thick along the shore. He was obliged to move with utmost caution. Here he trusted his weight to a fallen tree-trunk, only to have it cave in with him like a huge mushroom. Here he attempted to bend a limb aside and found it firm as steel. Here a twig snapped like a gun, leaving him to listen breathlessly.

“If I’m lucky,” he told himself, “I might even get a glimpse of the person who runs that wild craft.”

Coming at length to a series of rugged boulders he began moving forward with a series of short scrambles upward and slides downward.

[54]

“Not more than a hundred rods,” he told himself hopefully.

Fifty yards more he fought his way forward. Then of a sudden a loose rock rattled down before him.

“Rotten luck,” he mumbled, then resolved to make a dash for it.

Still he had heard no sound. Making a straight break for the bank, he at last put out a trembling hand to part the aspens which lined the shore. The schooner had surely not had time to escape. He would at least catch a close-up glimpse of her.

“Well, I’ll be—” he murmured as his gaze swept the river.

The schooner had vanished! Not even at the remotest corners of the river was she to be sighted.

“Well!” he breathed, seating himself and mopping his brow.

“Must be a submarine!”

“And,” he said slowly, after a moment’s thought, “why not?”

[55]

Five minutes later he rose and, having drawn a small flashlight from his pocket, examined every inch of the bank for a distance of a hundred yards.

“No dory’s been beached anywhere here,” he told himself. “I wonder what they wanted? What could they have been circling for if not for a safe landing? Looks mighty queer to me.”

With that he made his way back to his mossy-seated watching post, to sit and speculate upon the events of the day and of the night.

“Enough excitement to keep the moss from gathering above your ears,” he told himself. “Wonder what’s next.”

[56]

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPLIT ROCK MYSTERY

Next day Pant went fishing with Johnny.

“I can finish my ‘see-in-the-dark’ equipment this afternoon. That baby trout you brought in yesterday tastes like more. I don’t believe you know how to handle a real fish,” he grinned. “Now when I was down in the Gulf Stream I—”

“Yes I know,” Johnny broke in. “You were fishing for three hundred pound swordfish and only caught a half-ton shark. All right, come along, old sport. If that old rainbow doesn’t bump your eyes when you hook him I miss my guess.”

But Pant did not hook him that day. Neither did Johnny. If the old master-fish were still in that hole, he had learned his lesson well. He rose not once during a full hour of fly-casting.

“Don’t believe there’s a fish down there,” exclaimed Pant, throwing his rod down in disgust.

[57]

“Yes there is,” insisted Johnny. “Tell you what I’d like to do. It won’t help the present situation any but will improve opportunities for the future.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d like to dive down there and see what kind of a hiding-place that rock is. Almost every submerged rock has a pocket somewhere beneath it. That’s where the game fish hide. Question is, just where is that pocket located? If I knew that, I’d step over here some morning and silently drop a good-sized live minnow right down in front of his nose and in a minute I bet he’d take it just like that.”

“Chances are good,” Pant smiled. “Water’s cold enough to produce a thrill. There’s no one about, so just strip off and hop to it.”

No sooner said than done. A moment later, Johnny’s body shot up and out in a graceful curve and the next second he was at the bottom of the pool.

[58]

One look and the sights that met his eye caused three large bubbles to escape from his lips and rise toward the top.

Johnny followed the bubbles.

“He—he’s there,” he puffed as he gripped the side of the boat to clamber in.

“Man, oh, man, he’s a beauty! Twenty-five pounds if an ounce. He shot out of his hole and away like a flash when he saw me. But he’ll come back. He’ll come back and I’ll get him yet.”

After Johnny had rubbed down and dressed, even while he was rowing back toward camp there was a look of surprise, animation and mystery in his eyes such as a mere fish, even a master of the rainbow tribe, could not inspire. He said nothing further at the time regarding what he had seen at the bottom of the pool and since Pant was occupied with thoughts of putting his “see-by-night” together, he did not notice anything unusual. Nothing further was said about it. They cooked and ate their supper in silence.

“No use getting out too early,” said Johnny as he wiped the last dish and stowed it away in the little box cupboard in the corner. “I’m going to sit and think for an hour or two. Do you know, Pant, I believe that’s where a lot of people lose out in life. They never take time to sit and think and dream, to let the little shuttles of their brain drop, click-click, back into their proper places. They never listen to the whispers of the night. They just rush from this thing to that, from work to movies, from movies to jazz, and that’s the way they live. By and by they wake up to find some fellow who’s spent an hour or two each day, apparently just dreaming, has forged way ahead of them in the race.”

[59]

“Well you just go ahead with your dreaming,” laughed Pant. “I’ve got some work to do. Got to get my ‘see-by-night’ going.”

“By the way,” exclaimed Johnny suddenly, “have you enough stuff for two of those outfits?”

[60]

“Yes, I guess so. Why?”

“Mind making one for me?”

“Why—no—” Pant hesitated.

“Sort of hate to turn your tricks over to someone else?” smiled Johnny.

“It’s not that,” Pant shook his head. “But you see, you almost need a special pair of eyes to make it work successfully. Your eyelids have to be of the stop-watch variety. You’ve got to have perfect control of them. If you don’t you may come to grief, especially when you’re operating at close range.”

“Well,” said Johnny, “I’m not thinking of operating at close range at present. The thing I hoped to investigate will be half a mile away and a hundred and fifty feet below me.”

“Going ballooning?”

“Not quite.” Johnny smiled at his friend but offered no explanation.

“All right, I’ll fix you up one, but don’t blame me if it doesn’t give perfect satisfaction. This business of electrical tricks has become a sort of art with me.”

[61]

Pant turned to his wires, lenses and batteries, while Johnny with his chair tilted against a fir post to the porch sat staring into the night.

The room in which he sat was more a porch than a room. With a good roof and floor of boards, it was walled in with canvas and mosquito netting.

As he sat there he could see a short way into the forest. All beyond was dark, silent, mysterious. The cool, damp smell of the forest came to him with every faintest breath of wind. It brought back to his memory the trail through the forest, the trail with the girl springing along before him, and then the giant fir tree.

“Some girl!” he whispered to himself. “I must try to help her solve her problem. The ‘see-by-night’ and the big fir tree may turn the trick. Things that go wrong, go wrong at night. That’s the time to be on the watch. I’ll suggest it to her. Of course, I’ll have to go with her. No, I believe I’ll go out there alone and try the thing first. If I could find the tree. But of course I couldn’t.”

He recalled the dark objects he had seen floating down the river at night, the things he had taken for saw logs.

[62]

“Bet I can help her,” he breathed. “And I sure will try.”

Then his mind was caught by another memory, a memory of an occurrence so near to the present that it could scarcely be called a memory.

“Pant,” he whispered suddenly, as if afraid there were spies lurking out there in the shadows, “I saw something besides the fish when I took that dive down to the split rock this afternoon.”

“What?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“I’ll try.”

“I saw a small iron safe lodged in the crack of the split rock.”

“What!” Pant straightened up with a jerk. “Sure it wasn’t just a square rock?”

“Perfectly sure. Saw the hinges, knob and everything. The water was so clear and I was so close I could have read the figures on the dial.”

[63]

“Huh!” Pant grunted. “That’s queer. What do you think—”

“I think we’re going to get block and tackle and pull that safe out of there—after I’ve caught that fish. Guess the secret will keep that long.”

“Guess so,” grinned Pant. “But I’ll say you’re some fishin’ bug. Just think what may be in that safe. It’s been stolen, likely. May have a million dollars in it. Who knows? May be a big reward offered for its return.”

“All right,” said Johnny. “Give me just to-morrow morning. If I don’t get Mr. Fish, we’ll go after the safe.”

“It may be a trifle dangerous,” suggested Pant. “Fellow who put it there may be lurking in the woods with an army rifle or two leaning against a stump.”

“Might. I don’t think so though. It’s a pretty slick hiding-place. If it hadn’t been for my diving down there it wouldn’t have been found in a thousand years. Looked at through the water, it is just like a section of rock wedged into the crack.”

[64]

Again there was silence. Again Johnny sat staring into the dark. Ten minutes passed. Johnny started violently. A thought had come to him out of the dark. It was associated with the circling of the Black Schooner over his fishing-hole and with the safe down there in the split rock, but this time he did not trouble to confide his thoughts to his companion.

[65]

CHAPTER IX

A MAGNIFICENT BATTLE

There is a thrill that comes with the dropping of a minnow into a deep pool where a finny king resides in his rocky castle, a thrill unlike anything else in life. Johnny Thompson felt such a thrill as he watched his minnow disappear from sight just over the spot where the great rainbow trout was hiding. Morning had come and he was to have his try at the big fish.

“It’s this morning or never,” he whispered. “If we go after that safe we’re sure to stir things up so badly that he’ll seek another hiding-place. Little old minnow, do your best.”

Slowly, slowly his line sank to the bottom. From time to time there came a faint tug at it which took away a foot of line.

“Only the minnow,” he breathed, as each time his hand involuntarily tightened on the pole.

[66]

Johnny was born for action. Watchful waiting was not part of his nature. When the minnow had been down for two minutes, he began reeling in for another cast. He was carelessly winding in the line, asking himself questions about that safe at the bottom of the pool, when all of a sudden he was shocked into action.

Something had happened to his line. It was as if that safe had been tied to it and then cast into the river. He knew by instinct rather than thought that the magnificent trout had struck, had struck hard, that he had him solidly hooked and that there was to be such a fight as he had never before experienced.

Fortunately his line was a splendid one of braided silk. He used no leader. His hook was strong.

Gripping his rod and bracing himself, he closed one hand solidly over the reel. All but boring a hole into the center of his palm, it continued to roll.

[67]

He gripped it as only Johnny Thompson could. The fish felt the crush and strain of it. The strain told on him. Still the reel turned.

Suddenly, after a hundred yards had played out, the quarry turned. The line went slack.

“Now,” breathed Johnny. Seizing the handle, he turned with all the speed his nimble fingers possessed.

Half the line had been reeled in when the fish, leaping high in air, attempted to cast the hook from his mouth.

“Can’t be done,” exulted the boy as he felt again a terrific tug.

This time, by gripping his reel hard, he gave line slowly. At the same time, with his right hand he lifted his anchor.

Instantly the light, clinker-built rowboat shot out amidstream.

“Now for a ride,” he breathed. “Now I’ve got a better chance: not so much danger of a broken line. Ah, old boy, I’ll get you yet!”

The fish had chosen to fight his way straight upstream.

[68]

“Can’t let him do that; he’ll break the line,” Johnny breathed.

Thrusting his pole between his knees and clamping down hard on the reel, he seized the oars, prepared to assist the fish in his upstream journey.

Rowing just enough to keep an even strain on the line, he passed the jagged rocks by the left bank, he cleared the tangled mass of driftwood at the right, then swung clear to the middle of the stream.

Led forward by his strange guide, he had made a hundred rods or more when the trout, worn and irritated by the strain, suddenly changed his tactics. Swerving suddenly to the right, he made straight toward the left bank where was a rocky shore overhung with branches.

“‘Twon’t do,” Johnny panted, as he swerved his boat and attempted to arrest the fish in his mad course.

It was no use. The line was too long; the distance ashore too short. Suddenly a stout, overhanging branch shot sharply downward to dip and dip again in the dark blue water.

[69]

“He’s circled that branch and tangled the line on it. Now I’ll lose him,” he groaned.

Seizing his rod he began to draw himself toward shore. Much to his surprise at this moment, he heard a girlish: “Hello there! What you doing?”

“Oh! Nelsie. Good for you!” he shouted back. “Fishin’. Got a whale. He’s tangled on that branch to your right. Can’t you get him off for me? He’s a beauty, I’ll tell you.”

Nelsie’s keen eyes took in the situation at a glance.

“Wait a minute.” She disappeared.

Johnny, keeping his line tight, waited.

Presently he saw her brown head appear above a rock over which the bobbing branch hung.

Squirrel-like in her motion, she crept out on the branch. Farther and farther she came, until Johnny caught his breath sharply as he shouted:

“Be careful! Don’t take too many chances.”

Either she did not hear or did not care to listen, for she crept straight on.

Now, just as the part of the branch she was on touched water, he saw her put out a brown arm to thrust it deep into the water where the tangled line hung. For ten seconds, working frantically, she hung there.

Then something happened. Just what it was Johnny could not tell. Had the line suddenly loosened and thrown her off her balance? Had the bough cracked and dropped her? Johnny did not know. He only knew that with a little cry she plunged headforemost, to disappear beneath the swirling waters.

Instantly his mind was in a turmoil. Could she swim? He must save her. He stood there watching, waiting for her to come up, too startled to throw down his rod.

Ten seconds passed and no sight of her. Twenty, thirty, forty. Could it be that she had tangled with the line and was held down?

He was contemplating a plunge when, with the suddenness of light, there came a powerful pull at the line. Caught as he was, half off his balance, he was thrown sprawling into the river.

“That fish,” he thought as he fought to rise. “That fish! And the line is tangled about my wrist; I can’t let go.”

Fighting manfully he managed to bring himself to the top for a breath of air. Instantly he was sent whirling forward over the surface of the water. Barely missing a jagged rock, he entered a narrow bay.

“That fish!” he panted. “Who would have thought he had such a pull.”

Then suddenly he remembered Nelsie. She was in peril—must be saved. That line must come off his wrist. This senseless rush must be stopped. It did not stop. Struggle as he might, he could not lose that fish.

“There is a way!” he said grimly. An overhanging branch was within his reach. He struck out for it, grasped it.

“Shame to lose him after such a struggle, but there’s no other way.”

He clung to the branch while it seemed his arms would be torn apart. He felt the line cut into his wrist and hated the man who

could make such a line.

Then, of a sudden, there was a snap and the strain ceased. The line had broken. He was free.

“He’s gone,” he breathed.

At once in order to get his bearings he climbed upon a rock. He located the bough on which the line had tangled, the spot where Nelsie had gone down, and was about to swim for it when he caught a gurgle of laughter to the right and turning saw her like a dripping mermaid standing upon a rock.

“Is this your fish?” she trilled, holding up the king of rainbows.

“It was to have been,” he admitted in astonishment. “Where did you find it?”

“Down there,” she pointed to the river.

[73]

“You can swim!” It was hardly a question.

“Think I’d live by the river and not? What’d you break the line for?” she laughed suddenly. “The fish and I were giving you a jolly ride. Besides, I needed you for a sea-anchor. Nearly lost the fish when you broke loose.”

Then suddenly Johnny began to laugh. Nelsie, aided by the fish, had been towing him through the water. The fish had pulled her into the water and she had been plucky enough not to let go.

“Some girl!” he breathed. Then aloud, “Stay there. I’m coming over.”

A few moments later found them basking in a little circle of sunshine which struggled down through the branches. They were allowing their clothes to dry. The splendid fish rested on a mat of dry grass beside them.

“Do you know,” said Johnny suddenly, “I think I can help solve your father’s problem and find out where things are going wrong at the mill, only you may have to meet me here on the bank of the river at night and guide me to the giant fir tree. I don’t think I could find it in the dark.”

“All right, I’m not afraid. I’ll come.”

[74]

“To-night?”

“At the jagged rock where the river turns, up a little way from here.”

“All right.”

“At eight o’clock.”

He rose to go. "Thanks for helping me catch the fish. We'll divide it." He drew out his claspknife.

"Oh, no!" she cried quickly. "I caught a lot of brook trout this morning. Besides, I want you to weigh it. It's the biggest I ever saw, and I—I landed it, you know."

"I sure do know," laughed Johnny. "All right, to-night at eight." He disappeared through the brush where, on a sandy bank, his boat lay stranded.

"Now, if only I can get Pant's 'see-by-night' rigging to work," he breathed as he made his way through the brush.

CHAPTER X

MYSTERY NUMBER FOUR

“Mystery number four,” said Pant as he threw open the door, just as darkness was falling.

“Which? The dog? I see you’ve tamed him.” A wolflike-looking dog had thrust his nose in at the open door.

This dog had come howling about the cabin on the night they had landed. They had taken him for a wolf and had planned to shoot him. Then, just in time, Pant had discovered him to be a wild dog.

“Probably left behind by some roving Indians,” he had suggested. With his native ability to tame things, he had decided to tame this dog and make him his companion. But up to this day the dog had eluded him.

“Nothing mysterious about that,” Pant smiled. “I met an Indian in a canoe this morning and learned the Indian dog call. When I tried it out on our friend Savage here, he came right up to me.”

[76]

“Going to call him Savage, eh?”

“Good name for him. Savage and I discovered a real mystery. I think it’s a moonshine still but can’t be sure. It’s the strangest affair I’ve ever seen. But, say,” he exclaimed suddenly, “where’d you get it? Is it cut out of wood and painted? Or is it real?” His eyes had fallen on Johnny’s prize trout.

“It’s real enough,” Johnny laughed. “Twenty-two and a half pounds.” He held it up for inspection. “Largest catch on record since the year one. Had to have help to land him, though.”

Pant’s new mystery was for the moment forgotten. With the dog curled up at their feet, the two boys sat by the fire while Pant listened to Johnny’s story.

“I’ll say that’s some little pal you’ve discovered up there in the woods,” exclaimed Pant. “Shouldn’t wonder if she’d be a lot of help to us in finding out our real mystery and running it to earth.”

[77]

“I know she will,” said Johnny with conviction. “By the way, is the ‘see-by-night’ ready?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Going to try it out to-night with her as guide.”

“With her?”

“Sure. Can’t find the tree without her.”

“The tree?”

“Why yes. That big fir tree she and I climbed the other day. We’re going to the top of that to-night. Then we’ll use the ‘see-by-night.’ We’ll flash it down on the mill and discover if we can whether there is anything happening down there that ought not to be. The old mill’s financial heart is missing a beat now and then and it’s getting her father in bad. Colonel Remington has an interest in the mill. That may be our real mystery.”

“Yes, but, Johnny, you don’t know anything about this Panther Eye stuff! I tell you it’s a mighty delicate affair. You have to have no end of care and experience too.”

[78]

“I can learn.”

“Not in an hour. Not so’s you’ll be safe.”

“Well, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have promised, but I did. Can’t disappoint her. I’ll have to go.”

“Well, all right. I’ll do the best I can, but I tell you a hundred and fifty feet is an awful long jump. When you’ve got enemies about, the ground’s the safest place to be.”

“I’ll take a chance.”

There for the moment the matter was dropped.

“By the way,” said Pant as he gave a trout steak a deft turn, “now you’ve caught your precious trout, I suppose you’ll be going after that safe in the split rock?”

Johnny smiled assent at his friend.

“First thing in the morning.”

“Where’s your block and tackle?”

“Oh, hang it! Haven’t any.”

“Some down in the fish-house. I can get it in the morning.”

[79]

“All right; then we’ll go after the prize in the P. M. I wonder if it could be the real mystery after all? By the way, what was this other mystery you were speaking of a few moments ago?”

“It may not mean much and yet it may,” said Pant thoughtfully. “After you left to-day and I had got the dog eating out of my hand, I resolved like Robinson Crusoe to go out exploring our island, so I struck right back into the woods. Found an old trail, probably half Indian and trapper and half deer. You know what they’re like; just get through and that’s about all. Wonderful aisles through nature’s temples. All dark, damp, silent and

mysterious. You're lost in a moment but you don't care. You know you can find your way back, providing you break a twig at every cross-trail and make the twig point the way you should return.

"Well, I'd tramped on that way for three hours; getting farther and farther into thicker woods all the time, when I suddenly came to quite a little stream. Had to take off my shoes and wade it. And right there on the other bank in the soft ooze I saw the track of a man's foot. He had been barefooted as I was and the mark couldn't have been more than a few hours old.

[80]

"Well, sir! That gave me a start. I felt my hair sort of tickling at its roots and a creepy feeling go shootin' up my spine. Wasn't lookin' for anything like that.

"I was half a mind to turn back but curiosity got the better of my fear, so I went on.

"I hadn't gone a half mile farther before the dog began to growl. I had a time getting him quiet but at last I did. After that I crept forward on my hands and knees for quite a piece. Then I saw smoke rising through the trees. It was queer smoke, not rising up in one point like smoke from a cabin chimney but like a forest fire, in several places. I knew there couldn't be any forest fire though, for it would have been crackin' and snappin' and spreadin' rapidly. It had me stuck.

"Not wishin' to be caught right there, but wishin' to investigate further, I left the trail and crept off through the brush, then turned toward the smoke again.

[81]

"A hundred yards farther on I came to the edge of a sort of narrow clearing and there, in the center of it, was a small, newly-built log cabin and, believe me or not, I tell you I saw eight smokestacks along one side of it, and every one of them smoking full blast.

"Savage, old boy," I whispered to the dog, "this seems like the unhealthiest bit of woods I've ever been in and I think we'd better just jog right on back to our cabin by the beach. Which is what we did, and here we are."

Pant paused to spear a boiled potato and help himself to a second slice of trout steak.

"Moonshiners, I'd say," he mumbled, "but I might be wrong."

"Yes, you might," said Johnny. "I have another idea but I too might be wrong. I'll not suggest it. We'll just work each on his own theory. The thing's worth looking into. When we've gone after these other mysteries we'll take it up. Everything in its turn, I'd say. In the meantime I'll be obliged to you if you'd give me my first instruction in night gazing. I'm due up the river in an hour."

[82]

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE WATCH-TOWER

Hardly had Johnny anchored his boat and stepped ashore at the appointed meeting-place that night when he heard a movement among the pine boughs and the next instant saw Nelsie step out into the moonlight.

“Good,” he whispered, “you’re here, but come into the shadows.” He led her back into the depths of the wood. “You never can tell who’s skulking about in the night.”

“This way,” she whispered. “Keep close to me. If you get lost it will be for all night. You’d never find your way out.”

He heard the faint pit-pat of her footsteps on the bed of needles. Following more by sound than by sight, he kept close to her.

It was a weird experience, this following a slip of a girl through a dense forest at night. Now he started back at the swish of a branch across his face, now caught the scolding chit-chit of a small bird disturbed from his slumbers and now bumped into his leader as she paused to discover firm footing over a narrow stream. These things occurred only at long intervals. The most ghostlike moments were those in which he found himself drifting along through space with only the pit-pat of footfalls to accompany the beating of his heart.

[84]

“One might imagine that almost anything was lurking in those tree-tops,” he told himself; “a wild cat, mountain-lion or some other terror that haunts the night. And as for the tree-trunks, any one of them might hide some human outlaw.”

“I say, little squirrel,” he whispered, “aren’t you afraid?”

“Sometimes I am when I’m alone, but not with you,” she whispered back.

Johnny felt something swell within his chest as he caught these words.

“She’ll never be afraid when I’m about, if I can help it,” he told himself stoutly. There are some things which even a brave fellow like Johnny cannot help, as he was to learn not many days hence.

[85]

“Here we are.” The girl whispered the words long before Johnny had expected them. He was not sure but that he was sorry the journey was over. There was enough of the unusual about it to make it hauntingly agreeable.

But even more unusual adventures were in store for them. The climbing, in the dead of night, of a tree which appeared to rear its top to the very moon was unusual enough.

“Watch your step,” she whispered, as from the third round she paused for a second to pluck at his coat collar. “Keep a few rounds behind me.”

Johnny had his own notions about how far behind he would keep. His hands should be constantly on either side of her feet as she climbed the ladder; then, if she made a misstep and plunged for a fall, he might save her.

“When we reach the first limb, then it’s each fellow for himself,” he thought, “and the Lord have mercy on the fellow who slips.”

[86]

She was surer footed than he knew. It was with great difficulty that he kept pace with her, and all too soon he found himself groping his way upward among the branches.

More than once in the dim shadows which appeared to hang suspended from the very sky, she paused to balance herself on a limb and to whisper down instructions to him. And Johnny was very glad to obey them.

At last, with a sigh of relief, she put out a hand which grasped his and guided him to a seat beside her. There, feeling her shoulder against his, he sat trying to fathom the depths of darkness beneath him and to realize if he could that there really was an earth somewhere down there.

Slowly, as his eyes became accustomed to the scene, he made out certain bulks of darkness, certain gleams of light and knew they were woods and moonshine on the river. There were yellow spots straight before them and close to the white gleam of the river.

“See those twelve spots in a row?” whispered Nelsie. “Those are the lights in the homes of the married millhands.”

[87]

“What are the two over to the right?”

“Bunkhouse and store.”

“There’s a light moving about over where the mill should be.” Johnny suddenly became tense as his hand gripped her arm. “It’s moving about. What—”

“Oh, that,” laughed Nelsie. “That’s only old Mac. McDonald’s his real name. He’s the night watchman; sort of a pensioner. You see, he lost all but two of his fingers in a planer six years ago. He’s deaf and nearly blind but they couldn’t turn him out altogether, so they made him night watchman. He really isn’t any good. Dad wants the company to pension him and get a real night watchman. But the manager says Mac has as good a nose

for smelling fire as anyone. He thinks that all a watchman needs to watch for is fire.”

“And I think he’s wrong,” said Johnny. “I hope we’ll be able to prove he is. I think your mill’s profits are going down the river.”

[88]

“Down the river?”

“Yes, you wait and see.”

Johnny began fumbling first at his belt, then at his pockets. Lastly he took off his cap and gave it to Nelsie.

“Now,” he breathed, “we are going to find out whether I am an efficient ‘see-by-night’ operator.”

“‘See-by-night?’”

“Yep. It’s mighty dark down there but unless the thing fails to work I can tell you pretty much everything that’s happening around that mill of yours.”

A second later an intense spot of light appeared in the center of the scene before them. For an instant it lighted up the homes of the married millhands until Nelsie saw Mary Pulver, the saw-filer’s wife, enter the cabin next door.

“What was that?” she whispered, gripping his arm.

“That,” he said grimly, “was a false motion. I winked my eye but failed to open it again. That left the light on too long. If it happens often, it will be a dead give-away and this tree will be as safe as a stone quarry with forty blasts going off in it.”

[89]

“Why?”

“Because if there are any lumber rustlers about your mill and they catch us spying on them from up here, they’ll slip a stick of dynamite under the roots of this tree and send it skyrocketing into space.”

“Oh, no!” Nelsie gripped his arm with fingers that hurt.

“They’d do that little thing and enjoy it like Christmas and Fourth of July all in one.”

“Then you’ll have to be careful, won’t you?”

“I’m going to be.”

For several moments there was silence.

At last Nelsie could stand it no longer. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“I’m seeing all over the mill. Thing’s working perfectly.

Haven't spotted anything yet, though. All's quiet. Too early, or the wrong night, maybe."

At last Johnny settled back into his place beside her. "Have to wait a while and try again. Nothing doing now."

For a half hour they sat there suspended in air. A large part of the time they were silent. There was something about the darkness beneath them, the gleam of the moon on the river and the silence of the night, which seemed to suggest silence. When they spoke it was in whispers. Johnny explained a little of the working of the "see-by-night" to Nelsie. She in turn told him about the mill.

Three half hour periods of silence were broken only by a further survey of the mill. Johnny was just beginning to think that he must give it up for the night when of a sudden his eye caught some dark object moving about down by the edge of the millpond.

"Can't be old Mac," he breathed. "He carried a light. Besides, this person must have some sort of a boat."

CHAPTER XII

“JOHNNY, I’M NOT AFRAID”

“Nelsie,” he whispered hoarsely, “there is a small telescope in my right pocket. Draw it out and hand it to me.”

Without taking his eyes from the spot on the millpond, Johnny, when he had received the telescope, held it to his right eye, then adjusted its focus.

Seconds passed, seconds in which Johnny could feel the girl’s heart beat as she pressed against his side in eager anticipation.

“Yes, yes,” he whispered at last. “There are two of them in a small, flat-bottomed boat. Look like Italians; sort of short and dark.”

More seconds passed, then—“They’re lifting the boom and letting logs float out into the current of the river.”

“Oh!” gasped Nelsie. “Oh, the robbers!”

Now Johnny was moving his glass slightly back and forth.

[92]

“They must have a watch out. Yes, there he is, a big, broad-shouldered fellow in a red shirt. Looks French Canadian.”

“Pierre LeBlanc,” breathed Nelsie.

Just at that second something happened. A gnat is a very small creature, but can do a deal of mischief. One had blown into Johnny’s left eye. This eye, which had so successfully operated the delicate electric switch, closed automatically and refused to open. That left the “see-by-night” in full operation. A glaring spot of light lay on the millpond. It had shifted a trifle. It did not reveal the timber rustlers but did bring the mass of logs out in bold relief.

“Thunder!” exploded Johnny as in wild consternation he dragged the instrument from his head and so snuffed out the light.

“Just when things were going right,” he groaned.

“Well, anyway, you saw them.”

“That doesn’t do much good. I couldn’t identify them, since I never saw them before. I was going to bring you here again and let you use the instruments. You could probably tell for sure who it was.”

[93]

“Well, can’t we?”

“It would be risky now. They saw the light. If they followed it to its source, there’s nothing they’d stop at. Just for that I think we’d better get down out of here. They might hurry over and be waiting for us.”

Johnny slid from his seat, gave her his hand to the first limb, then, together they went scurrying down the tree.

As they dropped silently to the ground, Johnny put a hand on her arm. They stood there for a second.

A twig snapped off to the right of them. Was it the rustlers?

They did not pause to see. Their way led off to the left. They took it with a bound.

There followed another long tramp through the dark, mysterious forest. When at last they reached the bank of the river they sat down on a log to think.

[94]

“I tell you what!” said Nelsie at last. “Now we know they’re doing it, we could set a watch down there by the millpond somewhere.”

“It wouldn’t do,” said Johnny soberly. “They’d find it out and the game would be up. That might stop them for a time but it would never catch them.”

Again there was silence. The river, with the silver gleam of the moon upon it, swept on to the sea. The forest whispered to them out of its silence.

“Johnny,” he felt her hand lightly upon his arm, “Johnny, I’m not afraid.”

“Afraid to—”

“Climb the tree again at night. It—it’s for my father. I’m not afraid.”

“Well, if you’re not, I shouldn’t be. We’ll go.”

For a moment their hands came together in a clasp that was a pledge, then they rose and with a whispered, “Good night,” parted.

“Fellow’s a fool for having anything to do with girls. They’re sure to get him in where he can’t get out,” Johnny whispered to himself. A moment later he said more quietly, “I’m not sure but that I should have done it anyway. Besides, she’s a dead game sport.”

[95]

That night before Johnny crept into his blankets he reviewed in his mind the events of the past few days.

“Things sure have been moving lively enough,” he told himself.

“And talk about mysteries. There are mysteries galore. Question is, which one brings us the big pay?”

He called them before him one by one. There was the Black Schooner. Gliding silently down the river at night; returning at early dawn; making a visit to the fish-house where the Dust Eater was kept; it certainly presented interesting and fascinating problems.

Johnny considered various theories.

“Nothing it couldn’t be,” he told himself. “Smuggler, whiskey-runner, importer of illegal Chinese labor, Japanese spy. Any of these easily enough. But which is it or is it any one of them, and how are we to know?”

“Huh!” he grunted a moment later, “it may be just some innocent nut who likes scooting about in the dark. Looks queer, though, even at that.”

[96]

Then there were the timber rustlers. True, this mystery had been partly solved. The man lifted the boom and allowed the logs to drift down the river. But what happened then? How were the logs caught and disposed of at a profit? That would have to be looked into. The identity of the rustlers must be established. The giant fir tree must be climbed again at the dead of night and with the possibility of enemies lurking about in the bushes.

“Cheer up,” he told himself, “the worst is yet to come.”

After all, when this affair had been completely cleared up, would they have solved the mystery they were to be paid big money for solving? Well, that was the question. They would at least have the satisfaction of having helped someone out of trouble and that in itself was a great privilege.

Then there was the small steel safe in the split of the submerged rock. Who had lowered it to that strange resting place? Had it been the crew of the Black Schooner? What did it contain? Might contain nothing at all. It might have been stolen, rifled of its contents, then dropped in the river that it might not be found as a damaging witness.

[97]

“Not very probable,” he told himself. “Whoever put that safe down there, wanted to be able to find it again. He could always locate that split rock on a clear, calm day. He could come back and lift the safe at his leisure. If he hadn’t thought that way about it, if he’d wanted to lose it forever, he could have taken it out into the bay and dropped it where the water is deep. Question is, what does it contain? That may be our real mystery after all.”

And then, of course, there was Pant’s new mystery, the mystery of the deep woods. Back there in the very heart of the forest

was a cabin with eight stovepipes sticking out of its roof. What could anyone want of that many stovepipes in one small cabin?

“Mighty queer,” he told himself, “but I have at least one fair guess.”

[98]

At that he crept into his cot.

He lay there for a time listening. The wind was rising. He could hear the pine trees sighing and could catch the rush of water on the beach.

“Going to storm,” he told himself. “If it does we won’t be able to lift that safe to-morrow. Can’t locate the rock when the water’s rough. Can’t climb the big fir tree either. Well, we’ll have a rest maybe and I guess we need it.”

[99]

CHAPTER XIII

“SHE’S A SCHOONER ALL RIGHT”

There is no music so suggestive of sleep as the patter-patter and drip-drip-drip of rain on the roof of an unplastered cabin in the woods. Johnny heard it as in a dream, just as the first shadowy flickers of daylight struggled through the trees. With a sigh of content he turned over on his other side and drifted back to the land of dreams.

When Pant came in dripping with rain, he did not awaken Johnny. He had things to tell but they could wait.

“No use to rout him out,” he told himself. “Nothing we can do to-day except go for the block and tackle and maybe get back there in the woods and have a look at old Mr. Cabin with eight smoke-pipes.”

Having stripped off his water-soaked garments, he made himself a cup of steaming coffee and fried some bacon and potatoes, then sat down to a relished repast.

[100]

He was thinking of stretching out for three winks when Johnny yawned and sat up.

“Well,” he drawled sleepily, “what luck?”

“Saw things,” said Pant. “How about you?”

“Saw things too, but not as much as I should have liked. Gnat flew in my eye and jammed things up in fine style. Lighted the place up like daytime.”

“Whew!” exclaimed Pant. “That was bad. I was afraid of something like that.”

“I’m going back though,” said Johnny stoutly. “I saw enough to make me sure I was on the track of something.”

“How’s this fit into your part of the story?” said Pant, after listening to Johnny’s experience. “I saw a gasoline schooner, white, not our old black friend, gasoline, with a real pop-pop-pop to her, hanging about the end of the bay early in the night. She was too far away for me to be sure, but I thought she had a rowboat and a small log boom in tow. I’m sure I saw a dozen or so of fine sawlogs floating downstream; regular six-foot-through fellows, they were. Then a little while after that I thought I saw that rowboat of theirs dodging about behind the schooner. Too far away to be sure though.”

[101]

“Tallies with my idea of the thing exactly!” exclaimed Johnny excitedly, rising and pacing the floor. “Whole gang of them,

regular timber-rustling company. Those fellows up at the mill release the logs at the boom and your friends down here catch them in a small boom and haul them away with their schooner.”

“But the logs are marked,” said Pant. “How could they use them?”

“Little they care about that. Probably got a small mill in a secluded spot and a little timber of their own. They cut the stolen logs right up into lumber and peddle it up and down the bay. Who could prove anything on them?”

“I can,” he exclaimed suddenly, answering his own question. “And I will!”

[102]

“All right,” smiled Pant, “but watch your step. They’re probably a bad lot—wouldn’t stop at anything.”

“I don’t care for that,” said Johnny quietly. “Of course I’ll be careful; but this old world was made for honest people to live in and I’m going to do all in my power to see that honest people have a chance to do most of the living.”

“But how about the Black Schooner?” he asked suddenly. “Did you see anything of that?”

“I did,” smiled Pant. “She’s some craft! Not a submarine but a regular schooner. Built like a racer; big, heavy prow and not much of any after-deck. Curious part of it all is her power. What makes her go? She’s smokeless and noiseless as an air-gun. She came quite close in last night. I could see her as plainly as I see you now, and could even hear the click-click of some sort of engine rods. That was all. Goes like the wind, too; I never saw any craft that could go as fast. No smoke, no noise. One would say she was one of those toy boats that wind up with a crank and shoot ahead until the spring runs down.”

“You don’t think that’s it?”

[103]

“Of course not. Couldn’t build a craft strong enough to hold a steel spring with such power.”

“Did you see anyone on board of her?”

“Just one person, a man, with hair as white as snow and no cap on. Hair stuck straight out behind him; rather long hair. That’s how fast he was going.”

“Out to sea?”

“Out to sea.”

“Did he come back?”

“Came back a half hour ago. There’s a sea on, biggest I’ve known since I came here. Big breakers rolling in. And you may

believe me or not, but that craft was just jumping from crest to crest. If anything she was going faster than when she went out. And there was that old gray-haired fellow, ridin' the storm like Neptune himself. I tell you it was weird!"

"You didn't see anyone else?"

[104]

"Nope."

"Well, that beats all. Shouldn't wonder if that schooner, along with the steel safe in the split rock, were our real mystery. Can't tell though."

"No, you can't, and just for that I suggest that you go for the block and tackle this morning while I get a bit of sleep, and that, if it's still stormin', which I think it will be, we take the dog and go back to have a look at old eight smokes."

"All right. It's going to be a damp trip, but looks like it's worth it."

"This is the beginning of the rainy season."

"Hope not. Hope it's only the first notice. Hope we get two or three days more of sunshine first anyway. If we don't, things are going to look bad."

Johnny drew on his slicker and went out in the storm, leaving his companion to get some much-needed sleep.

[105]

CHAPTER XIV

A MYSTERY THAT GETS A LAUGH

Johnny was due for something of a surprise that day. His trip for the block and tackle seemed a simple enough affair, so simple that he did not dream of taking a rifle or any other instrument for protection along. Yet the affair provided him with a decided thrill.

Well protected by slicker and hip boots, he enjoyed the solitary journey to the abandoned fish-house where the Dust Eater reposed. There is a joy to be had from a lonely tramp through the woods on a rainy day that is to be secured in no other way. With the cool damp of saturated atmosphere bathing your forehead, with the drip-drip of raindrops from the leaves sounding about you, with the soft squash of the ground beneath your feet, you tramp on and on and on, with the spirit of restlessness which so often controls you, slowly oozing away until you feel yourself a part of the cool repose that is all about you.

Johnny had been enjoying all this to the full, had tramped through the woods, waded across three small streams swollen to many times their normal size by the torrents of rain, and found himself approaching the ancient fish-house, when something caused him to start and stare, then to listen with all his ears.

[106]

Had he caught a sound? He thought he had, but now all was silent. The drip-drip-drip of rain upon the leaves was all he heard.

“Guess I just imagined it,” he told himself. “Anyway, if it was something it was only a squirrel scolding about the rain or some boat sound coming in from the bay.”

Again his feet came down swash-swash as he pushed forward across a bit of swamp where the black tamaracks turned the uncertain light of a gloomy day into almost midnight darkness.

“Boo!” he shivered. “A place like this on a rainy day would be a likely one for a murder or something like that. I’ll be glad to get out of here.”

[107]

He did not leave the shadows as quickly as he expected, for, just as he was preparing to emerge from the darkest depths he again caught the sound that had disturbed him. Again he paused to listen.

“It was something,” he told himself. “No squirrel either. Squirrels don’t make sounds like that. I don’t believe it was a

sound from the bay either. If it was, then my sense of location has gone flooey. Seems to come from that old fish-house.”

As he stood there in awed silence the sound came again. Faint, indistinct, of uncertain origin and meaning, it shot an unnamed fear into his very being.

“What can that be?” Johnny breathed to himself.

There was no person supposed to be at the boathouse and no one save themselves lived within miles of it. The sound, a hoarse, grating, human voice-like sound, resembled nothing he had ever heard from beast or bird.

“No, not even from a raven,” he told himself.

[108]

For a full three minutes he stood there irresolute. Just as he was beginning to call himself a chicken-hearted child, the sound came again. Louder and more distinct than before, it sent a chill racing up his spine.

“Like someone in distress—a throttled groan,” he whispered. “Wonder if it could be? Wonder if I ought to go to their assistance?” Johnny asked himself.

Again he passed a moment in indecision. If someone were really in distress, there was almost sure to be someone else at the bottom of it. Someone might have attacked an enemy here. If he had, he was doubtless still lingering about. Little chance an unarmed boy would have against such a person. He thought of the visit the Black Schooner had made to the fish-house, and of the mysterious cabin of “eight smokes” hidden away in the woods, thought, too, of the safe in the split rock and of the disappearing lumber at the mill.

“This thing might be connected with any one of them,” he told himself.

[109]

Finding himself growing more and more afraid to go forward, he at last dragged himself by main force from his position and went stealthily forward to the very edge of the thicket. Here he paused again. Once he left this thicket he must come out into a half open space where a few scattered pine trees grew.

“Be a fair mark to anyone who chose to shoot,” he told himself. “All the same, what’s the sense of being afraid? Probably just no one after all.” He was about to step boldly out into the open when again the strange, haunting groan smote his ears.

Quickly he stepped backward, then, wheeling about, disappeared in the direction from which he had come. “No use taking unnecessary risks,” he told himself. “I’ll get Pant and the guns.”

A half hour later the two of them, with rifles slung beneath their arms, stood in that same spot and peered intently in the

[110]

direction of the fish-house, while their ears were strained to catch the least sound.

“Now bring on your ghost,” bantered Pant.

With Pant by his side and a good rifle in his hand, Johnny did not find the situation half so terrifying as it had seemed before. He was growing somewhat ashamed of his former fear when once more there came that peculiar whining groan.

“Lordy, but that’s haunting,” exclaimed Pant, clutching his companion’s arm. “Sounds half human and half beastly. Don’t wonder you were scared—would have been myself.”

“Question is,” he said thoughtfully a moment or two later, “what makes it? Who’s the rascal who is setting up all this disturbance? Or is it really someone in distress?”

“I’m for finding out at once,” said Johnny impetuously.

“Wait,” said Pant with a hand still on his arm. “If it’s really anyone, he’s stood it for more than a half hour. He can stand it a few moments more. It may be a plant, you know, a trick to lead us into a trap.”

[111]

He had taken his watch from his pocket. When the sound came again he noted the exact time down to seconds. Then, while their hearts beat time to the tick of his watch, they waited and listened.

Three times the long-drawn groan smote their ears. At each repetition Pant noted the minute and second hand’s position. At the end of the third time he straightened up with a grunt.

“Exactly the same period between sounds and the sounds are exactly the same duration. Doesn’t look like any human being, or animal, would be as regular as that.”

“He wouldn’t,” exclaimed Johnny, much relieved. “Pant, you’re a genius at finding things out! It’s something mechanical. Come on, let’s see what.”

Again he started forward but Pant pulled him back.

“You forget,” he whispered, “that we are living here in the woods to find things out; that we have already discovered that some things are going on which apparently shouldn’t be. Don’t you suppose that some people by this time have discovered something of our reason for being here and don’t you suppose they know something of what we know?”

[112]

“Y-e-s, might be,” Johnny hesitated. “But what’s that got to do with this?”

“May have a lot,” whispered Pant. “This thing, as I said before, may be a plant, a trap. We want to go slow, that’s all.”

They did go slow. They crept through the forest that lay between them and the fish-house, as hunters of mountain lions might creep upon their prey. With rifles ready they skulked on hands and knees from bush to bush and from tree to tree. When they had reached the last clump of trees at the edge of the small clearing that surrounded the fish-house, and when they had lain face down upon the ground until the sound smote their ears once more and they had determined that the sound must come from within the very walls of the fish-house, where rested their precious seaplane, their fear and excitement knew no bounds.

“Better crawl the rest of the way,” Pant whispered, “and not a word as we go. If it’s a plant, they may not have seen or heard us. We may be able to get the drop on them yet.”

[113]

The moments they spent crossing that open, grass-grown spot seemed hours to Johnny. He had never experienced fear in an open fight, but this thing got on his nerves. He kept wondering what a bullet in his back would feel like. Would it really hurt, or would it merely sting a trifle at first and do its hurting after?

Passing over a little ridge, they dropped into a small depression which, Johnny fancied, was like a shell hole in Flanders, but was in reality the hollow left by a stump burned out of the earth. Another ridge was traversed and they were at last up to the side of the building. Still nothing had happened.

“The silence is ghostly,” Johnny told himself.

At that second the silence was broken by the sound that should have grown familiar, but had not, the moaning groan. It seemed this time as if it were coming from the very earth beneath their feet. Johnny was obliged to take himself well in hand to keep from springing to his feet and running away.

[114]

“It’s inside,” breathed Pant, propping himself up on his knees and preparing to peer through a crack in the board walls.

Johnny followed his example. What they saw inside was a large square of black water and in the middle of it, her wings spread as if for flight, their seaplane, the Dust Eater. Everything seemed so much as they had left it that Pant found himself tempted to believe that the sound had not existed at all, that it was all an illusion of the ear. But just as he was thinking that, a strange thing happened: the wide wooden propeller of the motor closest to them began to revolve, and as it did so there came again that same low, sobbing moan. The boys jumped up with a jerk.

“Goof!” grunted Johnny, starting back as if he’d been shot. “What’s that?”

[115]

“Hist!” whispered Pant. “Want to give us away? It’s someone trying to start our plane.” His eyes were still glued upon that slowly revolving propeller. Three revolutions it made, then

quite abruptly it stopped.

“In three minutes,” whispered Pant, settling back but still peering through the crack, “unless the program is changed, she’ll turn again. I wonder why the exact period? Wonder where they’re hid?”

If anyone were hiding in that barn-like structure with its water for a floor, it surely was something of a mystery where they were keeping themselves. “Might be in the cabin or beneath the fuselage,” whispered Johnny.

Three long minutes they waited, then again, true to Pant’s prophecy, there came the haunting sound as the propeller began to revolve.

This time the look of suspicion on Pant’s face was suddenly replaced by one of understanding and amusement.

“Come on,” he exclaimed out loud, “we’re going in. We are a pair of nuts; at least I’m one.”

[116]

Quite overcome with astonishment, Johnny followed him into the building and was soon climbing over one wing to the engine whose propeller had but the second before ceased to revolve.

“It’s as simple as anything,” explained Pant, “once you know about it. You see, the last time I was over here I was working on a little invention of mine, a rigging for getting a little power when you’re really up against it. A fellow must have his batteries charged or he can’t start his plane, so I thought up a little scheme for charging the batteries when they run down. This little jar here contains certain chemicals which slowly produce a gas which creates a low pressure. When this pressure is strong it sets a tiny piston going. The piston is connected with a small generator which produces electrical power. The electrical power is stored in a battery. Enough can be produced in a day to start one of our motors. When I was here before I left the batteries connected with this motor and all this little mechanism in order. I threw off this lever that keeps the little piston from moving but by some chance it has slipped back into gear. The apparatus produces enough electricity, apparently, to turn the motor over three times. Then the supply of energy is exhausted and the propeller stops revolving. Simple, isn’t it?” he smiled.

“Simple as mud,” grinned Johnny, vastly relieved. “You and your wild inventions will be the death of me yet. What gets me is what made that ghostly noise?”

[117]

“That’s even more simple,” smiled Pant. “Dust Eater hasn’t been used lately and the oil has gummed on the propeller, hardened up so it creates friction and makes that scream of a sound.”

As proof of his statement, he stepped forward and gave the propeller a turn. The sound which came forth was evidence enough.

“All I got to say,” said Johnny, as he led the way in search of the block and tackle needed for lifting the safe from the bottom of the bay, “is that it’s about time we were using the Dust Eater a bit if she’s going to start playing tricks on us like that.”

[118]

Had he known how soon they would use her and what a journey they were to take with her, he might have felt a trifle startled. As it was he procured the needed equipment and was soon tramping back through the rain with Pant.

“Have to get an early start for old ‘eight smokes,’” he said over his shoulder as they trudged along.

“Sure will. Going to get dark early,” replied his companion.

[119]

CHAPTER XV

EIGHT SMOKES

The forest, as they started for the mysterious cabin of “eight smokes” that afternoon, was a water-soaked blanket leaking at every thread. They were well protected by slickers but their boots were soon making strange squish-squashes as they walked. As for the dog, he trailed along behind them with the rain dripping off his tail as if it were a down-spout to an eaves-trough.

“Hope we find our friend home,” mumbled Pant.

“What’ll we do if he is?” asked Johnny.

“Pretend we’re lost and inquire our way to the shore. We can do that much without exciting suspicion. May get a peep inside his cabin at the same time.”

But they did not inquire, not that day. Long before they reached the place the pungent odor of wood smoke reached their nostrils.

[120]

“If it’s a moonshine still, where does he get the stuff to make it out of?” whispered Johnny.

“Can’t tell. There’s always a way.”

Coming at last to a bend in the trail Pant put back a warning hand.

“Right here, soon’s we make the turn, we see the place. I’ll creep ahead and reconnoiter.”

He disappeared while Johnny squatted down by a huge tree-trunk and held the dog’s head between his knees.

“S’all right,” Pant whispered a moment later. “No one in sight. But, man, oh, man! he’s kickin’ up a smoke. Got all eight of ’em smudgin’ at once.”

He began creeping forward on hands and knees. Johnny followed him in silence. The dog slunk along behind.

Traveling thus they covered a quarter of the way to the cabin, a third, a half, three-quarters.

From time to time they paused to listen.

“Hist!” exclaimed Pant. “Into the brush. I think I heard something.”

[121]

Like some wild creatures, seeking shelter from the hunter, they faded into the dull brown of the brush beyond the path.

For a full five minutes, with wildly beating hearts, they watched and listened.

“Pshaw! Guess it was nothing,” exclaimed Pant, preparing to make his way back to the trail.

This time it was Johnny who called a halt. Gripping Pant’s arm he pulled him back. To his keen ears there had come the faint pit-pat of footsteps on the moss-padded trail.

He was not a moment too soon, for at that very instant a man appeared in the trail not a hundred yards from them. He came pussy-footing along toward them on the trail. In one hand he carried a gallon jug.

“Moonshine,” whispered Pant. “What’d I tell you?”

Again Johnny’s hand gripped his arm. The man had paused and half turned in the trail. The next instant he whirled about, set the jug beside the trail and retraced his footsteps.

[122]

“It’s our chance,” whispered Pant. “If he’s out of sight for three minutes I’ll have that jug. It’s evidence—the very best kind.”

At once he left Johnny and began creeping toward the place where the jug stood.

Fascinated, Johnny watched him. It was a race between a possibility and a probability. It was possible for Pant to reach the spot in a certain length of time. It was probable that the stranger, who had evidently forgotten something, would return before that time elapsed. If he should chance to appear in the trail at the exact second in which Pant stretched out his hand for the jug, what would happen?

Pant had disappeared from sight. The dog made a move as if to go in search of him. Johnny pulled him down. A deluge of water shaken from the trees drenched them. The dog uttered a low whine. Johnny pulled him under his slicker with a whispered, “Here, none of that!”

A minute passed; two, three, four. The stranger did not reappear. Pant must be nearing the goal. Johnny’s heart beat wildly. The final moment had arrived.

[123]

He saw Pant’s hand reach out for the handle of the jug. For one tense second it rested, then both hand and jug disappeared.

Pant began working his way back. Still the stranger did not appear.

The moments crept by. “Strange he does not come for the jug,” Johnny whispered to himself. “Wonder what would happen if

he did? Pant had no real right to take it. He isn't sure it's any of our business. Just because a thing is a mystery, isn't enough reason for going about picking things up."

He was roused from these reflections by a hand on his arm. He started, then smiled. It was Pant.

"Think I'll just pull the cork and touch my tongue to it," said Pant displaying the jug, "just to make certain."

The cork gave a little pop as it came out. Tilting the jug upward Pant lifted it to his mouth.

[124]

Of a sudden, when the jug was almost at his lips, there was a crash of breaking crockery, a gurgle and the jug, broken in a thousand pieces, lay at his feet.

"Ugh!" grunted Pant in surprise.

Johnny leaped to his feet.

Pant dropped on the ground and began looking about among the pieces of the jug.

At last he picked something up and thrust it in his pocket.

"Think we'd better be traveling," he whispered hurriedly.

"Which way?"

"Back."

Johnny protested:

"Why, we haven't really discovered anything. We—"

"Discovered enough," Pant broke in.

"Look at that dog," whispered Johnny.

A moment before the dog had been lapping up some of the contents of the broken jug, now he lay writhing on the ground, apparently in the pangs of death.

[125]

Pant gave him one look.

"Can't do anything for him. C'm'on. Let's get out."

He led the way back over the trail at a terrific rate. Only when they were on their own doorstep did he pause to look back.

"Fellow'd think you'd seen a ghost," Johnny panted.

"Worse than that," smiled Pant. "I've got his bullet in my pocket."

"Bullet?"

“Yes, sir.”

Pant drew from his pocket a much flattened lead bullet.

“That hit the jug,” he said quietly.

“How—how’d you guess it?” Johnny asked in amazement.
“There wasn’t a sound.”

Pant held up a bloody finger. “Just grazed it,” he explained.
“Tore the skin. That was all, but it was enough.”

“Where’d the bullet come from?”

“How’d I know? Some sort of gun.”

[126]

“Silent one then.”

“Silent as an Arctic night.”

“Think he meant it for you or the jug?”

“Don’t know.”

“That stuff in the jug was rank poison. It killed the dog—would have killed you if you’d tasted it.”

Pant shivered. “Far’s I’m concerned, I’m through with that mystery for the present. Check it off the list.”

“You can’t check any real mystery off the list; your mind won’t let you. That’s one thing you’ve got to learn.”

“Do you know,” Pant said after a good supper had revived his spirits somewhat, “I didn’t see him very clearly, but there was something about that man that reminded me of the old fellow who runs the Black Schooner. If he hadn’t had his coat collar turned so high and his hat pulled so low I think I could have been sure about it. As it is I can’t tell.”

“Perhaps,” said Johnny thoughtfully, “our mysteries are all joined together like the links of a chain.”

[127]

“And perhaps not,” smiled Pant.

The boys discussed the events of the day for a time—and turned in without having reached any conclusions as to their various problems.

[128]

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERRUPTED MOVE

To the great joy of our young detectives the next day dawned bright and fair.

“And now for the safe in the old split rock,” exclaimed Johnny. “The water’s smooth as glass. There’s one mystery that will be solved before another twenty-four hours and I’m glad of it. We haven’t gone deep enough into anything yet even to send in a report, and Colonel Remington will be looking for one.”

“We’ve got only enough rope to reach shore,” said Pant thoughtfully, “so we’ll have to use it that way; just fasten one block to a tree on the bank and the other to the safe. We can drag it ashore that way and it’s the only way we can raise it.”

“Probably you’re right,” said Johnny, throwing a coil of rope across his shoulders. “Well, let’s get moving.”

[129]

They were soon in the boat and paddling strongly upstream.

“I’ll have to dive down and wrap this bit of steel cable about the safe so we can hitch the block to it,” said Johnny as they neared the spot. “You can get the rope and tackle all clear while I am doing that.”

To anchor over the split rock it was necessary to run past it, then drop their anchor and drift back. The anchor was light; the current strong. The anchor would drift until it came to a group of rocks on the bed of the stream just above the split rock. Here it would hang up and leave them in just the position they desired. They had lowered their anchor. It was slowly drifting downstream. Johnny was stripping off his shirt, preparing for the plunge while Pant was arranging his ropes when, of a sudden, Pant dropped his ropes to seize his casting rod, which chanced to be in the bow of the boat.

“Hist,” he whispered. “Sit down.”

[130]

“What is it?” Johnny whispered.

“Don’t look round. Sit as you are. It’s the Black Schooner. It’s skirting the other shore. Think it will go round the bend and out of sight in a minute.”

Pant’s hand shook so badly that he got his line in a tangle and was unable to make a single cast.

In the meantime the Black Schooner, for the first time going at a moderate speed, crept along near the opposite bank like some submarine destroyer searching for enemy craft.

“Is he on board?” whispered Johnny.

“Can’t see anyone.”

“Gone yet?”

“Not quite. Now. There they go.”

“By the Great Horn Spoon!” Johnny exclaimed, “that was a narrow one! Think he saw enough to understand?”

“Don’t know.”

“What’d he do if he did?”

Pant considered a moment:

“Don’t know. Nothing, probably. Probably doesn’t even know the safe is there.”

[131]

“Yes, and maybe he does. We’d better let it go until night. I can fix up an electric light on a storage battery and take it down in the water with me when I dive. That’ll give me light enough. He’s likely to come back by here most any time and spoil things.”

“All right,” said Pant, reaching for the anchor, “to-night it is.”

They drifted downstream in silence. Neither spoke until they were nearing their landing place.

“Say!” exclaimed Pant, “how you going to find the place at night? You can’t see it as you drift over it.”

“That’s easy enough,” said Johnny. “Glad you spoke of it though. You can locate a spot anywhere on the surface of the water by lining up two sets of points on the shore. I’ve done it lots of times to locate a fishing hole.

“You see, the way you do it, you go to the spot when the sun is shining and the water clear. When you’ve located the rock, shoal or weed-bed you wish to mark you look to the right of you and perhaps you see a sharp pointed rock on shore. A little back from the shore you see a white birch tree with a fork in it, that is just in line with the sharp rock. It’s easy to remember. You say, ‘sharp rock and split birch to the right.’ Then you look at another angle and see an old snag that exactly lines up with a dead fir tree, broken off about forty feet up. You fix those two points in your mind and you have it. No matter what the weather conditions are, as long as you can see your four points, you are all right. When you get to a spot where the birch tree is behind the old sharp rock and the snag lines with the fir tree you are bound to be exactly over the spot. I’ll go this afternoon and spot my points, and to-night we’ll try our luck. We’ve got a good moon and can see our points all right.”

[132]

CHAPTER XVII

FLAMES FROM THE SEA

Just as the moon, having reached the tree-tops, was casting huge black shadows across the water, the boys in their rowboat pushed off silently from the shore.

“We’ll head her straight out for a few hundred yards,” Johnny whispered as he bent his back to the oars, “then we’ll turn and go upstream: not so likely to be seen from the bank that way.”

For a time nothing was to be heard save the all but inaudible dip-dip of the oars. “Now,” breathed Johnny, as he lifted one oar and allowed the other to drag, “half about and away—”

His whisper was cut short by something that had struck his eye: the flare of a light across the surface of the water.

“What’s that gleam?” he muttered.

[134]

“Where?”

“Behind the point, looks like. Mighty queer at this time of night.”

“Some ship’s light maybe.”

“Can’t be; too high and bright. Tell you what, we’ll row out a few boat-lengths farther. We may be able to see it then.”

The boat swung about into the course it had just left; then for a time there came the dip of oars.

“It’s just off the point!” Johnny suddenly exclaimed excitedly. “It’s a ship on fire. Look at her blaze! Swing about. It’s not so far. We might be of some assistance, and anyway it’s a sight worth going miles to see.”

Redoubling their efforts they sent the light rowboat skimming away across the water toward the spot where great flares of flame leaped skyward.

The point was a long, narrow finger of land that reached out into the bay. The cabin in which the boys lived was at the base of this point. To the right of it up the bay was the old fish-house in which the Dust Eater was stored. Back of that, far away in the woods, was the “cabin of eight smokes” while up the river, on the edge of that same wide stretch of evergreen forest, was the sawmill over which Nelsie’s father acted as foreman.

[135]

As Johnny’s mind took in the situation, he told himself that it was a fine thing that this fire was on the sea and not on the

land. "For," he reasoned, "even though the wind is offshore, any fire in the evergreen forest would back-fire its way down the point; then it would spread in every direction until nothing remained of cabins, fish-house, or mill."

Pant, who had a vivid imagination and a keen mind for adventure and who all his life long had had a desire to witness a fire at sea, kept glancing over his shoulder. As he did so he fancied that he saw things happening at the ship's rail and upon the sea near the ship. Now passengers and crew crowded the rail. Now boats were loaded and lowered. Long sweeping oars flashed in the light of the burning ship as the lifeboats put away. In his fancy he saw one or two passengers left aboard and in his fancy too drove the frail rowboat alongside to rescue them. The fact was that there was little but fancy in all that he seemed to see, for the ship, if she were a ship, was some distance out to sea.

[136]

"Best we can do is to get a closer look at her," Johnny murmured at last. "She's so far out that we can't possibly get near her before she sinks."

Pant was silent. They had swung part way toward the end of the point. "Say," he exclaimed suddenly, "that's not behind the point. It's right against the end of the point, and unless I miss my guess it's much closer than you think. Pull hard. Perhaps we can reach her yet. She may be only some gasoline schooner and we might get some salvage off her before she sinks. But where's her crew? Looks like you could see their boat."

Still rowing, but with his head turned to gaze across the sea, Johnny swept the black waters with his eyes. "Looks like the gleam of a mast off to the right," he murmured. "I can't really tell though."

[137]

More moments of silent laboring at the oars followed. Then again Pant glanced backward. This time he dropped his oars to turn square about and stare. Then, with a sudden exclamation, he seized the oars again.

"Pull! Pull hard!" he groaned. "That's not a ship nor yet a small schooner. It's only a rowboat piled high with inflammable rubbish and it's drifting on shore with the tide. In a little while, if we don't stop it, it will be against the beach, against that bank of dwarf yellow pines that line the shore, and that means a fire, a land fire, a forest fire that we will not soon forget."

One startled glance over his shoulder told Johnny that Pant's last conclusion was the correct one. Indeed, so close were they by this time that they were able to make out the outlines of the boat's prow.

"Pull! Pull!" shouted Pant as he strained at the oars until it seemed they would snap.

[138]

Bending far foreward, Johnny joined him in the long, strong sweep that fairly lifted the boat from the water. There followed the short, quick laboring breathing of boys who are putting every ounce of their energy into a task.

A glance backward told them they were making headway. But so was the burning boat. As if drawn by an invisible hand it came nearer, ever nearer the shore. Now it seemed fifty yards away, now twenty-five, now fifteen. The gap between the boats grew narrower and narrower. Would they make it? Johnny's mind was tormented with this question. Then of a sudden, a new question came to him. He spoke it out loud.

"Pant," he puffed, "what are we going to do when we get to her? Look at her now, flaming up like an oil tank. Wouldn't dare go near her; our own boat would catch fire."

"Might swim in and attach a line to her, then tow her away."

"Never could. It'd set your hair on fire; burn you to a crisp. Anyway," Johnny said suddenly, as he threw down his oars with a gesture of despair, "it's no use; we've lost. There goes the first pine tree."

[139]

It was all too true. Even as he spoke there came a sound of a sudden mighty wind, a wild wish-o-o-o as a tree, lighted by the heat from the boat, burst all aflame like a coal oil torch.

[140]

CHAPTER XVIII

FIRE FIGHTERS

Even as they looked, a second tree caught fire, then another and another. The leap of flames from bottom to top of a tree was like a single flash of light. Trees followed in such quick succession that the rush of their going was like the exhaust of some tremendous locomotive—whish-whish-whish.

For a full moment, fascinated by the magnificent spectacle that turned night into day and painted the waters of the bay black as ink, the boys sat with mouths open, staring.

Pant was the first to gain his senses. "It's treachery," he exclaimed, "treachery in the night. Someone set that boat afire, meaning it to drift ashore and burn us out. But come on, there's a chance of fighting it." He dropped to his place and seized the oars.

"How?" Johnny asked, incredulous.

[141]

"There are open trails across the point, two of them, used as portages once—we'll clear 'em and block the fire there. We've got an axe in the boat. Come on, pull, pull as if for your life."

Again they strained at the oars while Johnny's mind went over the whole situation. After weighing carefully the possibilities of their winning the fight against the flames that threatened not alone their cabin but their seaplane and the mill up the river as well, he concluded that they had a fighting chance.

"Lucky thing the wind's offshore," he told himself. "If it wasn't for that we wouldn't have a chance. As it is, she's beating it back from the bay mighty fast. There's water on both sides of her now and will be for perhaps a half hour, but after that, when she gets into the main body of the timber, man, oh, man, how she will spread! You'd think the rain of yesterday would hold her back, but the wind has whipped the trees all dry and the needles are like tinder. Looks like other folks would see the light of the flames but maybe they won't until it is too late. It's night and most folks are asleep."

"Wonder who played that dirty trick," he said to himself after a time. "Might have been those fellows who have been stealing timber. Think their trick is off maybe, so they'll have their revenge. Might be that fellow with the Black Schooner; he may be trying to hide something. Might be—"

[142]

His reflections were cut short by a word from Pant, but he was destined to remember that last mental suggestion many hours

later when a discovery of some importance was made.

“We better leave the boat here and swim ashore,” Pant suggested. “I think the first trail is right about there on the shore. We can anchor the boat here; it might get caught and burned up if we brought it ashore. If we get stuck we can swim out to her and get away.”

Without comment Johnny seized the anchor and tossed it into the water. Pant took up the axe. “Guess that’s about all we can use of this outfit,” he murmured. “Lucky we brought it along.” With that, he removed his shoes, tied them to his belt, then plunged into the sea and went along plowing toward shore.

[143]

Once on shore, they lost little time in locating the old portage which had undoubtedly at one time been used as a road for hauling logs across the point when rough weather beyond the point made it impractical to bring them around in a boom. That the road had not been used for at least three or four years was proved by the shoulder-high pine and fir trees that were growing here and there in the middle of it.

“We’ll have to cut out that undergrowth and throw it back,” Pant explained, wielding the axe as he spoke. “You toss ’em back; I’ll do the cutting.”

For some time only the thwack-thwack of the axe, the swish of branches and the distant, indistinct rush and roar that they knew all too well was the onrushing fire, disturbed the silence of the night.

But now, as they began catching glimpses of leaping flames through the thick timber, there came little signs of movement in the dead needles near their feet and in the branches above them. A great gray owl flopped lazily by them; a score of pack rats scampered across the trail; some creature that made a loud thump-thump-thump on the ground passed to their left.

[144]

“Deer,” whispered Pant. “They’ve been hiding on the point. Whole little old wild world’s moving out. I don’t blame them, either. May be moving ourselves only too soon. But we’ll fight it out here as long as we can. If it beats us here we’ll take another stand at the other trail farther back. The other trail’s really the best of the two; it’s wider. But we can’t afford to pass any chance up. We’re like an army digging in at one point and attempting to hold a position, then if it don’t prove safe, moving back.”

He glanced back over the broad trail they had left behind them. “A hundred yards more,” he muttered, “but she’s coming fast. And,” he added a bit anxiously, “the branches above us come awful close together. Once the fire leaps across we’re done for, at least at this point.”

[145]

Again the thwack-thwack of the axe was blended with the ever-

increasing crackle and roar of the fire. The heat was noticeable now. Pant was perspiring freely. His face was red as a sunset.

“Just a little farther,” he puffed. “There’s just one thing in our favor: The ground’s damp and the fire won’t creep across the trail on the surface.”

Three minutes more, with the breath of flames hot upon their cheeks, they fought their way toward the other shore; then with a wild whoop of triumph Johnny cast the last scrub tree into the sea. “There!” he exclaimed exultantly. “That’s all we can do. We’ll have to leave the rest to luck.”

“And tough luck I believe, at that.” Pant threw himself face down upon the ground to avoid the heat. “It’s hotter than I thought it would be. I’m afraid it will leap the gap.

“What was that?” he sprang to his feet a second later. Glancing down the trail that was now as light as day, he was horrified to see a great, tawny cat standing not ten yards from him. The creature’s eyes reflected the red glow of the flames till they seemed afire themselves.

[146]

“A lion!” he breathed, too startled to move from his tracks. “A mountain lion!”

For a second the creature, crouching for a spring, seemed undecided whether to leap upon the boy’s back or to spring away to the right in the brush. It was a dramatic moment. Pant felt his hair stand on end as his feet grew into things of lead and he stood as if driven into the earth like a post.

At last with a savage hiss the creature turned and leaped out of sight.

“Wow!” gasped Pant in relief. “He’s moving, too; and I can’t say I’m sorry.”

The next second brought him a new and terrible thought. “Come on,” he called hoarsely. “We’re beat here. We’ll have to try it farther back.”

[147]

It was true. The fire had made greater headway on the farther side of the point and had already reached the gap when a bit of mad perversity on the part of the wind sent a whirling eddy of air directly into the flames and tossed a red ball of fire across the gap. The far side was aflame in an instant.

“I don’t see any use trying the other trail,” grumbled Johnny in a black funk of despondency. “We were beat so easy; how can we hope to win next time?”

“Can’t tell,” smiled the indomitable Pant grimly as he seized his axe and broke away the brush. “You never can tell. Help may come. We must fight to the last ditch.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE MASKED MAN

Fortunately the wind freshened at this time. Coming from the land, as it did, it had a tendency to hold the fire in check. Still, as they struggled through underbrush, fought their way through briar patches, or scurried beneath gigantic spreading pines, they heard again and again the startling whee-o-o-o of a particularly large conifer as the fire shot upward among its branches. They knew that it could be but a matter of moments until the fire reached the second portage. Even Pant despaired of saving the forest by clearing the trail of underbrush. However, being of a hopeful disposition and bulldog courage, he hoped against hope that something might happen to avert the catastrophe.

As he struggled forward, his mind went over just what such a fire must mean—the total destruction of all their plans as well as their equipment, for the fire would blot out all clues save the safe at the bottom of the river. Their hiding place would be gone. Their means of locomotion, in case of a long voyage, would be gone, too; the fish-house and Dust Eater would almost certainly be burned, for the wind had veered slightly in that direction and would carry the fire thither at a terrific rate. “We might be able to make a dash for it and get the plane out,” he told himself grimly, “but more likely we’d get burned to a crisp undertaking it.”

[149]

If the fire was not checked the mystery of “eight smokes” would be a mystery no longer. A charred mass of logs and twisted sheet iron flues would be all there was left of it.

Not only would all their plans be brought to an end but Johnny’s new-found friends at the mill would be homeless and jobless; the mill and the mill town would burn together. “And,” he told himself, “all this wonderful virgin forest belonging to the man who is employing us will be destroyed. What a pity! how many hundred of homes where happy families live, where children dance about while mothers sing, could be made from these very trees? And all that gone because someone’s black heart prompts him to wreak vengeance upon some other person.”

[150]

As he finished these gloomy thoughts he found himself breaking through the timber to the second road. To his great joy he found this a very much wider road and more recently traveled.

“Not so much work here,” he told Johnny hopefully. “We may make it yet.”

“Think so?” was Johnny’s only comment, as, seizing the axe, he

prepared to do the chopping that he might relieve Pant's blistered hands.

For fifteen minutes they worked along in grim silence. Again the heat of the fire was upon their cheeks. The wind had lulled. The fire was coming forward by leaps and bounds. Just as they began to despair, there came a sudden on-rush of wind from land. So strong was it that it appeared to seize the flames and cast them back until they stood a fiery wall against the sky.

[151]

"Like Moses's pillar of fire," Johnny told himself in an awed whisper.

Instantly his mind was diverted by something that was happening in the uncleared portion of the trail just before him. Had he caught the gleam of fire through the branches? It did not seem possible, yet it was true. There was a second fire crackling up there.

"It's no use," he exclaimed, casting down the axe. "The villains are setting fire all about us. We'll do well if we escape with our lives." He turned and was about to flee down the open trail when Pant seized him by the arm. "Hold on," he exclaimed. "That fire's all on the inside of the trail. Looks like back-fire to me. Someone's come to the rescue."

"Back-fire!" exclaimed Johnny. "What blockheads we have been! Back-fire's the very stuff. The wind is just right. We'll light the trees along the trail. The wind will hold the fire off so it won't leap the gap, and you don't get the terrible accumulated heat of that bank of fire coming down the point."

[152]

He began searching his pockets for his match box. The instant he found it he started lighting tufts of dry grass and tossing them into dense masses of pine needles. Some of them went out; others caught and soon there was a line of fires flashing all along the trail.

Pant's task was that of watching these fires to make sure that no sparks leaped the intervening space and lighted on the wrong side of the trail. A dozen times he stamped out little patches of fire in the center of the trail and once, in the nick of time, he slashed down a young fir tree that was all ablaze and cast it into the burning mass beyond.

The fires they had started grew in intensity and volume. The heat was rapidly becoming unbearable. Coming to a narrow brook that crossed the trail, Johnny dampened his handkerchief and fastened it over his face. Pant followed his example.

As they at last reached the beach once more and looked back they saw a continuous line of fire on one side of the trail but none on the other.

[153]

"Wonder who our friends are," said Pant. "Someone from the

mill, I suppose. Probably came down in a motor boat. Well, I'll say they came just in time."

"We'd better work our way back along the trail if we can stand the heat," suggested Johnny. "Sparks might leap across and undo all our work yet."

To their great relief they found the heat already somewhat abated. The trees next to the trail had burned and the fire was rushing on to meet the conflagration that was creeping toward it from the bay.

"Soon they'll meet," exclaimed Pant in high glee; "then watch for a wonderful display!"

Working their way back along the trail they stamped out any tongues of flame that seemed inclined to attempt the crossing of the trail. So intent were they upon their task that they all but ran into a tall man who like themselves wore a mask to protect his face from the flames. He was patrolling his share of the trail.

[154]

Apparently taken by surprise, he halted in the trail, then, half turning about, muttered: "Close call. Very close."

At that he faced squarely about and walked rapidly in the direction whence he came.

"Well I'll be darned!" whispered Johnny. "What do you think of that?"

Pant did not answer. He was watching every motion of the stranger, taking in every detail of his appearance and dress.

"I'll know him if I see him again," was his comment at last. "Think mebbe I've seen him before, once, mebbe twice, but I'm not sure. Did you notice how long and gray his hair was?"

"No," said Johnny, "can't say I did. My notion was that it was Nelsie's father. He acted peeved at us because he thought perhaps we set the fire by some clumsy accident."

"Nothing like that," smiled Pant. "Nelsie's dad wouldn't have come alone. He'd have the whole mill force with him."

[155]

"Anyway," Johnny said, "you've got to hand it to him; he knows how to fight fires."

"Look!" exclaimed Pant breathlessly. "Oh! Look!"

The sight that met their gaze as they turned their faces toward the bay was one they would never forget. The two columns of fire, one that had gained volume through long burning and the other by being urged forward by the wind, had advanced until like two armies they had met.

With a roar that could be heard for miles, the fire leaped

hundreds of feet in air. Seeming to seize bushes, branches, whole trees, and tear them from their moorings, it sent them rocketing through space to drop at last sizzling in the bay.

It was all over in a moment. The point, stripped of its vegetation, lay black and red beneath the yellow light of the moon. The fire was checked; the vast stretches of timber were saved.

[156]

“Let’s wander down this way,” said Johnny. “We may have a chance to thank our tall friend yet.”

They tramped the length of the trail, but though they went to the very water’s edge, then up and down the beach, they found no trace of him.

“Like some king in hiding,” Pant smiled, “he has vanished.”

[157]

CHAPTER XX

FIRES THAT GLEAM IN THE NIGHT

The forest fire was now well under control. Like some city burned by destroying soldiers, the whole point still gleamed out in the darkness. Four great yellow pine trunks, seeming the pillars of a vast ruined cathedral, glowed red to their very tops. The lesser trees, thousands of them, stood flashing back the light like candles for the bier of their more ancient brothers, the yellow pines, which for all one knows might have lived a year for each red glow that surrounded them.

“Pity to waste so much timber,” said Johnny.

“Yes, but think what it might have been!” said Pant. “Tell you what,” he exclaimed, “if I only had a violin I’d re-enact the picture of Nero playing while Rome burned.”

“Here’s a mouth organ,” grinned Johnny. “Do the best you can.”

[158]

Pant took the despised little musical instrument and out from it sent such weird and enchanting tones as Johnny in all his experiences had never heard. Now it rose like a wild trump of warriors exulting over the fall of their enemies’ most beautiful city, and now it fell to the low mourn of those who sit by ruins and lament the loss of a home. Now again it was the sweet, low song of woods nymphs, who, just beyond the trail that had stopped the flames, were, Johnny fancied, rejoicing over the preservation of their glorious forest.

“Where did you get all that?” Johnny asked when his companion had finished.

“Down in the heart of the Cumberland Mountains in Kentucky,” Pant smiled. “Tunes that have never been set to music. Wonderful melodies they are; telling just how men feel when they are left to live a natural life in the heart of the wilderness. They are like the Scotch songs that Sir Walter Scott tells of in his stories of the Highlanders; the kind that were played on the ancient Harp of the North. I can’t do them very well. You should hear the natives do them, especially when they have a violin they have cut out of the heart of some great mountain tree with their own hands.”

[159]

“I should enjoy hearing them,” said Johnny.

“And some time you shall,” promised Pant. “It’s a wonderful and strange country, full of notions and peculiar ways and as packed with weird superstitions as the heart of India itself.”

“Yes, let’s go down there sometime,” said Johnny. “But first we must solve the many mysteries that hover over this cape and bay. Who put the safe down by the split rock? What does it contain? What is the Black Schooner? Who is its master? What sort of power has it? Who is stealing timber from the mill? What is the cabin of ‘eight smokes’? Whose is it? Who set this fire to-night? Why did he do it?”

“Ten questions,” grinned Pant. “Just like an examination.”

“Yes,” said Johnny, “and if I had to pass the examination at the present time I’m afraid I wouldn’t make a passing grade.”

[160]

“Nor I,” admitted Pant.

“But we’ll stick till we can.”

“We will,” said Pant, gripping Johnny warmly by the hand.

Nothing remained but to watch the fire, to see that no sparks were blown across the trail to set a fire beyond. Once or twice the wind sent an eddy of these sparks soaring high. This gave the boys anxious moments but resulted in no new conflagrations. Toward morning a slow drizzle set in which wet them to the skin but at the same time soon reduced the fire to a mass of cold black charcoal and left them free to seek shelter in their cabin.

“Grub,” said Johnny drowsily, as he warmed himself by the newly kindled fire, “then hours of sleep. After that we go after the safe in the split rock.”

“Only hope it’s still there,” said Pant, wrinkling his brow.

“Of course it will be. Why shouldn’t it?”

“Why should it have been there in the first place?”

[161]

“That,” said Johnny, “is just what we are going to try to find out.”

[162]

CHAPTER XXI

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

That night, just after dark, the boys found themselves all set for a great adventure.

“Got the rope and tackle in the boat?” asked Pant.

“Yep—battery, wire, light, everything. Hop in and we’re off.”

Pant leaped into the boat; Johnny shoved her off and they were away, up the river in the night.

The moon had not yet risen; fleeting clouds obscured the sky. It was a fit night for adventure.

“Just right!” whispered Pant, as he leaned forward in an attempt to pierce the dense darkness.

“Have to use a flashlight to locate our steering points,” Johnny whispered back.

Steering more by his sense of direction than by sight, Johnny drove the craft to the point in the river which he supposed to be directly above the split rock.

[163]

“Now the flash,” he ordered. “Make it short and snappy. We don’t know who’s lurking about.”

A gleam of light flashed across the water: Pant’s flashlight. It darted here and there, everywhere, for one tense second, then blinked out.

“Two boat-lengths upstream. Make it four; we’ve drifted a little. Two to the right.”

Johnny pulled at the oars in silence.

“Now, again,” he breathed.

Once more the light gleamed.

“Fine!” whispered Pant. “No, we drifted too far—that’s good. Over she goes!”

There followed an almost inaudible splash as the anchor went over.

A second later they felt the boat tugging at the anchor, felt, too, the slow downstream drift, and felt sure that in another moment they would know whether or not they had reckoned correctly.

But the moments passed and the boat continued to drag its

anchor.

[164]

“Missed it,” Pant mumbled. “We’ll have to try again.”

Once more the light flashed; whispered directions were given and the boat moved forward. Again the anchor fell and drifted. Came again the moment of tense waiting and then:

“Now, here we are. Let’s have that light.”

With deft fingers Pant adjusted the electric wires. For an instant a bright light shone in the bottom of the boat; the next, it was snapped off.

“It works,” he muttered. “Got your tackle? Ready?”

“Yep.”

Seizing an object from the bottom of the boat, Pant dropped it into the water. This he lowered away by an insulated wire until it was ten feet below the boat. He touched a button. There came a gleam from the depths below. A yellow ball of light shone there.

“Works perfectly,” he whispered. “Over you go!”

[165]

Johnny was poised for the plunge, when there suddenly came to his ears the faint click-click of steel rods working in perfect unison.

The next instant a black bulk seemed to loom straight above him.

With a shrill whisper of fright and warning, he dropped flat on his back in the boat.

The next instant the black terror had passed, but the rowboat was tossing like an eggshell in a tempest.

Staunch little craft that she was, she rode the wild waves like a cutter. A moment later, the wake of the black peril having spent itself, the two boys sat up rubbing their shins.

“Wha—” Pant breathed.

“The Black Schooner!” Johnny whispered back.

“It’s a haunt!” Pant declared. “Can’t do a thing without her showing up.”

Johnny did not reply to this; he was looking over the side of the boat.

“It’s gone!” he exclaimed.

[166]

“What’s gone?”

“The light’s gone out.”

“You’re right,” said Pant. “It’s broken or water-logged or something.”

“Well,” said Johnny, with a sigh, “I guess that about ends this affair for the present. Can’t do anything without a light. Anyway, I don’t fancy the job as long as our old black friend is about. Lift the anchor and I’ll row you ashore. Guess I’ll go up the river and have a look at the mill. Nelsie won’t be looking for me, but that’s all the better. Think I can get a close-up look at the mill without being spotted.”

CHAPTER XXII

A MYSTERIOUS POWER

After putting Pant ashore, Johnny turned the prow of his boat upstream, then gave himself over to the long, steady, tireless stroke which was to carry him miles against the river's swift current to a safe landing close to the great mill.

Three hours later he was dragging his craft ashore. Before him, as he stood there for a minute after beaching his boat, he saw a narrow, hidden eddy of the river. Behind him was a dense thicket of second-growth pine, fir and tamarack.

"I guess the boat'll be safe enough here until I come back," he mumbled. At that he turned and began searching along the shore for some logging road or trail that might lead him inland. He was not long in finding a logging road and, by great good fortune, this led directly to his desired destination, the mill.

As it was now after midnight, the place was as still as a tomb. Only the all-but-silent rush of water in the river whispered of the mighty din and clatter that went on here by day. Even old Mac, the incompetent watchman, seemed to have vanished.

[168]

"Spooky place," Johnny whispered to himself, as he dodged from the shadow of a great pile of waste to dart for the cover of timber-piles where, tier on tier, millions of feet of lumber lay stacked.

Creeping along in these shadows, he at last came to the mill itself. A giant open shed, devoid of doors, gates, locks or keys, it was open to his inspection.

Accepting this implied invitation, he crept within. Here the atmosphere took on a more ghostly look. Each upright beam seemed a man. Over each tongue-and-groover and each planer, he fancied he saw phantom men bending over their work, men who had labored here and passed on never to return. Perhaps even these machines had taken their lives. Such was often the misfortune of a mill hand.

Johnny was not here, however, to dream of ghosts. He had come for a purpose. He meant to get the lie of everything, so that if occasion demanded he might find his way about in this labyrinth with ease.

[169]

Suiting his actions to this purpose, he left the planing-room, once more to come out into the moonlight. Here he hurried along the edge of the mill pond where, like so many black crocodiles, the saw logs lay sleeping.

Having rounded this, he came to a low, narrow shed of sheet

iron.

“Power house,” he murmured.

No smokestacks towered above this building. The power that turned these many wheels and set a hundred saws singing came from a fall in the river, a hundred miles away. There electrical power was generated to be carried over high tension wires to this power house where three great electric motors set it to work. This electrical power was far safer than steam, the danger of fire being entirely eliminated.

“Great idea,” Johnny thought to himself. “They call it white coal, this power. They—”

[170]

His reflections were suddenly cut short. Had he seen a dark shadow flit past him? He thought so. Flattening himself against the wall, he waited for he knew not what.

His heart thumped so loudly, he thought it would begin a tattoo on the sheet iron side of the power house.

Seconds passed and nothing happened. A minute went by, another and another, and no sound came.

“Just my imagination,” he told himself as he finally relaxed his vigil to creep around the corner of the building.

Once he had come to the door of the building, his assurance left him. The door was ajar.

“Surely they would not leave it unlocked all night,” he told himself.

Again he flattened himself against the wall to stand at alert attention.

No sound, save the swish of waters, came to his ears.

[171]

At last he pushed the door wide open and peered within. Three black bulks loomed before his eyes—the motors. Aside from these, and a rack of tools, the room contained nothing. On the wall was a black granite plate. From the surface of this, lighted by the moonlight, the faces of dials and indicators gleamed, while the handles of six knife-switches pointed straight at him.

“Open, as they should be,” he told himself. “Mighty strange, though, that all this should be unlocked at this time of night. Suppose a fellow ought to tell them. It’s dangerous. What if some child came this way? Might be electrocuted. What if some mischief-maker threw in the switches, set the motors going, throw the whole mill running like mad. It might tear the thing to pieces.”

His first impulse was to awaken someone and tell him.

“But then,” he told himself, “first question they’d ask would be: ‘What you prowlin’ around here this time of night for?’ And what’d I say, huh? Guess I’d better let them take the chance. It’s their mill, not mine.”

[172]

Turning, he hurried from the room to resume his skulking along in the shadows. He soon came to the shed where was housed the huge traveling platform that carried the eight-foot logs to the giant saws that sang a merry song as they ate their way through the hearts of the fallen giants.

“I’d just like to stand on that platform,” he told himself, “and imagine I’m controlling the levers, sending the logs forward, setting those saws singing. Just—”

He had stepped upon the platform; had taken three steps forward, when, to his utter astonishment, he caught the low hum of a revolving saw. The next instant the platform shot ahead with a sudden lurch that threw him sprawling on his face.

Madly he scrambled to his feet. Not five yards ahead of him a great saw was cutting air. He was in its path. A moment more and he would have been sawn asunder.

[173]

In wild consternation he leaped from the moving tram and, dashing out of the shed, once more sought shelter in the shadows.

“Now, I wonder,” he breathed. “Someone turned on the power. Did they know I was on the tram? Did they do that in hopes of getting me?”

Being a fellow of action, he wasted little time in thought.

“Might get a glimpse of the villain,” he told himself. Dashing down a long lane of shadows, he came once more in sight of the power house. The door was still ajar. All was darkness and silence.

Fifteen seconds he stood there staring ahead, listening to the low hum of the distant saws. Then he worked himself cautiously forward to peer within the power house.

He truly expected to see someone within. Strong and splendidly trained, he braced himself for a battle.

No battle followed. To his great amazement, he found the place as empty as before. To his far greater surprise, he saw the knife-switches still standing wide open. And yet—he could scarcely believe his ears—he caught the unmistakable hum of two of the motors.

[174]

“Huh!” He started back in astonishment and fear. “Tremendous motion with no electrical current to drive it. How can that be?”

Once more he darted back into the shadows.

“No place for me,” he murmured. “Big things going on here that I know nothing about. And yet,” he mused, “this may be the key to the big secret, the great mystery.”

Even as he mused, the song of many saws, which had grown louder each second, suddenly ceased.

At the same time he became conscious of some movement on the ground to the right of him. A strange gliding sound came to his alert ears.

“Like a snake,” he told himself.

The next instant he found himself racing after a pair of dark objects that leaped wriggling and twisting toward the river’s bank.

[175]

“Wires!” he exclaimed.

And now the speed with which they traveled redoubled. Race as he might, he could not follow them. They were lost to his sight but still he raced forward. It was as if he followed a phantom.

Stumbling forward in the darkness, now falling, now rising to leap on again, he drew up at last at the river’s bank. And there he caught a glimpse of a dark bulk gliding down the river.

“The Black Schooner!” he breathed. “The craft of great and mysterious power. I wonder if it was her power that turned all those wheels to-night?”

For a time he stood lost in reflection; then, catching a gleam of light, and realizing that the mill hands had been roused by the strange phenomenon of the sawmill started in the middle of the night, he decided that flight for him was the better part of valor.

Five minutes later he was silently drifting down the river in his boat, but his mind was far from drifting; it was thronged with many strange and wild thoughts.

[176]

[177]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SAFE IS GONE

Dawn was breaking the next morning when Johnny reached his shack. Pant was asleep. After a lunch eaten half in his sleep, he crawled between his blankets and was lost to the world.

It was high noon when he awoke. He found Pant sitting at the table tinkering with fine wires, lenses and batteries. On his face there was a look of determination such as Johnny had not seen there for many a long day.

“Something unusual has happened,” was his mental comment.

If something had happened, Pant was not the type of fellow to blurt it out at once. Indeed, he said nothing about anything that had happened to him. When he saw that Johnny was awake, he turned and drawled, “Well?”

“Saw things,” was Johnny’s answer.

“What?”

[178]

“A lot.”

“Elucidate.”

Johnny proceeded to elucidate. When he had told the whole story of his visit to the mill, of his experiences there, of the mysterious power, the elusive wires, and the Black Schooner, he turned to Pant with the exclamation:

“Now what do you think of that?”

“I think,” said Pant, with an odd sort of smile playing about his mouth, “that it’s about time we did something. That’s why I’m working with these trinkets. I want to rig up a good, reliable Panther Eye that will give us a good, sure look in the dark; also a Crimson Flash that will throw fear into man or beast, if it chances to fall upon either. When one goes on a journey he’s wise to take along his whole bag of tricks. He can never tell what’ll come in handy.”

“A journey, did you say?”

“I figure we may take one.”

“In the Dust Eater?”

Pant nodded. “Brought her ’round this morning and hid her in a little cove by the beach where she’d be handy.”

[179]

“That’s all right,” smiled Johnny, “but the first thing we’re to do to-day is to lift that safe from the split rock, don’t forget that. Black Schooner or no Black Schooner, I’m highly in favor of dragging it ashore in daylight. There’s no telling what valuables it may contain.”

“That’s right; there *is* no telling.” There was a humorous smile on Pant’s face.

“Why? What’s up?”

“Nothing much, except that the safe has vanished.”

“Vanished?” Johnny started from his seat.

“Yep. Clean gone. Party that sunk her evidently reckoned she wasn’t safe there as long as two folks like you and me were about, so they lifted her and hid her elsewhere.”

“You’re sure about it?”

“Yep. Up there early this morning,” said Pant, tersely.

“Well!” exclaimed Johnny. Then he sat for a long time in a brown study.

[180]

“I sent word to Nelsie yesterday,” he said at last, “that I’d be up to-night and we’d climb the big fir tree to use the Panther Eye and see what we could see.”

“That’ll be all right,” said Pant quietly, “providing nothing unusual happens. You see, I’m looking for the Black Schooner to do her usual nightly roving around midnight, and I thought we’d follow her.”

“Follow her? They’d know we were following and get frightened away!”

“I think not. We’ll take the Dust Eater and give them a big lead. Then we’ll fly high. We can keep track of them by aid of a telescope and the Panther Eye. There are plenty of planes flying along the coast these days. The Black Schooner fellow will never guess that we have any interest in him. Anyway, I think it’s time we made a move; we’ve got to get some of the snarls out of our tangle of mysteries. Too many of them get on my nerves. If you and your little pal, Nelsie, have good luck, you can dispose of the log rustlers to-night. Old eight smokes can wait. The Black Schooner looks like the big hokus-pokus. You never can tell, though.”

[181]

“You never can,” agreed Johnny, as he swung his feet to the floor and reached for the steaming coffee pot.

[182]

CHAPTER XXIV

“THEY’RE CHOPPING AT OUR TREE”

Johnny did not tell Nelsie of his strange experiences of the previous night at the mill when he met her by the river’s bank after darkness had fallen. She, on the other hand, told him all that had happened at the mill after he had vanished. Certain light sleepers among the crew had been awakened by the sound of moving wheels and whirling saws—the mill was in motion, and that at the dead of night. They had at once roused their comrades. Some rushed to the foreman’s house to beat upon his door. Soon all the village was aroused. Rifle barrels gleamed in the light of lanterns. Half-dressed men, women and children ran everywhere. There was wild confusion.

“And what do you think?” Nelsie whispered back, as they hastened over the forest path. “When they got to the mill, not a wheel was moving, as these workmen had said they were. Not a thing had been harmed. It seemed like the men had dreamed it. Only thing is the power house was unlocked, and Peterson, the engineer, swore that it had been locked. Only clues they found were some footprints down by the river. One of the men made cement casts of those tracks, so maybe they’ll find the man, after all.”

[183]

Johnny started as he caught these words. “Might be my footprints,” he said to himself. “If they run me down, how’ll I explain it?”

There were, however, matters of more immediate importance at hand, so, for the time, the thought was forgotten.

When they reached the great fir tree with its rustic ladder reaching to the clouds, Johnny found himself experiencing a genuine case of nerves. He found himself wishing that the fir cone that produced that giant of the forest had rotted in the bottom of the river. He did not want to climb that tree. As he put out a hand to grip the first round of the ladder, he found the hand to be shaking violently.

“Oh, come now,” he grumbled. “This won’t do. We’ll just have to buck up, that’s all.”

[184]

For one full minute he stood stock-still, while the nerves all over his body came to rest, as a flutter of falling leaves come to rest after the passing of a flurry of wind.

“Now,” he breathed, “that’s better.”

He had mounted halfway to the first branch when off to the

right a twig snapped.

“Rabbit, or perhaps a deer,” he told himself. Nevertheless his heart was thumping violently.

As he rested for a moment on the first branch, he caught the clear, long-drawn note of a whistle. That, too, came from somewhere off to the right.

“Deer whistling to his mate,” he told himself. Yet, as he said it, he knew that down deep in his heart he did not believe a word of it. He had heard deer whistle in the forest many times. It was like that, yet not quite. There was a false note which a trained ear, such as Johnny’s, could not fail to catch.

If Nelsie caught these sounds she gave no sign of it. She was climbing steadily and was now far above her companion.

[185]

“Humph!” Johnny grunted as he resumed his upward climb. “If there were men about, what could they do? Not a thing. If worst comes to worst, we can roost in the tree like birds until daybreak.”

He was not going to be able to do that, but this he could not know.

Climbing steadily, he at last reached a seat beside the “little brown squirrel.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, as she leaned far forward to part the branches. “It’s going to be wonderful! And did you say I might wear that Panther Eye thing to-night?” She gave Johnny’s arm a little squeeze.

“If the thing works,” Johnny whispered, “and if I see things worth seeing.”

From his exploration of the previous night, Johnny was more competent than on previous occasions to locate the spots he wished to watch. The Panther Eye worked perfectly. He kept it trained upon the mill pond the greater part of the time. Yet, in spite of all this, an hour passed, another, and then another without any movement about the mill being revealed.

[186]

“Guess this is not the night,” he whispered to his companion.

It was nearing midnight. The forest beneath them seemed strangely still. Not a breath of air stirred the tree-tops. Suddenly out of that stillness there came a long-drawn whistle.

“What’s that?” Nelsie gripped his arm.

“Deer whistling to his mate,” Johnny tried to be reassuring.

“No, it’s not,” Nelsie whispered quickly. “I’ve heard them many, many times. It’s never like that.”

“Heard it once before to-night.”

“Perhaps we’d better climb down.”

“Perhaps.”

“Might be dangerous.”

“Might.”

“Think we’d better try it?”

[187]

“Guess so.”

Johnny made a move to swing himself from the crow’s-nest seat. At that very instant there came a sound that sent a cold chill running up his spine and set his hand trembling so he was obliged to drop back into the seat.

“An axe!” Nelsie breathed in an awed whisper. “They’re chopping at our tree!”

[188]

CHAPTER XXV

TOTTERING TO A FALL

The first stroke of that axe was all but paralyzing. To be perched in a giant tree, a hundred and fifty feet in air, then to catch the ring of an axe striking at the roots of that tree, perhaps at last to bring it thundering to the ground, that surely was enough to blanch the cheek of the bravest of the brave.

It was only a matter of seconds, however, before Johnny was his usual cool, indomitable self.

“Humph!” he muttered, “it’s just some fellow’s idea of a practical joke; wants to scare us. The tree’s at least nine feet through. He couldn’t fell it in four hours. And, if worse comes to worst, he surely must know that I could jump on his back from ten feet up in the tree, then beat his senseless brains out afterwards.” He settled back in his place. “Let him chop; he’ll tire of it soon enough!”

“Johnny,” breathed the girl, “are you very, very strong?”

[189]

“I’m as strong as the average fellow of my age and size,” said Johnny soberly. “What’s better, though, I know how to use that strength to its very best advantage. I’ve been trained to that as few fellows are these days. In these times too many people trust to their wits to keep them out of danger. It doesn’t always work. There come times, even in our tame little world, when strength and skill of muscle win. Take the great war: Boys needed it then; they always will need it.”

Then, realizing that this little “brown squirrel” of a companion needed no lecture along these lines, Johnny lapsed into silence.

He started as he felt a sharp grip on his arm, and his ears told him that a second axe was now ringing in tune with the first.

“Two of them,” he murmured. “That means they’ll get through twice as quickly, if they really mean business. But how about it? If worse comes to worst, won’t your friends down at the mill hear the chopping and come to our rescue?”

[190]

“They won’t hear it,” whispered Nelsie. “Not a single chance. It sounds loud enough up here, but that’s because there are but few branches to stop the sound, to split it up and carry it away. But through the forest it doesn’t travel far; not nearly to the mill. Besides, they don’t know I’m here. Who cares if a tree is chopped down? No one pays any attention to that. They can’t carry it away. Might be a bee-tree, or they might be after a bobcat. Who could guess?”

Again, save for the monotonous chop-chop of the axes as they

bit into the solid trunk of the tree, there was silence. Nelsie was bearing the suspense bravely.

Moments passed; five, ten, fifteen, twenty precious minutes of life. Johnny felt the even beat of the girl's heart as she pressed against his side. Oddly enough, he found himself wondering how it would seem to have such a brave little heart stilled forever.

At the end of twenty minutes the strain was beginning to tell on the nerves of the girl. Her breath came more sharply. Her feet swung ceaselessly back and forth. Her fingers clasped and unclasped.

[191]

"This," said Johnny, "seems to be getting serious. I really believe the fools mean business, whoever they may be."

At that instant he found himself asking the question: "Who are they? I've been assuming that they are the log rustlers. But are they? Would men do such a deed for a few thousand feet of timber? Can it be that this is the work of the master of the Black Schooner? Has he been spying on us, as we have him? He was about, watching us when we took that jug of poison out at the shack of eight smokes—at least, someone was, for he sent a silent bullet crashing into the jug. Can it be that he has seized this moment to rid himself of me? Can it be that he, after all, is the brains of the timber-stealing gang, and that the mystery of the Black Schooner, the eight smokes, the safe in split rock, and the strange doings about the mill at night, are all one?"

He found no satisfactory answer to these problems. Only one thing seemed clear: These choppers, whoever they were, and whether few or many, meant business. For the protection of the girl, if not for his own, he must go down and fight them.

[192]

"We'll have to go down," he whispered quietly, "I'll go all the way, and, if it's necessary, land on their backs. You can stay on the lowest branch till the scrap's over."

He felt her hand tremble slightly as it gripped his, but in that grip there was a message of confidence which went to the very center of his heart.

Noiselessly then they began to slip from limb to limb. That he was taking a desperate chance Johnny knew right well. He was not armed. The men beneath him had axes; probably had firearms, too. Like some wild creature, he might be shot from the tree long before he reached the ground. Yet there was no other way. He could not see this girl—any girl for that matter—in grave danger without trying to help her. And if the danger came to her because she chanced to be with him, then his obligation was still greater. "And such a brave little sport as she is," he told himself.

[193]

These reflections were cut short by a sound that sent a thrill through his being, a sound which so unnerved him that for a second he was in danger of plunging to his death far below, simply because of his inability to retain his grip upon the branch that supported him.

“The tree!” he gasped. “It’s cracking before its fall!”

For five seconds he clung there irresolute. What could it mean? Was the tree hollow and rotten at the base? Had this little chopping prepared it for a crash to earth? This seemed impossible. There could be but one answer: The villains, whoever they were, had known of this rendezvous of himself and the girl. Feeling sure that he would return they had with a great crosscut saw all but severed the tree at its base. Trusting night to hide their work, as it had, they had waited until their quarry was up the tree, then with axes they attacked the remaining section of the tree’s trunk. Now the tree was cracking for a fall.

[194]

Quicker witted than he, the girl had half-circled the trunk, and, like a flying-squirrel, was about to pass him in a mad, downward flight, when he seized her arm.

“No! No! Not down! There isn’t time! It’s sure death. Up! Up! Up as far as you can go,” he urged. “And remember, she falls toward the river!”

Understanding not at all, but trusting implicitly, the girl climbed upward. Amid the thundering cracks of the doomed tree, she leaped from limb to limb. Passing their crow’s-nest seat, she climbed to dizzy heights beyond.

And Johnny? Had he suddenly gone insane? He had not. His mind was simply going over the grooves which forethought and planning had worn there days before. They had but one chance—a slim one, but a chance. He was taking it. At the top of the tree the limbs were young, green, springy, pliable. They must reach these before the tree tottered.

[195]

“She’s going!” he fairly shouted at last. “Climb out! Out! Get away from the river! Out! Out! Until the limb bends. Out, out, and cling there!”

Beginning to understand, the girl did his bidding. She was ten feet above him. He, too, climbed out upon a branch. Clinging there, he saw above him her swaying form and for a few brief seconds gloried in her courage. Then there came a sickening swing, followed by a second’s halting in mid-air. Johnny set his teeth hard for a wild plunge through space. The tree was tottering. In another moment it would go thundering down.

[196]

CHAPTER XXVI

WHIRLED THROUGH SPACE

He had not long to wait. There was time for a fleeting glance at the girl swaying on the bough above him, another moment for the grim setting of his teeth, then came the breath-taking swing which told him they were away.

Gripping the limb with a strength born of fear of sudden death, he felt his body straighten out as his feet, like the tail to a comet, cracked together in mid-air. The bough was slender and limber, but strong. With the pull of his entire weight upon it, it did not give. For the second, all was well.

And the girl? One flashing glance above him showed her, feet out, hair streaming, face set like a marble goddess, clinging to her place.

It seemed to him that in this mad rush downward his lungs would be torn from their place. His heart stood still. He was paralyzed, not with fear, but with the terrible momentum. How long would it last? How long could he last? Would he lose consciousness, lose his grip, plunge to his death? He had hoped that the long, wide swing of the bough to which he clung would check his final dash to earth. Would it? There were smaller trees beneath these giants. Would he and the girl be plunged into these and hang there, pierced through and through, like mice hung to barbed wire by shrikes?

[197]

All these questions sped through his mind like mad. Then his brain reeled. The terrible downward rush through that seemingly endless arc in space was dragging the life from his body.

He now saw, heard, felt things as in a dream. A dark body dashed past him. The girl? Had she lost her hold? He, too, plunged forward. The tree had at last reached the ground. Something cut savagely at his face. He sank low, only to leap high in air again. The limb had swung low, but he had not touched earth. The limb had sprung upward again. It had saved him. The girl had passed him in the same mad rush. Had she, too, been saved?

As the bough again swung downward, he was suddenly seized with a great weakness. His hands lost their power to grip. His hold relaxed and he fell to earth with a shock that jarred every bone in his body and at the same time brought him back to life.

[198]

Standing up, he tried to fathom the half-darkness about him. He was surrounded by boughs and needles of the fallen tree.

“Nelsie! Nelsie, are you there?”

His own voice sounded strangely hoarse and unreal to him. For a minute there came no answer. Then, very near and very low:

“Yes, yes, I am here. Safe. But do be careful; there is danger.”

Ten seconds Johnny had for rejoicing; then there was business at hand. A dark body came catapulting at him through the dark.

The object that came plunging through the air at Johnny was a man. He had climbed upon the trunk of the fallen tree, and, apparently enraged at discovering his would-be victims still alive, had plunged straight down, intent upon making short work of what remained to be done.

[199]

Unfortunately for him, he had no knowledge of the nature of the boy he was about to attack. Johnny Thompson had been in many a battle of wits and brawn. Now all his strength and all his prowess came back to him. His rage at such a cowardly assault only added strength to his arm and cunning to his brain.

When the attacking one landed, it was not upon Johnny's back but upon a mass of broken boughs. With the agility of a tiger, Johnny had leaped aside. The man stumbled and fell. As he rose to his feet something with the force of a trip hammer and the speed of a rifle-ball struck his chin. Rising a foot from the ground, he shot upward and backward to fade away in the heaps of green boughs. Johnny's good right arm had lost none of its force.

But now there came another, and another. Bent on Johnny's destruction, they attacked from front and rear. With one of these villains crashing down upon his back, Johnny doubled up for a fall.

[200]

Even in such a position, with such odds against him, he was more than a match for them. Like a bucking broncho, he bent every muscle of arm and leg to throw his assailants from him. His right arm shot out and under. One assailant felt his neck cracking from the terrible grip of a half-nelson, while the other, faced by Johnny's terrible right, hovered over in a vain attempt to dash in to his fellow-conspirator's rescue.

It was all over in a very few minutes. Dazed, with noses smashed and muscles aching from blows rained upon them by this husky young athlete, the remaining opponents were glad enough to slink away into the brush.

Once more Johnny had time to think of Nelsie. He called softly, then waited for an answer.

“I'm here—but I—I can't get up,” came back in a hoarse whisper.

[201]

Quickly wild forebodings flooded Johnny's mind: Nelsie had

been seriously injured; her limbs were broken; perhaps even worse, her back. She was paralyzed.

This fear held him spellbound for a time. Then, with a stout heart, he went bounding through the brush.

“Where are you hurt?” he asked, as he bent over her. “Is—is it your legs or your back?”

“It—it’s my legs,” she whispered, “but they’re really not hurt. I—I landed like a butterfly. But—but, some way they won’t hold me up.”

“Only weak from fright, thank God!” murmured Johnny. “Your strength will soon come back all right.”

Nelsie silently nodded assent.

At that he lifted her and carried her carefully far back into depths of the forest, where he was sure they would not again be attacked.

“What a night!” he exclaimed, as he dropped down beside her.

[202]

“But—but what’s this?” exclaimed the girl, “Why, it’s blood on my hand! You—you’re hurt!”

“Why, no, I guess not,” said Johnny cheerfully. “They never even touched me.”

He put a hand to his cheek, to discover for the first time that his face was bleeding.

“It’s nothing serious,” he told her; “just some scratches where the fir branches cut me as they shot past me on that last wild plunge.”

Strengthened by another’s need, the girl rose unsteadily to her feet and insisted upon walking to a near-by brook, where she washed the clotted blood from his cuts and stopped the bleeding with dry moss.

“I—I guess it’s really not serious,” she whispered as she felt over the cuts carefully, “but—but it might have been—”

“There are a lot of things that might have been,” chuckled Johnny, “but they weren’t, and we’ve that to be thankful for. And that reminds me—I have a date with my partner. We were to have taken a little trip in a seaplane. I may be too late, but I’ll have to try for it. This is my crowded night.”

[203]

“Oh! Must you go down the river?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me take you. My father’s small motorboat is just

around a bend in the river. I'm strong now; I'll have you down there in a jiffy."

"I suppose," said Johnny, as they went scouting down a trail in the dark, "that we ought to rout out the entire mill force and go after those rascals who tried to murder us."

"Did you cripple any of them?" Nelsie asked eagerly.

"I think not seriously. Marked them, though."

"Then we could never find them in the night; the forest is too thick, and there are too many places to hide. Track them better in the morning. Leave that to me and my daddy."

"All right," said Johnny.

Nelsie now led the way down the bank of the river and around the bend to a secret landing.

[204]

The next moment they were stepping into a trim little motor boat. The motor began its lively pop-pop-pop, and they went shooting down the river.

[205]

CHAPTER XXVII

A CLUE GIVEN

Scarcely a quarter of an hour had elapsed when they rounded a sharp bend in the river to enter a half-hidden cove. To Johnny's relief, he caught the outlines of the broad wings of the Dust Eater as they lay spread out above the water.

"In time," he murmured, as he directed Nelsie to pull alongside.

"Hasn't passed yet," Pant mumbled from his place in the fuselage. "Have a quiet time?"

"Oh, very!" Johnny's grin was lost in the darkness.

He pulled himself up to the surface of the lower plane.

"Want to come up?" He gave a hand to Nelsie.

"I just want to tell you we've been through a lot to-night," he said to Pant. "Wonderful adventure! We hadn't seen a thing all evening and were about to climb down when things began to happen. We—"

[206]

"What's that?" Nelsie gripped his arm. Her ears, keener than his, had caught a faint click-click. The next moment, like a flash of light, the Black Schooner shot by them.

"There she goes!" exclaimed Pant, leaping for his place at the wheel. "Got to get off at once or we'll lose him. Get the girl down."

"Isn't time. Take her along. Room for two in the back seat. Back in an hour. Want to go?" He reached for Nelsie's arm. But she was already climbing to her place.

"Never flew," she flashed back, "except from a tree. This'll be better."

"The motorboat?" inquired Pant.

"I'll cut her loose and she'll drift ashore; the eddy leads that way."

Ten seconds later Johnny was buckling a harness about the girl. The powerful motor thundered. They began to glide over the water. Then, almost imperceptibly, they began to rise. They were on their way, off for a journey such as not one of them had dreamed of, a journey as full of thrills as had been the earlier hours of that night.

[207]

Stretching back an arm, Pant thrust something into Johnny's hand. There were two objects, a crumpled bit of newspaper and a letter.

Drawing a small flashlight from a pocket in the fuselage, Johnny gave it to the girl who sat tucked in beside him.

"Please hold that while I read," he shouted in her ear. The thunder of the motors drowned his voice, but she understood. Snapping on the light, she held it tilted downward upon his hands while with nervous fingers he tore open the letter. This letter he knew at once from the handwriting was from the man who had hired them to watch the river. What could he have written? Had he told them more definite details of their mission? Had he complained of their inaction, or had he written to call them off the scent? Johnny bent over the sheet, on which the rays of the light were flashed.

In the meantime Pant had headed his craft straight out of the mouth of the river toward a small island which lay close to the main shore line. Here he must make a choice of directions. The Black Schooner had disappeared. There was a narrow channel between the island and the one to the north of it. The schooner might have gone directly north up the coast; it might have shot through the channel which wound in and out between numerous islands and the shore; it might have circled the island and gone directly out to sea, or it might have turned south. He chose to go south because that led along less populated shores. Something about this mysterious Black Schooner led him to believe that it would seek secluded places. Pant chose to fly over the island and skirt the seaward shore of islands rather than skim along above the channel. For this choice he could give no reason, except, perhaps, the fact that out there the sea would be wilder, a taste of adventure which he could not help but feel sure the schooner's master would enjoy.

[208]

As Johnny Thompson in the back seat scanned the letter before him, his brow wrinkled in thought. He had made no mistake; the letter was from his present employer. It ran, in part, as follows:

[209]

"I have been perplexed and a little disturbed at not hearing from you. All other people employed by me in similar service have sent me extended reports of their operations. Have you nothing of importance to report?"

"Perhaps I was wrong in giving you no clue. I will give you one now. Certain occurrences in the locality which you now occupy have led me to believe that my brother is operating there. He is my elder brother, a genius and a great inventor but a man with a peculiar turn of mind. Few of his inventions have ever been turned to account. He probably has his own reasons for this; mostly wrong ones. He is fearless, scrupulously honest and harmless as a child. He is growing old. I loved him as a boy. As a man I have seen little of him. He is my only

remaining relative. It is only natural that I should desire to spend part of my declining years in his fascinating company. That is my only reason for continuing this search which has been long and costly. If you can assist me in bringing the quest to a successful issue your reward shall be ample.”

This, then, was the letter which Johnny read as the plane carried him swiftly northward. Could it be that the man with gray hair streaming behind him as he drove the Black Schooner madly through the water, was Colonel Remmington’s brother?

[210]

“If he is,” he told himself, “then some of my theories will have to be revised. There is not a chance in the world that a ‘scrupulously honest’ man would have anything to do with the log-rustling that has been going on. And certainly no man who is ‘harmless as a child’ would ever order a tree cut down knowing that two young people were at the top of it.

“And how about the safe in the split rock? What reason could any person have for hiding a safe in such a place, unless he had come into possession of it by dishonest means? The log-rustling and the attempt to murder us by cutting down our tree may not have been connected in any way with the Black Schooner, but it seems almost certain that the safe in the split rock must. The connections are too close.

[211]

“Of course,” he reflected, “some men are queer. This brother of his would seem to be. He may have fancied that he had some secret to hide there in the split rock, some secret which did not need to be hidden at all. Such things have happened.

“There are circumstances which seem to point to this brother as the man of the Black Schooner. He appears to be of the right age. The wonderful demonstration of mysterious power at the mill the other night, and the remarkable speed of his craft attained without smoke or noise, would seem to point toward some great and startling invention. And yet, you never can tell.”

His reflections were interrupted by Pant’s actions. Allowing his craft to volplane toward the sea, he adjusted his Panther Eye equipment, then began sweeping the water.

[212]

Putting his lips to a speaking tube, he grumbled:

“Fraid we’ve lost him. Thought he’d go north, but perhaps he didn’t. Oh, well, if worst comes to worst, we have another night before us.”

He touched a lever, the engines thundered and they began climbing again.

Bending over the side of the fuselage, Johnny allowed his gaze to drift out over the sea. At first he could catch only an inky-black surface, flecked here and there with foam. But gradually he became conscious of a moving speck cutting across beneath

their path.

“Pant,” he trilled through the tube, “turn your old Panther Eye to the left and sweep the sea there.”

For a half minute there came no sound save the throb of the motors. Then suddenly Pant touched a lever here and another there. The plane turned in its course.

[213]

“That’s her,” he shouted back. “All but missed him. He’s going straight out to sea. Looks like madness, in such a craft, but I suppose he’ll turn back soon.”

“Got plenty of fuel?” Johnny asked anxiously.

“Enough for a thousand miles.”

“Good!” Johnny settled back in his place beside the girl, who had all this time been silent.

“I’m afraid we’re going to miss our breakfast,” he shouted in her ear. “We ought to get back there to report our tree adventure, but this thing is important.”

“I don’t care,” said the girl. Then she hugged herself and shivered.

“She’s cold,” Johnny told himself. “For that matter, so am I.”

Motioning her to snap on the light again, he dug deep into the recesses of the fuselage before him to drag out a heavy, fur-lined blanket. This he wrapped snugly about her.

After providing himself with the same bit of comfort, he was about to settle back once more in his place when the crumpled bit of paper handed to him by Pant caught his eye. Removing it from the recess in which he had thrust it, he spread it out on his knee. The glaring headlines that struck his eye brought an exclamation to his lips. With an eager hand he motioned the girl to hold the light so he could read the finer print.

[214]

[215]

CHAPTER XXVIII

A STARTLING REVELATION

The heading to this front page of the newspaper read:

EXPRESS TRAIN ROBBED AT RIVER BRIDGE

As Johnny read the story of this daring robbery, the muscles of his face grew tense.

The robbery had occurred in the dead of night. The train had been flagged at the bridge. Three armed men had covered the express messengers with rifles, while two others had rolled a small safe containing currency and bonds, valued at more than fifty thousand dollars, across the car, and had sent it bumping down the embankment.

What had happened after that no one knew, save that the train was at last released to go on its way, and that the search made some hours later seemed to indicate that the safe had been carried down the river in a schooner. Certain natives of the country had seen a black schooner in the river at about that time, but had no idea of its name, or whence it had come, or whither gone. From that point the whole affair was shrouded in mystery.

[216]

Eagerly Johnny searched for the date on the newspaper.

“Twelve days ago!” he breathed. “That tallies pretty well with the movements of our Black Schooner.

“So that’s it,” he sighed, as he settled back in his seat. “The owner of this mysterious silent schooner is not Colonel Remington’s long-lost brother. Or, if he is, he’s changed mightily. And, of course, he may have. Men do change. Anyway, whoever stole that safe is a desperate fellow and has desperate companions.” He began feeling over a machine gun strapped to the fuselage of the plane.

“Had you mostly for a decoration,” he murmured, “but we may need you badly yet.”

As he thought of it now, there remained little doubt in his mind but that this was the black schooner used in carrying away the loot from the train; that the safe which had rested for a time in the split rock was the one belonging to the express company; that the securities and money were still in the safe; and that it now rested in the cabin of the schooner which at this moment was cutting the dark waters far below them.

[217]

“And yet,” he admitted, “there could be two black schooners and two small safes. Question is, are there?”

“One thing’s sure: If we ever come up with that schooner, we’re going to move very carefully. They’d send us to eternity without the bat of an eye, if they’re the fellows.” A grim smile curved Johnny’s lips.

Just there he wished the girl by his side were safe in her home by the mill. He was destined to wish this several times before the adventure was over.

His thoughts were quickly brought back to the present time and place by a shrill whistle at the speaking tube. It came from Pant.

[218]

“Schooner’s turned north,” came in brisk tones. “No telling where he’ll lead us. Think we’d better turn back?”

“No.”

“Think it’s something big?”

“Yes. Paper makes it look that way.”

“How about the girl?”

“She—” Johnny paused to glance down at her—“why, blamed if she isn’t asleep! Guess it’s the wind did it. Didn’t get her sleep last night.”

“All right; cover her up snug and we’ll sail on. Man, oh, man, that schooner’s got speed, though! Seventy miles an hour and keeping it up. Where does he get the power, I’d like to know!”

“That’s part of the mystery.”

Johnny bent over and, dragging forth a great blanket of leather, covered the girl from head to foot. Nelsie did not open her eyes, but sighed her comfort.

“Boo!” he shivered. “Going north at this altitude’s no snap.”

[219]

Straight on plowed the Black Schooner. Straight above her sailed the Dust Eater. Hours sped by. The sun, a red ball on the horizon, lifted itself higher and higher in the heavens. Hundreds of miles of black ocean sped beneath them.

“They think they can outlast us,” Johnny told himself. “Well, perhaps they can. Who knows? Anyway, we’ll show them a race.”

He found himself worrying about the fuel in the tanks. How many hours would it last? They were many miles from land. As far as eye could span, there was only black, restless water.

“Dangerous to land here in a seaplane without fuel,” he thought. “The plane wouldn’t last long.”

But the plane, as if run by perpetual motion, thundered on and on.

And now, as Johnny strained his eyes to look far ahead, he caught a strange gleam on the horizon. Increasing in intensity moment by moment, this at last took on the form of a silvery white line.

[220]

“What is it?” he called through the tube.

“Ice,” was Pant’s laconic reply.

“Then we’ve got them! They’ll have to stop there and turn back.”

“Perhaps.”

Again the motors thundered, and again Johnny’s ears were strained for the last pop-pop-sput-pop-pop which would announce that their fuel was exhausted, their journey at an end.

Still the fuel lasted while, as the moments passed, the silver line became a broad mass of ice.

And now apparently the master of the schooner has seen it. He slowed up. His mad career at an end, he neared the floe, then began skirting it. His prow was now pointed toward the west.

This lasted for an hour, then there appeared a broad break in the ice floe. From the schooner it must appear that this gap extended in a broad line quite through the floe. But to those in the plane it was evident that the gap was narrower at the farther end and slowly closing in, forming a trap.

[221]

The schooner’s master dared it. The Black Schooner’s prow cut the narrow waters. For five hundred yards she shot forward. Then, suddenly, she slowed down. She halted with her prow all but upon a huge ice pan. She turned to find herself facing other ice pans. Slowly but surely they were closing in. As if propelled by an invisible force, they were trapping her.

“Got ’em!” Pant breathed, as the seaplane circled for a landing. “They can’t escape!”

“Yes,” grumbled Johnny, “and perhaps neither can we!”

“We’ll land first and talk about that afterwards.” Pant tilted her nose downward. A moment or two later she glided, graceful as a swan, down upon the water.

As they bumped the side of a broad ice field, Nelsie awoke and, throwing the blankets from her, rubbed her eyes sleepily, and asked, “Where are we?”

[222]

“That,” said Johnny, “is a thing I don’t know. Only know that we’re here, and the Black Schooner’s here with us.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OF THE ICE FLOES

“I think we’d do well to try to get the plane up on this ice pan,” suggested Johnny. “The ice might swing about and crush her in the water.”

“All right,” agreed Pant. “Just wait till I get out an axe and cut a path for her up onto the cake, then I think I can start the engines and slide her right up.”

This plan proved a good one. A half-hour later the three of them were standing beside the plane, which was high and dry on the ice.

“There’s some canned beans, beef and salmon, also some tins of butter in the forward locker,” suggested Pant. “What say we eat? There’s a small alcohol stove for cooking.”

“I’ll be cook,” exclaimed Nelsie, glad to be of service. “I never dreamed I’d be the chef on a real Arctic expedition. It’s going to be a real lark!”

[224]

“I hope so,” said Johnny rather dubiously. He was thinking of the task they now faced, that of overhauling the Black Schooner, and wondering, too, how much fuel there was left in their tanks, and how far it would carry them.

As soon as they had finished their meal, Pant began unslashing the machine gun.

“May need it,” he explained.

“Yes, we may,” said Johnny. “If the fellows prove to be the train robbers, what’ll we do?”

“Capture ’em.”

“Yes, if they don’t capture us. But what then?”

“Arrest ’em and take ’em back to justice. A plain American citizen may arrest a criminal with stolen goods in his possession, and if they haven’t that safe on board the schooner, then you may call me a bum detective. As for taking care of them after we get them, that’s something we’ll have to figure out later.”

It was a rather reluctant Johnny who, a half-hour later, followed Pant with the machine gun across his shoulder as they made their way over the ice pack to the place where the Black

[225]

Schooner lay waiting. He carried a high-power rifle and wore an automatic at his belt. Nelsie had been left behind to guard their camp. He wondered in a vague sort of way whether she would ever see him again.

“Oh, shucks!” he said to himself. “Probably no one aboard that schooner but that light-headed old inventor brother of Colonel Remmington.”

He did not feel at all assured of that, however. As they approached nearer and nearer to the schooner he became more and more nervous.

A wind suddenly sprang up from the north-east. Driving sharp bits of snow against their faces, it increased in velocity with a suddenness such as they had never before experienced. They were going at an angle to it, only half facing it, but for all that the particles of ice and snow cut like knives.

“Look at it come!” Pant mumbled as he caught his breath hard, then, “What’s that?” he exclaimed suddenly.

[226]

Johnny screened his eyes and looked ahead. “Mast of the Black Schooner, I’d say.”

“But—but it seems to move!”

“Nonsense! It couldn’t.”

They were still fighting their way forward. A giant pile of tumbled fragments of ice hid the thing from their view.

“Good wall to hide behind until we get up close,” said Pant.

“Breaks the wind, too,” said Johnny, as he increased his speed.

For some time they traveled in the lee of that ice pile. Finally they were forced to come out once more into the open. It was with wildly-beating hearts that they stepped from behind their shelter.

Instantly Johnny sprang back, crying:

“It moves! It moves! We’re right in its path. It will run us down. It moves through ice as if it were water. That—why, that’s no real ship! It’s a phantom!”

[227]

He would have turned and fled in wild terror had not Pant gripped him by the arm.

“Wait,” he commanded. “She’s quite a ways off yet. Wait and see.”

“Thirty knots an hour,” Johnny breathed, as with bated breath and staring eyes he watched the Flying Dutchman of the ice fields racing toward them.

CHAPTER XXX

NOW I AM TO KNOW ALL!

So startling was this weird phenomenon of a black schooner cutting its way through solid ice, that Johnny Thompson found it difficult to remain quietly in his place and watch.

They were somewhere off the coast of Alaska. This was an ice floe from the Arctic. Ice pans, six feet thick and big as a city block, lay before the schooner, yet she appeared to pass through them as she might had they been composed of sea foam. Here, too, were piles of ice-fragments, ground smooth by the restless motion of the sea. She passed through these without dislocating one. There came no sound of grinding and crushing. Only the all but inaudible swish of snow as it beat against the ice piles came to their ears, yet the schooner moved straight on.

It was weird, fascinating beyond compare.

“She’s a phantom, a ghost of a ship,” Johnny murmured.

[229]

Then, catching a low chuckle from his companion, he wheeled quickly about to find him smiling.

“Fooled! Tricked by the storm!” Pant grinned. “That schooner doesn’t move! It only seems to.”

“Only seems to?”

“Sure! Hasn’t come any closer, has it? Would be here by now if it were going at the rate it appears to be traveling, wouldn’t it?”

“Y-e-s.”

“It’s an optical illusion. The storm’s fooled us. I’ve heard of such things. The snow shoots in one direction so fast that it makes the schooner appear to be traveling rapidly in the opposite direction. She’s not moving; hasn’t been moving. She’s locked solidly in the ice.”

“Well,” Johnny licked his dry lips, “that beats me!”

“Me, too, but since things are as they are, I suggest that we resume operations. We can come up behind that big pile of broken ice off there to the left. Unless I miss my guess, we will then be only a hundred yards from the schooner. We’ll set the machine gun up behind that ice pile with a loophole through our barricade of ice. Then one of us can man the gun while the other takes the rifle and goes up to reconnoiter.”

[230]

“You man the gun,” said Johnny. “If I ever knew anything about

a machine gun, I've forgotten it. Besides, I'm for action. No hovering behind an ice pile waiting for things to happen for me!"

"As you say," Pant smiled a grim smile. "But you may get shot."

"If I do it will be the first time."

"And perhaps the last."

"That may be. But let it rest at that. I'll go. Fix up your cannon."

Five minutes later, as Pant with benumbed and trembling fingers adjusted the parts of his machine gun, Johnny found his teeth chattering in spite of all his efforts to control them.

"Cold or fear?" he asked himself. "Whichever it is, I must control myself. Some mighty quick action may be required mighty soon."

[231]

That he might forget the course of action that lay just before him, he set his mind to work once more on the problem of the Black Schooner. Who was aboard her at this moment? Daring train robbers or a harmless old man?

"I'd rather it were the old man," he told himself. "He'd not put up a fight and he'd be able to tell us a lot of interesting things: What the wonderful power is that drives his schooner at such a terrific speed, without either smoke or noise; why he hid the safe in the split rock; what is in that safe; and, perhaps, what made the mill go without the electric current being turned on; and why there are eight smokestacks to the cabin in the woods and why our tree was cut down. Perhaps he could tell us about all these, and, again, perhaps he couldn't. He might have had nothing to do with all of them.

"But I'm pretty mighty sure the train robbers are over there in the schooner, and then there'll be a scrap. Of course it's them. Why would a harmless old man take such chances to escape from a pursuing seaplane, when he had nothing to hide and nothing to fear?"

[232]

"Ready!" whispered Pant. "Have your rifle at alert. If you scent danger, step aside and I'll send a few bullets singing over their heads. If that doesn't work, I'll lower my sight and riddle their cabin as if it were a pasteboard box. So long," he said, as Johnny stepped out from behind the ice pile. "And may you come back!"

That hundred yards to the schooner seemed a mile as, bending low, Johnny leaped into the teeth of the storm. There was a round window in the bow of the schooner through which he could be seen. A shot from this window might bring him down before he had gone ten paces.

Yet nothing happened. The schooner was as silent as a grave. Now he had covered twenty yards, now thirty, fifty, seventy, and now—now he leaped into the protecting shadows of the schooner. For the moment he was safe.

Holding his rifle in a position for instant defense, he paused to catch his breath.

[233]

Only a moment was thus spent; then, creeping around to the after-deck, he dragged himself over the rail.

“I’m here,” he panted.

His heart was beating loudly, but his nerves were steady. Setting his lips tight, he moved down the deck toward an opening in the fore-castle. The outer door stood ajar. Pushing it open, he peered within.

He found himself looking into a sort of broad anteroom that ended with a closed door. The solitary object in this room caught and held his eye. For ten seconds he stood there motionless, fascinated, staring.

What he saw was a small steel safe. He recognized it at once as the one he had seen in the split rock.

“The express company’s safe. And yet, is it? The express company’s safes are lettered with the name of the company. No name is on this safe. But it might have been painted over,” he told himself.

Then, suddenly, he realized that the time had come for action and that the danger was far greater than he had anticipated. In this hallway, he was completely hidden from Pant’s view; he might be overpowered and killed before Pant knew what was happening.

[234]

Yet he did not hesitate. With his heart beating a tune in unison with the wild thunder of the storm, he stepped forward and thumped a loud tattoo on the door.

For a moment there was silence; then there came a sound of shuffling feet.

Johnny’s rifle shifted to an advantageous position. There was the sound of a lifted latch; the door began to open.

“Now,” Johnny breathed, “now, I am to know all!”

[235]

CHAPTER XXXI

SECRETS REVEALED

The door to the schooner's forecabin was not opened slowly, as if by someone in fear or distrust, but briskly as a business man's office door might be opened. Johnny found himself facing a smiling old gentleman who said simply:

"Well?"

Johnny's eyes had time to take him in before his astonished mind could frame an answer. His snow-white hair was long and flowing but carefully combed and scrupulously clean. His clothing was spotless and appeared to have been pressed only yesterday. His face radiated a wholesome cleanness which spoke of a long life of clean, sane living, for the man who stood before him must be well on to seventy.

"Can it be Colonel Remington's brother?" Johnny asked himself.

As if reading his thoughts, the man smiled and said, "I am Colonel Remington's brother. He doubtless sent you. I don't resent your coming—rather like it in fact. Shows the old rascal still harbors a brotherly feeling for me. Won't you come in?"

[236]

"Excuse me," said Johnny, regaining his power of speech, "but I have a friend out there in the storm."

"Why, so you have!" exclaimed the recluse. "They call him 'Pant,' do they not?"

"Yes," smiled Johnny, wondering meantime how this strange man could know so much.

"By all means go and bring him," said the old man. "Let's have a regular party."

Feeling the genial warmth of the cabin on his cheek, Johnny stole a glance within. The whole place reflected the nature of its owner. It spoke of culture, refinement and a genial welcome, all of which Johnny had not expected to find. All thought of train-robbers and of men who chop down trees to kill, was banished from his mind. Yet mysteries enough remained to be revealed. Then he thought of Nelsie.

"Excuse me," he said, "but there is still another, one less used to hardships than we, a girl."

[237]

"So-ho!" laughed the other. "You brought little Nelsie along? Then we shall have a merry party indeed. Go bring your friends, and, since they must be hungry, I will be preparing a

feast for them, a strange bit of oriental food which I discovered while on my cruise in Japan.”

An hour later the three friends were praising the food their new-found host had prepared for them, and at the same time gazing about them in awed interest at all the strange and mysterious curios that adorned the walls of this unusual cabin.

“I suppose,” said their host at length, “that there are several mysteries which you would be glad to have me reveal.” He smiled as they started forward in their seats. “You are very fortunate, being the only persons to whom I ever purposed to reveal a secret. For once I am ready to answer questions, for, at last, it does not really matter; at least it cannot matter to me, and as for the rest of the world, perhaps it is better that they should know. I am ready.” He settled back comfortably in his chair. “You ask questions. If I know the answer, I will give it to you as truthfully as I can.”

[238]

For a full moment the trio sat in dumb silence. This was so far from their wildest dreams that they did not know how to act or even to think.

“Well,” the host smiled at last, “who shall be first? The lady, of course. Courtesy demands it.”

“Who cut down our lookout tree, and why did they do it?” Nelsie asked quickly.

The man’s face took on a puzzled expression. “Your lookout tree? Has it been cut down?”

“While we were in the top of it.”

“What!” the host started forward. “Surely—surely no one would do a deed so inhuman and cowardly!”

“They did though.”

[239]

“Well, that,” said the old man, settling back with a hurt look on his face, “you could not expect me to know the answer to. Had I known of such villains in this world of ours I should have moved heaven and earth to bring them to justice.”

“Oh! forgive me!” cried Nelsie, overcome with mortification. “The question was at the tip of my tongue and I spoke before I thought.”

“Nothing is easier than forgiving a fair young lady,” he smiled, as he bent forward and touched her fingers to his lips.

“And now,” he said briskly, “who will be next?”

“Why did you hide the safe in the split rock?” asked Johnny.

“That, now, is something I can tell you,” smiled their host. “It

is, moreover, bound up with several other secrets and I will tell them all at once.”

“You have noticed,” he said, leaning forward in his chair, “that this schooner is possessed of a peculiar and powerful mode of locomotion?”

[240]

Johnny nodded.

“This power,” he went on, “is electrical, but not such electricity as you have ever heard of before. You know about batteries. You know that a certain acid is necessary to give batteries power. Certain liquids store up more power than others. That is a matter of common knowledge. Well, once while exploring the north coast of Russia, in a little village called Kingagin, I found a witch-doctor who used as a medicine a peculiar, and to the outside world, an unknown, acid. Being in need of acid for my engine’s storage batteries, I tried some of this. Imagine my surprise at finding that this acid gave my batteries a power ten times as great as that produced by any other acid.

“I at once began inquiries regarding the source of supply of this acid. At first I could get no satisfactory reply but at last, when I had offered the crafty witch-doctor about everything I had aboard my schooner, he led me to a place up the river where the acid was actually seeping out from a rocky crevice.

“I remained in that place long enough to load my schooner with receptacles filled with this strange fluid, then went on my way. Ever since that time my schooner has been run by batteries filled with this mysterious and powerful acid. I don’t pretend to explain it; I only know the power is there and I use it.”

[241]

“It is a great discovery,” breathed Johnny, “one of the greatest the world has ever known.”

“And the secret will die with me,” smiled the old man. “The acid I had on board is at this time mingling with the salt water of the sea. There is not a drop left on board. I poured it out but two hours ago. The place of its origin I will not reveal—that secret must remain untold.”

“But think what it would mean to the world,” breathed Johnny. “How much more easily the wheels of all the factories of all the world might be turned!”

“And to what purpose?” asked his host. “That the rich might be made richer and more powerful; that from the poor should be taken some of their opportunity to earn bread?”

[242]

Johnny knew that this theory regarding the relation of employment and power had been exploded long ago, but realizing the futility of arguing with an old man, he remained silent. Only to himself he said, “I begin to see where Colonel

Remmington found grounds for saying his brother was peculiar.”

“But that does not tell us why you hid the safe at the bottom of the river,” said Pant.

“Ah, so it doesn’t. I was coming to that. You see,” the old man smiled, “I had a fancy that at some time, in the dim and distant future, the human race would be ready to receive my great secret. I conceived the idea of hiding this secret in a safe made of an alloy that resists rust and corroding, and the best place I could think of for hiding it was the split rock in the river. I tremble now as I think of how near you came to getting that secret by lifting the safe.

“Of course, when I saw you had discovered the safe, I at once removed it. It at that time, of course, contained a description of the place where the acid might be found and a sample of the strange fluid. Now it contains only a metal box filled with some odds and ends of more or less valuable papers which I shall ask you to take to my brother.”

[243]

“You mean, which you are going to take,” smiled Johnny. “Surely, after reading this letter, you cannot refuse to return with us.”

He handed to him the letter he had received from Colonel Remmington.

The old man’s eyes were strangely misty as he finished reading it.

“Alas, perhaps I have made a grievous mistake,” he sighed, “but I have enjoyed living alone and so I have done it. If things were different now I might change, but since they are as they are, the die is cast. I shall never return.”

“I suppose,” he said at last, “that this mysterious acid accounts for the moving of the wheels of the sawmill on that night not long ago?”

[244]

“Yes,” smiled the old man, “it does. I had not counted upon your being about. I had always wished to try this power upon a great mill and, having arranged everything about the mill so nothing could be harmed, proceeded to do it. It worked perfectly, did it not?”

“Too perfectly,” smiled Johnny. “Came near being the death of me.”

“There is one other thing,” said Pant. “The cabin of ‘eight smokes.’ How about that?”

“That,” said the inventor, “is a secret which concerns you greatly, for in it you may find a small fortune. I am going to reveal one of my discoveries and you may feel free to reap any

benefit which may come from it.

“You are aware,” he smiled, “that the oils in wood may be obtained by baking the wood or leaves in a furnace. These eight smokestacks were simply the smoke pipes of eight small furnaces. Perhaps you do not know that leather is prepared for commercial uses by the aid of certain vegetable oils which contain tannin. I have been seeking for an oil that would give me the result I sought. At present all the tannin used in the preparation of very white leather comes from Europe. I was seeking a plant that would give us the desired result in America. I found it. In the upper right-hand corner of my safe you will find the name of the plant and some notes regarding the process of extracting the oil. This is what the world calls a valuable commercial secret. If you are interested in money, as I have never been, but as most young people are, you will find that this secret will go far toward making your fortunes. My brother is a shrewd man and will do much toward making your secret pay big dividends.

[245]

“I have only one favor to ask in return for this secret.” He settled back in his chair as if a great weariness had overcome him. “It is simply this, that you return to the schooner in twenty-four hours and that, after removing your notes and the metal box of papers from the safe, you turn the valve in yonder far corner three complete revolutions to the right. The schooner is of iron. The valve lets in the water. The schooner will sink in a half hour, so do not loiter about.”

[246]

“That,” said Johnny, “would be murder.”

“Oh, no. I shall not be here.”

“Where shall you go? This is an ice floe.”

“I shall be in my berth, sleeping the long sleep. A great specialist has given me just twelve hours more to live. I feel sure he is right. I feel it creeping upon me now and shall ask you to leave me. I have nothing to regret and nothing to fear. I have lived a long, happy and contented life and am prepared for whatever the future may have to offer.”

As the three young people rose to tiptoe from the room they felt that they were already in the presence of death.

Twenty-four and a half hours later the mast of the schooner wavered for an instant in mid-air, then sank suddenly from sight.

[247]

CHAPTER XXXII

OTHER MYSTERIES UNCOVERED

There was sufficient fuel left in the tanks of the Dust Eater to carry the two boys and Nelsie to a radio station fifty miles away on the coast of Alaska. Here they were able to obtain fuel for the return journey and to notify their friends and relatives of their safety.

The sun was shining brightly and the sea was calm as the Dust Eater at last came to rest on the surface of the bay at the mouth of their river. It was only an hour later that Nelsie found herself folded in her mother's embrace.

The uncovering of other mysteries came thick and fast. The mystery of the fallen lookout tree had already been cleared up. When Nelsie did not return to her home, a searching party was formed. Members of this party came upon a man wandering about the woods in a dazed condition. When led back to the village and revived by food and stimulants, he turned state-evidence and revealed the fact that he was one of a gang of timber rustlers that had for a long time been robbing the mill. He also admitted helping to cut down the lookout tree but denied any knowledge of Johnny and Nelsie being at the top of the tree at the time. Johnny's good right arm was accountable for his dazed condition when captured. The remainder of the gang were taken into custody the same day, so the river was cleared of timber thieves. It is strongly suspected that these were the men who in such a strange manner set the forest on the point on fire, but this they have never admitted so the matter still remains a mystery. The tall man who had come to their rescue that memorable night of the fire was none other than the owner of the Black Schooner.

[248]

As for the express company's safe, it was soon after found, empty and sunk to the bottom of a deep pool in the river.

When the boys had made their report to Colonel Remington, he turned to them with shining eyes.

[249]

"My brother," he said, "was a strange man. He died and was buried as strangely as he lived. You have done me a great service. How shall I repay you?"

"Only by looking after the patent process which he was so kind as to give us, the secret for tanning white leather," said Johnny promptly.

"I shall do that gladly," smiled the Colonel, "and shall see that the proceeds are ample. How many ways are the proceeds to be divided?"

“Three,” said Johnny. “Nelsie is in on it. She needs the money for high school and college.”

“Is that your wish?” asked Colonel Remmington turning to Pant.

“Absolutely.”

“All right. Then for the present it is good-bye and again I thank you.” With that he bowed them out of the room.

[250]

* * * * *

During the night of the forest fire, Pant had assured Johnny that the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky, the land of feuds and moonshine, was a wonderful place for adventure. Strangely enough, they had scarcely returned from their row with the Black Schooner when a letter came to them inviting them to go into the heart of these very Cumberland Mountains to look into the holdings of an owner of a “blanket survey.”

“Whatever that is,” said Pant as he read the letter.

“Yes, whatever it is!” exclaimed Johnny. “Sounds good to me. I’m for it.”

So it was decided at once that they should go. They did go and adventures enough they had, but that must be told in our next book, “The Hidden Trail.”

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original printed text—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Added a table of contents to be consistent with other volumes in the series.
- Silently corrected palpable typos.
- Once replaced “snag” by “sharp rock” to make directions consistent.

[The end of *The Black Schooner* by Roy J. Snell]