A Mystery Story For Boys

White Fire

Roy J. Snell

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Mystery Stories for Boys

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By
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WHITE FIRE

CHAPTER I
THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY

Johnny Thompson started, then stared with dilated pupils at a spot on the aluminum casting before him. The spot, a jagged notch left by imperfect work in the foundry, turned first a dull red, then a bright red, then a glowing white.

Mechanically his hand touched the valve of his oxy-acetylene torch. Yes, it was as he had believed, the acetylene valve was closed. The oxygen valve was open, it was true, but the drum which had contained oxygen under a thousand pounds pressure was empty. In fact, he was waiting for the arrival of a new drum. That was what made the thing seem strange, impossible! It was a miracle, only miracles don't happen in such places—he was working in the heart of a great industrial plant which turned out automobiles in twenty carload lots and airplanes by the hundreds.

Johnny scratched his chin and stared at the white spot. True, the nozzle of his torch was aimed at that spot; but five minutes before it had sput-sputted for a few seconds, then died down to an insignificant flame giving too little heat for any sort of welding. He had cut that flame off, yet now, before his very eyes the metal glowed white hot.

With a grin which said plainer than words, "I'm dreaming," he thrust a finger in a can of water, then held it over the glowing spot until a drop of water fell.

Instantly he started afresh and stared with wilder eyes. There had come the hiss of water on white-hot metal.

"It's hot—hot enough to weld!—no doubt about it," he whispered. "What in the name of all that's good?"

Mechanically he lifted a light hammer and struck four deft blows. The metal yielded to the touch of the hammer as wax to the seal. Still as in a dream he selected a bit of metal and dropped it into the niche in the casting.

Watching it closely, he saw it, too, turn dull red, bright red, then glow white. Again his hammer fell upon the spot. Deftly he struck it here and there until presently no trace of the weld remained save the glowing white spot.

That, too, changed rapidly, first grayish white, then light red, then dull red, then black.

For a time he watched it, then with a file he brushed away the black scar, leaving the casting perfect, ready to take its place in a splendid chummy roadster.

A chummy roadster! For a moment, at thought of it, Johnny's mind left the mystery. It was to be *his* chummy roadster, and was to cost him only a small fraction of what it would cost on the market, for was he not of the salvage department? And had not the head of that department given him permission to salvage a part here, another part there, and another there, a few in the foundry, in the forge room, in the electrical repair shop, here and there all over the factory, until he had all the parts to make a complete car, and was he not to pay for the car just what the total value of the whole number of parts would have been if they had been thrown upon the scrap pile?

A chummy roadster! It was the only bright spot that had come upon his horizon since he had returned home at the call of a telegram, and had arrived to find his home draped in black, with noiseless footsteps passing to and fro. His father, the father who had been his boyhood chum, had left him for other lands. He had left, too, through no fault of his, a debt unpaid and no estate from which to pay it.

To Johnny Thompson, who had had many adventures but had saved no money, whose soul was a soul of honor, this situation called for but one thing: Adventures for him must cease. He must settle down to hard work and clear off the debt which clouded the family's good name.

Dearly as he loved adventure, much as he longed to be away to some untried wilderness of Russia, Africa, South America, he had set his teeth tight and had said:

"It is my duty and I will."

For a half hour he had permitted his mind to dwell upon his thrilling experiences in Russia with the “Reds”; in Alaska with Hanada; beneath the Chicago river with Cio Cio San; with Panther Eye and the wild beasts of the jungle. All these adventures he had dreamed through once more, then he had resolutely turned his back upon them and had gone forth in search of work.

Work was not easy to find. Times were dull. At last after five days of fruitless search, through the kindness of an old friend of his father he had secured a place in the salvage department of a great automobile and airplane factory. This department took parts that had been badly forged, or badly cast, and attempted to make them perfect, to put them back into the line of construction.

“Cutting costs,” the aged manager had told him. “That’s what we’re after these days. Can’t afford to waste a move. And if you can help us do that you’ll soon be a valuable man.”

“Not much chance for adventure in sorting rusty castings, I guess,” Johnny had smiled, “but I’ll take the job; glad to. Thanks!”

“Now, see here,” the manager had smiled. “It’s queer about that adventure stuff. You can’t always dope it out, but sometimes I think that if a fellow is destined for adventure he’ll find it; yes, even in the heart of a noisy old industrial plant.”

Johnny had smiled and had at once forgotten the remark. He had resigned himself to hard and grimy toil, and for four months had stuck with determination to his job.

Now that remark came back to him as if he were hearing it again: “If a fellow is destined for adventure he’ll find it; yes, even in the heart of a noisy old industrial plant.” Was this strange white fire which enabled him to make a perfect weld with no oxygen and with his gas turned off, the mystery which was to provide the adventure destined to come to him?

He stared about the deserted room. It was after hours and no one was in the building save Tommy Barr, who had gone for a new tube of oxygen. He could discover no possible clue which would tell him of the origin of the strange white fire.

He started as there came a metallic click, click. Then he smiled. It was Tommy rolling the tube over the tile floor.

“Tommy,” he said, “the funniest thing,” then he paused and turned the remark to another subject. He had been about to tell of the strange white fire. “The mystery is mine,” was his sudden conclusion. “I’ll solve it alone.”

When Tommy had gone for the night, with trembling fingers Johnny selected a second defective casting and set it in the vise as the other had been. Eagerly he watched to see what would happen. His impatience grew as the moments passed, for no dull red glow answered his invitation to the unseen source of magic fire.

“Guess the spell’s broken,” he mumbled.

He waited a few minutes longer, then, switching on the valves of his torch, he sent a touch of blue flame against the defective casting and, a few minutes later, threw the now perfect part on the rapidly growing pile by his side.

After that he switched off his torch, snapped off the electric light and went home.

Long before sleep gave his tired eyes rest, however, he pondered over the strange doings of the mysterious white fire, and well he might, for as the days passed that mystery was destined to become more intricately complicated, more strangely baffling on each succeeding day.

Arriving at the factory, as was his custom, a full ten minutes before work for the day, Johnny, next morning, was surprised to find a boy waiting for him with a message from William McFarland, manager of and large stockholder in the plant, his father’s old-time friend.

“What’s he want, sonny?” Johnny smiled.

“Don’t know; jes’ wants to see you at the office.”

“Something to do with that white fire,” was Johnny’s mental comment.

“Johnny,” said the industrial leader, motioning him to a chair, “when I gave you a job in our salvage department you said something about adventure.”

Johnny smiled and nodded.

“You’ve had some adventures,” the magnate scowled, “that ought to have been profitable.”

“How—how?” Johnny stammered.

“Don’t matter how I found out. The point is you should have saved a lot of money from the proceeds of those adventures. Apparently you haven’t. There was that gold mine in Siberia; I’m told it was a new Klondike.”

“It was, but—”

The magnate held up his hand for silence. “There was also that bag of diamonds you rescued from the head of the bolsheviki band. Where’d your share of all that disappear to?”

“I never had any share,” Johnny answered. “In that Siberian gold mine affair I was pledged to pay over the profits to a relief committee working with the refugees in Vladivostok. In the case of the bag of diamonds, it belonged to a defenseless Japanese woman and her people. I returned it to its rightful owner.”

The magnate sat down. He was smiling. “That’s the sort of fellow I thought you were—a son of your father. Know what broke your father?”

“Not—not altogether.”

“He was too honest, too good to his employes. Sold them stock when things were booming because he thought it would be a good thing for them. Then, when the slump came and the stock went down, down, down, he bought it back at the price they had paid. I think it was a mistake. He thought it a point of honor. He paid them the last cent and it broke him flat.”

The capitalist sat staring into space. When he spoke again his voice was husky.

“Such men as that are rare. You’re like your father. That’s why I took you into our shop. I didn’t need you in the salvage department. I do need you now for a far more important mission.” He rose and closed the door. “I need you for a secret mission, one about which you must not breathe a word to any living being save myself.”

A silence fell over the room; a tense, almost vibrant silence.

“Johnny,” he put his hand on the boy’s arm, “we’ve a great discovery within the walls of our factory, a discovery to which the formula, for the time being, is lost.

It is a new type of steel. It has the hardness and the flexibility of the Damascus sword blade and, like that wonderful weapon, its owner cannot tell how it was made."

"Then what good will—"

Mr. McFarland again held up his hand for silence. "You know, in these days of keen competition, manufacturers of motors for airplanes and automobiles are bending every effort to produce steel that will stand severe tests, that will endure strains and over-drive, and will last, last!"

Johnny nodded.

"We have such a steel as that, a marvelous steel. The man who discovered it is a genius—one of our mechanics. Unfortunately, after he had produced a few bars of this steel, and before he confided the formula to any other person, or had discovered ways of working it, he broke down from the excitement and over-strain. His mind became a blank—a complete blank."

He paused to stare at the wall, as if in a dream.

"And there," he went on, "are the bars of steel, some only eight inches long, some two feet—eight of them. Up to last night, that is. Now two of the shorter ones are missing. I was very careless. They should have been guarded. Competition is very strong, and doubtless a competitor has a spy in our plant. If that spy makes away with that steel, if the other man discovers the secret formula first and secures a patent, you can see what it will mean to us."

He looked Johnny squarely in the eyes. Johnny returned the gaze, but his knees trembled. He remembered his experience of the previous night. He had been the last man to leave the factory. Was his employer about to accuse him of stealing the precious bars?

It was a tense moment. For a full thirty seconds not a sound disturbed the room. At last the magnate spoke in a whisper:

"Johnny, from now on it shall be your task to guard the six remaining bars, and to discover the whereabouts of the two that were stolen."

Johnny's muscles relaxed like a violin string when the bridge falls.

“I—I—” he leaped from his chair, “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will. Now sit down there in the corner for fifteen minutes and think out some plans for discovering the lost property. You don’t need to tell me of the plans, but tell me what I can do to aid you.”

Eight minutes had elapsed when Johnny sat up with a start.

“I have it,” he exclaimed. “I’d like an electro-magnet, a powerful one, leaned against the south doorpost to the east exit. I want it connected up with switches in such a manner that I can operate it at a point where I can watch the doorway and not be seen myself. The electro-magnet should appear to be merely stored there temporarily.”

“I’ll have it attended to at once,” said the magnate. “I wish you luck.”

CHAPTER II
JOHNNY'S TRAP WORKS

Closing time that afternoon found Johnny in a cubby-hole just back of the main entrance. He was peering through a crack which appeared to have been left between the boards by accident. It had, in fact, been made for Johnny's benefit that very day.

He was watching the long line of workmen, each swinging in his right hand his paper lunch-box, file out of the building. A clicking, turnstile gate allowed only one to pass out at a time. The factory had other exits, but this was the only one close to the spot where the strange and precious steel bars had been stored.

Beside the narrow board-walk over which the single-file line traveled, lay a circular affair of iron. Some three feet across and two feet thick, it appeared but a crude lump of metal carelessly left there. A close observer, however, would have noted that electric wires led away from the back of it. This was Johnny's electro-magnet. When suspended in air from a cable this innocent-appearing affair could lift a half-ton of steel to a freight car platform as easily as a child might pick up a handful of straw.

"It isn't likely that the fellow who took that steel would attempt to take it from the building at once. He'd hide it in the factory and carry it out some other night. Sooner or later I'll get him. Sooner or—"

Johnny's thoughts were cut short by a hand lightly laid on his shoulder.

"Thought I'd find you here." It was his employer. "Some things in the factory I want to show you when the men are gone. They're about out now. I'll just wait here. Don't let me disturb you."

But Johnny *had* been disturbed; his eyes for the moment had been drawn from that passing string of men and the electro-magnet. As he again focused his eyes on the crack, he gave an involuntary start. Clinging to the face of the electro-magnet as if glued there, was an oblong paper box—a lunch-box. And the man who owned it? He had passed on out of sight without any apparent attempt to regain possession of his property.

“Rotten luck!” Johnny’s lips framed the words but did not say them. The trap had worked. There was iron or steel in that box; that was why the powerful electro-magnet had drawn it to itself. He had recovered the property, but his man had escaped. The precious steel was safe. That much was good. He heaved a sigh of relief; watched the last workman march by, touched the switch, saw the box drop from the magnet as the current was shut off, then turned toward the door.

At this point a doubt came to his mind. What if the metal in the box proved to be some other metal than the precious steel? He had been about to display his catch in triumph. He decided to make sure first, and so merely said: “In just a moment I’ll be ready.”

Stepping outside, he secured possession of the mysterious lunch-box and, carrying it as if it were dynamite, again entered the cubby-hole and said cheerfully: “All right; I’m ready now.”

As they walked slowly back into the factory Johnny’s eyes turned first to the right, then to the left. For the time the baffling mysteries of the hour were forgotten, and for the hundredth time he was lost in admiration of this marvel of modern industry, a vast manufacturing plant. Here they passed through the forge-room where, by the dull light of dying fires, one might see trip-hammers, looming like giants, resting from their labors. Now again they passed through a sand-strewn room where crater-like heaps were smoking—the foundry. And now they emerged into the assembly-room, where were automobiles partly put together, and further down, airplanes poised like giant birds ready for flight.

“The things I am to show you to-night”—the voice of his employer roused him from the spell which the place had put upon him—“are secrets, secrets known only to myself and two other men. This factory was rebuilt and enlarged during the World War. Our entire output was then being taken by the Government. In those days every precaution was necessary. Spies of the enemy were all about us

and in our very midst, seeking out our most valuable secrets, ready to destroy our plants and so cripple our army. It was such a time as this that I had installed in this plant the contrivances which I am about to show you and which may, perhaps, be of assistance to you. Your work from now on will be done at night. You slept this afternoon as I instructed?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you will be all right for tonight."

"Easy," answered Johnny slangily.

"Now, here," they had paused in the center of an aisle, "please note your exact position. Got it?"

"Yes."

Johnny's employer nodded approval.

"Have you a watch and flashlight? It's dark where you're going."

"No flashlight." In spite of his best efforts, Johnny's knees trembled.

"Here's a small one. Now prepare yourself for a surprise. In five minutes stand up. Watch me."

The magnate reached up and gave a pull on an electric lamp wire just above his head. The next instant Johnny felt himself shoot rapidly downward, to land at last with no perceptible shock upon some flat object. All about him was pitch darkness. At once his trembling hand snapped on the flashlight. As its welcome gleam shot out before him, he saw that he was in a narrow, cement-walled chamber. One glance downward and his tense muscles relaxed.

"Humph!" he grunted. "The scrap-conveyor!"

It was true. Beneath this up-to-date factory, a tunnel had been cut, through which a broad, flat conveyor ran. On this conveyor, from every point in the factory, scraps of iron, steel, brass, cloth, wire, rubber and what-not were carried without the lifting of a human hand, direct to the scrap-room.

“It’s a clever exit, nevertheless,” thought Johnny, “and worth remembering. ‘Five minutes,’ he said, ‘then stand up.’”

Focusing the flashlight on his watch, he waited. The conveyor was moving. He could see the shadows of cement beams slowly rise and pass by him. The place was fairly spooky—“like a tomb,” he said to himself. It was dead still, too. Nothing save the almost noiseless motion of the conveyor broke the silence. “What a spot for a tragedy,” he thought. “A fight here in the night; the victor escapes; the dead body is carried silently on to the scrap-pile.”

One minute passed, two, three, four. The silence grew oppressive. Five! Then came a sudden flood of light from above him. Leaping to his feet, he reached up to the edge of a cement floor and vaulted up to it. Silently a second trapdoor closed behind him. His employer stood beside him.

“Have a nice ride?” he smiled.

“Fine! A bit spooky, though,” Johnny grinned back.

“Could you use it in an emergency?”

“I think so. It’s the wire of the lamp hanging directly above it, isn’t it?”

“Right. Works electrically. Pulling that wire does the trick. There are some others, though. We must hurry on. I have a directors’ meeting at eight.”

The marvels, the tricks of magic which Johnny witnessed during the tense half-hour that followed, thrilled, charmed and at times frightened him. Now he caught himself leaping aside, as if to avoid the blow of a hidden force, and now frozen in his tracks, he felt chills race up and down his spine, while cold perspiration stood out upon his brow. Convinced as he was that he was in the hands of a friend, he could not fully overcome the spell of this seemingly magic factory. While standing idly leaning against a wall, he would suddenly become conscious of a movement in front of him, and there, not three feet before him, a second wall towered. Whether it had risen from the floor, dropped from the ceiling or developed out of thin air, he could not tell, so sudden and silent was its motion. Again, he was standing talking to his employer and, having been attracted by a sound in the distance, turned away for an instant, only to find on turning again to his friend that he had vanished; the pillar beside which he had been standing had swallowed him up.

After initiating him into the secret mysteries of six of these strange devices, his employer promised him more in the future, then took him over to the front of a massive vault built into the wall of the factory.

“Here,” said Mr. McFarland, “we keep our most valuable tools and the diamonds used in giving to shaftings their finishing touches. Here also rest the six bars of steel of the mysterious, unknown formula. We hope soon to rediscover that formula, or that its inventor, through the agencies of the doctor of the sanitarium, will be restored to his normal mind and memory. An old and trusted employe presides over the vault during the day. It will be your task to guard it nights. At any time you feel yourself in danger, there are the secret doors, walls and passages I have shown you. They may be of great service to you in securing aid, if it is needed. And now I must bid you good night.”

“Good night.” Johnny’s own voice, as if coming from a cavern, sounded hollow to him.

As his employer disappeared from sight, however, he shook himself and attempted to remember something he had postponed, something of which his subconscious memory was striving to tell him.

Suddenly he started.

“The box! That lunch-box caught by the electro-magnet!”

The next instant he was hastening away to the cubby-hole where the box still rested.

As he put his hand to the door, a sinking feeling seized him. What if it were gone? The next instant found him reassured; with the handle of the box in his own right hand, he was hurrying back to his post of duty.

But what was that? Had his well-trained ear caught the sound of a footstep? With heart beating double-time, he stood in the shadow of a great punch-press and listened. Yes, there it was; a stealthy, gliding footstep.

Stooping, with a silent, tiger-like motion he crept forward until the steel door of the vault was within his view. There, in the shelter of a milling machine, he paused and crouched motionless as a cat.

He did not have long to wait, for out of the shadows there crept the dark, crouching form of a man.

Direct as an arrow the man glided forward. Now he was ten feet from the steel door, and paused to listen. Two steps more, and a second pause. And now his hand was nearing the shining metal knob that controlled the combination lock of the vault. Again he appeared to listen.

At that second, Johnny's eyes fairly popped out of his head—a strange thing was taking place. The knob which had been white in the semi-darkness, had turned a dull red!

"The mysterious fire!" he whispered, almost aloud.

The next instant there came a strange hissing cry of pain. The person crouching there, without noting the red glow, had grasped the knob.

For a second he appeared to study the knob; then, without as much as looking backward, he turned and darted away.

Frozen in his tracks, Johnny stood staring at the knob until the red glow had faded out and the knob shone white once more.

A long time he stood there, his mind rife with wild wonderings. What was this white fire? Whence its origin? Johnny was not superstitious; he felt that some human being was back of it all. But that human being, was he friend or foe? If friend, then he had frightened the enemy away! If enemy, then he had known of Johnny's presence and had used this means to warn his confederate.

Presently, when his mind was again composed, he thought of the lunch-box and with trembling fingers reached down to lift it from the floor.

What would it disclose? How would its contents affect the mystery he was trying to solve?

Johnny drew a deep breath, and grinned happily.

CHAPTER III
JOHNNY FLUSHES A SKULKER

Trembling with suppressed excitement, his brow deeply furrowed, Johnny lifted the lid to the lunch-box, then stared in surprise and disgust. The box contained, not the precious steel bars of unusual and as yet unknown composition, but a small twist drill, worth, perhaps, a dime. For a moment he stared at the thing, then picked it up and thrust it into his pocket.

“Sneak thief! Petty larceny of the pettiest kind. But, anyway, I’ll report it to the chief. He may want to do something about it.”

The rest of that night, waiting in the shadow of a gigantic sheet-steel press, in full view of the vault where rested the remaining bars of steel, Johnny saw no movement, heard no sound that told him there were other human beings in the building save himself and the regular night watchman, who made his monotonous hourly rounds, pausing only to punch a clock here and there. But motionless and silent as they might be, Johnny knew there were at least two persons in that building who were there without leave or license.

To attempt to run down a single individual in the vast plant, with its labyrinth of aisles, with thousands of machines, drill presses, millers, forges, moulders, cranes, conveyors, with its seemingly tangled mass of overhead equipment and its endless underground tunnels, would be equal to the task of capturing a fish with a hand-net on the bottom of the Atlantic. To discover the person would be almost impossible, and even if he were discovered, his capture would be difficult indeed. Only the best of good fortune could crown such an effort with success.

Johnny knew there were two men. One was he who had attempted to tamper with the vault’s lock, and the other was the originator of the mysterious white

fire. That the fire was produced by electric currents set to operate upon certain given contacts, Johnny could not believe. In the case of the knob to the vault's door, this might be true, but in that of the aluminum casting such a theory was impossible, for Johnny knew there could have been no prearranged electrical contacts.

The casting had been on the floor. Johnny had lifted it to his vise and had clamped it there. No one had been near it, save he himself, from that time until the mysterious heat had enabled him to do the work of repair by welding. How could the heat have come there? That, he could not tell. Who had created it? He could not even guess. What had been the purpose in either case? Was he friend or enemy? What would be his next strange demonstration of power? All these remained unanswered. Of one thing alone Johnny was positive: The person had been in the building and was there still.

The thought made him distinctly uncomfortable. "Why," he thought suddenly, "if he is our enemy, he has but to burn out the lock to the vault and the door will swing open of its own weight!"

Then he thought of himself. He had an uncomfortable conviction that this heat might be applied anywhere—on his own body, like as not. At times he saw himself racing about the factory tortured by an intolerable heat which turned his garments to ashes and charred his very flesh. At such times as these he rose and shook himself free from disturbing fancies.

He tried in vain to remember any great discovery which would make such intense detached heat possible. He could think of none.

"It's a discovery! A great discovery!" he whispered at last, "and the discoverer, instead of bettering the world with it, is playing with it just to make one person most awfully uneasy and unhappy. And yet," he paused to think, "and yet he did send that chap gliding away from the vault door as if his life depended upon it."

In spite of all his forebodings, nothing further disturbed the vast silence of the night, and Johnny was ready, upon the arrival of his employer in the morning, to make his report. He had decided to tell of the lunch-box and twist drill episode, but to say nothing, for the present, of the strange white fire. He felt that his employer would simply be perplexed and disturbed by this news, without in any way offering a contribution to the solution of the problem. This was an affair

which a single individual might best work upon alone.

“No,” said his employer, as Johnny displayed the small twist drill and told how he came into possession of it, “we’re not, as you have already suggested, interested in that sort of thing. If there is a sneak-thief in our factory, he will receive his just deserts in due time, and that with no assistance from us. Our factory is run on the honor plan. Every man is put upon his honor. If he proves unworthy of the trust, his fellow-workmen will find it out first of all, and, since the honor of the entire group is at stake, they will request him to mend his ways or draw the pay due him and leave. It is useless for him to attempt to deceive them. He must be on the square or get out.

“In this case,” he smiled, “it is probably not a case of theft at all; it is very probable that this drill was borrowed by the workman for some work at home, with the consent of his foreman.”

Johnny blushed uncomfortably.

“Your plan, though,” the manager hastened to assure him, “is a good one. Keep it up, and you may catch something yet.

“I have said,” he went on, “that we are not interested in petty thefts. We are not. This perhaps makes you wonder that you are employed as you are at the present time. But this is quite another matter. The taking of those two bars of steel, insignificant as they may seem—a few pounds in all—is of great importance to us, since, as I have explained to you, it may mean the revealing of a valuable secret.

“The question of one’s right to keep a commercial secret is a delicate one. From a moral standpoint it depends entirely upon the type of secret. Unquestionably there are some secrets which no one has a right to keep. Many great secrets have been thrown open to the world as soon as they are discovered. Radium is a case in point. If our nation were at war with some other nation at the present time, it would undoubtedly be our duty to share our secret steel process, should we be so fortunate as to unravel all its mysteries, with the Government. Since we are not at war, it does not appear to be our duty.

“The law allows us to retain our secret until it has been patented. However, if another should discover it, we would hardly be in a position to claim a share in the patent right, since no one can prove that the other person did not possess the

secret first.

“You will see then, that any person who attempts to discover our secret can hardly be classed as a criminal; he is simply playing the game in a rather unfair way. There have been secrets enough carried from one manufacturing plant to another. Retaining one’s commercial secrets and reaping advantages from them is part of the romance of business. You will find few manufacturing plants, big or little, but have their secrets. In one with the magnitude of our own there are many secrets; the one you are guarding is but one of them.”

“But—” Johnny began, then hesitated.

“But what? Come on; let’s hear what’s on your mind.”

“Don’t you think it’s really one’s duty to give the whole world the benefit of his secrets?”

“In time, yes. But not at once, unprotected by patents. We have spent a great deal of money in discovering these secrets. We have a right to get that money back with a fair profit.”

“I see,” said Johnny.

“And you are ready to go on with the search?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Report to me when there is any new development. Good morning, and better luck next time.”

That night the electro-magnet trap caught nothing. Johnny went to work with a sense of defeat disturbing his usually well-composed mind. Had the two bars of steel been carried at once from the factory, and were his well-laid plans to come to naught? Would the steel be tested and analyzed, the formula discovered and patented by the intruder?

“At least,” he told himself, “I can guard securely that which is left.

“Mr. Jordan,” he said to the aged keeper of the vault by day, as he came to take his post for the night, “can’t they work that steel as it is?”

“What steel?” The old man gave him a sharp look.

“You know,” Johnny smiled.

“Oh!” the other laughed. “No, it doesn’t seem to respond properly to the heat they have tried on it; it crumples up like mud when they try to work it. And when it comes to analyzing it, there’s an element or two they don’t understand. It’s as if the stuff was from a meteor dropped out of the sky.”

Johnny thought of these things on the watch that night. “I’d like to have a piece to experiment with,” he told himself. “This white fire, now; I wonder how that would affect it. Fine chance to try that,” he laughed to himself, “First place, no steel; second place, no white fire.”

A week passed with no reappearance either of the mysterious white fire or the stranger who had attempted to tamper with the lock of the vault. Johnny was growing uneasy. It was true that his pay had been increased enough to enable him to put away a generous sum at the end of the week toward the paying of his debt of honor. But the task was growing monotonous, and, besides, there was no opportunity to work on his chummy roadster that was to have been built up from salvage.

But one dark night, when the wind was banging at the steel-framed windows of the plant, and rain beat upon the skylights in great torrents, adventure came stalking his way in the form of a crouching, skulking human who made his way, all oblivious of Johnny hidden by the shadow of a forge, to a dark corner of the forge-room, where he rattled about in a pile of imperfect forgings. He had just turned and was about to skulk away when Johnny’s lips framed a word.

The word was not uttered, for like a flash it came to him that in that particular spot there was no opportunity to head the man off and capture him.

He thought of the strange entrance to the scrap-conveyor tunnel which had been shown him by his employer. The conveyor was not running. Once he had dropped down upon it, he could stoop and run forward upon its surface some two hundred feet. He would then come out at a place in the direction in which the man was going. In that spot a trick-wall might be made to rise and head him off. He would be trapped!

A few silent steps and Johnny was upon the spot above the scrap-conveyor. His

hand went up to the light wire. Straight down he dropped. The next minute he was racing along the conveyor.

At the end of this race he took a long breath and waited. There would be a struggle, he knew that. The best man would win; there was no one to aid.

With a sharp intake of breath, he touched a button, a trap flew open. With a leap he cleared the opening and fell sprawling. His estimate of time had failed him. The skulking stranger had tripped over him and they had gone down together!

CHAPTER IV
A FIGHT IN THE NIGHT

Johnny Thompson was as nearly as possible a perfect physical being. Having been taught from childhood the necessity of physical well-being and muscular prowess to the business man as well as to the mechanic or professional athlete, he had kept himself fit and had never neglected an opportunity to learn some new trick or turn on the wrestling mat or gymnasium floor.

In the struggle that followed the collision there in the dark aisle of the factory neither Johnny nor the stranger had the advantage of anticipating attack. Both had been surprised.

Johnny soon learned that his antagonist was no ordinary person. Seizing the man by the feet, Johnny clamped on with a grip of iron. But to his utter surprise the man gave the sudden twist of a professional contortionist, and came up between his own knees, clawing at Johnny's face like a cat.

Loosing his hold Johnny made a sudden grab for the other's waist, but in that fraction of a second the man took a sudden double backward somersault, and leaping to his feet, dashed away.

Instantly Johnny was up and after him. He was dashing along at full speed, making a good gain at every leap, when of a sudden he banged into a perpendicular wall. The wall was rising. It lifted Johnny some four feet in air to dash him to the floor again.

"The fake wall!" he muttered, astonished. Had the other runner known of this trap and had he sprung it? Or had it been an accident?

There was not a moment to lose. Dashing back the way he had come, he rounded

a pillar and was again in full pursuit.

The stranger was now far ahead of him, just rounding a corner to enter the loading-room.

Through this loading-room, which was a full block in length and two hundred feet in width, there ran a double railway switch. This switch was filled with freight cars, some empty, many loaded with raw material, bales of rubber-cloth, bars of steel, bundles of wire. If the man chose to lose himself among these cars the pursuit was at an end. Johnny pressed on; there was a chance that the great doors at the farther end stood ajar, and that the man would attempt escape at once.

As he rounded the corner, Johnny saw that the doors were ajar and that, a third of the way down the long unloading platform, a slim figure was fleeing.

“Can’t do it. Got to try, though,” he panted, as he sped along.

Suddenly he became conscious of a chain dangling just before him. It seemed to him that there came a slight jangle from that chain. Yes, now he saw it lift, then drop a foot or two. What could it mean? Now it moved forward a yard and stopped.

The chain was within his reach. Acting from instinct rather than reason, he grasped it, thrust his foot in the loop at the bottom, and the next minute, with a grinding roar sounding above him, he felt himself shoot forward at a terrific speed.

The chain was attached to a huge traveling crane. This crane, which was a steel beam swung from wall to wall of the structure and running on iron wheels along a steel rail set at the very top of the wall, fifty feet above, was electrically operated from a small cab that hung just beneath it.

Johnny looked up at the cab. He could see no person there. Darkness might account for that, but all the same he felt a cold chill creep up his spine. Was this, after all, a charmed factory? Had he, all unknown to himself, been moved to some enchanted city where heat, with no apparent origin, melted metals, and where giant cranes ground their way at express-train speed with no one to guide them? He was tempted to think so.

But cold reality brought him back to his senses. Dangling from a chain, he was rapidly approaching a man who was doing his utmost to escape. What if that man were armed? A wonderful target he would make, dangling there in mid-air!

Cold perspiration stood out on his furrowed brow. His knees seemed about to sink from beneath him. He swung one foot free, and began whirling about to give the chain a side-wise pendulum motion that he might prove a poorer target.

Meanwhile, the stranger did not turn to look back. The very thunder of the traveling crane appeared to lend new speed to his limbs. Perhaps he imagined the entire place to be swarming with men engaged in pursuing him. A surprised look overspread his face, as Johnny, not three feet to the right of him, swung past.

The man instantly dodged back and dropped to the floor, but Johnny, leaping from his iron swing, was upon him before he could get to his feet again.

There followed a second struggle similar to the first. This stranger *was* a contortionist, there could be no question about that now. Before three minutes had elapsed, he had again wriggled like an eel from Johnny's grasp and had dashed through the door to freedom.

In disgust, Johnny sat up and dabbed at some scratches on his face which were bleeding. "Never saw anything like that," he grumbled.

Above him the traveling crane hung in impressive silence. He gazed up at the driver's cab. All was motionless there. But what was that? Did he see one of the landing doors on the fourth floor open a crack, then close again? He thought so, but in the pale moonlight that streamed in through the windows he could not be sure.

"Fate seems to mock at a fellow sometimes," he mumbled. "Look at the luck I had, that trip on the crane and everything, and then look at the luck I didn't have; he got away!"

He moved a foot to rise, and something jangled beside it.

"What?"

He put out his hand and took up a bar of steel. For a second he flashed a light upon it. His heart beat wildly; the steel was blue—the bluest steel he had ever

seen.

“It’s one of the stolen bars,” he muttered. “Lost it out of his pocket.”

A careful search showed him that the second one was not there. Then suddenly he remembered that he was a long way from his main trust—the vault where reposed the remaining six bars. Rising hurriedly, he went racing back to the center of the factory where the vault was located.

Arrived at the corner of the forge-room he paused and peered away through the darkness to a point where a small light shone above the vault door. He half-expected to see a figure crouching there. There was no one in sight. Once more the aisles of machines, conveyors and tunnels appeared deserted. Strain his eyes and ears as he might, he caught only the din of the storm beating on the cupolas above the forge-room and an occasional flash of lightning.

Seating himself on a fireless forge, he leaned back against its smoke conveyor and rested. The double struggle, the race, the strange occurrences of the night, had unnerved him. He started at every new blast of the wind, fancying it the move of some new intruder.

He was puzzled. Who could have been present to give him that fast ride on the chain of the traveling crane? Surely not a watchman; these men knew nothing about traveling cranes; indeed, few men did. The manipulating of these huge burden-bearers, capable of carrying a loaded box-car from one end of the unloading room to the other, was a delicate and difficult task. There were scores of levers and switches to operate, scores of motions to memorize, yet this man, whoever he was, had shown a competent control of the massive machine. Who could he have been?

He thought again of the bar of secret-process steel which he had now in his possession. Only a few days before he had wished for a particle of that steel that he might test it. Now he had in his possession a whole bar of it, yet how was he to secure a sample for testing? Only a minute particle was needed, but how was that to be obtained?

He was seized with a sudden desire to try his skill on this strange metal. He had learned a little of steel-testing while in the salvage department. Not sixteen feet from the point where he now sat there was a branch laboratory for testing steel. All the equipment for testing it was there. There was only lacking the tiny

particle of steel.

Taking the bar from his pocket, he turned it over and over. He struck it on an anvil and enjoyed the bell-like ring of it. He held it to the light and studied the intense blue of it. Never before in the history of the world had there been such steel, he was sure of that.

Laying the bar down upon the cinders of the forge, he took a little circle around the forge-room to stand at last gazing at the door of the vault.

Some faint sound caused him to turn about. At once his gaze was fixed on the forge where the steel bar was resting. The red glow of fire was on the forge. The coal was on fire. One end of the bar glowed with a peculiar white light!

His first thought was that there had been matches lying on the forge, and that they had been accidentally lighted, setting off the coal. This theory was quickly abandoned. Coal didn't start burning that easily.

Then, remembering the old vault-keeper's remark, "It doesn't seem to take the heat right. Gets all sort of crumbly when it's been heated," he dashed for the forge, seized a pair of tongs, and drew the piece of metal from the fire. It slipped from the tongs and fell upon the cement floor with a dull thud.

In an agony of fear lest the steel had been ruined he seized a hammer and cold chisel and, placing the edge of the chisel against the still white-hot surface, struck it sharply with the hammer.

A thin circle of steel coiled up about the edge of the chisel, then dropped to the floor.

"Nothing the matter with that steel," he muttered, as he watched the white heat slowly fade to a bright red, then dull red, then black, "but one thing, I'll wager: That was our old friend the 'white fire' once more."

He glanced about him apprehensively, as if fearing to see glowing eyes staring at him from the dark, but all he saw was a fresh flash of lightning followed by a burst of thunder.

Looking down, his eyes were caught by the thin coil of steel cut from the bar. It was cool now and blue almost to transparency. He picked it up and dropped it

again, to see it bounce ten inches from the floor.

“Nothing the matter with that steel,” he repeated.

Then a new thought struck him.

“Why, that—that bit of coiled steel is my particle for testing.”

Touching the bar of steel he found it still hot. Waiting impatiently for it to cool, he paced the floor, his eye first on the vault-door, then on the precious steel. What if he were to be successful in his analysis of the steel? That would be a great honor, indeed.

Retracing his steps to the side of the forge, he once more tested the steel bar. Finding it cool enough, he thrust it into his pocket, picked up his bit for testing, and strode away to the laboratory, where through a window he could keep watch of the vault door.

CHAPTER V
A STRANGE TEST

On a work bench before the window in the laboratory there rested an instrument the like of which Johnny had never seen before entering the factory for work. The main body of it was a black drum about a foot long and ten inches in diameter. Out from this drum there ran a tube which, bending first this way, then that, passed into a bottle, then out of it into a second, then out again and so on until six or eight bottles had been included in its route.

“Let’s see,” said Johnny. “This one catches the carbon, this one, tungsten, this, water vapor, this, iron, and so on. Guess the thing’s all set for taking off the different known elements that are likely to be found in any steel. But how about those unknown elements? Here’s a wild shot in the dark.” Taking down three bottles from the wall, he poured a little from each into a fourth bottle. He then replaced the three bottles and, by the aid of two short tubes, inserted the bottle he had just filled into the circuit running from the drum. Repeating the operation with a new set of bottles he added a second bottle to the circuit.

“There,” he smiled, “if there are any strange atoms floating around, those ought to give them a home. Now for it!”

Pushing open a slide in the side of the drum he adjusted his bit of steel in a position between two electrical poles and directly before a small nozzle. He then shut the drum, turned on a switch which started a low snapping sound inside the drum, turned a valve which set a slight roar resounding within the drum, then sat back to watch.

Presently a greenish gas could be seen passing along inside the glass tube.

“Working!” he smiled. “Pretty slick arrangement! Electric spark sets fire to the

metal, oxygen feeds the flame. Burn up anything that way. That gas was the hardest, most flexible steel in the world a moment ago."

As he sat there watching the process go forward, hearing the hum and snap inside the drum, now and then catching the roll of thunder from the storm that raged outside, he thought of the three Shakespearean witches and their steaming caldron. He liked to think of himself as a modern wizard with his smoking electrical caldron.

But something caught his eye. The color of the liquid in one of the bottles of chemicals he had mixed at random was turning from white to a dull brown as the gas from burning steel passed through.

"Catching something!" he ejaculated. "Wonder what it may be?"

For ten more minutes he sat watching. Then, when all the gas had apparently passed off he turned the valve, threw out the switch, and sat there lost in thought.

It was interesting, this experiment. This instrument had always fascinated him. He felt that it might be that he had made a discovery. But thus far he could go, no farther. Of chemical analysis he knew nothing. Already he had made a vow with himself that, as soon as his debt of honor was paid, he would begin somewhere, somehow, a study of those sciences which were so closely related to industry—chemistry, metallurgy, engineering, mechanics, physics.

But now he was stuck. He had never really been given permission to work in the laboratory alone at night and he was loath now to admit he had done so.

"Oh, well," he sighed, "probably nothing to it, anyway. I'll just label you and put you up here for the present." He scrawled a few words on a label, pasted it to the bottle containing the dull brown liquid, then set it upon an upper shelf.

"Some day," he smiled, "perhaps I'll have the nerve to tell Mr. Brown about it, but not now." Brown was the head of the laboratory.

He went out into the aisle and began walking slowly up and down before the vault. He was sleepy and tired. This night work was telling on him.

"Wish it was over with," he muttered. "Anyway," he smiled, "I've got something to show them this time," and he patted the steel bar in the right-hand pocket of

his blouse.

* * * * * * * *

“You say someone drove the traveling crane down the loading-room and helped you chase that man!” the manager exclaimed next day after Johnny had told the story of his queer night’s adventures. “That seems incredible!”

“Maybe so, but it’s true!”

“There are only three men in our employ who can run that crane and they, I am sure, were not there.”

Johnny smiled. “Can’t explain it; all I know is, it’s true.”

“I’ll put a double guard on the place. Can’t have things going on like that.”

Johnny smiled again. He had told of the double struggle with the snake-like adversary, of the chase, of the ride on the traveling crane, and the recovery of one steel bar, but had not mentioned the “white fire” nor the steel test he had made. “What’s the use?” he had asked himself. “Who’d understand a thing like that ‘white fire’?”

“Well,” said his employer, “I’m glad you recovered one of the bars; I only wish you had secured the other. One may do us all the harm possible.”

“You never saw such a man,” Johnny half-apologized. “Like an eel, he was, a regular contortionist. I’ve handled a lot of fellows, but never one like him.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Mr. McFarland reassured him. “You did better work than many persons twice your age might have done. Well,” after a moment’s thought, “you keep that bar until this evening, then, when you go to work, give it to Marquis and have him put it in the vault. Your work will be as before until further orders.”

Johnny was disappointed. He had hoped to be relieved from this task, which would grow doubly monotonous since it was definitely known that the remaining bar of steel had been carried from the factory. He managed to conceal his disappointment, however, and went his way, to sleep the day through with the bar of steel beneath his pillow.

He did not return the bar to Marquis, the day keeper of the vault, as he had been instructed to do. When Johnny arrived he found the vault locked, its keeper gone.

“Well, old precious one,” he smiled, patting the bar of metal, “it’s one more night in my company for you, whether you like it or not.”

It was that same night, in the long, silent hours just following midnight, that something happened that was destined to change the entire course of Johnny Thompson’s life. He was sleepy—sleepier than usual, for his sleep had been broken into that day.

“If only I had another shaving off that steel bar,” he thought to himself, “I’d do that experiment again, and try for a different result.”

As if expecting the miracle to repeat itself, he walked to the forge-room and placed the bar of steel on the little heap of coals at the center of the same forge that had burned so mysteriously the previous night.

Then with a laugh, which told plainer than words that he thought he was kidding himself, he turned and strolled away down the aisle among the forges.

No room held such an endless fascination for him as this forge-room. In the day, especially toward evening when the outer light was failing, when the forge fires burned brightly, and the white hot metal on the dies glowed at each stroke of the massive hammers, when the whang-whang-whang of steel on steel raised a mighty clamor, then it was a place to conjure about. But even now, in the dead still of the night, the powerful hammers resting from their labor, the long line of forges with fires burned out spoke to him of solemn grandeur and dormant power.

He had just made the length of the room and had turned about when from his lips there escaped a muffled cry.

Instantly he broke into a run. Once more, as on the previous night, the forge on which the steel bar lay was a mass of white and red fire.

By the time he had reached the spot, the bar of metal was a glowing white mass from end to end.

His first thought was to seize the tongs and drag the bar from the forge to the floor; his second was a bolder one. It caused his heart to thump loudly, his breath to come quickly.

Dared he do it?

He put his hand to an electric switch by the side of the trip-hammer nearest the forge. The answer was a snap and a spark.

“Current’s on,” he murmured. “I could do it. Old McPherson taught me how when I was in the salvage department—but dare I?”

To the lower surface of the hammer was attached a nickel-steel die. To the surface on which it fell was bolted another. The two matched. A white-hot bit of steel placed upon the lower die at just the right spot, then struck; then moved and struck again; moved and struck two times more, would be no longer a clumsy bar of steel, but a rough-finished connecting-rod for an automobile. The white-hot bar of steel before him was just the right length and thickness. Dared he do it?

As in a dream, he seized the metal with the tongs, lifted it, swung it about to the proper position on the nickel-steel plate, touched a pedal with his foot, heard the whang of steel on steel, saw the hammer rise again, moved the white-hot metal, touched the pedal, heard the whang again; twice more repeated the operation, then tossed the bit of metal, still glowing white-hot, upon the sanded floor; a perfect connecting-rod as to shape—but as to composition? His breath came hard. Had the bit of metal been spoiled in the heating and the forging? And, if it had, how could he ever square himself?

To quiet his wildly beating heart he took a turn about the factory, then returned to the forge-room. He was just re-entering the forge-room when something caught his eye. What was it? Had his eye deceived him, or had he caught sight of a furtive figure dodging behind the sheet-metal press over at the right? In a moment he would investigate, but first he must make sure that the newly forged connecting-rod of priceless steel was safe.

Quickly his heart beat as he lifted the now thoroughly cooled steel, and allowed it to fall upon the cement floor.

“Sounds like real steel,” he exulted.

He picked it up and examined it closely. “Not a flaw. And real steel—the best steel on earth—and I forged it! But how?” He paused, a puzzled look overspreading his face. “How shall I tell them I heated it? What good will one forging do with no means of forging more?”

“Oh, well!” he murmured, at last, “I’ll tell them, anyway. And now,” dropping the connecting-rod in his pocket, “the next thing is something else. I wonder what it will be!”

He left the forge-room and walked cautiously toward the sheet-metal press.

As he neared it, a dark object, like some wild animal leaping from its hiding-place among the crags, leaped out, and away.

Who was this? Was it his contortionist-enemy returned in hopes of retrieving the lost bar, or was it some other intruder?

Johnny did not waste time on idle questions, but sprang away in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER VI
A WILD RACE IN THE NIGHT

Johnny had not gone far in the pursuit of the strange intruder who had leaped out from behind the sheet-steel press, before he realized that this was no ordinary runner. Not only was he fleet and sure, but he was also nimble as a deer.

Almost from the first it became an obstacle race, a hurdle race, a long-distance endurance race, all in one. Into the milling-room, where were long lines of milling-machines and where great quantities of unfinished parts—cam-shafts, crank-shafts, gears and a multitude of smaller parts—were piled close together, the fugitive raced. Over machines and heaps of parts alike he hurdled. Dodging this way and that, he was now lost to Johnny's view and now found again.

Panting, perspiring, yet confident, Johnny followed on. Knowing full well that when it came to a test of endurance few men could outdo him, he held to his pace, striving only to keep his opponent in sight.

One thing puzzled him. In the tiger-like leap of the fellow, in the swinging, crouching stoop, there was something strikingly familiar.

"I've seen him before, I know that," he told himself, "but when and where?"

Suddenly the fellow shot up the cross-bars of an inclined conveyor track which led to the second floor. Suspended from a mono-rail above this conveyor track was an electrically controlled tram.

Was the electricity turned on? Johnny's mind worked with the speed of a wireless. His muscles did its bidding. Leaping to the platform of the tram, he threw the lever back. So suddenly did the thing start forward that Johnny was all but thrown from the tram.

The next instant he caught his breath and threw in the clutch. He was not a second too soon, for had the tram traveled ten feet further it would inevitably have struck the racing stranger square in the back of his head.

“I want to catch him, not kill him,” muttered Johnny.

But the stranger was game. Leaping away to the right, he dropped through a hole in the floor in which there dangled a chain. Quickly he disappeared from sight.

Johnny followed, and, just as he touched the floor below, heard the hum of an electric motor.

Johnny knew at once what it was—a “mule,” as the workmen called the short, snub-nosed electric trucks used all over the shops for light hauling.

“I can’t catch him on a mule,” he groaned.

But again his face cleared. Just before him there stood another of the trucks. “A mule against a mule,” he smiled. “Now we’ll see who’s the best driver.”

The race, while wild and furious, assumed an almost humorous aspect; indeed, Johnny fancied that from time to time the stranger turned about and uttered a low chuckle. That was disconcerting, to say the least. Added to this was the growing conviction that he had met this fellow before, and that under more favorable circumstances.

All this, however, did not in one whit abate his desire to win the race and capture the fellow. Wildly the mules plunged on. Around this corner, then that one, down a long row of half-assembled automobiles where a single mislaid tool in their track might mean a disastrous spill, through a maze of trucks loaded down with finished parts, now out into the open air between buildings, now through a tunnel, they raced. Now gaining, now losing, now dashing through a short-cut and almost clipping the end of the stranger’s mule, now headed off by a slamming door, Johnny gained, only to lose again, until at last he came up short to find the stranger’s mule standing deserted in the heart of the packing-room.

“Where could he have gone?”

It took but a moment for the answer. There came the grind of the overhead tram. The tram used for carrying fully boxed machines led to the great loading room

where Johnny had lost his other race.

“If he makes it, he’s gone!” Leaping out and up, Johnny caught the platform of a second tram; he drew himself up, threw in the lever and was once more in the race.

At last fortune was favoring him. The door to the loading-room was locked. The stranger was running himself into a narrow passage from which escape would be impossible. Johnny leaped from his tram, to find the stranger facing him. That person was clearly on the defense. With fists doubled up he advanced to attack.

Just as the stranger struck out with his right hand, Johnny ducked low—so low that the other’s blow glanced harmlessly over his head. The next instant Johnny would have come up with a “haymaker,” had not the stranger thrown himself, stomach down, on Johnny’s back, and turned a quick somersault forward.

Whipping himself about, prepared for another wild race, Johnny was astonished to find the stranger standing smiling at him, and extending his hand;

“Good work, Johnny, old boy!” the other grinned. “You haven’t lost a bit of your pep!”

“You’ve got the best of me,” Johnny smiled doubtfully, “but if you ever had any more pep yourself, I’d hate to have followed you far!” He mopped his brow.

“Don’t recognize me, eh? Perhaps you miss the blue goggles.”

“What?” Johnny stared. “What? Not my old pal, Panther Eye?”

“The same,” smiled the other.

“But what are you doing here?”

“Been working here for a month. Got a way of getting in when I want to. Thought I’d make you an early morning call. Whew! you sure gave me a merry chase! Good of you though not to knock my head off with that tram. ’Fraid you’ll never make an ideal guard.”

“I’d never be a guard at all if I had my way. But what’d you run for?”

“Just wanted to see how much you had in you,” chuckled Panther Eye.

“Oh, you did! Well, you saw, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” the other admitted, taking his turn at mopping his brow.

“Say!” Johnny exclaimed, “since it’s only you, I’ve got to get back to my post. Got some cakes and a little ice-cream in the bottom of a freezer from the company cafeteria. Want to join me?”

“Sure.”

“All right; let’s go.”

As they made their way back through the maze of machinery to the vault, Johnny was busy with his own thoughts. Strange questions kept rising in his mind. This fellow, Panther Eye, or “Pant,” as the boys called him for short, had been with him in many an adventure. He had appeared to possess strange powers, too. The boys had called him “Panther Eye” because he appeared to have the power to see in the dark. There had been a time when Johnny had been with him in a cave dark as a dungeon, surrounded by hostile natives, yet Pant had somehow known that the natives were there, and had led the way through the dense darkness to safety. There had been other times—many of them—in which Pant had made Johnny a heavy debtor to him through his use of wonderful powers.

“Now,” Johnny was wondering, “just how much has he to do with the events of the last few days? He’s too honorable a fellow to have anything to do with the attempt to secure the secret-process steel for some other manufacturer. But how about the white fire? What of the driving of the traveling crane?”

At last he closed his mental questionings with a sigh. He had never asked Pant to reveal any of his secrets and he was not going to begin now.

Soon they were feasting on ice-cream and cake and talking over old times.

“By the way,” said Johnny, as dawn began to break, “have you ever met Mr. McFarland?”

“Say not!” grinned Pant. “He’s the manager, ain’t he?”

“Yes. Want to meet him?”

“I’d try it once.”

“All right. Soon’s I’m relieved from duty we’ll wander around to his office.”

“Chum of yours, I suppose?”

“Not exactly. But I’m working under his orders. Got something to turn in this morning.”

“Let’s see. What?”

Johnny showed him the connecting-rod made of the strange blue steel. “Made that myself,” Johnny said proudly.

A peculiar smile played about Pant’s lips, but he said never a word.

When Pant had been introduced to the manager, as one of Johnny’s oldest and best friends, who happened to be working at the plant, Johnny produced the connecting rod, and, with trembling fingers, handed it to the manager.

“What’s that?” A puzzled expression came into the manager’s eyes.

“Connecting-rod made of the new-process steel.”

“What! Can’t be! That steel won’t work! Nobody knows how. But—” He paused to look more closely—“but it is! Say! Do you know how to work it?”

“No,” Johnny said regretfully, “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Then how was it made? Where did you get it?”

Johnny sat down and this time told the story of the white fire through from the beginning. Only one thing he did not tell: He did not tell of testing the steel in the laboratory and of the bottle of brownish liquid on the top shelf.

The manager listened with rapt attention, now and then ejaculating: “Never heard of such a thing! Can’t believe it unless I see it myself! Impossible, young man! Impossible! Can’t believe it!”

“But here’s the forging to prove it,” insisted Johnny stoutly.

“Tell you what!” said the manager, “I’m willing to lose a night’s sleep over it, or part of one at least. We’ll try the thing out. We’ll see if the ghost walks to-night,” he laughed. “We’ll take out two of the long bars in the vault and one of the short ones. We’ll put them on the forge and—and if the fire comes and they get white-hot, we’ll cut the two long bars in half, and hammer four connecting-rods from them and one from the short one. That will give six with this one you have, making a full set for one of our chummy roadsters. Can you drive a car?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. If the ghost walks to-night, it’s a trip clear across the continent for you—all the way to the Golden Gate and back again! What say?”

“I—I—say all right,” stammered Johnny.

“Mind you,” warned Mr. McFarland, shaking his finger at Johnny, “that’s providing the white fire comes. But, pshaw! it won’t. Whoever heard of such a thing? But, anyway, I’ll be around at nine sharp.”

“Shall I bring Pant?” asked Johnny.

“As you like—providing the ghost doesn’t object.” The manager laughed again, and the two boys walked out.

That night, when the perpetual din of trip-hammers, riveters, millers, and general construction machinery was stilled, and the plant had taken on a hushed and seemingly expectant air, the three, Mr. McFarland, Johnny and Pant, gathered in the corner of the forge-room.

The manager seemed nervous. His hand trembled slightly as he placed the three steel bars on the forge.

Johnny’s brow was wrinkled. He was worried. He was fearful that the experiment would not work. Indeed, he had little hopes that it would. And he did want it to, for success meant the chance to get away from his monotonous task, as well as a glorious cross-continent trip.

Pant's face wore the old mask-like look that Johnny had seen on it so many times before.

"Now, I take it," smiled the manager, "that the formula is to place the bars of steel on the forge, then turn your back and walk away. Always must go according to formula when dealing with ghosts," he laughed. "Are you ready? I have placed the bars in position. All right. We're off! Remember, no looking back!" Slowly, solemnly, they marched to the end of the forge-room, then turned about. Johnny's heart was beating violently.

"Why!" exclaimed the manager, "your friend isn't with us!"

It was true. Pant had disappeared. Before Johnny could make a guess as to what had become of him, there came another exclamation from Mr. McFarland:

"It's working!" There was awe in his voice.

Johnny stared for a second, then started on the run. He was closely followed by his employer. The bars, already glowing red, had turned to almost a white heat by the time they reached the side of the forge.

The manager had been an expert forge man long before he became a capitalist. He now took charge.

"Steady!" he cautioned. "One thing at a time. First we'll cut those bars in two. A chisel edge on that anvil there. That's right. There you are. Now forge that one while I cut the other one."

Whang-whang-whang went the hammer. One perfect connecting-rod. Whang-whang-whang—another. Three times more, then with perspiration standing out on their faces, Johnny and his employer sat facing one another while the connecting-rods cooled. To Johnny it seemed that they must resemble nothing quite so much as two puppies, who, after succeeding in killing a rat, sit on their haunches to grin at one another.

Suddenly Johnny sprang up;

"Hello! Here's Pant," he shouted. "Where you been? Look what we've got!" He pointed at the forgings.

Pant smiled a strangely noncommittal smile. “Why, I—happened to think of something,” was all he said. There was again that teasing smile about the corners of his mouth.

“Well, now, I’d like to know more about that transcontinental auto trip,” smiled Johnny, turning to his employer.

“Not to-night. All the details are not worked out yet. Besides, it’s late, and old fellows like me belong in bed. But I want to congratulate you.” He put out his hand. Johnny shook it warmly. “The more I think of it, Johnny, the more I’m inclined to think your ghost is a scientific enigma.” With a nod to Pant which might have meant merely “good night” and which also might have indicated something more mysterious, he was gone.

“You see,” said Mr. McFarland, as Johnny took the chair by his desk next morning, “you helped us to speed things up quite a bit by getting those connecting-rods forged. This new steel must be tested out in actual service. Even had we the formula, this would be true. Now, with this set of connecting-rods in our possession, we are in a position to give the steel a thorough testing out.

“My proposition is this,” he wheeled about, and leveled his eyes upon Johnny. “We’ll get those connecting-rods milled down to the shape and surface needed, if we have to use diamond millers to do it. When they are in perfect shape, we’ll put them into one of our chummy roadster engines, and you take that roadster across the continent and back again to test them out. What do you say to that?” His face broadened into a smile. “It’ll be some trip, but by George you deserve it!”

Johnny did not appear to share fully in his enthusiasm.

“It’s all right,” he hesitated, “and I’d like to do it. It would be a wonderful experience, but—but there’s that chummy roadster I was salvaging and was to have at cost. It’s two-thirds done. It will mean a long wait. I—I’d like to finish it.”

“I see,” said the manager, stroking his chin. “You want a car of your own—that’s natural. I suppose most boys do.”

“It’s not that,” Johnny hesitated, then added: “Not that at all, sir. I want to finish it to sell.”

“Sell it?” His employer stared.

“Yes, sir! I have a debt.”

“A debt?” The manager’s eyes registered disapproval. “A boy of your age shouldn’t have debts.”

Johnny got red in the face, hesitated a moment, then blurted out: “It’s not my debt. My father’s debt, but one he would have paid every cent of had he lived.”

“Your father’s debt?” the manager asked with a curious change of tone. “Yes, he would have paid it. I believe you. And you want to pay by selling the car you have salvaged?”

“Yes, sir; part of it.” Johnny’s eyes were upon the floor.

“All right, you shall. You shall pay it. But just now we need you for this new service. Can you trust me to see that your affairs come out all right?”

“Yes, sir.” Johnny looked him in the eye.

“All right. Be back in my office here at this time day after to-morrow. In the meantime, you are on your own.”

“There’s one thing more,” said Johnny. “This fellow Pant is an old friend of mine; he’s seen me through a lot of things. Any objection to his going along?”

“None whatever. He’ll be a help to you, and between you, you must guard the car well, for you must not for one minute forget that it contains almost our entire supply of the precious new steel, and that as yet we do not know the formula.”

“We’ll do our best,” said Johnny, as he pulled on his cap and left the room.

CHAPTER VII
A RACE ACROSS THE DESERT

Johnny was puzzled and not a little worried. The chummy roadster, equipped with connecting-rods of the new steel, which had carried them seven thousand miles without a mishap, lunged first to one side of the road, then to the other. It leaped forward to bury itself in a cloud of dust that lay deep as mud on the desert trail. To the right and left of them and before them, far as eye could see, was sagebrush. The air was permeated with the odor of it.

They were two hundred miles from anywhere, in the heart of the Great American Desert, and behind them, like a streak of fire, a long, low red car was bearing down upon them. It was this car that puzzled and worried him.

“Can’t give her more gas, can you?” Pant asked hoarsely. “They’re gaining fast.”

Pushing the dusty goggles up from the ridge of his nose, Johnny stared ahead. There never was another such trail. In a land where rain never falls the roads rut, and the ruts fill with dust. Cars sink in to the axles, and skidding, shoot to the other side, to fall into a deeper rut.

“To go faster is suicide,” Johnny groaned. “Guess it’ll have to be a fight!”

“Mighty uneven one, too, probably,” Pant muttered. “Don’t stop till I tell you to; I’m getting into the back seat to have a look at them.”

Gripping the seat he made his way, tossed first this way, then that, to the back of the car. There he remained with eyes fixed on the back trail.

Rapidly Johnny ran over in his mind the circumstances which led up to this moment. He had gone to the manager’s office at the time appointed, and there

had been given the car, equipped with the strangely valuable connecting-rods. He had been instructed to draw on the company for expense money when necessary, to report progress once a week, to make his way to the Pacific coast and back.

The outgoing journey had been wonderful. The speeding across broad plains, between waving fields of grain, the climbing of the Rocky mountain and Cascade passes, circling up and up and up, with here a yawning canyon hundreds of feet beneath them, and here, not a hundred feet above them, one of those perpetual banks of snow; all this had given Johnny a new vision of the grandeur and beauty of his native land.

The return trip had been uneventful until they had reached the western edge of the Great American Desert. There in a garage, where they had left their car for a change of tires and to secure a box lunch to take with them in crossing, they had seen a man who roused Johnny's suspicions.

"Did you see that fellow?" he had asked of Pant, as they left the garage, "the chap standing by the door?"

"Some bird!" Pant had chuckled.

"Looks like a gigantic frog," Johnny had smiled. "Did you notice what prodigiously long fingers he had, and what spindly legs?"

"I bet he could scratch his ear with his big toe all right," Pant had laughed. "Some contortionist, maybe."

At the word "contortionist" Johnny had started. He recalled his struggle back there in the factory with the fellow who appeared to have all the strange characteristics of a contortionist. So strong was the resemblance between this man and the one back in the garage he was tempted to turn back.

But he had called himself fanciful and foolish, and had gone on with Pant for their lunch.

Upon returning to the garage, however, his first thought was of the car. The instant his eyes fell upon it a quick exclamation had escaped his lips, and he bounded forward.

Dressed in a suit of unionalls, and bending over the engine, had been the slim stranger.

“Hey, there! What’s up?” Johnny had demanded.

“Tunin’ her up a bit. Why? What’s worry’n’ yuh?”

Johnny eyed the stranger angrily.

“That’s our car. We didn’t order any work done in it.”

“Your car?” The other had straightened up in amazement, real or cleverly pretended. “Why, then I’m workin’ on the wrong jitney! Beg your pardon. I’ll put her back in shape. Won’t take but a minute.”

“I’ll tend to it myself,” Johnny had said rather shortly.

“Oh! All right, brother. No quarrel about that!” The stranger had gathered up his tools and had backed away.

Johnny’s heart had skipped a beat when he saw how close a shave it had been; two of the connecting-rods were all but free from their fastenings, and the others might have been in a few moments more.

“I’d like to have him pinched,” he grumbled, “but what’s the use. They’d say we were crazy. You can’t tell them the whole truth, and you can’t have a man arrested for working on the wrong car by mistake.”

Pant nodded a sympathetic assent.

They had taken the desert trail with many misgivings. This roaring red demon behind told them that their fears were well founded. They did not know how many men there were in the car, but there were probably two to their one, and the other men were doubtless heavily armed. There could be no doubting their purpose. They were after the steel.

“Looks bad!” Johnny groaned, as he braced himself in the seat and prepared to give the car three more notches of gas, hoping against hope the meanwhile that they would heave in sight of some sheep-herder’s shack or some truck caravan coming from the other direction. Well he knew that, on this unfrequented road,

the chance was slight.

They were speeding up. The car swayed from side to side like a drunken man. It tossed this way and that like a ship in a high sea. Now they careened to the right, and, running on two wheels, plunged madly forward, to swing back and go whirling to the left.

All this time Johnny, with hands grimly gripping the wheel, with eyes glued upon the road, was, in his subconscious mind, counting the cost. It had been his chance. Now he was going to lose. He had hoped that this trip would mean much toward wiping out his debt of honor. That was all over now. He had made, he hoped, a good impression on his employer. This, too, would be forgotten. With the valuable steel parts stolen, the work of their weeks of travel would be lost. The secret formula, too, might be discovered. And all this because he had not taken precaution to see that the wily stranger was clear of the neighborhood before they started across the desert.

A hill loomed ahead. The slight climb ended in a broad, flat plateau. Here the alkali dust disappeared. Straight, hard and smooth for a mile, perhaps two miles, the road stretched.

Johnny's heart gave a bound of hope. What was beyond the brow of that plateau?

All this time his mind was wandering back to Pant. Sitting there silently in the back seat, his eyes glued upon the road, he seemed oblivious to all else. There had been a time when Johnny would have considered him equal to the task of stopping the pursuers by some magic power. By the flash of a crimson light, which appeared to come from his very eyes, he had seen him stop a hungry tiger stalking its prey. But those were the days in which Pant wore a cap pulled well down and a pair of immense black goggles. There had been mystery behind this cap and those goggles. Pant without them seemed shorn of his magic power, like Samson when shorn of his hair.

Down the smooth, straight stretch of road they sped, and for one mile at least the red demon gained not one single yard.

But as they reached the end of that plateau, grim despair gripped the boy's heart. Far and away lay only the uneven volcanic ash and the sagebrush. Not a house, not an automobile, not a cattleman's pony dotted the landscape, and from this

promontory one might see miles.

“Might as well wreck her.” Johnny ground his teeth. “We’re stuck here. If they catch us they’ll strip her, and you can’t run a car without connecting-rods. Old boat,” he groaned, “we’ll stick to the trail till we crash or they run us down.”

The car gave a lurch, all but turned over, righted itself and shot down the ridge.

“Hey!” Johnny caught Pant’s voice at his elbow. “Guess you can ease up a bit now. No use takin’ too many chances. I think by the looks of it, their car’s on fire!”

Johnny slowed down, then looked back. He could not believe Pant. He looked again. It was true; above the dull brown cloud of dust was a white and black cloud of smoke.

“Couldn’t be the sagebrush?” said Johnny, rubbing his eyes.

“Don’t think so,” said Pant, climbing back into the front seat. “Sagebrush wouldn’t make that kind of smoke; besides, it’s green and wouldn’t burn.” The car bumped along at a milder pace. The red demon, now unmistakably ablaze, reached the crest of the plateau and stopped. Men swarmed out of her.

“Four of ’em,” Pant chuckled. “Fine chance we’d have had against ’em!”

“They’re waving at us,” said Johnny, after a glance over his shoulder.

“Let ’em wave. Think we’re green, I guess. Expect us to come right back and play things into their hands. Be a car or something along here to-day or to-morrow, sure. Won’t hurt ’em to eat dust awhile. That’s the job they meant to give us, all right.”

Ten miles farther on they stopped for lunch. As Johnny drew the lunch-box from beneath the back seat, he noticed a long, slim leather case lying on the floor of the car. As he picked it up, he was astonished at the weight of it.

“What’s this, Pant?” he asked in a surprised tone.

“That? Why that”—Pant seemed unduly excited—“that’s a little emergency case I always carry with me.”

He put out his hand for it, and having it, at once fastened it to his belt beneath his jacket.

“Emergency case?” thought Johnny. “I wonder what kind.” But as usual he asked no questions.

He was destined to remember that case and the unusual circumstances of the burning car many days later.

CHAPTER VIII
THE DUST-EATING MULE

The long, dark corridors of the vast automobile and airplane factory were silent. The same old ponderous machines loomed here and there, while smaller ones stood sentry everywhere. At the end of one long alleyway a small light gleamed. Flickering first to the right, then to the left, it cast gigantic shadows against the walls.

Two boys were working over a “mule.” A mule in a factory, as you will remember, is one of those hard-working, snub-nosed little motors that drag trucks about from department to department. The boys were working over the motor of this mule. There came now and then the metallic clink of a wrench, or the tap tap of a hammer, followed by a grunt of satisfaction or disgust.

“There!” Johnny Thompson straightened up and stretched his cramped muscles. “I guess she’s about ready to move.”

The trip across-continent and the return had been accomplished. Aside from the stirring adventure on the desert, they had met with no unusual experiences. The connecting-rods, struck from the steel of mysterious composition, had performed wonderfully well. When measured by instruments that were exact to the ten-thousandth part of an inch, it had been found that they had worn down only thirty-four ten thousandths of an inch, while connecting-rods of the best known commercial steel would have worn one hundred and forty-two ten thousandths of an inch in making the same mileage. Small figures, but in the history of steel they promised to mark an epoch.

The inventor’s mind was improving but he had not as yet succeeded in recalling the formula. While hoping for his recovery, the boys were preparing to make a

more rigorous test of this new steel. The company were manufacturing a new type of seaplane. Every afternoon the two boys, togged out in aviator's garb, were learning to fly this new plane. It was planned that, when the boys found themselves to be perfect masters of this new vehicle of the air, the six connecting-rods should be placed in the motor of the seaplane, and that it be shipped to the Pacific coast. There, under ideal conditions, they were to test out, not only the connecting-rods, but the seaplane, flying, as a last trial, a thousand miles or more.

The pay Johnny had received for the cross-continent trip had enabled him to make a large payment on his debt of honor. As for Pant, he, for the first time in his life, had a savings account.

During their forenoons they were busy in the factory. At times Johnny thought of the vial of dark liquid that reposed on the shelf in the laboratory, the one he had placed there the night he made the analysis of the mysterious steel. At one time while in the laboratory he had glanced up to make sure it was there. It was still in its place. He had been tempted to tell the chemist about it but was afraid of being laughed at.

"Never mind," he told himself, "in time I will learn to make a chemical analysis myself. Then I'll see what's what."

The question of the strange white fire puzzled him at times. He wondered, too, how the automobile of the contortionist had happened to catch fire in the desert. But these were mere vague wonderings which had no answer.

Though they were well occupied during the day, the boys found time at night for working upon a new, strange problem of which as yet, their friend, Mr. McFarland, the president and manager, knew nothing. It was this problem that occupied their minds at the present moment. It was a stirring moment. Many nights they had spent working over a new type of engine, one that had never been set in a motor vehicle before. Now it was ready for the try-out.

"Track clear?" breathed Johnny.

"All clear," Pant whispered back.

"All right; here goes!"

There followed a series of sudden sharp explosions. These increased rapidly until they became a loud and insistent purr. Then, with the force and speed of a frightened pig, the little motor car shot forward.

The movement was too sudden for the boys. Johnny was thrown backward upon the floor. Pant, thrown in a wild whirl to the right, saw the motor, a black streak, shoot down the dark alley-way.

“She’s got speed,” he muttered.

The wild snorting of the motor awakened echoes in every corner of the factory. This was followed almost immediately by a deafening crash.

Pant started quickly forward, then paused. Johnny was now on his feet.

“Did she explode or hit the wall?” Pant asked.

“Hit the wall.”

Johnny rubbed his bruised head ruefully.

“Wouldn’t believe she could make such time.”

“That was a powerful engine.”

The two boys were now on the run. They arrived at the scene of the disaster just ahead of a tall man carrying a flashlight and a bunch of keys.

This man—the watchman—flashed his light upon the bent and twisted metal that lay against the wall, then demanded sternly:

“What’s that?”

“That,” said Johnny with a wry smile, “is a pile of scrap.”

“Don’t get fresh,” the watchman warned. “What is it?”

“It’s what I said it is,” said Johnny seriously. “If you want to know what it was, I’ll tell you; it was a dust-eating mule.”

The watchman’s mouth flew open. “A—A,” he sputtered incredulously. “I told

you before, young fellow, don't get fresh." He moved a hand toward Johnny menacingly.

"I have told you the truth," said Johnny stoutly. "Perhaps I should have said a dust-burning mule. That's what she was. It wouldn't be a bit of good to explain to you; you wouldn't understand, and besides, I don't want to. That's our secret. We have permission from Mr. McFarland to conduct experiments here nights."

"But you have no permission to endanger men's lives."

"That's right," Johnny admitted; "we were a bit careless."

"I'll just turn the facts in to the boss and you can fight it out with him," said the watchman sourly as he turned away.

"Well, that's that," said Johnny sorrowfully. "It's a complete loss. We'll have to begin all over again. But from that little test I am convinced that the engine has a wonderful future."

"This particular one had a brief but eventful past, I'd say," grinned Pant.

After one more look at the wreck, they turned and went their way.

That night before he fell asleep Johnny reviewed in his mind the events that led up to the happenings of that evening.

He, Johnny, had been standing on the steps of the official entrance to the plant one afternoon, when Mr. McFarland had said to him: "Johnny, please go down to the north gate and request that old man to go away. He is stopping the workers as they pass and trying to engage them in conversation. He looks like he is a propagandist for some radical organization trying to make the men discontented. Get rid of him if you can."

The man had turned out to be not a radical at all, but a friendly and harmless old man who was seeking some one who could be interested in a new type of engine which he had invented. Such a fine spoken and polished old gentleman had he proved to be that Johnny had been prevailed upon to accompany him to his home to see the engine.

He had found the home of the aged inventor to be a fourth-floor back flat, being

merely two dark rooms upon an alley. Here, with his wife, a pleasant-faced old lady, he lived and labored.

“You see,” he had said, as he uncovered the engine with the dramatic movement of one who unveils a great work of art, “this engine of mine is different from all other internal-combustion engines. It doesn’t burn gasoline; it burns dust.”

“Dust!” Johnny had exclaimed.

“Dust!” the old man had smiled. “Watch it!”

He touched a lever. There followed a succession of rapid and sharp explosions. These increased in number per second until they became a prolonged purr, as the one in the “mule” had done. The engine was now revolving at full speed.

“You see?” the old man had smiled. “She runs—on dust!”

“On dust,” Johnny had repeated in a daze.

The old man had touched the lever and the engine had stopped.

“You think it strange,” the old man had smiled, motioning Johnny to a chair and taking one himself; “but, after all, is it so strange? The first internal-combustion engine, we have it on good authority, did not burn gasoline but a composition of gun powder and other substances. The greatest grain elevator in the world was destroyed by a dust explosion. Billions of fine particles of carbon dust gathered in the air space above the wheat. A spark touched it off. A tremendous explosion followed. There is unlimited power there. Why not harness it?

“You are looking,” he pointed at the engine, “upon the motor power of the future. It ran, as you saw a moment ago, on coal dust, a very finely powdered coal dust. A little is let in at a time. A slight ash is formed. This drops out at the top of the cylinder, as you will see the engine runs inverted. It was burning coal dust, but any carbon dust will do. Wood ground fine, wheat dust, peat dust, any carbon dust will drive it. Think what that means to the world-traveler of the future! No more disgusting waiting for gasoline; no more weary miles on foot. You land in the heart of Africa, India, Siberia. You have with you a small grinder like a wheat mill. It is run by batteries. You are out of fuel. You merely grind up a dry tree-trunk, a sack of wheat or a few pounds of coal, and you are away again.”

“Sounds like a dream,” Johnny had sighed.

“It is a dream—a dream that has come true,” the old man had fairly shouted. “All that is needed is capital to perfect larger motors, to put them upon the market. If only your president can be made to see it, as you and I see it—”

“I’ll try,” Johnny had gripped the old inventor’s hand. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The next night Pant had accompanied Johnny to the aged inventor’s room, and there over some wonderful coffee and doughnuts prepared by the inventor’s wife, they talked over the future of the strange dust-burning engine.

It was decided that, since the engine had never been tried out in any vehicle, Johnny and Pant should obtain permission to experiment with it in the factory after hours to perfect it further before it was presented to the busy president.

Three weeks of spare time experimenting had resulted in the complete wreck of the engine, smashed against a brick wall.

“Now we’ll have to begin all over again, and because that watchman turns us in we’ll have to show our plans to the president,” said Johnny.

The revealing of their plans was not the misfortune they thought it, for Mr. McFarland at once became keenly interested in the enterprise. He took them off their regular work and set them doing full time in experimenting with this new engine.

In two weeks they had a new mule doing double-quick time all over the shop. Another two weeks saw them riding about the streets of the city in a car driven by a dust-burning motor.

Their happiness knew no bounds. Boundless, too, were their ambitions. This should be the airplane engine of the future. Two twelve-cylinder motors were manufactured for the seaplane they were to drive and the plane and motors were shipped to the Pacific coast where, over the placid waters of a bay, they might experiment with little danger of disaster.

They had been on the Pacific coast, driving the plane equipped with the two dust-burning motors and with one of the motors using the six connecting-rods of mysterious steel, for a week when one day Johnny decided to make a short drive

over the country alone. Not suspecting that anyone could, this time, be on their trail, he told Pant of his intention while in the lobby of their hotel while a number of persons were present.

He made a successful trip of some two hundred miles. A fog had blown up from the sea but he knew the location of a beautiful mountain lake which he had often longed to visit. On an island in this lake, he had been told, were to be found traces of the wonderful fossilized forests for which the West is famous.

By circling low he succeeded in locating the placid surface of the lake and in making a creditable landing. Unbuckling his harness he rose stiffly, stretched his cramped limbs, then, turning hastily, unlashed a small skiff from the back of the fuselage and, having tossed it lightly into the water, seized the paddle, leaped into the skiff and paddled rapidly toward the shore.

He had been gone for perhaps five minutes when, without warning, from out of the white fog there appeared the prow of a small motorboat. The engine was not going. The two occupants of the boat were rowing, each with one oar. Their destination, beyond doubt, was the seaplane.

Not a word was spoken until the taller of the two men, a strange-appearing fellow with unusually long fingers, put out a hand and, steadying himself for a moment, leaped from the boat to the lower wing of the plane.

“Work fast,” the shorter man cautioned in a whisper. “He may be back any moment.”

“Count on me. Don’t want any mix-up. Nasty business,” whispered the other, then with a spring he was away down the length of the plane. The next minute he had climbed to a narrow platform parallel with the powerful motors which hung suspended halfway between the upper and lower planes.

Drawing a wrench and a pair of pliers from his pocket, he worked over the engine to the right for some eight or ten minutes. When he had finished, he mumbled something that sounded like:

“Guess that’ll slow him up,” then thrusting his tools, together with some other small objects, into his pocket, he leaped back to the plane, and, racing down its length, sprang into the motorboat.

“Thought you had decided to stay,” grumbled the waiting man.

“Time enough,” the other drawled. Seizing his oar, he pushed the boat away from the plane.

The next moment they disappeared silently into the fog. They had been gone but an incredibly short time when Johnny reappeared in his shallow skiff.

“Well, she’s still here,” he breathed with a sigh of satisfaction. “Guess I ought not to take such chances, but who’d be out here that knows our secret?”

He climbed happily back to his seat in the plane, buckled on his harness, then touched his lever.

But what was this? The engine gave a few sput-sputs, then stopped dead.

“What?”

He could not believe his senses. He tried it again. No better results.

Snatching off his harness, he leaped to the platform beside the motor.

For a moment his eyes and his fingers played over the line of spark plugs of the twelve-cylinder motor, as a skilled musician plays over the keys of an organ.

Then his face went blank.

“Changed!” he muttered. “Somebody’s been here. That spark plug there; never had one like that. And that one; I cracked the enamel when I put one in there. It’s gone. Perfectly good-looking one there now. Somebody’s tampered—”

He drew from his pocket a wrench. Quickly unscrewing the spark plug, he placed it on top of the cylinder, then gave the propeller a whirl.

“No spark,” he mumbled. “Dead! Dead as a last year’s ragweed!”

Again he paused in thought.

The next moment he was all action. Dropping to the fuselage, he dragged from within the space back of the seat numerous odds and ends of wooden rods, coils of wire, clamps, bolts and glass insulators. These he pieced together with

incredible speed. At length a wire-strung pole was thrust high in air. Wires were attached at the bottom, a receiver thrust over his head, and then, seated in his place before the wheel, he was allowing his fingers to play upon the key of a wireless.

“Sput—sput—sput!” The snap of the electric current sounded above him. He was sending out an S. O. S. addressed to Pant at the home station.

“Sput-sput-sput,” the instrument sounded again and again. Each time he waited for an answer. At last, to his great joy, it came. The buzzing in his receiver resolved itself into the dots and dashes of the Morse code: “Shoot, Pant.”

“Thank God!” Johnny exclaimed.

The purpose of the intruders was plain enough. They had hoped to drive Johnny to desert his plane in this lonely spot, then they would return and strip it of its priceless steel at their leisure.

“I’ll show them!” he hissed.

Again his fingers played on the key. He instructed Pant to bring twelve spark plugs to the island on Lake Poncetrane. He was to make a landing there, if possible, then to bring the spark plugs to the northeast corner of the island where he, Johnny, would be waiting for him.

He listened until the other boy’s O. K. rang in his ears then, removing the receiver from his head, he settled back in his seat. It would be two hours before Pant arrived. Everything would be all right if—suddenly he sat up straight, his brow wrinkled—“if he can land on the island!” he exclaimed; “and I doubt if he can. There’s a small bare space in the very center, and that is covered with rocks; the rest is timbered. If he can’t land, we lose!”

At last he rose and, having drawn himself up beside the motor, busied himself with the task of removing the faulty spark plugs.

“The villains!” he muttered. “It’s a dirty trick!”

He had just completed his task of removing the spark plugs, when there came to his waiting ear the drum of a powerful motor.

“Pant,” he murmured, “good old Pant. He’s made it in record time. Now if only __”

He did not finish. He dared not hope that it could be done.

The thunder of the motor grew louder. The fog had cleared now, and he could see the plane, an airplane Pant had borrowed, like some gigantic dragon fly, drifting down upon him.

Before it reached the spot in the sky above him, it swerved to the right and went skimming low over the tree-tops of the island.

Johnny made no move to go ashore; there would be time enough for that after Pant had effected a landing—if he did.

For a second or two the drum of the motor ceased, and Johnny’s heart stopped beating with it. Could Pant make it?

But again came the thunder of the motor. Again the plane appeared above the trees. He had not found a safe landing place.

Once more the plane circled over the island, then dipped out of sight. Again the motor stopped. This time Johnny was sure Pant had been successful, but again his hopes fell, for the plane rose to circle once more.

Four times he attempted it; four times failed.

“Can’t do it. It’s no use!” Johnny sank limply down into his seat.

But Pant was swinging around. He was preparing to pass low over the seaplane. What could he want?

As he came scudding along with engine shut off, Johnny heard him shout:

“Watch this!”

The next moment he saw his hand shoot out. Something dropped from that hand. Straight down it dropped for a hundred feet, then something resembling a parachute filled with air appeared, and checked its fall.

Quickly Johnny leaped into his skiff and was away to the spot where this miniature parachute would fall. The thing was heavy. Could he reach it before it dragged the parachute to the bottom of the lake? Straining every muscle, he sent the skiff flying over the surface of the water.

The parachute had fallen into the lake. Now he was a hundred feet from it, now fifty, now twenty-five, and now—now, his hand shot out and seized it just as, water-logged, it was beginning to sink.

As he dragged the cloth affair from the water, from his lips there escaped a glad shout. Attached to the parachute's cord were three spark plugs.

Hardly had he made this discovery than there came again the shout:

"Watch this!"

He did watch, and did do his best, but in spite of his efforts the second parachute sank before he reached it.

But there were others. Twice more he succeeded and three times failed. But he now had nine new spark plugs. Surely there were enough.

Paddling hastily to the plane, he made the changes, dropped into his seat, and again touched his lever. This time there came a welcome burst of thunder and he was away.

He gazed for a second behind him to see Pant, his purpose fulfilled, speeding away toward home.

"That," smiled Johnny, "was a clever trick. I'd never have thought of it. But trust good old Pant for that. Who'd have thought, though," his brow wrinkled, "that old Slim Jim, the contortionist, was still on our trail?"

Strangely enough, during the days that followed the contortionist put in no second appearance.

Three weeks of testing proved to them that their engines were a complete success. Then began what proved to be their great adventure.

There came to them a short, bald-headed man of middle age, with a letter from

Mr. McFarland, their employer.

The letter read: “This gentleman, Professor Paul Lasky, is a very close friend of mine. He may ask you to do something difficult and dangerous. Do it if you can, for his cause is worthy and his need imperative.”

The stranger was not slow in laying his needs before them. A tramp steamer had gone on the shoals of a coral island some two thousand miles from the Pacific coast of America. Some passengers and members of the crew had been drowned. The others had been rescued. The wreck was driven high on the sand in a sheltered bay, so she would not break up at once. Some hardy adventurers, claiming to have owned the steamer, had put off in another steamer four days previous with the purpose of salvaging her cargo. It was imperative that he, the professor, should reach the wreck before them. A seaplane was the only craft that could bring him to the island in time, and of all the air-craft then on the coast, none had the possibilities of such protracted flight save their own. He wished them to take him there. The reward would be ample and, should his mission be successfully accomplished, they would be real benefactors of mankind, since some tens of thousands of children would be benefited.

Johnny and Pant held a long consultation. The undertaking was a serious one. Could it be that the stranger knew the type of engine their plane carried? His mission must indeed be an important one if a mere landsman, accustomed to neither the sea nor the air, would attempt such a perilous flight to accomplish it.

“What can it be?” Johnny demanded of Pant.

“Can’t tell. Some treasure on the ship, perhaps.”

“But the ship and the cargo belong to the men who have gone to strip the wreck, don’t they?”

“Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not. Perhaps, at least, not all.”

“Well, if you are ready to undertake it, I am.”

“You’re on!” exclaimed Pant, gripping Johnny’s hand. “It will be a wonderful test for our motors.”

“And I don’t think our contortionist friend can follow us,” smiled Johnny.

Twenty hours later, after having covered fifteen hundred miles in steady flight, they realized that it was indeed to be a wonderful test for their motors, and to them as well; a test out of which they might never emerge.

They were sailing high over a boundless expanse of water, when Johnny suggested that they drop to the level of the sea and rest their motors for an hour as they drifted, sea-gull-like, on the surface of the gently heaving ocean.

“Perfectly calm down there,” he called through his speaking-tube.

“Guess so.” Pant, who was acting as pilot, set her nose downward and slowed his engine for volplaning.

As they neared the surface of the water, an exclamation of surprise escaped Pant’s lips.

“Why, she’s rolling in great billows. Not a breath of air, either!”

“It’s stifling,” grumbled Johnny.

Pant gave one look at the barometer. Instantly his face clouded.

“Didn’t know the glass could drop so low,” he mumbled. “Nasty weather coming. Can’t float on that water. Better climb back up.”

Slowly the plane climbed skyward again. When she had reached a high altitude, with the suddenness of thought she ceased to climb.

It was as if she had run, head on, into an immense filmy veil of silk that hung from the high heavens, its fringe touching the sea. The veil was dark, the darkness of midnight blue. It seized the plane and set it twirling, whirling, pitching, plunging. It was as if a giant hand had seized the veil from above and twisted it, as one twists a damp towel to wring it.

It was then that Pant at the wheel lost all control. Johnny, in the cabin, became an over-large punching-bag. Harnessed to his seat from every side, he swung now into space, and now jammed hard into place, to feel himself banged against the side of the narrow cabin. With head sunk limply forward, with his whole body relaxed, he waited dumbly for the end. What that end might be, he could not even guess. They were caught in a typhoon, hundreds of miles from land,

somewhere in mid-Pacific.

CHAPTER IX
A PLANE IN A TYPHOON

When they struck the typhoon Johnny had the courage to hope that Pant might bring them out of it in safety. This, however, seemed scarcely believable. The cabin, a moment before stuffy as a clothes closet, was now as breezy as a mosquito-bar tent in a stiff wind. She was battened tight, too. The mad whirl of the plane made Johnny dizzy and sick. His ears were full of strange sounds. The creak and groan of planes, stays and guys, that seemed about to snap, was mingled with the thunder of the engines. Above all this, like the voice of some mad siren's spirit filled with hatred and revenge, rang out the shrill scream of the wind. Johnny's eyes were blinded by strange weird lights—red, yellow and purple—flash upon flash.

"Must be in the midst of the gigantic smithy where lightning bolts are forged," he grumbled, as he closed his eyes tight and took one more mad whirl that it seemed must be the craft's last.

But at that, the seemingly last moment, the whirling gale took a strange turn. The plane hung motionless in mid-air. By good fortune she stood right side up. Her planes were as yet unimpaired.

She was a staunch craft. Not a stick, nor wire, nor screw but had been tested and doubly inspected before they went into her. Her two twelve-cylinder engines, lying one beside the other above the fuselage, were bound and braced from every side. Johnny thought of all this as they lay there suspended in space.

It was a lull; he understood that well enough. A strange lull it was, too, as if the storm had taken their frail craft into its gigantic fist, as an ape holds a fledgling bird in his horny claw before crashing it against the trunk of a tree.

Johnny’s lips were pressed to the speaking-tube. “We’re in for it!” he shrilled to his pal.

“Yes?” came back from Pant.

“How you standing it?”

Pant retorted with a grim chuckle:

“Not so bad. Pretty wet out here.”

“What—what’ll we do?”

“Going to climb. Top to this thing somewhere, maybe. Nobody knows, though. It’s a typhoon. Always wanted to see what a plane’d do in a typhoon.”

“You’ll see, but never tell, maybe.”

“Maybe.”

“Look out—here she comes again! It’s—”

“Yes, it’s—” Pant’s voice seemed blown back into him by the terrific gust of wind. The next instant, a darkness such as he had never seen; a tumult such as he had never heard; a torrent of rain such as he had never witnessed; a wild whirling such as he had never experienced, drove all power of thought from his befuddled brain, leaving him again a half-animate, over-large punching-bag, swinging in the narrow center of the cabin.

Even in this dizzy state of half-consciousness he thought of Pant. When told that he might not escape disaster, he had not said, “I have escaped before.” He might have said it, for there had been other adventures; a night in a forest in India, with a mad black leopard’s eyes gleaming at him out of the darkness; an hour in a dungeon-dark cave, with murderous savages about him. There had been other adventures, too, and he had escaped; yet he did not say, “I will again.” That was the kind of fellow he was. Confident of his ability, interested in all of life, thrilled by each new experience, he stood ready to face each one as it came and do battle valiantly, leaving the results to a power greater, a mind wiser, than his own.

At this moment when Johnny was thinking these thoughts, Pant was being dragged forward half out of his soggy, water-soaked harness, then slammed back into his seat, to be deluged to the drowning by a downpour that was not rain, he thought, but more like a sky-suspended tank of fresh water. He found himself surprised that the plane held up against it; that it did not sink at once into the sea. His leather coat hung like a weight of steel upon his shoulders; his eyes, his ears, his mouth were filled with water. It chilled, benumbed, depressed him.

The plane was traveling with the gale; whether in a circle or straight ahead, he could not tell. The engine was shut off. Would it start again at his bidding? That he did not know. If not, their situation was hopeless. The time would come when the storm would drop them, as it drops a bird it has harried and beaten to its death. Then, with no power, they would sink helpless into the sea. And such a sea as it must be! He had not seen it since the storm began. He could imagine it, though. Black, angry water tossed into foam. Billows, mountain high. What a landing-place for a seaplane! One resounding crash that echoed above the demon laughter of the waves, then all would be over!

“She must start! She must,” he muttered. Half-unconsciously he put his hand to the lever, then quickly drew it away.

“No, not now, not now,” he muttered. “The dust! The dust! If only it is still dry!”

Then, for a moment, his mind dwelt upon the wind. It was strange about that wind. It did not come in gusts, but flowed straight on like a stream of water. In the utter darkness, flooded by torrents of rain, carried steadily forward by that constant flow of wind, he was overcome by an illusion. He fancied himself passing beneath the surface of the sea. Only the touching of his tongue to his lips, to satisfy his mind that this was not salt water that beat in from every side, could dispel the illusion.

The whole thing was so terrific, so altogether beyond comprehension, that it shunted off the powers that drove his brain to action. It was altogether unbelievable.

As Johnny Thompson’s mind cleared itself of the effects of the airship’s mad whirl, it began puzzling over certain questions: What was to be the end of this? Why where they there?

The truth was, Johnny did not know why they were there. They had come upon

this long and perilous air journey over the sea at the request of a stranger. No, perhaps they had not been as mad as that. The man had brought with him a letter of introduction from their employer. Yet, why should he not have told them more of his intentions? How could this journey benefit tens of thousands of children? They were in imminent danger of being destroyed by the storm. He felt that it would help if only he knew the reason why.

There came another whirl. He caught his breath and tried to think clearly. It was a monstrous experience; he could not think of it in any other way.

“Can’t last long—wonder we haven’t hit the water before this. Must have been mighty high up.”

To his surprise and great relief, the plane again righted herself. This time, half on her side, she lay upon the air like a crippled bird poising for its death plunge.

His lips were at the tube.

“What you going to do?” he shouted above the roar of the wind.

“Going—to—get—out—of—here,” came back.

“Can—you?”

“Can—try. Look—out. Start—engine. May—take—tailspin. Can’t—be—worse, —though.”

The next instant there came the thunder of the powerful motor.

“Thank God! Dust’s dry,” Pant muttered as he tried to straighten up his tilted car.

When he heard the thunder of the motors, Pant could scarcely have been more thankful about anything. True, there were not another such pair of engines in the world, but there had been a strain put upon every bolt, rod, feed-pipe and screw such as had been endured by no other engines. If there had been a single break, then all was lost.

When they did respond to his touch, he at once tilted his right plane in such a manner as to square her up. The wind was blowing steadily, and, he thought, less violently, though this was hard to concede, since it seemed to him that a more

madly violent gale than even now was blowing would be hard to imagine.

The plane righted herself gracefully. Truly, this was a marvelous bit of machinery, made by master builders. She had been designed for dependability rather than speed, yet she presented a rather rakish appearance, her upper planes jutting out over the lower ones by a full five feet. Her fuselage was built like the body of a wasp, in two parts. In the forward part was the driver’s seat, fully exposed to the open air. In the rear portion was a closed cabin fitted with two seats. These seats in fair weather might be made to collapse in such a manner as to form a bed. Thus it was possible for one aviator to rest while the other was at the wheel.

But the distinctive part of the whole equipment was the engines. If Pant had felt any misgivings about the type of engine their plane was fitted with, the next few minutes made him doubly thankful that they were just what they were.

Hardly had they begun a mad rush straight away with the wind, the nose of the plane tilted twenty-five degrees upward, than there began to play about him vivid sparks of fire.

“Picking up lightning,” he muttered.

Like lights twinkling on the deck of a steamer the sparks leaped from plane to plane. They flashed down the guy-wires and braces, leaped to the motors. Setting her firing irregularly for a second, they raced for the tail, only to flash back to the wheel and give Pant’s arm such a sudden twist that for the second he was paralyzed.

The next moment his lips were at the tube.

“Mighty bad,” he shouted. “Dangerous—I—I—say.”

“Better—stop—her,” came back from Johnny.

Pant’s hand was at the lever. The engine went still, but just at that instant a tremendous flash leaped up from the large tank at the rear of the fuselage.

Pant leaped high, then sank back with a shudder.

“Man! Man!” he gasped. “If that had been gasoline in that tank! If it had!”

His brow wrinkled. “I only hope it didn’t rip her wide open. Anyway, we climbed some. Can afford to glide.”

They were surrounded by a succession of vivid flashes of lightning. The plane was tipped to a rakish angle. Through a storm-washed window Johnny saw what lay below. The ocean, vast, mysterious, dark and terrible, appeared as a limitless open-hearth steel furnace filled with gleaming molten metal.

In the very midst of this was what appeared at first to be a mere splotch on the surface, but which in time resolved itself into the form of a steamship.

He gasped as he made out its form, “To think,” he muttered, “that any ship could live in this!”

Yet, as he thought of it, he knew that they had in years past. He had read authentic accounts of ships riding out such a storm.

Even as he watched he saw the water smooth out into what he knew to be the surface of a gigantic wave; saw, amid the flashes, the ship leap forward to meet it; saw her prow rest on air; saw her plunge; saw her buried beneath an avalanche of sea.

He shut his eyes, expecting never again to see that ship; yet, when he opened them, she was still there battling with the elements.

“Bravo! Bravo!” he exclaimed involuntarily.

The next instant the plane tipped back into position, the engines roared, he felt her turn and knew that Pant had set her head-on against the storm.

He listened to the roar of the engines and thrilled at the battle as he felt the shock of the storm.

Suddenly, as the sheet-lightning flashed, he saw a dark object pass his window, then another.

“The parachutes!” he exclaimed in consternation. He put his lips to the tube: “Storm—tore—the—parachutes—away.”

“I—know,” came back from Pant. “No—good—now,—anyway. Can’t—land.”

Then at the very thought, Johnny laughed. On a calm sea the parachutes might save them; in such a storm, never.

“Saw—a—ship—down—there. See—her?” he asked a moment later.

“Yes.”

“Think—that’s—the—ship—we’re—racing?”

“Might—be.”

“If—it—is—we—win.”

“If—we—live—through,—yes.”

There was silence. But again there came a sound from the tube. This time it was not Pant, but the stranger who rode behind Johnny. Johnny started; he had quite forgotten him.

“What—what is it?” he stammered.

“Thought—I—ought—to—tell—you.” The voice was low and subdued, like a parson reading the funeral service at a grave.

“Tell—me—what?” Johnny asked, bewildered.

“About—the—wreck. Why—we—are—going—”

But at that instant there came a blinding flash, a deafening roar, and the plane seemed to leap into midair, like a rowboat hit by a fifty-pound projectile.

CHAPTER X
THE TASTE OF SALT SEA WATER

When he had collected his scattered senses after the tremendous lift which the plane had been subjected to, Johnny Thompson knew that they must have been in the midst of a terrific electrical explosion which had occurred in mid-air; a current of electricity such as no mere man-made voltmeter would ever measure had leaped from cloud to cloud. For a fraction of a second the circuit had been broken. The explosion had followed.

Pressing his lips to Pant's tube, Johnny inquired curiously:

"Any—damage?"

"Can't—tell—yet," came back. "Hope—not."

For a moment there was no sound, save the screaming of the wind. Then, again, came the call of the stranger.

"Hello!" exclaimed Johnny.

"About—the—wreck. Ought—to—tell. May—not—come—out—of—this. You—may—come—out. Can—you—hear?"

"Yes,—yes!" Johnny was impatient of delay.

"Ought—to—tell. Mighty—important. Wreck—mighty—important. Lot—of—people—affected. Children—most. Ought—to—tell."

"Well, why doesn't he tell?" was Johnny's mental comment. "Has the storm driven him mad?"

He wanted to know about that wreck. His life was imperiled for a cause, but what cause he did not know. His mission in life, he had found out long ago, was to help others live more happily and profitably. If the cause were a good enough cause, he might cheerfully die for it. “Children,” the man had said, “many children.” Well, that was best of all: to help many children.

“Well,” Johnny grumbled through the tube, “why—don’t—you—tell?”

“Going—to—tell,” came to Johnny through the tube. Then the Professor told his story. There was a pause between every pair of words; the wail of the storm, the thunder of the engines, the roar of the ocean, made it necessary. Even so, he was forced to repeat several sentences over and over before Johnny caught them. It was aggravating, doubly so since any word might be the man’s last; might be the last Johnny ever listened to, as well. There was one word the man repeated ten times or more, and, at that, Johnny did not catch it. It was an important word, too, the most important word, the very keyword, but Johnny gave it up at last.

“Isn’t any use,” he muttered after the tenth time. “Some great treasure, but whether it’s gold or diamonds, or old ivory or frankincense, I’ll never be able to tell, if I ask him a thousand times.”

The stranger, it seemed, was a professor in a medical college; his brother, a medical missionary in one of those border countries that lie between China and Russia. During the war something became very scarce, but just what something Johnny could not make out. He, the Professor, wrote his brother about it. The something came from Russia—only place it could be obtained. There was fighting still in those regions where it was found, between the bolsheviki and their enemies. Children in the United States, it seemed, tens of thousands of them, would benefit if it were brought out from Russia. Johnny could not see how that could be. “Perhaps the mine belongs to an orphanage,” he decided, half in humor, half in earnest.

The Professor had written his missionary brother of the need. He had written that he thought that, for the sake of the children, the thing must be managed. It could be carried out, the treasure could. It would require a considerable investment, perhaps twenty thousand dollars. The Professor had sold his home, had raked and scraped, borrowed and begged. At last the money was sent to the brother.

Months of anxious waiting followed. Finally there came a cable from an obscure

Chinese port. The missionary brother had the precious stuff and was boarding the “Men-Cheng,” a tramp steamer, manned half by Chinamen and half by white men. She bore a Chinese name but carried an American flag.

He had not trusted the officers and steward of her overmuch, so, instead of putting his treasure in their hands, he had chartered a two-berth stateroom and had carried it with him in four flat chests. Piling three of them on the lower berth, and sliding the other beneath, he had slept in the berth above.

That cable was the last ever heard from him. The steamer had been caught in a gale and driven upon the shore of a coral island, as Johnny already knew. The missionary brother did not appear with the rescued members of passengers and crew. All these survivors had been questioned, but none knew anything about what became of him. It seemed probable that he had come on deck in the storm and had been washed overboard.

And the treasure was there still. Beyond question, it was in that stateroom where he had stored it, since none but him knew of it.

The wrecking crew, more than likely, was a gang of ghouls, with no principle, and with no knowledge of such things, anyway. They would either dump the treasure into the sea or carry it away. In either case it would be a total loss, and the small fortune of the Professor would be gone forever. It seemed, however, that the Professor was more concerned about the children’s share than he was about his own.

“What sort of treasure could it be,” Johnny asked himself, “that even the roughest, most ignorant rascals would dump into the sea?”

“Bunch of nonsense,” he muttered. Yet there was something about the intense earnestness of the man that gripped him, convinced him that it was not nonsense, but that here was a truly great and worthy cause.

Suddenly it came to him that, were he to outlive the stranger and reach the wreck, he would have no means of identifying the chests. Again his lips were at the tube.

“The—chests!” he shouted, “the—chests!”

“Yes—yes,” came back.

“The—chests. How—can—you—identify—”

His sentence was broken halfway. There came such a thundering, grinding, screaming horror of noises as he had never heard, not even in this hurricane. The seaplane stood still. Her engines were going, but she did not move. It was as if the shaft had broken loose from the propeller and was running wild, yet Johnny knew this was not so. He knew that the violence of the storm had suddenly become so great that the plane could make no headway before it.

So there they stood, halted in mid-air. What must come next? Was this the end? These questions burned their way to the very depths of his throbbing brain.

He had not long to wait for action. The plane began to turn slowly about. It was as if it were set upon a perpendicular shaft, and a mighty hand was gripping and turning it against its motor’s power to resist.

Then the thunder of the engines ceased; Pant had foreseen the ultimate end of the struggle and had prepared himself for it.

The plane swung around, square with the wind, then began a glide which increased in speed with each fraction of a second. Pant was dragged from his seat by the mere force of the air. With nostrils flattened, eyes closed, body bent like a western rider’s, as he is thrown in the air by a bucking bronco, he still clung to the wheel and guided the craft as best he could.

Feeling himself constantly drawn to the right, he realized that they were not gliding straight downward, but were following a gigantic spiral—perhaps miles across. He shuddered. He had experienced something similar to this in his boyhood days—the spiral glide of the amusement park. Yet that was child’s play. This was grim reality, and at the end of the glide lay the remorseless, plunging sea.

Johnny Thompson and the Professor sat in their cabin, too much overcome to move or speak. Through Johnny’s mind there ran many wild thoughts. Now the past, his home, his friends, his mother, were mirrored before his mind’s vision. The next he was contemplating freeing himself from his harness and opening the cabin door. To be trapped in that cabin, strapped to his seat, as they took the plunge into the sea, would be terrible. Better that he might have one fierce battle with the ocean. Yet there was still a chance—a ghost of a chance—some startling development that might save them. Then, if he were loose in the cabin, the cabin

door open, he would be shaken out to his death while the plane flew on to safety.

He ended by doing nothing at all, and the plane, holding true to her spiral glide, swung on toward the dark waters. The spiral seemed endless. One might almost have imagined that the storm had an upward twist and was shooting them toward the skies.

A moment's flash of lightning undeceived them. The sea lay close beneath them, perilously close; almost it appeared to be lifting up hands to grasp them.

Johnny Thompson at last began to struggle with his harness. Pant licked his lips with his tongue and thereby received a revelation. The moisture on his lips was salt; they were in the midst of the salt spray of some titanic wave. The end was not far off.

In desperation he kicked the engines into gear. There followed a moment of suspense. Thinking of it afterward, not one of the three could account for what followed. Perhaps the current of air created by some on-rushing wave had lifted them; perhaps the very force of the powerful engines had torn them from the grip of the remorseless spiral glide. Whatever it was, they suddenly found themselves booming along over the raging sea, and with each hundred yards covered there came a lessening of the wind's violence. It seemed that they were truly on their way to safety.

Johnny started as from a revery. The signal from the Professor's speaking-tube was screaming insistently.

"Hello!" he shouted hoarsely.

"Those—chests," came back through the tube. "Do—you—hear—me? Those—chests—they—are—marked—with—initials—L—B—on the bottom. Do—you—hear? L—like—lake. B—like—bird. Get it?"

"Yes," Johnny answered.

"All—right."

Again, save for the thunder of the engines and the diminishing howl of the wind, there was silence.

“Wish I had tried harder to get the name of those things in the four chests,” Johnny mused. “I’d like mighty well to know. Didn’t sound like anything I have ever heard of. Perhaps it’s some kind of Russian fur; new name for Russian sable, maybe. Guess there’s no use asking him about it now. Too much noise; couldn’t hear.”

Then his mind turned to the steamer they had seen struggling in that raging sea. He wondered if it had escaped.

“Hope so,” he murmured, “even if they are our rivals. We’ll beat them easily if we get out of this. Looks like we would, too.”

Then, suddenly, his face went gray. He had thought of something—the dust in the fuel tank! There would have been enough to carry them to their destination, and a little to spare, had they not encountered the storm. They had battled the storm for what seemed hours. This had consumed much fuel. What awaited them once they were free from this storm?

He put his mouth to Pant’s speaking-tube, but the message remained unspoken.

“No use to cross a bridge till we come to it,” he muttered. “Not out of the storm yet.”

CHAPTER XI
LIFE'S HAZARD OF A SINGLE GLIDE

The coming out of the storm was like riding out of night into the bright light of a new day. Pant, as he sat at the wheel, steering as in a dream, was entranced by the beauty and wonder of it. They had been near death a score of times in a single hour; now they were racing away to life. Life! What a wonderful privilege just to live! How foolish boys must be who risk life for some useless plaything—to accept a "dare" or experience some new thrill. So he mused, and then all at once he realized that they had risked their lives for a cause of which they knew little.

"Well," he said, as he settled himself more firmly in his position behind the wheel, "we've come this far, so we've got to see it through. I wonder how far that storm has carried us off our course, and in what direction we are going now?"

Rubbing the moisture off the glass of his compass, he read their direction. Then he started. They were going north by east, and their course was set for south by southwest.

Pant stared at the compass.

"Whew!" he whistled. "At that rate, we'll be back where we started from in due course of time."

Then a new thought worried him. He, too, had remembered the dust in the fuel tank. It must be running low. He could not tell their exact position, but believed they were far nearer to a small group of islands which they had sighted shortly before the storm struck them than they were to their destination.

Immediately there was set up in his mind a tense conflict. “It’s better to keep going in your present direction and to seek safety with a fresh supply of fuel from those islands you just passed,” said his native caution. “You have no right to turn back, for if you do you are sure to lose the race,” said his instinctive loyalty to the cause of another.

Loyalty won the day, and with mouth grimly set he gradually turned the plane about. Skirting the fringe of the storm, he sent the plane speeding on her way.

Gradually the smoke of battle—the mists that lay low on the horizon—disappeared, and they emerged into the glorious sunlight. The ocean lay a glittering mass of jewels beneath them, jewels that sparkled on a robe of emerald green. The sky, a vast blue dome, lay spread above them, while a few white clouds skirted the horizon. Behind them, like the uplifted head of a terrible sea-dragon, the storm still reared its masses of tumult to the heavens.

“That,” said Pant through his mouthpiece, “was the worst I ever saw.”

Johnny Thompson threw back his head and laughed. A merry laugh it was. It was easy to laugh when they were free.

For an hour the plane held steadily on its course—south by southwest. It was a wonderful journey. Weary as he was and prone to fall asleep at his post, Pant enjoyed it. Here and there they passed flocks of sea-gulls that rose screaming from the sea. Once they raced for a few miles with a honking wedge of wild geese. The presence of this flock made Pant think they must be near some land. What land it might be he could not even guess, but the thought cheered him.

For an hour, an hour and a quarter, an hour and a half, they sped on. Both boys had forgotten the question of fuel. Johnny was puzzling over the name of the contents of the chests on the wreck; Pant was wondering about the fate of the ship they had sighted in the storm, when there came a hoarse rumble from the right-hand engine, and the thunder of their drivers was lessened by half.

With trembling hand Pant threw the lever out. The other motor was still going, but he realized that it would be but a matter of moments until that one also was dead.

Instinctively, as if preparing to run away from the ocean, which, having been lashed by the storm, must still be rolling in great, sweeping waves that would

wreck their frail craft the instant she touched its surface, he tilted the plane's nose to a sharp angle and set her climbing.

They had been traveling some three thousand feet above the sea. Now they climbed rapidly. Four thousand, and five thousand, six, seven, eight, nine thousand. They were now entering a filmy cloud that sent long waving arms down to clutch them. Now and again they "bumped," dropping straight down a hundred feet, then rising again. It was a glorious experience, even if it might be their last.

With ears alert, as are the ears of a man expecting the sentence of death, Pant awaited the last hoarse cough of the engine.

Finally it came; a grinding whirr, a tremor running through the plane, as a shudder runs through the form of a dying animal, then all was silence.

It was such a silence as none of the three had ever experienced. For hours they had listened to the scream of the storm, to the roar of breakers, to the thunder of their engines. For another hour and a half they had listened to the engines alone. Now there was utter silence; a silence so intense that, had a feather been falling from a sea-gull's wing, it seemed that its passage through the air might be heard.

The plane had broad, spreading wings. It would float with easy grace to the very surface of the sea. But then?

There was plenty of time to think now. No one cared to speak. Their minds were concerned about many things. Life as they had lived it lay spread out before them like the pages of a picture-book. All the past moved before them. They came to the end, at last, and thus to the question of the ship in the storm and the wreck on the desert island. Had the ship escaped from the storm? Was the wreck still intact, or had it been destroyed by the waves? Would the wreckers find the treasure? What then?

Slowly the plane drifted down. Eight thousand feet, seven thousand, six, five, four, three.

Suddenly Pant moved in his seat. Seizing his tube in his excitement, forgetting that they might easily speak to one another since the sound of the engines was gone, he shouted:

“Listen!”

Johnny threw open the door of the cabin and sat listening.

“I only hear the waves,” he said.

“Two kinds of sounds, though,” smiled Pant; “a steady wash and a thundering.”

“Yes, I hear them.”

“The thundering means land.”

“Eh?” Johnny gazed down toward the wide circle of the sea. “But where?”

It was true. From this point in the air, though they could see for many miles, only the unbroken expanse of dark green waters met their view.

“There!” exclaimed Pant in triumph. He was pointing to a long line of white. “That’s surf. Some coral island there. Surf’s breaking over it. If we can make the lee of it we’re safe.”

He brought the nose of the plane about until it pointed toward the white line. Silence followed—a silence that could almost be felt. Only the murmur of vast waters and the distant thunder of the breakers, like the falls of a great river, disturbed that silence. Their lives depended on the length of a single glide.

Johnny Thompson opened two small round windows, portholes to the cabin. The Professor, sensing the tenseness of the situation, without fully understanding it, did likewise. Then the three of them watched the rolling ocean as it rose up to meet them.

Now they appeared to be a mile from that white line of foam. They were twenty-eight hundred feet in air. At fifteen hundred feet they appeared to be scarcely half a mile away. Beneath them rolled the treacherous waves; before them the breakers roared. Just over that crest of foam there lay a narrow bay, still as a millpond. Could they make it? Pant lifted a trembling hand to his forehead to brush away cold perspiration. Johnny stirred uneasily. Only the Professor was silent. Motionless as a sphinx, he watched the ocean spin along beneath him.

Gradually as they sank lower and lower objects became distinct to them. The

north end of the island appeared to rise some twenty feet above the sea. The south end was lower. The whole of it was lined with a fringe of palms.

“Better turn her a bit south,” Johnny suggested. “It’s lower there and less chance of a smash.”

Without a word Pant followed his directions.

Lower and lower they drifted. Closer and closer came the island. For a time it seemed that they must inevitably drop into the sea. Then it appeared that they would miss the ocean but drive into the palms.

A hundred feet in air they swept on. Catching his breath, Pant unbuckled his harness. Johnny and the Professor followed his example. The next second, with a strange, land-like breath of air sweeping up to them, they passed over the very fringe-tops of the palms. One moment later they were standing up in their craft, which gently rose and fell with the water. Without a word they solemnly shook hands.

There are moments in the life of every person when he feels himself so closely welded to the life of some other one that only death can separate them. Johnny felt that such a time had arrived in his life. He and Pant were already inseparable. Now, by this simple, silent handshake, they took the Professor into their narrow circle. They had suffered in peril together.

They were now on a narrow island of the Pacific in a seaplane without fuel, and with provisions for but a day. Come what might, they would stick together until the end.

Their first precaution was to bring their plane as close in shore as the shallow water would permit, then to anchor it securely. After that they unfolded a small, collapsible boat and prepared to make their way ashore.

“Inhabited or not?” smiled Pant.

“If inhabited, cannibal or otherwise?” Johnny smiled back.

“I hope we are not to tarry here long,” said the Professor.

“We’ll tarry until we discover some fuel, and I don’t think green palm trees will

be of much use," said Johnny seriously. "Have you anything to suggest?"

The Professor seemed inclined to take these remarks as being in the form of a joke, but seeing that Johnny was serious, he said, as his brow wrinkled:

"It is really very important that we be on our way. We cannot be more than a hundred miles from our destination."

"Perhaps not even that," said Pant, "but they may be very hard miles to travel."

"If we only were there," sighed Johnny. "There is sure to be coal on the wreck."

"But, since we're not, let's explore our island," suggested Pant.

"And sleep," said Johnny. "I'm about to fall asleep as I walk."

"Better bring the rifles," suggested Pant. "Doesn't seem likely that there is a single living soul on this island—it's no more than a coral rock sticking up out of the sea; can't be two miles long—but you never can tell."

Johnny brought two rifles from the plane. After rubbing the moisture from their barrels, he slipped a handful of cartridges in each, and set them up in the bow of the boat.

Pant had already gathered up an armful of sacks and cans, enough food for a day ashore. Throwing these into the bottom of the boat, he exclaimed: "All aboard for no man's land."

Then all climbed in. Johnny took the oars. Ten minutes of rowing brought them ashore.

It was a strange sensation that came to them as they stepped on solid ground once more. They had been swinging and tossing about for so long that solid earth seemed unreal—only part of a dream.

"Don't see a sign of life," said Johnny as he glanced up and down the beach, then into the depths of the palms.

"Here's a bit of bamboo that looks as if it had been cut with a knife," said Pant.

“Might have drifted in,” suggested Johnny. Other than this they found no sign of life.

After a brief consultation they decided that, simply as a matter of precaution, they should make the rounds of the shore before settling down to sleep.

Night would be coming on in an hour, so, after partaking of a hasty repast, the two boys, armed with the rifles, struck up the beach to the right. The Professor was left to keep an eye on the plane.

Nothing eventful happened until the boys had made three-fourths of their journey. As they had expected, they had found no sign of human life on the island. Night was falling; the sea was growing calm after the storm; they were looking forward to a few hours of refreshing sleep when, of a sudden, as they rounded a clump of palms, Johnny sprang backward, and, clutching his companion’s arm, dragged him into the deeper shadows.

“Wha—what is it?” stammered Pant.

“A camp fire on the beach, and men, six or eight of them, I think, sitting about it. Natives, I should judge.”

For a time the boys stood there in silence. It was a tense moment. Each in his own way was trying to solve the problem that had suddenly thrust itself upon them. Should they show themselves to the natives, or should they try to discover some way to escape from the islands?

“I don’t think,” said Pant, as if talking to himself, “that we can get off the island without their aid.”

“A ship might appear,” suggested Johnny.

“Not likely,” said Pant. “We’re too far off the beaten path of sea travel.”

“All right. C’m’on,” said Johnny, as he led the way out into the open where the camp fire gleamed.

CHAPTER XII
FLYING KNIVES

The two boys approached the strangers with rifles loosely slung under their arms, as if they had just come from hunting. The men about the fire showed no signs of surprise. They did not leap to their feet nor attempt to glide away. They merely turned their heads at the sound of footsteps, then sat there watching as the boys approached.

Pant took the lead. He had lived among men of many climes, and would doubtless be better able to understand these strangers. Reaching the edge of the circle he sat down by the fire, motioning Johnny to do the same.

For several moments the little group sat in silence. Out of the corner of his eyes, Johnny studied the strangers. There were five heavily-built, raw-boned fellows with dark skins and thick lips. They were dressed merely in breech-clouts. There were two small brown boys with the squint eyes of Orientals.

“Couple of Japs and their serfs,” was his mental comment.

Presently one of the Orientals dug from the ashes of the fire two roasted sweet potatoes. These he offered to the guests. After that he supplied each member of his own group in the same manner.

Johnny noticed that there was a little pile of these potatoes on the beach, also two brown hempen sacks full of some commodity. These sacks were tied tightly at the top.

They ate the potatoes with great relish. After that they were given water to drink.

When they at last attempted to engage the strangers in conversation, they found

them quite incapable of understanding English.

Finally Pant, growing tired of the effort, rose and strode down to the beach where the brown sacks were lying. He thumped one of the sacks, then lifted it from the ground.

“About a hundred pounds,” he muttered. Then, turning, he walked back to the group by the fire. He had taken one hand from his pocket. In its palm reposed a shiny ten dollar gold piece. He pointed to the sack he had lifted, then offered the gold to the smaller of the two brown boys.

The boy reached out his hand and took it.

The act was repeated in reference to a second gold piece and the remaining sack. This offer was also accepted.

“They know the value of gold all right,” he smiled. “I have bought two hundred pounds of rice. Let’s get it on our backs. I think if we cut right across beneath the palms here we will about strike our camp.”

With the sacks of rice on their shoulders, they trudged on for a time in silence. At last Johnny spoke:

“What do we want of all this rice?”

“Three people can live a long time on two hundred pounds of rice.”

As he stepped out again into the moonlight he gazed about him for a time, then in a musing tone said:

“I wonder where we’ll be to-morrow night. It’s going to work all right. The only question is, how many miles do you get out of a hundred pounds of rice?”

The next morning, after they had taken their bearings, Pant said, “Far as I can make out, we’re something like a hundred and fifty miles from the wreck. Question is, will our fuel carry us that far?”

“Our fuel? What fuel?” his two friends echoed.

“Yes,” smiled Pant, “we have some fuel—two hundred pounds of it.”

“The rice!” exclaimed Johnny. “I hadn’t thought of using it for that.”

“Well, perhaps we’d better not,” said Pant, wrinkling his brow. “It’s all that stands between us and starvation. Our brown friends left the island last night. What’s more,” he went on, “I don’t know how much carbon there is in rice. Do either of you?”

They both answered in the negative.

“Well, there you are,” said Pant. “You see, if we can’t tell that, there is no way of guessing how far two hundred pounds of rice will carry us. It may let us down after we’ve gone fifty miles and clump us right into the ocean. And the next time we may not be as fortunate as we were this time in finding a safe harbor. Then again, we might land safely in the lee of another of these islands, only to find ourselves without a single mouthful of food. So you see there’s something of a hazard in it.”

The Professor rose and began to pace back and forth. He was very plainly agitated. For fully five minutes he did not speak. Then he turned to face the boys.

“The need of haste,” he said slowly, “is great. Nothing in the world, it seems to me, could be much more important. But you have risked your lives for the cause; I will not press you to do so again. You must decide for yourselves whether we shall take the venture or not. As for me, I am ready to go.”

Pant and Johnny looked at one another. Pant read Johnny’s answer in his eyes.

“Fair enough.” He sprang to his feet. “We go.”

A half-hour’s time was consumed in grinding a quantity of the rice, then they were away. The remaining rice might be ground and fed to the engines as they traveled.

Pant was again at the wheel. On his face there was the strained look of one who constantly listens for some dread sound. They were flying low. Now and again his gaze swept the sea. Twice he dropped to an even lower level, as he fancied he caught the rush of waters upon an unseen shore. Each time he climbed back to their old level and they sped steadily onward.

Fifty miles were recorded, then seventy-five. A hundred stretched to a hundred and twenty-five.

Suddenly Pant's brow cleared. He climbed to a higher level. The engines stopped all at once. But this was because he had thrown back the lever. As they glided silently down, there came to them the old welcome sound of breakers. Johnny Thompson, leaning far out of the cabin, swept the sea with a pair of binoculars.

"Over to the right," he exclaimed.

"Land?" asked the Professor.

"An island; ours, I think. A rocky promontory to the south, flat to the north, just as the sailors described it."

"Thank God! We have made it!" The Professor brushed cold perspiration from his brow. "I was afraid—afraid of many things."

The motors were again started, only to be shut off five minutes later. Then they began the delightful circling journey which was to bring them to a safe harbor and their goal. This time there was no trying uncertainty; there was still fuel in their tank and they knew something of the place to which they were coming.

"I hope we don't have to."

"We'll go back and try for some sweet potatoes in the morning. I think perhaps I'll find another use for the rice."

"What?"

Pant did not answer. "Funny bunch, those brown boys," he mused. "Don't savvy English, but they know Uncle Sam's money, all right. It's that way all over the world."

The island was very narrow. They soon found themselves on the beach facing the bay where the "Dust Eater," as they called the seaplane, was anchored.

It was decided that they should take turns at the watch, three hours to the watch. This would give each of them six hours of sleep and fit them for whatever of fortune or misfortune lay in their immediate future.

The Professor took the first watch, Pant the second. Pant had hardly begun to pace the beach on his watch when there sounded across the waters the quick pop-pop-pop of a motor. His first thought was of the “Dust Eater,” but immediately he laughed at his fears; the popping was made by a much less powerful motor than those belonging to their seaplane.

The sound came from toward the south end of the island. Racing down the beach, tripping over sand-brush and bits of drift here and there, he managed to arrive in time to see the tail-light of a motorboat fast disappearing out on the sea.

“The Orientals and their men!” he exclaimed disgustedly. “It was stupid of us not to keep track of them. They might have given us a lift to the very island we’re bound for. We were too played out to think clearly, though, and now they’re gone.”

He walked slowly back toward their camp.

“Since that’s settled,” he thought to himself, “it’s time I was trying something else. I’ll get at it at once.”

Arrived at camp, he cut open one of the large sacks of rice and poured a quart of it in an aluminum kettle. Placing the kettle in the bottom of the canvas boat, he shoved off and was soon at the door of the cabin on the “Dust Eater.”

For a moment he paused to gaze about him. He had never seen anything quite like the night that lay spread out before him. The moon, a great, yellow ball, hung high in the heavens; the sea, now calm, lay sparkling in the moonlight, while the palms shot skyward, a blue-black fringe on the garment of night.

He had little time for such reveries, however. There was work to be done.

Once inside the cabin, he took up a trapdoor in its floor and, from the space beneath, drew out a strange circular arrangement. To this he attached wires running from a line of batteries hung securely against the walls. He next poured his quart of rice into a small hopper at the top of the circular mechanism. There came a snap-snap as he threw in a switch. A whirling grinding sound followed. Presently, from a small tube, there began to pour forth a white powder, finer than the finest flour. This he caught in the kettle.

“Ought to work,” he mumbled, as the white pile in the bottom of the kettle grew

to a sizable cone.

When the machine gave forth a strange new sound, as of a feed-mill running empty, he snapped off the switch.

“Now we’ll see,” he murmured.

Taking up the kettleful of white dust, he walked back to the fuel tank of the plane, and, with the aid of a funnel, poured in the powder. After screwing on the top, he went back to his old place at the wheel.

He pressed a button here, threw a lever forward there, and at once there came the thunder of a motor. Quickly he threw back the lever. “Don’t want to wake them.” He stood up and peered shoreward.

Satisfied that his companions had not been disturbed, he returned to the cabin and put things to rights.

“Wreck’s to the southeast,” said Johnny. “I can see it plainly. Look’s queer, though; all white, as if there had been a recent snow.”

A moment later, as they circled lower, he laughed and exclaimed: “Sea-gulls!”

It was true. The ship, but recently a staunch sea-craft, had become a roost for sea-gulls. Literally thousands of them rose screaming into the air as the “Dust Eater” gracefully glided into the waters of the sheltered bay.

There is no mystery in all the world greater than a deserted wreck. An old house, an abandoned mill, a cabin in the forest, all these have their charm of mystery, but the wreck of a ship, laden with who knows what treasure, and abandoned by her master, a wreck so remote from inhabited lands that it has not been visited since the night of its disaster, here was mystery indeed.

So eager were they to board the craft that they could scarcely wait until the plane had been made fast and the canvas boat lowered.

One question troubled Johnny: The seamen, taken from the wreck, had reported no native inhabitants of the island, yet some might have been hiding out in the rocky portion of the place, for this island was some three times the size of the island they had just left.

As he climbed up the rope ladder which still dangled from her side, and sprang upon her deck, slippery with guano deposited by the gulls, he kept a sharp watch for any signs of depredation done to the ship since she was deserted. He found none, and no signs of life on the main deck, but as he went down the hatch, he fancied he discovered the faint mark of a bare foot on one step.

Their first thought was of the four chests.

“Was your brother’s berth on the main deck or below?” Johnny asked.

“That I cannot tell,” said the Professor.

“Probably main deck,” said Johnny, “but you can’t be sure. You take the larboard side of the main deck, and, Pant, you take the starboard. I’ll go below and see what I can find. Some of the staterooms will be locked. We can search the open ones first, and pry the others open later if necessary.”

As he sprang down the hatchway, he fancied he heard a sound from below. For a moment he was tempted to turn back. Then with “Probably only a sea-gull,” he dropped on down and began making his way along a dark companionway. He had not gone ten paces when he heard a soft pat-pat of footsteps. The next moment a sharp exclamation escaped his lips.

From the door of a stateroom had appeared a brown head, then another and another.

Suddenly some object whizzed past his head, to strike with a sickening spat in the wall behind him. He did not need to be told it was a knife.

The door of a stateroom stood open beside him. Instinctively he sprang inside and slammed it shut. He was not an instant too soon, for a second knife struck the door. Such force had been used in its throwing, so keen a blade it had, that the point of it struck through the wood the length of Johnny’s little finger.

“Well, now what?” he murmured.

And then he thought of his companions. How was he to warn them before it was too late?

CHAPTER XIII
THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

For a single minute Johnny Thompson remained behind the closed door; then his fear for his companions drove him forth. Throwing the door wide open, he made a dash for it. Down the companionway and up the hatch he raced at full speed.

The Professor was the first person he came across.

“Where’s Pant?” he gasped. “Natives on board—murderous fellows!”

“Where?”

“There!” A black form appeared on deck. “Dodge!” exclaimed Johnny, setting the example. “They throw knives!”

It seemed, however, that this precaution was unnecessary, for the black man sprang to the gunwale, then leaped overboard. He was followed rapidly by two others.

Pant had heard something of the commotion, and now came hurrying around the corner of a cabin.

“Natives,” explained Johnny. “Bad ones!”

“Better get to the rifles,” breathed Pant. “Can’t tell how many of them.”

He leaped for the rope ladder. In another minute they were rowing rapidly for the “Dust Eater.” As Johnny climbed to the cabin on the plane he looked back. “There they go!” he exclaimed.

It was true. A long, slender canoe, manned by four husky native paddlers, was shooting over the water at an incredible speed. They were striking boldly out to sea.

“Guess they’re as afraid of us as we are of them,” smiled Johnny.

“Think that’s all of them?” asked Pant.

“Yes, that’s one more than I saw,” answered Johnny.

“We came at a fortunate time,” remarked the Professor. “They doubtless belong to another island and have discovered the wreck in passing. The whole tribe will be along presently to loot it.”

“In that case,” said Johnny, “we’d better work fast.”

“And get away before they come,” said Pant. “Good idea. Plenty of coal to grind up for fuel. Perhaps we can get away before dark.”

After securing the rifles they hastened back to complete their search, confident that the treasure chests would be in their hands in short order.

In a cabin formerly occupied by the chief steward, Johnny found a master key, which expedited their work. With his two companions standing guard, Johnny was able to unlock one stateroom after another in rapid succession. One glance in each was enough to satisfy him that the chests were not to be found there.

When they had made the entire rounds of the main deck, and had discovered no chests of any sort, their hopes fell a trifle. There remained, however, the lower deck. To this they hastened. When this search proved fruitless, they stood for a minute silently looking at one another.

“The hurricane deck!” exclaimed the Professor. “The officer’s cabin!”

Thither they rushed. Here again they were unrewarded.

“What could have happened?” asked the Professor in consternation.

“You don’t suppose he changed his mind and shipped them as cargo, do you?” asked Johnny.

“I hardly think so,” said the Professor, “yet all things are possible.”

“It’s my opinion that those natives carried them off,” said Pant.

“Didn’t in that canoe,” objected Johnny. “Saw right into it. Wasn’t a thing. Might have hid them on shore, though. I suggest that we go ashore and do a little searching, and prepare some sort of meal. There’s food down in the galleys—canned stuff and the like.”

Leaving the Professor to keep watch, the two boys hurried down below, to reappear a few minutes later each with a dishpan full of cans, jars and cartons of food of every description.

“Won’t starve, anyway,” panted Johnny.

“Yes, but whatever we do we’ve got to hurry,” said Pant. “Those natives will be coming back. Then there’ll be no staying on the island for us. Natives are all right when there are plenty of white men about to make them be good, but give them three white men and a shipload of loot and them about a hundred strong, then see how quickly the white men disappear.”

Hurriedly they dumped their supplies into the canvas boat, then paddled rapidly for the shore. They were soon partaking of a hearty meal as they sat upon the fallen trunk of a giant palm in the shade of a delightfully cool grove.

Johnny could scarcely finish his meal in his eagerness to explore that region of the island close to the shore. Before the others had finished eating, he hastened around the end of the grove and came out upon the shore close to an out-jutting rocky cliff. At the base of this cliff he paused in astonishment. Back a little from the beach and against the end of the cliff was a rude cabin built of drift-wreckage from the ship.

With much hesitation he approached the door of the cabin, which was a real door taken from the ship. “Some white man; no native built that,” he murmured as he knocked on the door.

Getting no answer, he knocked again; this time louder. Still no response. Having turned the knob he was surprised to find that the door was not locked. Pushing it back, he looked within. Then, quickly closing it, he raced back to camp.

“Come see what I have found!” he exclaimed. “There must be at least one survivor of the wreck who did not escape with the ship’s crew. There is a cabin built of driftwood at the end of the cliff!”

“A cabin! A cabin!” exclaimed the others, as they sprang up and prepared to follow him.

An inspection of the cabin convinced them that it had been occupied for some time and had been but recently abandoned, if, indeed, the builder might not be expected back at any moment. Some garments of an oriental design hung upon the wall.

“Wonder if he’s a Chinaman?” said Johnny.

There was a well-built bunk on one side of the room, and on the opposite a wood-burning stove improvised out of empty gasoline cans. There was a small table, a ship’s chair and a box of dishes, also a handmade set of shelves well stocked with ship supplies.

As the Professor rummaged about one corner of the room his hand fell upon an object which immediately absorbed his attention. For a few minutes he stood staring at it. Then he whispered to himself:

“Could it be possible? If it only were!”

To the boys he said nothing, but Johnny saw an unaccountable new light of hope in his eyes. “I wonder,” he said, “if this man could have discovered the chests and brought them ashore for safe keeping?”

“I have been wondering that myself,” said the Professor. “It’s worth looking into.”

“In the meanwhile, where is he?” asked Pant.

“The natives may have done for him,” suggested Johnny.

A cloud passed over the Professor’s face. “Let us hope not,” he said quickly. After a moment’s thought, he added: “We must search the island thoroughly. We must find the chests and that man.”

“Do you know,” he said suddenly, drawing an object from his pocket, “that is the razor I learned to shave with when a boy? It was my father’s—an old-styled one, called a ‘pipe razor.’ There was never a better made. I found it in that shack just now.”

The two boys stared but asked no questions.

A few minutes later, while the Professor was gone for a bucket of water, the boys held a brief consultation. “It’s all right to search the island,” said Johnny; “I don’t like the idea of owning up we’re beaten myself, but how about those natives?”

“It’ll be pretty bad if they once land,” said Pant, “but perhaps we can prevent them from landing.”

“I don’t see how. We couldn’t attack them before they had done us any harm.”

“No, we couldn’t, but there may be a way to stop them. Time enough to think about that once they come in sight.”

“And then there’re those chaps who claim the wreck belongs to them.” Johnny’s gaze wandered far out to sea, as if he expected to catch sight of a coil of smoke drifting there. “If they weathered the storm, they’ll soon be down upon us.”

“Can’t do anything about that, either, until it happens,” said Pant.

“All right then, we’ll take up the search. I fancy the Professor will want to be one of the searching party. Will you stay with the camp, or shall I?”

“I’ll stay.”

“Say,” said Pant, a moment later, “it’s funny about that razor he found!”

“Yes, it is. Probably his brother had it on board, and this sailor, or whoever he is, this survivor, took it off and has been using it.”

“Maybe so,” said Pant in a skeptical tone of voice. “Seamen are very superstitious about razors belonging to dead men, though.” If he thought any further along that line, he at least said no more about it at that time.

Several hours later, just as the two searchers were returning from a long and fruitless tramp over the island, and were being cheered by the odor of coffee boiling over an open fire, Pant suddenly pointed to the open sea.

“There they come!” he cried.

Low on the horizon there appeared three long, low sailing vessels.

“Natives!” said Johnny in dismay.

“That’s what,” agreed Pant; “and what’s more, we’ve got to do something about it quickly or they’ll be swarming ashore with murder in their eyes. We’ve got to get to the plane.”

“Will you go along?” asked Pant, pausing to address the Professor.

“I thank you,” said the Professor. “I don’t blame you for seeking safety. As for myself, I shall stay here until I have succeeded in proving certain conclusions I have come to, or else have disproved them.”

The boys rushed on down to the beach, then pushing the canvas boat off, rowed rapidly toward the “Dust Eater.”

“I am afraid,” said Pant, “that our professor friend doesn’t understand us very well.”

“And I fear I don’t understand this move very well, myself.”

“You will shortly.” They had arrived at the seaplane. “You take the wheel; I’ll stay in the cabin.”

Though surprised that he should be requested to fly the plane, Johnny asked no questions, but, taking his place before the wheel, set the engines in motion and soon found himself gliding out over the sea.

“Sail straight out over them,” ordered Pant through the tube, “then hover there as best you can. Not too high though.”

Johnny followed instructions and was soon directly above the three large canoes. He could see the natives plainly. There were twenty or more of them in a canoe.

Great, swarthy fellows they were, dressed in all manner of apparel, from a full suit of white duck to a mere breech cloth. They were heavily armed. Johnny was a little startled to note that many of them carried rifles. The plane was not out of range of a good rifle. The natives, apparently stupefied at the appearance of this gigantic bird, were staring upward, making no movement. Even their paddles were idle.

Presently a wisp of smoke rose from one of their canoes.

“That’s strange,” Johnny thought to himself.

The native nearest the spot leaped to one side, and there were frantic efforts to quench the little fire that had started in the side of the boat. While this was being accomplished, however, with all the natives bunched at that end of the boat, a second fire broke out in the other end of this canoe. This fire gained some headway before it was discovered. The boat began to leak. The natives flew into a panic. Some of them leaped overboard and swam toward the other canoes.

When a third blaze appeared in the boat a panic followed. Every native in the canoe forsook her. Plunging into the sea, they made haste to reach the remaining boats.

Pant looked down with interest while the burning boat, now in full blaze, sent flashes of light across the water.

When the last survivor of this strange wreck at sea was aboard the remaining boats, these crafts turned rightabout. Every oar and paddle was set doing double time to carry them out of these mysterious and terrible waters.

“Good thing it happened,” said Pant. “Don’t think we could have trusted them.”

“Not if the sample of knife-throwing they gave me was any sign,” Johnny replied. He was greatly relieved.

“Might as well go back now and join the Professor again in his search,” said Pant. “Hope we can make it snappy, though. That steamer’ll be along any minute now.”

“I’d like to know where those chests are, and what’s in them,” said Johnny.

“So would I.”

Slowly the “Dust Eater” settled down upon the waters of the bay. A few minutes later they were sitting about the fire, making plans for the night’s watch and the morning’s renewal of the search.

“Clouding up. Looks like storm,” said Pant suddenly.

“Hope it doesn’t bring those black boys back to us,” said Johnny, wrinkling his brow.

Before Johnny went to sleep he thought in some wonder of one experience of that day, of the burning of the native canoe. He could not help but connect that up with other incidents: the white fire in the factory and the burning of the automobile in the desert. Had Pant been at the bottom of all these things? If he had been, what strange new power did he possess?

After that he thought for a time of their own problems. Would they ever return to the factory to report the complete success of the new steel and of the dust-burning engines? And would he ever analyze the contents of that vial in the factory laboratory? Of one thing he was certain, and he smiled grimly as he thought of it: they were not likely to be bothered by their ancient enemy, the contortionist, on this desert island.

CHAPTER XIV
A STRANGE LIFE BOAT

It was night, a night of storm. The wind had come sweeping in from the sea, bringing rain and rolling waves. It was not a typhoon, but a straight-on nor'wester of great violence. By the aid of an improvised capstan, the two boys had dragged the "Dust Eater" high up on the beach, and, with ropes and wooden stakes had guyed her there.

The storm was now at its height. The wind set the dark clumps of palms swishing and moaning in a dismal fashion. Great sheets of rain beat against Johnny's face as, wrapped to the chin in a slicker, he went from the cabin close to the cliff where they had taken refuge, down to the beach, to make sure that the guys to the plane were holding firm.

When he had assured himself that all was well, he paused for a moment to gaze out to sea. He was half afraid that the two native boats had not reached their harbor before the storm broke.

"Keeping them off this island is one thing, driving them into the teeth of a storm another; wouldn't want to be responsible for their deaths," he mumbled. Then he started.

"What's that? A light?"

There had come a lull in the storm. The rain had ceased. It seemed to him that, as he strained his eyes to gaze seaward, he made out a light. Now appearing, now disappearing, it seemed to be upon some craft bobbing up and down with the waves that were rolling high.

"Can't be the natives. No canoe could ride this storm. It might be—" This

second thought sent him hurrying across the beach toward the cabin. His companions were asleep, but this was important; he would waken them.

“They’re taking an awful risk,” he explained to Pant and the Professor, a few moments later, as they stood upon the brow of the cliff watching the now unmistakable light of a ship out to sea. “They’re too close in now for safety. Shoals out there, and it seems to me they’re coming closer.”

“Lost their bearings,” suggested Pant.

“Think a beacon fire would help?” asked the Professor.

“Probably would only mislead them,” said Johnny. “Besides, I think it’s rather too late. Unless I mistake their position, they’re due to go aground any minute.”

With strained and expectant faces the three stood watching the bobbing light. Now it appeared, now it was lost to sight, but at each new appearance it seemed to gleam more brightly, as if coming nearer.

They were troubled by this new turn of affairs. There could be little doubt but this was the ship they had seen struggling in the grip of the typhoon, the ship which had come to dismantle the wreck. If she went aground, it would be their duty to assist the unfortunate sailors in every way possible, yet, in doing so, they would doubtless be bringing disaster down upon their own heads. These were rough, unscrupulous men. They would at once suspect the two boys and the Professor of treachery. After that, what would happen? Who could tell? Yet, they were men and, in time of disaster, they must be given every assistance.

The three of them had scarcely thought this through, each in his own way, when Johnny exclaimed suddenly:

“There she goes!”

They caught their breath and waited. The light had disappeared. For a moment they looked in vain for it; then it reappeared, rose higher than ever before, then hung gleaming there like a fixed star.

“Hard aground!” exclaimed Johnny.

“And likely to break up at any minute,” answered Pant.

A moment later there burst out above the ship a ball of fire, then another and another.

“Sending up rockets,” said Pant. “I wonder how they expect to get aid from these desolate shores? No ship could come near them without going aground. No lifeboat could ride such a sea.”

“And yet,” said Johnny, “we must try to give them assistance. If we don’t there’ll not be a man of them alive by morning. Their ship is out where the breakers are rolling strongest, not sheltered by the point, as the Chinese ship was.”

“It’s true,” said the Professor, “we must render them some assistance, but how?”

“The ‘Dust Eater,’” said Johnny.

“Couldn’t ride that sea, even if she could the storm,” said Pant. “What’s your idea?”

“Might not work,” said Johnny, “but in times like these, anything’s worth trying. C’m’on.”

They hastened down to the beach where the “Dust Eater” was straining at her moorings.

“You and the Professor prop up the boat and set the wheels under her, while I work at something else,” said Johnny.

He rushed into the cabin of the “Dust Eater” to return at once with two great balls of stout hempen twine. This was a reserve supply to be used for lashing the wings of the plane in case of accident.

There were quantities of drift timber from the wreck of the Chinese craft scattered about on the beach. After gathering up several of these, Johnny began splitting them into pieces a foot in length and about the size of a broom handle. These, as fast as he had split them, he tied into one end of a ball of cord, leaving a space of six or more feet between each two. When he had worked at this for some time, he at last turned to his companions.

The “Dust Eater” was supplied with a set of starting wheels which might be attached to the beam of her boatlike body. These were for use only when an

emergency made it necessary to take a start-off from land. Such an emergency was now at hand. Whether, with the gale blowing, they would be able to make a successful flight, remained to be seen. They were now in a position to make the attempt, for Pant and the Professor had completed their task.

“Now each of you go to a guy behind her and loosen it, but do not let go,” said Johnny. He stepped forward and loosened the two in front.

“Take a snub ’round a stake,” he cautioned, as an afterthought. “Are you ready? There’s two balls of twine on the beach there. I’ve tied some sticks to one end of one of them. The other end of that one is tied to an end of the second one. I’m taking the end with the sticks on in with me. When we get away, Professor, you must attempt to play the line out to us as we fly. Don’t let it break if you can help it. We’re going to try to take them a line. They must have rope enough to reach shore, and pulleys to make a flying car. We can get them ashore if it works. Do you get that?”

“Yes,” came the answer.

Johnny nodded approval.

“All right. Pant, give your guy rope to the Professor. Keep it snubbed, though.”

Pant, understanding his part, climbed into the pilot’s seat.

“Now, Professor, ease away. Give her the dust,” he breathed to Pant.

The engine thundered. They were away with the storm. A wild circle brought them perilously near the cliff, but they missed it.

Johnny felt the slowly growing strain on the cord and knew that the Professor was succeeding with his task.

“Right over her, if you can,” said Johnny.

The wind caught them, nearly dashing them into the sea. The line tangled with the braces, but Johnny managed to drag it free.

“Now, now—right over!” shouted Johnny. The next moment he sent the wood-weighted end of the cord whirling toward the ship. The line burned his fingers,

but he clung to it as it played out.

It was a fortunate cast; almost a miracle, was Johnny's mental comment, for at once he felt a tug on the cord such as mere water could not give, and that instant he let go.

"Can't help but find it," he told Pant through the tube. "Back to the island now. It'll take all of us to draw their line in."

It was a difficult landing. The beach was narrow and none too long; the waves washing it from end to end. Three times they soared low, but did not dare attempt it. The fourth time, driving straight against the wind, they sank lower and lower, at last to feel the welcome bump-bump on the sand. The next moment they were out of the plane and guying her fast.

"Made it!" was Johnny's brief comment, as they finished. "Now for that line."

Pant did not follow at once; he was looking intently out to sea, where a light was blinking, brightening, then dimming, then lighting up again.

"Get that?" he shouted to Johnny.

"What?"

"It's a signal. The message they sent says, 'Haul away!'"

"That's good. That means they have our line. We can't haul a heavy wet rope across the water and up the cliff by hand; have to have a capstan for that. Guess the one we used this evening will do."

Finding the capstan, they dragged it up the side of the cliff. Here they anchored it firmly. Then began the task of pulling in the line. It came in quite freely at first; Johnny was beginning to think the cord had broken, when the back-pull began to stiffen.

"Got 'em all right," he panted, as they redoubled their efforts.

Fathom after fathom the line was reeled in. So tight grew the strain that they felt sure it must break. But it did not. Presently they came to a knot and the end of a heavier line.

Attaching this to the capstan, they reeled in rapidly until they came to the place where the line was double, the added strand much larger than the other.

“Big one’s for the pulley to ride on; the little one’s to pull them in by,” explained Pant. “Now, all together, let’s draw her tight!”

Round and round went the capstan. Up—up—up rose the dripping rope until, at last, it swung entirely free from the sea.

Seizing a lantern, Pant alternately dimmed and brightened it. This he repeated several times.

“Giving them the signal for O. K.,” he explained.

He then watched their light as it dimmed and brightened.

“They say,” he smiled, “‘Haul away.’”

This time by hand they reeled in the smaller cord. Length after length of it was drawn in and coiled on the rocks. When, for a moment, there was a heavy back-pull, they knew that the men on the swaying rope-hung pulley had been dipped beneath a giant wave. They redoubled their efforts, and presently had the pleasure of seeing five half-drowned men drop down by a line from the pulley to the sandy beach.

This time it was Pant’s turn to signal “Heave away.”

The signal was obeyed. The swinging car was hauled back and loaded once more with human freight.

This was repeated over and over again until the last man was ashore. When this last man cupped his hands and shouted up to them, “All safe,” the two boys dropped down upon the rocks exhausted.

“Well,” said Johnny, after a time, “we’ve got them. Question is, what are we going to do with them?”

“More than likely it is, ‘What are they going to do with us?’” grumbled Pant. “There are twenty or more of them to our three. Their ship is a hopeless wreck. It will, half of it, be on the beach in pieces by morning. We have the only means of

transportation. The only way to leave the island is by plane. Question is, what will they do about that?"

It was, indeed, a serious situation. Johnny's brow wrinkled as he took in the full significance of it.

"Might as well go down and mingle with them," he said, presently. "There's no better way to judge of a man's character than by listening to what he says in the dark."

They found the men rough and boisterous. Some of them were smashing up all available timber and building fires under the brow of the cliff. Others had crowded the little cabin to an unbearable degree.

Pant and Johnny crept into a dark corner beneath the cliff and facing a blazing fire.

"Pretty rough," was Johnny's only comment.

Soon he became conscious of the presence of a little man who appeared to stand aloof from the others. He was a clean, decent appearing fellow.

"Pretty close one," Johnny said, by way of starting conversation.

The little man turned and gave him a sharp look.

"You from that airplane?"

"Yes."

"I'll say it was close." The man lowered his voice. "Wouldn't 'ave 'appened but they was quarrelin' over 'ow they'd divide the plunder, them officers was."

"The plunder?" said Johnny.

"Yes, didn't you know?" the sailor whispered. "That wreck don't belong to them. It belonged to a company in China. The captain of 'er fergot to set a line to 'er and attach it to the shore, as is the law of the sea, so she's fair salvage to those 'as gets to 'er first—just plunder, I'd call it."

“But they claimed her.”

“Sure, so’s no other ship wouldn’t come fer ’er. They was sharp ones, them officers!”

“And worse than I thought,” said Johnny.

“Worse, did you say? They’re a ’ard lot. Know what they done to me? Shanghaied me, they did. ’Ere I is in the ’arbor with no money and no place to sleep, and they says to me, ‘Sleep in the ship. We can’t sail fer four days,’ an’ that night, up they ’eaves anchor and out to sea they blows, an’ me a-sleepin’ sound. That’s ’ow they ships me. An’ no agreement to pay ’er nothin’. Say,” he whispered, “if they’s a show-down, or anything, between you and them, you count me in on your side. But don’t you fight them if you can ’elp it, fer, as I say, they’s a ’ard lot.”

Johnny thanked him, then lay for a time listening to the low murmur of voices. At last he fell into a half-sleep from which he awakened to find that day was breaking.

He scrambled down from the rocks to the beach. There he met a short, broad-shouldered man with beady rat-like eyes.

“I’m Captain Hicks,” said the stranger. “That your seaplane?”

“Yes,” Johnny answered, trying to smile.

“Fine plane. Luck, I call it. Our purser is a licensed pilot. Soon’s weather clears, I’ll have him take me over to another island in that plane.”

Johnny gasped. He was about to protest. Then the hopelessness of the situation came to him.

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “that he is accustomed to handling all kinds of motors?”

“Knows ’em like a book,” the captain chuckled as he passed on.

“All the same,” said Pant, some time later, when he had been told of the conversation, “I’ll wager he’ll have some difficulty in getting old ‘Dust Eater’ to

perform for him. These dust-eatin’ birds are particular who rides on their backs!”

CHAPTER XV
THE CHESTS ARE FOUND

The storm passed over with the rising sun; the clouds scurried away, the wind went down, and the sun set the ocean, the shore and the tree-tops all aglitter with a million diamonds. It seemed fortunate that there was to be no prolonged uncertainty about the future, yet the boys dreaded to face the conflict which manifestly lay before them.

The beach was strewn with drift from the lately wrecked vessel. Hardly a vestige of the ship was left to mark the spot where it had gone aground. The wreck of the Chinese ship, however, was still standing, the point having sheltered it from the force of the waves.

Seamen were at once busy salvaging eatables from the wreckage. Various barrels, boxes and casks, containing beef, pilot-bread, tea, coffee, cheese and like commodities, which would prove invaluable if there was to be a prolonged stay on the island, were piled on the shore.

“Here, you. Lend a hand,” the captain shouted to a knot of men.

The bay was quiet now. His purser, the former air pilot, had had the landing-wheels removed from the “Dust Eater.” They were prepared to launch her.

“That captain is a rotter,” said Pant. “He and his purser would go off and leave us all here to starve if they could.”

Very confident of his ability, the usurping pilot took his place before the wheel as the seamen prepared to shove the plane into the water.

Johnny Thompson had been looking on with interest when, all at once, his eye

was caught by a stranger who had silently joined the group that stood about. He wore an oriental costume, yet he was a white man.

Johnny started. At first he thought it was the Professor who had garbed himself in the clothing left in the cabin while his own clothing dried. But instantly he knew he was wrong; this man's face was too brown and too much seamed to be that of the Professor.

Like a flash, the truth dawned upon him: This was the Professor's brother. He had not been drowned at the time of the wreck of the Chinese ship, but had, somehow, saved himself after the others had been picked up by the passing steamer. It had been he who had built the cabin by the cliff. That explained the presence of the razor in the cabin. It explained, too, the mystery of the missing chests; he had brought them ashore and had hidden them somewhere on the island.

He had been hiding out, but, on seeing the ship wrecked the previous night, had doubtless decided to cast his lot with these marooned men.

He did not have long to wait for the proof that at least some of these conclusions were correct, for almost instantly the Professor, turning, saw the stranger. For a second his face went white and he seemed about to fall. He recovered himself and sprang forward, and the two men embraced one another, like two children who had been a long time separated.

But now Johnny's attention was attracted by a suppressed laugh from the men about him, who had been watching the new pilot in his attempt to start the "Dust Eater." As he looked, he saw that the man's face was as black as it might have been had he smeared it with burnt cork.

What had happened was that having attempted to start the engine, and having failed, he had climbed back to the fuel tank and there had unscrewed the top, thinking to see if there was gasoline in it. In attempting to look inside, he had put his face too close to the opening, had blown into it, and the feathery coal dust with which the boys had filled the tank had risen up in a cloud to besmirch his damp visage.

The purser was in a fine rage. He ordered the sailor who had rowed him out to the "Dust Eater" in the canvas boat to take him ashore. Once his feet touched the beach, he came racing toward Johnny and Pant.

“Leave this to me,” said Pant. “You and the Professor quietly drop out of the bunch, and then make your way to the north end of the island as quickly as possible.”

He had hardly said this than the purser was upon him:

“Smart trick!” he snarled. “Thought you’d balk us. Took out the gasoline and filled the tank with coal dust!” He seemed about to strike Pant.

With a tiger-like spring, Pant leaped back.

“Better not.” His voice was low, like the warning hiss of a panther.

The purser hesitated.

“Let me tell you something,” Pant said evenly. “There isn’t a drop of gasoline on this island as far as I know; not a drop in that plane, either, but all the same, she’ll fly for a man who understands her.

“Now, I’ll tell you what,” he went on. “You come over to the plane with me. Look her all over. See if there is any gasoline on her. Then you let me try to get her going. See if I can’t do it.”

“All right.” The other man’s smile showed his incredulity.

Together in the canvas boat they went out to the plane. Carefully the purser looked the plane over, then expressing himself satisfied that there was no gasoline on board, he seated himself carelessly astride the fuselage, and with a mock-smile, said:

“All right. Let’s see you start her.”

Pant dropped silently into his seat. This was his chance. If he could make a clean get-away all would be well. Johnny and the Professor would be waiting at the north end of the island. He would pick them up and they would fly away. They would report the wreck of the steamer at the nearest port and leave the rest to the American consul.

Catching a quick breath, he touched a button, then pulled a lever. At once the engine thundered. They were moving.

“Now a little quick work,” he whispered to himself.

He whirled about, and with one swing of his powerful arm pitched the astonished purser from the fuselage into the sea. The next instant the plane rose gracefully from the water. He was away.

The purser came up sputtering, to swim for the shore. The captain roared at Pant, commanding him in the name of all things he knew to stop. Bullets from a seaman’s rifle sang over his head, but all these arguments were lost on him. He was on his way.

Taking a wide circle, that he might give his companions time to arrive at the meeting-place, he at last swung back to the end of the island.

To his surprise, as he eased the plane down into the water, he saw, not two men, but four, awaiting him. Besides his two companions, there was the Professor’s brother and the little shanghaied English sailor.

There was no time for demanding and receiving explanations; not even when he saw four large chests piled on the rocky shore did Pant ask a question. The canvas boat had been fastened to the “Dust Eater”; it was still there. Righting this, he pulled for the shore. The chests were quickly tied together, and the men loaded into the boat. Then, with the line of chests following in their wake, they pulled back to the plane.

The lashing of the chests, two back and two before the cabin, consumed time. When this was done, Pant tumbled into his seat, the other four piled, pell-mell, into the cabin; the motors thundered and they were away.

They were not a moment too soon, for the captain, suspecting the move, had ordered his men to race to the end of the island. Just as the “Dust Eater” rose, graceful as a swan, out of the water, the first man appeared at the top of the cliff.

“Close one!” grumbled Pant through the tube.

“Safe enough now, though,” sighed Johnny.

Their journey to a port on the largest island of the scattered group was made in safety. The wreck was reported; then the “Dust Eater” was loaded aboard a steamer bound for San Francisco. They were to have a safer if not a more

eventful journey home.

It was only after the four chests had been safely stowed away in a large stateroom aboard the steamer that Johnny and Pant were let into the secret of their contents. Then, with his brother by his side, the medical missionary unlocked one of the chests and lifted the lid.

The two boys leaned forward eagerly.

What they saw first was nothing more than sawdust. The missionary put his hand into this sawdust, and drew out a half-gallon can. This can had a small screw top. This he took off, and, having poured a little of the contents into the palm of his hand, held it out for the boys' inspection.

"Oh!" exclaimed Johnny in surprise. "Do you mean to tell us that we have gone through all this to save four chests of oil?"

"But wait," said the Professor quickly. "This is no ordinary oil. It is Russian napthalan. It is worth at the present moment, a dollar and a half an ounce. There are sixty-four ounces in that can, seventy-five cans to the chest, and four chests. Figure for yourself its value. But money," he went on in a very serious tone, "is not the principal reward. It never is. There are in America today tens of thousands of children suffering from a terrible skin disease. They have no relief. A salve, of which this oil is the base, will at once relieve their condition, and in time will cure them. To save these children, is this not a cause for which one might gladly risk his life many times?"

"It is," said Johnny with conviction. "I am glad we came." In this expression he was quickly seconded by Pant.

Later that evening, after the moon had spread a long yellow streamer across the waters, Johnny and Pant sat in steamer chairs side by side silently gazing across the sea. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Johnny was going over the events of the past few months. In these months many mysteries had leaped out of the unknown to stare him in the face and challenge his wits to find their answers. Some had been solved; others remained yet to be solved. There was the white fire of the factory which had worked such wonders with steel and, closely associated with that, were the fires that had started, apparently without cause, on the red racer in the desert and the savages' canoe. These remained mysteries, as did the problem of the composition of the new steel. He wondered still if the vial

he had put away on the upper shelf of the laboratory in the factory could possibly add some light to this problem.

Of two things he was certain: The dust-burning motor was a complete success and the blue steel was the most marvelous steel ever invented. He hoped that Pant and he would not now be long in revealing these facts to those most interested. They would delight the heart of their employer and would bring great joy to the aged inventor of the motor.

First, though, they must return from the coast to the factory with their machine. He hoped that, by this time, they had succeeded in shaking the contortionist off their trail.

“But you never can tell,” he whispered to himself.

As if his mind had been working on these very problems, Pant said suddenly:

“We’ll take the boat rigging off the ‘Dust Eater’ when we reach the Golden Gate and rig her up with landing wheels. Then we’ll fly home. What do you say?”

“Looks like the best plan,” said Johnny. “That’ll give the motors one more try-out and us another thrill.”

Had he known the kind of thrill it was going to be, he would doubtless have favored shipping the plane by freight.

CHAPTER XVI
A RACE IN MID-AIR

Johnny Thompson was happy; he thought he had never been so happy in his life. They were on their last lap home. The flight over the Rockies and across the Great American Desert, then over the vast prairies, had been accomplished with ease and pleasure. In a few hours they would be dropping down to the landing field at the factory.

“I only hope the inventor has come to himself enough to tell them the secret formula,” he mumbled to himself. He was thinking of the new process steel and again, for the hundredth time, the vial in the laboratory flashed through his mind.

“Guess I should have told them,” he mused. “Might be something in it. Might be __”

Pant’s signal at the speaking tube broke in on his reflections.

“Plane to our larboard aft,” he called. “Big blue one with wide planes. Looks like a racer.”

Johnny started. What plane could this be? They were not in a region frequented by airplanes, nor in the path of an air mail line. But then, he reassured himself, planes were common enough the country over.

He could not, however, shake off at once the sense of fear that gripped him. He had not forgotten their mad race across the desert, nor his narrow escape on the mountain lake. A race in an airplane might not end happily, especially with him at the wheel.

His mind became at ease presently, and he again took up the thread of thought

that had been broken off. Should this day's work be completed in safety, their days of thrills and dangers would, for a time at least, be over.

"Seem to be following us," broke in Pant again. "Man, but they've got some speed! Let her out a notch or two."

The plane seemed fairly to leap from beneath them as Johnny, obeying instructions, "let her out." She was a good, substantial plane, of the type that is destined to become the express-carrier of tomorrow, but she was not of the fastest model.

Johnny risked a glance back. Pant seemed to be fumbling at something near his belt beneath his heavy leather coat.

"If he were only up here at the wheel!" Johnny groaned.

"Drop down a few hundred feet," suggested Pant. "If it's necessary, we might make a landing." Johnny tilted her nose groundward.

As they came closer to earth, they realized at once that a landing was impossible; they were passing over range after range of low, rolling hills. There were no valleys to the crooked streams that flowed between the hills.

"Shoot her up again; better traveling," suggested Pant.

It seemed to Johnny that he could catch the thundering throb of the other plane's engine. But this was only imagination. Truth was, however, that the other plane was gaining on them. Yard by yard they came closer. As the miles sped from beneath them, the distance diminished. Now they were a mile away; now three-quarters. And now they plunged into a great mass of white mist, which was a cloud, and were for a time lost to view.

As they came again into clear sky, Johnny gasped. The other plane appeared to have doubled her speed. It could be only a matter of moments now. What mad thing did those fellows mean to attempt? Did they hope to force them to the ground? Would they ram them? To do so seemed certain death to all.

"They've got parachutes!" shouted Pant through the tube.

Parachutes? Johnny's mind was in a panic. Perhaps they meant to take to their

parachutes after ramming the “Dust Eater.”

“Johnny!” Pant’s voice was even and composed, “just slow her up a bit and hold her in a steady, straight line.”

“Slow up!” Was Pant mad? The other plane must be all but upon them! Without question he obeyed. Straight as a chalk line they shot on through the blue.

One minute, two, three, four, five. As Johnny counted them on the dial of the clock in front of him, he expected at any one of them to feel a sudden shock.

But the shock did not come.

“As you are,” he heard Pant breathe at last. “No, I think you might circle a bit. Looks like we’re over a meadow. Not a bad landing-place. They’ve taken to their parachutes. Their plane’s on fire, but she’ll carry on a mile or two before she drops.”

“Their plane’s on fire!” Pant had said it in such a composed tone of voice that one might think it quite the thing to expect at this juncture.

Glancing back, Johnny saw him struggling to replace something beneath his leather coat. It looked like a long black leather case.

With trembling hands he set the plane to circle downward, to follow the burning plane, which was now careening wildly. Some two miles back the two parachutes of the others, white specks against the blue, were nearing the ground.

“We’ll just have a look at their plane and be away again before they arrive,” suggested Pant. “Their fuselage is of sheet-steel. It won’t burn. There may be something of interest in the seat or somewhere.”

Johnny did not fully approve of this maneuver. Yet, since Pant was in charge of this expedition, he proceeded to put the suggestion into execution.

* * * * * * * *

“Here’s what I found in that plane.” Pant drew some jagged bits of rusty metal from a canvas bag. It was four hours after the burning of the blue racer. The two boys had made a landing near the wreck, and Pant had hurried over there, to

return with two objects which he found in the seat: a canvas sack and a pair of gloves.

They were now safe on the landing-field of the factory. They were “home.” Their journey and its dangers at an end, they were resting on the grass for a few moments before going to report to their employer.

“This is all there is left of the bar of new process steel they made away with. They tried to work it by heating it in the usual way, and failed. They found out some way that we were trying out some parts made of the steel, and were all for running us down and taking it away from us.”

Johnny examined the bits of metal carefully. “I believe you’re right,” he answered.

“And these gloves,” said Pant, holding the pair up for inspection, “establish the identity of the driver of the blue racer. No one but your friend, the contortionist, the frog-man, could wear such long-fingered affairs as these. I suppose,” he said thoughtfully, “that we could have the sheriff out in that country hunt those fellows up.”

“What kind of a case would we have on them, though?” smiled Johnny. “The sky’s all free property up to date, isn’t it? You can’t have a fellow arrested for following you, can you?”

“I suppose not,” Pant reluctantly admitted. “Well, anyway, we got their machine.”

“Pant,” said Johnny suddenly, “you set that airplane on fire.”

“What?” Pant started and stared. “Well,” he said after a few seconds, “what if I did? Didn’t do it until they had shown they were planning to run us down, and then, not until I knew they had parachutes. That was all right, wasn’t it?”

“Sure it was all right,” smiled Johnny. “It was more than all right—it was good.”

For a time the two were silent.

“You set their auto on fire back in the desert, too,” Johnny resumed.

“Sure I did.”

“How’d you do it?”

The masked look that appeared to hide Pant’s face faded. “I’ll show you, Johnny. Just because you’re such a good pal I’ll show you.”

Detaching from his belt the black leather case, which Johnny had seen twice before, he walked to the plane and, after attaching two wires, started the motor.

“Watch the grass over there a hundred feet.”

Suddenly the ground began to smoke, and a patch of grass turned to brown, then black.

“Fairly rips up the ground, she does,” Pant said with a proud grin. “There’s a piece of gas pipe somebody’s left sticking up in the ground over there about three hundred feet. Watch that!”

Johnny watched with popping eyes while a foot of the pipe turned first red, then intensely white, then toppled over like a weed in a forest fire.

“Pant,” he said breathlessly, “what is it?”

“I don’t quite know myself,” Pant smiled, as he shut off the motor. “There’s been a lot of things like it. X-ray, violet-ray, radium and the like, you know. But this is something I got up myself—sort of a cross between fire and lightning, near’s I can find out. I’m having it patented, though for the life of me I don’t know what you’d use it for. You can’t go around the world setting autos and planes on fire when they come up behind you.”

“And that,” said Johnny, “is the white fire?”

“Exactly! I got a lot of fun out of that business in the factory. Fooled you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, and helped us a lot. That’s why you didn’t stay about when the manager was with us?”

“Sure it was. I had to go back and get the show going.” Pant threw back his head

and laughed.

“Well,” said Johnny, rising and stretching, “guess we’d better go in and make our report.”

“Leave that to you,” said Pant. “I’ll run over and see if my patent papers are at the postoffice.”

“And there,” said Mr. McFarland, a half-hour later, as Johnny sat by the desk in his private office, “are a couple of papers you might be interested in.”

The instant he had them in his hand Johnny recognized his father’s signature.

“Notes,” he murmured. “Why, they’re marked ‘Paid in full.’ I—I don’t understand.”

“You will remember,” said the manager, struggling against a huskiness in his voice, “that your banker told you he held notes against your father. He never told you who the real owner was. He was acting according to orders in doing this. I was the real owner, and now—since you have rendered a service to our company which more than balances the account—I am giving them to you marked ‘Paid in full.’”

Johnny’s mind whirled. His good fortune seemed too good to be believed. His debt of honor was canceled. He might face the world with a clean start.

“I—I,” he stammered, “I can’t thank you.”

“There is no occasion,” said the magnate. “It is a plain business proposition—value for value received.

“You may be pleased to know,” he hurried on, glad to change the subject, “that we found a glass bottle left in the laboratory by the inventor, that tells us what the new element in the steel is. We have also discovered a method of heat treatment which enables us to work the metal. We are now in a position to manufacture engines and utilize this new steel. It will be worth millions, and the inventor, who is slowly recovering, will receive his share.”

Johnny was experiencing strange sensations. “Where,” he managed to ask, “did you find the bottle which gave you the secret of the formula?”

“Upper shelf; right-hand corner; central laboratory. Why do you ask?”

“For no reason,” said Johnny, a queer smile playing about his lips, “except that I guess I was the fellow who put that bottle there.”

He then explained how he had made the test at night, to help keep himself awake, and how he had not dared to reveal the results for fear of being censured.

They had a good laugh over it, and at the end Mr. McFarland said:

“Just for that you may have the chummy roadster which you and Pant drove so far. And, by the way, send Pant to me. He must have some reward. How do you think he’d like the plane you drove?”

“Guess he’d like that O. K.,” smiled Johnny. “Thanks for the car. If you’ll allow me, I should like to use it driving back and forth from your factory to the School of Engineering. I’d like to spend a half day in each place. There are a lot of things I need to know.”

“A splendid idea!” said Mr. McFarland. And at that Johnny bowed himself out.

A half hour later he and Pant sat drinking coffee and munching doughnuts in the small kitchen of the aged inventor of the dust-burning motor. They were telling their story to the delighted old couple. And that story, better than mere assurance, informed them that the invention was a huge success and that they were rich. No other pleasure could have so fittingly crowned this series of adventures than did this simple story-telling to two old people who appreciated it all as no others could.

Johnny stuck to his purpose of attending the engineering school. He learned there many of the secrets of science and industry. The time soon came, too, when he might put his knowledge to work. For, one day, he received a wire from Pant, who was again on the Pacific coast with the “Dust Eater.”

“Come at once,” the telegram ran. “Need you. Big new sea mystery. Will explain on arrival.”

What that mystery was and how they solved it must be told in our next volume of mystery and adventure, “The Black Schooner.”

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