A Mystery Story for Boys

MYSTERY WINGS

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Title: Mystery Wings
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Release Date: October 7, 2013 [EBook #43904]

Language: English

Produced by Stephen Hutcheson, Rod Crawford, Dave Morgan
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at
http://www.pgdp.net

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By
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The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago

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CHAPTER I
THE MYSTERIOUS CHINAMAN

“Pardon, my young friend!”

Johnny Thompson started at the sound of these words spoken by someone close behind him. He had been seated in a corner of the park. It was early evening, but quite dark. He sprang to his feet.

“Pardon! Please do not go away.” There was something reassuring in the slow easy drawl of the stranger. Johnny dropped back to his place. Next instant as the light of a passing car played upon the stranger, he was tempted to laugh. He found himself looking into the face of the smallest Chinaman he had ever known. To Johnny the expression “Who’s afraid of a Chinaman?” was better known than “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?”

But what did this little man with his very much wrinkled face puckered into a strange smile, want? Johnny leaned forward expectantly.

“You think hard. You are worried. Is it not so?” The little man took a seat beside him. “All the time you think baseball. You do not play. But you think very much. Is it not so? This town, your team, they are everything just now. Is it not so? And you are troubled.” The wrinkles on the little yellow man’s face appeared to crinkle and crackle like very old parchment.

“Let me tell you,” he put a hand on Johnny’s arm. “You think of Centralia. A long time you have thought, ‘They will defeat us unless we find a pitcher, a very good pitcher.’ And you have found a pitcher. Perhaps he will do. You are not sure. Is it not so?”

Johnny started. All this was true. Centralia was the great rival of the little city he chanced to call home at that moment. He was thinking of the coming game. But

this new pitcher! That was a closely guarded secret. Only three people knew and they were pledged to silence.

“Ah!” the little man leaned forward, “You are more greatly troubled now. You are thinking, ‘Someone has told.’ No, my young friend, it has not been told. It is given Tao Sing to know many things. Tao Sing can tell you much.”

“Are you Tao Sing?” Johnny fixed his eyes on the dark face beside him.

“I am Tao Sing.” The little man blinked strangely. “It is written, I shall be your friend. Tao Sing shall tell you many things. Ah yes, many, many things.”

Johnny was astonished, so much so that for an instant his eyes strayed away to the deep shadows beyond. When his gaze returned the dark figure of the little yellow man was gone. He had vanished into the night.

“How could he know that?” the boy asked himself in great perplexity. “I have only known it three days. It has been a pledged secret.” Here indeed was a mystery.

Johnny Thompson was, at that moment, living in the little city of Hillcrest. Having wandered the world over, sleeping beneath the tropical moon and the Midnight Sun, and meeting with all manner of weird adventures, he had returned to the place that had fascinated him most as a very small boy—his grandfather’s home. At the edge of this sleepy little city, a hundred and fifty miles from any truly great city, Johnny had found the rambling old home still standing, and in it, a little grayer and slower, but still his kindly old self, was his grandfather.

“You’ve come for a long stay this time, Johnny,” he said with a warming smile. “That’s fine!”

“Yes,” Johnny had replied, “I’m tired of big cities, of adventures and mysteries. I—well, I guess I’d just like to sit in the sun awhile and—well, perhaps play around a little.”

“There’s a fine ball team,” the old man had said enthusiastically. “Lots of interest in it this summer.”

“Baseball—” Johnny said the word slowly. “I’m rather poor at that. Might be ways I could help though.”

And there had been ways. When their best pitcher's arm went bad and their hopes of winning the Summer League pennant promised to go aglimmering, he had marched bravely into the office of Colonel Chamberlain, the town's most resourceful business man, and said, "Colonel, it's up to you to help us out."

To Johnny's vast surprise the Colonel replied, "Sure I will, Johnny." At the same time the Colonel had smiled a mysterious smile. "Truth is," he said, "I've been sort of holding out on you boys. I've got a man right here in the laboratories who can throw circles all around any pitcher in the League."

"Here in the lab—"

"Wait and see!" the Colonel stopped Johnny. "You bring Doug Danby around tomorrow night." (Doug was Captain of the team.) "I'll have him throw over a few for you, just in private." He had kept his promise.

"Mysteries," Johnny thought, sitting there in the park in the dark after the little Chinaman had vanished. "They're not just in big cities nor in tropical jungles either. You find them everywhere. Take that pitcher—one of the most mysterious persons I ever saw. Such a strange looking chap too—dark-skinned as some priest from India. And can he pitch!

"Boy, oh boy!" He spoke aloud without meaning to. "Will we win!"

"No, my friend!" So startled this time was Johnny, at once more hearing the sound of the little yellow man's voice that he sprang to his feet, wild-eyed and staring.

"No, my friend, you will not win," the little man repeated quietly. "There is a reason. Soon I shall tell you the reason, my young friend."

"Why you—"

Johnny saw a yellow hand waving before him for silence.

"One more thing I will tell you," the little man continued. "There is a pep meeting tomorrow night. You will not go."

"No, I—"

Johnny did not finish. Once more the little yellow man had disappeared.

“How could you know that?” Johnny called into the darkness.

“I have a picture of your thoughts,” came drifting back. “You will not believe. Sometime I shall show you this picture of your thoughts.”

“A—a picture of my thoughts.” Johnny dropped back to his place on the bench. “A picture of my thoughts? How could that be? And yet—

“How could he know?” he repeated after a long period of silence. And indeed how could this little man know all he had told? In regard to the mysterious pitcher the Colonel had discovered for the team, there was a bare chance that someone had talked. They, the three of them, Doug Danby, Colonel Chamberlain, and Johnny, had agreed to keep this a secret for at least one more day.

“Yes,” he thought slowly, “someone might have talked. But that pep meeting! I only decided last night that I’d better not go. And yet he, a strange Chinaman I have never seen before, he comes and tells me what I have thought. How strange! How—how sort of impossible. And yet—

“He said he had a picture of my thoughts. I—I hope he brings it round for me to see.” Laughing a short uncertain laugh, the boy rose from the bench to walk slowly toward his grandfather’s home.

A rather strange city was this one where, for the time, Johnny had a home. No city of its size has a more unusual population. A dozen or more years back it had been a mere village. Only native-born Americans lived there. Then it began to grow. The Chinese people came first. For some reason all his own, a very rich Chinese merchant, Wung Lu, had settled there. In almost no time at all, he had gathered about him a large group of the strange little yellow men. They had erected a Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Men came from afar to bargain here for Oriental goods from across the sea.

“They’re queer, these little yellow men,” Johnny told himself now, “but somehow I like them.”

Yes, though he was not very conscious of it, this was one of Johnny’s great gifts. He had a way of “somehow liking” everyone. And because they somehow came

to know this, they liked him in turn. He and Wung Lu, the Chinese merchant who, rumor had it, was immensely rich, had become great friends.

“But this little fellow with the wrinkled face,” he thought, “now who can he be? I supposed I had seen them all. And he is one I could never forget, yet I’ve never seen him before.

“Strange sort of fellow,” he mused. “Said he had a picture of my thoughts. How could he have? But then how could he know those things he told me?”

Johnny had read books about the way people think. He remembered reading something about one person being able to read another’s thoughts. Could this little man do that? Had he read his thoughts? He shuddered a little. It was so mysterious, so sort of ghost-like.

“He couldn’t have read my mind, at least not when he found out I wasn’t going to the pep meeting. I hadn’t thought of it once, at least not tonight.”

The whole affair was so baffling that he gave it up and turned his thoughts to Saturday’s baseball game.

Johnny had known for a long time that Centralia, nine miles away, and Hillcrest had been rivals, friendly rivals, but the keenest of rivals all the same. For four years, one straight after the other, Centralia had won the annual summer baseball tournament.

“Last year,” Johnny thought, “Hillcrest almost beat them in the last game. But this year we’ll win if—

“But then—” his mood changed. “He said we wouldn’t win, that little yellow man with the wrinkled face said that!” he exclaimed, half in anger. “How could he know? And yet, how could he know what I had been thinking?

“Oh well!” He stamped the ground defiantly. “What’s one game? There are others to be played. If we lose one, we’ll win in the end. And we’ll not lose this one! See if—”

He broke short off. Soft footsteps were approaching. It was the little Chinaman again.

“It’s he,” Johnny whispered. “Will I never get rid of him? He’s like a shadow, a ghost haunting a fellow in the night.”

As the little man came close to Johnny he said in a voice that was little more than a whisper, “You know that Centralia baseball captain, Barney Bradford?”

Johnny grumbled, “Of course I do. Suppose you have a picture of his thoughts too.”

“Ye-s-s,” the little man drawled, “Tao Sing has picture of that one’s thoughts.”

“Oh, you have?” This affair was getting almost funny. “What does he think?”

“He thinks his pitcher has been sick. He thinks, not sick now. Pitch tomorrow. Win tomorrow. He thinks this—Barney Bradford.” The little Chinaman let out a low cackle. “I have the picture of his thoughts. So now you know that Tao Sing tell no lie. You did not know this pitcher is well again. Is it not so?”

“I—I did not know,” Johnny agreed reluctantly.

“And your team mates did not know. But Tao Sing, he know. Listen!” The little man’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You are a friend of Wung Lu, the rich and wise one, is it not so?”

“Y-yes, that’s right,” Johnny stammered, too astonished to think clearly.

“Ah yes, you are a friend of Wung Lu,” the little man murmured. “Perhaps some day I will show you the picture of your thoughts. Perhaps very soon, some day I shall show you.”

Once more the little yellow man vanished into the darkness. He left an astonished boy staring at the place where he had been.

A few moments later Johnny met Meggy Strawn at his own door. Meggy was champion cheer leader for Hillcrest.

“Why Johnny, what’s up?” she asked. “Why all the gloom?”

“Burt Standish is going to pitch tomorrow.”

“Burt! He can’t! He’s got heart trouble. Johnny, who told you?”

“Why, a—” Johnny stopped short. He couldn’t tell Meggy that some little Chinaman had taken a picture of Barney Bradford’s thoughts. That would sound sort of queer. “I—I—” he hesitated, “I just found out.”

“And yet I believe it,” he thought to himself as he hurried past her.

There was reason enough to believe, for next day as Johnny took his place on the bleachers there was Burt Standish, the pitcher who was supposed to have serious heart trouble, on the mound warming up.

“He knew,” Johnny told himself with sudden shock. “That little Chinaman knew! And yet Centralia succeeded in keeping it a dead secret. Not a player on our team knew Burt was to pitch.” His respect for the little Chinaman’s mind reading, or whatever it might be, rose several notches.

CHAPTER II
A STRANGE PROPHECY COMES TRUE

“Oh!” someone exclaimed. “There is Burt Standish! He’s going to pitch against us!”

Johnny knew that voice. It was Meggy Strawn. Johnny could not quite remember when he first played with Meggy. Many summers he had visited at Grandfather Thompson’s old-fashioned house, and Meg was always there. She lived only three doors away. He remembered her in rompers, short dresses and knickers. Now she was sixteen. Her bright orange sweater and skirt of brilliant blue somehow matched her sharply turned-up nose and freckled cheeks. Meg was real. Johnny thought her the realest girl he had ever known. “Not soft,” was the way he had expressed it, “Just gloriously old-fashioned, no painted lips, nor cheeks either, and no cigarets—nothing like that; just all girl! And pep! Say, there’s not a girl with half her get-up-and-go, not in the whole big city of Chicago, or anywhere else!”

Yes, Johnny liked Meg. And now as he smiled at her he said, “Burt Standish will pitch, and we’ll lose the game.”

“Lose! Johnny—” Meg grabbed his arm. “Why do you say that? I just heard we were to have a marvelous pitcher, a real star.”

“Yes,” Johnny agreed slowly. “Guess I know as much about that as—well, as anyone, except Colonel Chamberlain. All the same, we’ll lose. You’ll see!”

“Crepe hanger!” Meg gave him a shake. “Just you watch our smoke!” Seizing a megaphone, she sprang out upon the turf to shout:

“Yea! Yea! Yea! Team! Team! Team!” Then, as her lithe young body swayed in rhythmic motion there came back from a hundred throats:

“Yea! Yea! Yea! Team! Team! Team!”

All the same, as Meg dropped to a place beside him on the grass, Johnny repeated solemnly, “We lose. Tao Sing knows.”

“What?” Meggy gave him a sharp look. “Who is Tao Sing?”

Johnny did not reply.

A moment later, at a motion from Colonel Chamberlain, who had just come onto the field, Johnny walked away.

“I’m sorry, Johnny.” The Colonel’s face was sober as Johnny reached his side. “It’s a tough break for the team, but J. can’t be with us today.”

“Jay?” Johnny stared.

“Suppose you are thinking J-a-y.” The Colonel smiled. “Just leave the last two letters off. That’s what our star pitcher prefers to be known by—just the plain letter ‘J.’ And, as I was saying, I couldn’t get him out—not today. He—he told me he didn’t want to chance it.”

“Chance what?” Johnny was keenly disappointed. “’Fraid his arm wouldn’t hold out?”

“Not that. Something else. I can’t explain further.” The Colonel’s voice dropped. “Just tell the boys we’re sorry. Hope he can be with you next game.”

It was a very sober Johnny who walked toward the spot where the Hillcrest team was gathered, waiting, expectant, hoping at any moment to see their new pitcher. This quiet, old-fashioned city had somehow gotten into Johnny’s blood. It was the home of his ancestors. He loved it for that and for other reasons. The people who lived here stood for certain things—that is, most of them did. They were honest, or at least as honest as they knew how to be. They were kind to the unfortunate. They believed in both work and rest. Saturday afternoon was their time for recreation. They loved their ball games. And there were very special reasons why, this year, these games *must* be a grand success. Johnny knew this. That was one reason for his sober face.

“Sorry!” he said quietly, a moment later, to Doug Danby, the captain. “The

Colonel just told me our surprise pitcher won't be here today."

"Won't be here?" Doug's jaw dropped.

"Oh well!" he sighed a moment later. "Just have to make the best of it. And—" his lips closed tight. "We'll win anyway."

"Oh no, you won't." These words were on Johnny's lips. They remained unsaid.

"See?" Johnny grinned at Meg as he returned to his place. "Our star pitcher will not be here! What does that mean? What did I tell you?"

"Yes, you and your mysterious Chinaman!" Meg scoffed. "We'll win, you'll see!"

Johnny did not truly hear this outburst. He was wondering, in a strange and sudden sort of way, whether there could be any connection between the mysterious little Chinaman and the failure of their star pitcher to appear. "Of course not," he whispered to himself. All the same, he did not feel quite sure.

If they lost that game it would not be Meggy's fault. This became evident from the start. With her bright sweater thrown carelessly upon the ground, shapely brown arms waving, nimble feet dancing, she led the cheering as no cheer leader had done before.

And it did seem from the start that old Hillcrest had more than an even chance. Fred Frame, their regular pitcher, whose arm had a mean way of going back on him just at the wrong moment, held his place in the box and pitched remarkably well.

Hillcrest went into the lead in the first inning. They held that lead doggedly until the fifth. In the sixth they slipped. Three runs came in for the rival team, and Hillcrest stood one score behind.

"It's going to be too bad if we lose," Johnny said soberly as Meg, seizing his arm to steady herself for a moment, whispered hoarsely, "Every game counts. The fans want victory. They want the pennant, or—"

She did not finish for at that moment Doug Danby, captain of the Hillcrest team, got a homer, tying the score.

“Ray! Ray! Ray! Doug! Doug! Doug!” Meggy was away like a flaming rocket.

The first half of the eighth found Hillcrest ahead by two runs.

“Johnny, we’re going to win!” Meggy was jumping up and down.

“No,” said Johnny soberly, “we’re going to lose.”

“Johnny, why do you say that? We’re two runs ahead!”

“Wait and see.” Johnny’s face was solemn.

“Now why *did* I say that?” he thought to himself a moment later. “Just because that little Chinaman said it. And how could he know?” He was quite disgusted with himself. And yet—

“We’ll show them!” Meggy cried. Seizing a megaphone, once again she sprang to the grass before the grandstand.

Johnny cheered loudest of all and hoped with all his heart that his dire prophecy might not come true.

“We’ll win!” Meggy screamed. “Of course we will!”

Hillcrest came up to bat. The dark eyes of the opposing pitcher gleamed as he sent the ball streaking across the plate.

“Strike one!”

“Strike two!”

“Strike three!” The umpire’s voice boomed, and Hillcrest’s star batter went down. Two others followed in a row.

A hush fell over the grandstand as the home players took their places on the diamond. It was now or never.

The pitcher seemed nervous. The balls went wild. The short, stocky catcher waited the next in grim silence.

“Strike—”

“Strike——”

Even Johnny was hopeful. Vain hope! The next two were balls.

“Take your base.”

But now the pitcher got a grip on himself. One man went down swinging. The next sent a pop-up into the infield.

“Two down. We got ’em!” Meggy screamed. Johnny was silent. Why did he believe in that little yellow man? He was plagued by the question.

“Yes! Yes! We got ’em! There he goes! Down to second. Francois will get him!” For a space of seconds he was sure the game was over.

Like the steady swing of a pendulum the catcher’s arm went up. The ball sped. It came exactly where Roger Kreider’s mit should have been. But Roger muffed it. The hard-thrown ball rolled far into center field. The runner went on to third. Four more wild ones and a batter went to first. The next man up hit one squarely on the nose and boosted it over the fence for a home run. After that the Centralia rooters went mad.

Had Hillcrest lost? The fans watched in grim silence as their team came to bat. It took but one score to tie, and two to win. But those scores never came. They went down swinging bravely, one, two, three. The game was over. Hillcrest had lost.

“There will be other games,” Johnny consoled the disconsolate Meggy. “Many more.” And at that instant he resolved that Colonel Chamberlain’s star pitcher should be in the box for the next game. “Even if I have to drag him by the heels!” he muttered grimly.

But Meggy, staring at him in a strange way, whispered, “Johnny, how did you know?”

“I—I didn’t,” Johnny replied hoarsely, “not really.”

Then he ducked. He saw the little Chinaman approaching and did not want to be seen in his company.

Ten minutes later the diminutive Tao Sing caught up with him.

“You see!” He was all smiles. “I tell you! I have picture of what you think. I have picture of what Barney Bradford think too. You are good friend of Wung Lu.” Once again his voice dropped. “Monday I show you picture of what you think. Four o’clock? Heh? Mebby all right. Heh? You come to Whong Lee’s place, yes? All right. Monday.”

He was gone. Johnny stared after him. What was it all about? He had to know. He would be at Whong Lee’s place at four on Monday—he was sure of that.

CHAPTER III
THE THOUGHT CAMERA

“I now proceed to take a picture of your mind.” The queer little Chinaman who called himself Tao Sing twisted his face into a smile and in doing so added a hundred wrinkles to the thousand that already made up his rather comical face.

Four o’clock on the Monday following the ball game had found Johnny at the door of Whong Lee’s little shop asking for Tao Sing. Tao Sing had said he would show him a picture of his thoughts. Johnny did not believe he could do that. However, one of Johnny’s rules for living was, “Never pass anything up.” So here he was.

“Take a picture of my mind?” he laughed. “You can’t do that. I still have my head on. You can’t take a picture through my skull.”

“No. This I cannot do,” the little man said soberly. “But I can make a picture of what you think.”

“What I think,” Johnny whispered to himself. “That’s what he said the other night. Of course it’s nonsense. But he did tell me what I had thought about the pep meet. He did tell me what none of our team knew about the ball game. I’m going to find out how he did that if I can.”

“You mean you can read my mind?” he said to the little Chinaman.

“No, I cannot read your mind. No! No! Not that.” The little man’s brow puckered in a comical manner. “I can make a picture of your thoughts. You shall see.

“Wait!” Tao Sing twisted a knob on some small instrument before him on a table. He punched a button that made a loud click.

“What’s he up to?” Johnny asked himself. He had met this man only twice. Knew nothing of him really. Now in a stuffy little room in the back of Whong Lee’s shop where all manner of Oriental roots and seeds were sold, he was listening to strange talk. There was a druggy smell about the place that made him slightly dizzy. He wished in a vague sort of way that he was not there, but being there, decided to stay.

“Now!” The little yellow man heaved a heavy sigh. “Now you think. Ah yes, to think is easy. We always think, except when we sleep. Then we dream. You do not believe? Then you try not to think at all. Ah! This you cannot do.

“But to remember what you thought—” the little man rattled on, “ah, that is more difficult. But now you must remember. For very soon I shall show you what you have thought. It shall be all put down, right in here.” He tapped his instrument. “Where I can see it, read it when I choose. Tomorrow? Yes, in ten years? Yes. In a hundred years? Yes, yes, always.”

“Why, you—you couldn’t do that!” Johnny stammered.

“Ah, you shall see!” The little man’s wrinkled smile appeared again. “Now! Get ready—think! I record your thoughts.” A second button clicked, sounding loud in the silent, drug-scented room.

“He won’t record much,” the boy told himself stoutly. “But of course it’s all nonsense.”

He put his mind to the task of running over a song:

> “I’m riding to the last round-up,
> I’ll saddle Old Paint, and ri—ide—”

What utter nonsense! This little man was a fake. He could not keep his mind on the words of that song. A fly caught in a spider’s web buzzed loudly in one corner. He heard the rustle of rice paper—Whong Lee wrapping up some Ginsing roots perhaps.

With a wrench he brought his mind back to the song:

“The last round-up, the la—ast round-up.”

He felt all sort of stuffed up. Even in the daytime this place was spooky enough. What if this little man *could* read people's minds? How terrible to have someone about, who could tell everything you thought! You'd just have to stop thinking, and that was impossible. Again he was back at the song:

"I'm riding to the last round-up—"

"Now you may stop thinking," the little man broke in. "Only—" he smiled again. "You will never stop, not for one moment, except when you are asleep.

"Now," he said briskly, "we take this out." He held up a round metal box a little larger than a silver dollar. "We fit it in here. We turn this handle, so—very slowly, for two minutes."

Taking out his watch, he proceeded to time himself while the tiny handle went round and round noiselessly.

"This little Chinaman is a fake," the boy thought to himself once more. "He must be. How could anyone make a picture of your thoughts?"

And yet—he found himself trying to think what that would mean. If you were able to photograph the thoughts of your mother on the night before Christmas, or your teacher when you thought she had caught you in some prank, or the person who sits next to you in a street car, or the new girl next door, or a person suspected of some terrible crime. Johnny's head fairly whirled with the possibilities of the thing. In the end he thought, "Huh! It can't be done!"

Beginning to feel that he had dwelt upon this long enough, he switched his thoughts to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Johnny could visit that fascinating place any time he pleased because he was a friend of the great Wung Lu, who spent much time there.

At times Johnny had lived near great forests. These he had explored with interest. He had followed mysterious rivers and searched hidden places in wild mountain ranges. Here he explored Chinatown.

And such a fascinating place this Chinatown was—especially the Chamber of Commerce to which, from all over the world, rich Chinamen came that they might trade silk and tea, quaint Chinese toys, teak wood boxes and a thousand other articles of trade, for wheat and typewriters, teaspoons and automobiles.

There were strange and fascinating things in the great hall of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce—a lamp made of three thousand pieces of porcelain, banners old as the hills from which they came, and brass dragons that seemed much older.

Johnny was deep in his contemplation of these things when the little man who called himself Tao Sing said, “Now then, you shall see!” He heaved a sigh. He snapped his old-fashioned watch shut. “Now we take it out of here. It is done. Your thoughts, how shall we say—they are pickled. They will keep a long, long time.

“But wait!” He held up a finger. “You shall see these so wonderful thoughts.

“See.” He took a small instrument from a shelf on the wall. “I put it in here. I wind this so.” A clicking sound followed. “I press this so. Now. Now! You look.” His tone rose as he pointed to the top of the instrument resembling a high power microscope. “You look! You see!”

Johnny did look, and what he saw struck him dumb. There, passing slowly before his eyes were words, faintly illuminated words. Strangest of all, he realized as he read that these words represented his thoughts of a few moments before.

The words passed slowly. There was ample time for reading every one. Yet, so astonished was he that for a time he did not read. When at last he got a grip on himself he realized that here recorded, apparently for all time, just as a moving picture is recorded, were his least and most trifling thoughts of a few moments before. The buzzing fly was there, and Whong Lee’s wrapping of a package. And, sadly jumbled with the rest, was his thinking through of that song.

There came a click louder than the rest. The space beneath his eyes went blank. The show was over.

“You see!” cried the little man. “I have your thoughts. They are recorded. They will keep a long, long time.”

To say that Johnny was astonished is to express his feelings not at all. He looked up at Tao Sing for all the world as if he had never seen him before.

“Say! You are wonderful!” he exclaimed. “Can you do that again?”

“You want to see again?” The little man grinned.

“Yes. Oh yes.”

“All right. You see.”

The little man fingered the microscope affair for a moment. “All right.” He stepped back. “You look see.”

Johnny did “look see,” and the thoughts that passed through his mind as he looked were strange indeed.

“It can’t be true,” he told himself. “And yet it is. A wonderful new invention, like the telegraph, radio, television. Like all the wonderful things of our marvelous age.”

The words that fell from Tao Sing’s lips as the spot before Johnny’s eyes once more went blank, left him staring.

“You want to try?” said Tao Sing.

“T—try?” Johnny stammered at last. “Try to take pictures of people’s thoughts?”

“Yes, yes.”

Once again Johnny stared. “Nothing,” he thought, “could be more interesting. And yet—

“Oh bother!” he whispered at last.

Then to the Chinaman, “Yes, I sure would!”

“All right.” The Chinaman’s eyes narrowed. “You do for me, I do for you.”

“Do what?” Johnny asked.

“Not very much.” Tao Sing’s eyes became mere slits of light. “You know Wung Lu?”

Johnny nodded.

“Wung Lu very rich, very wise.” The little man’s eyes opened suddenly very wide. “You see Wung Lu sit and think long time, eyes half shut. Think long time. Very wise thoughts. You take picture of these thoughts. Tao Sing read thoughts. By and by Tao Sing very wise. You take picture Wung Lu’s thoughts. You give ’em to Tao Sing. What? You take ’em pictures your friends. All right. You keep ’em. What?” He looked at the boy very hard.

Johnny stared. Here indeed was a strange offer. He was to sit in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, as he had often sat before, admiring the ancient, green-eyed dragon, while Wung Lu, the rich and wise one, sat in his corner contemplating a large portly Buddha. He was to take pictures of the wise one’s thoughts.

“Wung Lu thinks much.” Tao Sing spoke slowly. “He talks little.”

Johnny knew this to be true. Wung Lu smiled often. He seldom spoke.

“No great thought should be allowed to perish.” The little man was quoting some Chinese proverb.

“I’ll do it,” said Johnny quite suddenly.

“All right. Here, I will show you.” Soon Johnny was lost to the world in his study of the invention he believed to be the most marvelous in existence.

A half hour later, as he marched home with a mysterious package under his arm, his mind was overflowing with the strangest, weirdest plans. How many things there were that he truly wished to know! Now he would get them from the minds of others without asking questions. There were secrets too that required no end of scheming to uncover. Now it would be no trouble at all.

“And those stories I have been planning to write for the *Sentinel*!” (The *Sentinel* was the little city’s weekly newspaper.) He was fairly bubbling over with enthusiasm. “Never have to write them at all now; just prop that old thought-camera up against the books on my table, get all set to look right at it, start it going, think the story through. And there you have it. All that’s left is to copy it down from the thought picture. How simple! How grand! How—”

He broke short off. Arrived at his own door, he had all but tumbled into Meggy Strawn who had been waiting for him there.

“Meg!” he muttered. “I—I beg your pardon.”

“You better!” Meg exclaimed. “I’ve been waiting half an hour. Doug Danby wants you to go over to the laboratories with him right away. Important business. He—

“But Johnny!” Her tone changed. “How queer you look! You must have been seeing a ghost.”

“Per-perhaps I have,” Johnny said slowly. “A ghost of—well, never mind of what.”

“Johnny, tell me.” There was a teasing look in Meg’s eyes.

“Not now. Perhaps never.” Johnny was through the door and into the house like a flash.

After hiding the newly acquired thought-camera in his closet, he tiptoed down the back stairs, then sped away through the garden and the back gate toward Doug Danby’s house.

“Can’t face those teasing eyes,” he told himself. “Not just yet. I might tell, and that would be betraying a dark secret, Tao Sing’s and mine.”

CHAPTER IV
A PLACE OF GREAT MAGIC

“Hello Johnny!” Doug Danby exclaimed, as Johnny came racing into the Danby’s back yard. “Where you been? Gee! You look queer! As if you’d been stealin’ chickens or something.” Doug laughed.

“Oh forget it!” Johnny exploded. “Here! Give me your catcher’s mask. I’ll use it to hide my face.”

“Don’t need it,” Doug replied. “All self-respecting secrets carefully guarded—that’s our motto.

“But say!” Doug exploded. “The Colonel wants to see us! Guess it’s about that pitcher of his. Bet he’ll be with us next Saturday. And if he is,—say! Boy! We’ll lick ’em!”

Doug was a fine boy. Johnny liked him a heap. Tall, slightly angular, like the boy Abe Lincoln, he was honest, hard-working and full of droll fun—just the sort of boy that should come from a little city like Hillcrest.

Together the boys walked rapidly down the street. They soon caught up with a slow ambling figure that greeted them with a squawky but none the less hearty, “Why, hello Doug! Hello Johnny!”

This was Professor George, the little city’s favorite old man. He was eighty years old, was Professor George. The younger men of the city could remember when he was a popular teacher in the high school. Now, for years, he had been Professor George, friend of every boy in town.

The professor had a hooked nose and there were huge brown freckles all over his dry face, but his kindly smile was worth earning, and many a boy owed his success to Professor George’s kindly, steadying hand.

“Sorry you lost the game Saturday,” he said as he tried hard to keep in step. “You’ll have better luck next time. I’m sure of it.” Professor George had not missed a ball game in twenty years.

“Yes,” Doug exclaimed enthusiastically, “we’re going to have a grand pitcher, regular big league stuff! We—”

His words were broken in upon by a booming voice. It was Big Bill Tyson speaking. He had suddenly appeared from somewhere. “Just the fellows I want to see!” he roared. “The very ones. Wanted to tell you about the ball grounds.”

“Ye—es. What about it?” The words caught in Doug’s throat. He had been dreading this for some time, in fact ever since Big Bill’s father died. Bill’s father had owned the ball park. He had owned a lot more of the town besides. Now it all belonged to Big Bill. Once the ball park had been the grounds of a canning factory. Bill’s father had been rich and generous, a good citizen and a great friend of Professor George. So, when the antiquated canning factory failed to pay, he had allowed Professor George and his boys to tear it down and to use the lumber for a fence and bleachers of a ball park.

But now the good old man was dead and Big Bill reigned, in his stead. Big Bill was a different sort. He cared little for boys, in fact he thought very little about the welfare of anyone but Big Bill. So now Doug, Johnny and Professor George stood, inwardly quaking, awaiting his next word.

“It’s like this—” he tried to be brisk and business-like, but succeeded only in appearing, in the boys’ eyes at least, as a big bully. “Like this—” he began again. “Fellow came into my office last week. He’s interested in organizing a professional baseball league. Hired players and all that from out of town. Play the games on Sunday. Big thing for the city. Bring lots of folks here. Fill up the soft-drink places, pool halls an’ all that. Fine big thing!” Thrusting his fingers in his belt, he swelled out like a turkey gobbler.

“But the boys could play their games on Saturday just the same,” Professor George put in hopefully.

“No. No, they couldn’t. That’s what I wanted to tell you.” Big Bill scowled. “Boys would be in the way. Professionals need practice and all that. So—it’s out you go, just like that!” He snapped a pudgy finger. “Unless—”

“Unless what?” Doug breathed.

“Unless you can get me a thousand dollars.”

“Rent?” Professor George gasped. “We—”

“Rent nothing!” Big Bill roared. “First payment on a contract to purchase the grounds.”

“For—for how much?” Doug was staring.

“Ten thousand dollars on contract.”

“Ten thousand!” Johnny whistled through his teeth.

“We—ll,” Professor George said slowly, “that’s a fair price, William. But you’ll have to give us time to think where we can get it.”

“All right.” Big Bill suddenly put on a business-like air. “Two weeks. Time enough for anybody.” At that he strode away.

“Might as well make it two years,” Doug grumbled gloomily, “for all we’ll ever make it!”

“Now, now Doug!” Professor George admonished. “It’s a worthy cause, a very worthy cause. Nothing better for the boys than good, clean baseball. God loves boys, I’m positive of that. So, just like as not He’ll show us the way.” Professor George was religious but he was not what you call pious. His religion, like the blood that coursed through his veins, was a real part of him. Every boy who came to know him respected him the more because of his religion.

“Well, boys,” the good old professor said as he left them at his own door, “don’t let William trouble you too much. We’ll get round him somehow. Used to trouble us in school, William did, but we always got round him, somehow.” He gave forth a cackling laugh. “Always got round him somehow.”

“Bill went to school when Professor George taught,” Doug explained as he and Johnny went on down the street. “Dad says Bill cheated something terrible, but Professor George always caught on to him. That’s why he don’t like Professor George, even now.

“He’s been cheating ever since,” he added gloomily. “He’ll cheat us out of our ball park if we don’t watch out.

“A thousand dollars,” he murmured thoughtfully. “We’ve got half that much in the bank—been saving it for new bleachers. Took two years to save it. Fine chance to gather up that much more in two weeks!”

“Got to advertise,” said Johnny. “This mysterious new pitcher now. He ought to draw a crowd if we only had him advertised.”

Like a flash a bright idea occurred to Johnny. “I’ll think up some good publicity,” he told himself. “Think it up just right. Then I’ll shoot that thought-camera at myself and turn out some swell copy. Old C. K. Lovell will put it in the *Sentinel*, I know he will.” But of this he said never a word to Doug. The thought-camera was a deep, dark secret.

“He is mysterious!” Doug exclaimed quite suddenly.

“Huh! What? Who’s mysterious?” Johnny dragged himself back to earth with a start. “Oh! Yes! That pitcher. Sure he is. Terribly mysterious.”

“The Colonel says he’s been working in the laboratories for three months,” Doug broke in. “Three months! I’ve been round the lab nearly every day, and I never once saw him, except that evening when he pitched a few over for us.”

As the boys approached the long, low building known as the laboratories, Johnny felt a thrill course up his spine. He was to see that strange pitcher. With his olive skin and bright gleaming blue eyes, this pitcher’s very movements seemed to say, “Here I am. A mystery. Solve me.”

The laboratories too held a special charm for Johnny. Here all manner of strange chemical secrets were sought out and often found. Already these laboratories were famous. Here a new drug had been discovered that had proved a great boon to those suffering from asthma. With characteristic generosity, the Colonel had given this discovery to the world, asking no profit to himself.

It was rumored that here a poison had been discovered, so powerful that it would make war impossible. One drop of it on any part of the body would mean instant death. This was only a rumor. Better founded was the statement that “heavy water”—a water in which no animal life, however small, could live—had been

produced. However these things might be, both Johnny and Doug approached the place with a feeling akin to awe, for this to their growing minds was a place of great magic.

In the office of the laboratories they found awaiting them not only the Colonel, but a short, round-shouldered boy who wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses.

“Hello, Goggles!” Doug greeted the bespectacled boy with a hearty grin. “What you doing here? Been discovering some new element or something?”

“Johnny—” he turned to his friend. “Meet Goggles Short, the boy wizard, both chemical and electrical, of our fair city.”

“Aw now!” Goggles was embarrassed.

“Fame,” said the Colonel with a cordial smile, “is a terribly embarrassing thing, Goggles. However, since you have attained it, you’ll have to bear up under it.”

“I suppose you think—” the Colonel’s tone changed as he wheeled about to face the other boys, “I suppose you think that I sent for you to talk about our new pitcher. I did not. He is not here.”

“Not here!” Doug’s face dropped. “Gone for—”

“No, not for good,” the Colonel broke in. “Just for a day or two. He’ll be back for Saturday’s game. I’m ready to guarantee that. And you boys are going to need him—for—” his voice dropped, “for more reasons than one.”

“You know Big Bill’s plans.” Doug’s face took on a hopeful look. “You’ll help us.”

“Y e s .” The Colonel spoke slowly. “Only moral and mental support, however. Cash is all tied up.

“But you’ll lick Big Bill, I’m sure of it!” the Colonel’s tone carried conviction. “Goggles here has an idea. Sit down.” He motioned them to chairs. “Goggles, tell them about it.”

“Well I—you know—” Goggles pulled at his sleeve nervously. “It’s sort of like

this. Maybe it won't help a bit. But this is it. Dave Saunders over at the electric shop has been experimenting with a thing. I've been helping him. Thing's got eyes, better'n human eyes because they're quicker."

"Electric eyes," Johnny put in.

"Sure! How'd you know?" Goggles' eyes bulged behind his thick lenses.

"Know a lot about them," Johnny chuckled. "Sometime I'll tell you about how a fellow talked to me down a beam of light. Electric eyes helped him to do that, and a lot of exciting things happened. But go on. What you using electric eyes for?"

"Umpire," Goggles said with a broad grin. "Baseball umpire. Got forty eyes. Some see up and down and some sideways. We've tried it out. Works swell. Calls balls and strikes perfectly. Never a miss.

"Thing is—" Goggles hurried on. "A week from Wednesday we play Fairfield. That team's always beefing about the umpire. Holler their heads off. So I thought —" he took a long breath, "thought you might like to try our old electric umpire. He'll umpire fairly. Never a mistake."

"That—" Doug sprang to his feet, "that would be swell! And man! Oh, man! We'll draw a crowd! Think of it! Something absolutely new. Electric umpire! What do you think of it, Johnny?"

"Wha—think of what?" Johnny started. "Electric eye. Oh! Yes, it's interesting."

"No! More than that!" Doug exploded. "Electric umpire!"

Truth was, strange as it may seem, Johnny's mind had gone off the track. It had suddenly been deflected by the thought-camera, the most extraordinary thing he had ever seen. "I dreamed it," he had been telling himself. "Thing never happened. That Chinaman never recorded my thoughts. But if he did, if the thing's in my closet when I get home, I'll try it—like to try it now." This was what he had been thinking when Doug Danby brought him back to his present surroundings.

"Swell idea!" he enthused, once the electric umpire had been explained to him. "Work all right, I'm sure of it."

“And draw a crowd,” put in Doug.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Colonel Chamberlain agreed. “Paying crowds are what you need right now. You’ll get that extra five hundred dollars in plenty of time. All you need is advertising.”

“Leave that to me.” Johnny was on his feet, ready for a dash home. With the aid of the thought-camera, he would dish up plenty of fancy advertising.

“All right,” Doug agreed, “you look after that. I’ll get in touch with the Fairfield bunch. See if they’ll stand for this electric umpire.”

“They’ll stand for it right enough,” the Colonel said with a smile. “They get a percentage of the gate receipts. Just talk publicity to them and they’ll agree readily enough.

“Well—” his tone became brisk. “Council of war is over. I’ll have my pitcher on hand for Saturday’s major attraction. And you, Goggles, you’ll take care of Wednesday. Meeting’s adjourned.”

With a “Thank you, thank you a lot!” the three boys filed out of the office.

“Well,” Doug sighed, “we didn’t see him after all.”

“See who?” Johnny was once more lost in his contemplation of the immediate future.

“The pitcher, of course,” Doug grumbled. “Fellow’d think he was just an ordinary person.”

“Well, perhaps he is,” Johnny chuckled.

“And perhaps he is not,” Doug replied as they lost themselves in the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER V
JOHNNY'S THINK-O-GRAPHS

"Yes," Johnny whispered to himself as he thrust his hand deep into a dark corner of his closet. "It's still there. The thought-camera is no dream. But will it record thoughts for me? That's the question."

He found himself all aquiver with excitement. He was like a very small boy with his very first camera.

"Like to try it on myself," he thought. Then, recalling the little Chinaman's test and the sadly muddled thoughts the camera had brought out, he, for the time at least, abandoned that plan.

"There's grandfather," he told himself. "He sits by the hour every evening, looking off into the night and thinking. Wonder what those thoughts are like. I'd really like to know. That—that's where I'll try it first." He hurried downstairs.

Johnny was very fond of the stalwart old man he called grandfather. A pioneer of his small city, he had seen much of life. At times he talked of those days long gone by. For the most part he sat in his great chair on the broad porch and gazed away into the darkness toward the spot where, in the daytime, the blue began.

Slipping silently into a chair close to the old man, Johnny touched the release to the thought-camera. There followed a low buzzing sound. Johnny's heart leaped. The camera was working. But was it recording thoughts, his grandfather's thoughts? Only time would tell.

For several moments in the night, disturbed only by the cricket's chirp and the distant bullfrog's hoarse croak, the pair sat there motionless.

Then the old man stirred. "What's that, Johnny?" he asked.

“What’s what?” Johnny’s voice trembled slightly.

“Sounds a little like a new sort of cricket,” the old man rumbled.

“Nothing I guess.” Johnny snapped off his thought-camera. The sound ceased. “Well, guess I’ll go up,” he said in as steady a tone as he could command. “Goodnight!”

“Goodnight, Johnny.”

The boy fairly ran up the stairs. He was obliged to drop into a chair in his room to calm himself. Then, after shaking his fingers to loosen their tenseness, he went about the business of the hour.

Having removed the small cartridge containing the long, thread-like film, he set it revolving in that other magic box that was supposed to develop and finish it. Two minutes of this and the thing was done. Or was it?

Drawing one long deep breath, Johnny placed the film in the microscope-like affair, then started the mechanism.

For ten seconds he stood there squinting into the brass tube, spellbound. Then he exclaimed, “Hot diggity dog!”

After that, for a full fifteen minutes his thoughts were focussed upon the thing before him. In that quarter hour he ran the film through three times.

“Nothing,” he murmured as at last he sank into a chair, “nothing could be half so marvelous!”

And indeed it *was* marvelous for there, stripped of all the backwardness and timidity that so often hamper the speech of old men, were recorded the golden thoughts of one grand old man as he dreamed of the glorious pioneer days that are gone forever.

“I’ll copy it,” Johnny told himself, “then I’ll have it printed in the *Sentinel*.

“No,” he amended, “I’ll do better than that. I’ll record his thoughts night after night. They’ll never be the same. It will make a book. And such a book!”

At that he sat for a long time dreaming of the marvelous things he would do with that thought-camera.

“But it belongs to Tao Sing,” he reminded himself. “Only he knows the secret of it. How long am I to have it? As long as I fulfill Tao Sing’s wishes I suppose.”

At that, with a shudder he could not entirely explain, he recalled his promise to Tao Sing. He was to carry the camera to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He was to point it at his friend, the rich Chinese merchant Wung Lu, and record his thoughts for Tao Sing.

“I wonder why?” Disturbing thought!

“Think-o-graphs,” he whispered to himself before he fell asleep that night. “Good name for them, all right. A picture of your face is a photograph, so, naturally a picture of your thoughts is a think-o-graph. There now!” he chuckled to himself, “I’ve coined a brand new word. And if this thought-camera comes to be a common possession as ordinary cameras are, it will be a very popular word. If it does—” he repeated slowly.

He tried to think what the world would be like if anyone who wished it might have a thought-camera and photograph other people’s thoughts. There would not remain in the world one secret that could be kept, that was certain. All the secrets between nations would be at an end. Spies would lose their jobs. No criminal could escape revealing his innermost thoughts. The whole thing made him slightly dizzy, so he gave over thinking about it, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI
BESIDE THE GREEN-EYED DRAGON

The days that followed were strange ones for Johnny. At the very beginning, in his enthusiasm for a new and quite wonderful thing, he nearly gave the secret of the thought-camera away.

“Penny for your thoughts!” he said as he met Meggy Strawn on the street the very next day.

“Not for a dollar!” Meg exclaimed.

“All the same, I shall have them!” declared Johnny.

“You never shall!” Meg laughed in his face.

“I have them right now,” Johnny said in a mysterious tone. “I’ll bring them round later.”

He did too. The result was rather surprising. As Meg read her own thoughts, copied by Johnny from the thought picture he had taken, she gave him a startled look. “Why you—” she broke off to stare at him for all the world as if she had never seen him before. For a full moment after that neither of them spoke. When Meg at last broke the silence, it was in a queer small voice.

“Johnny, don’t ever do that again! I don’t know how you did it—you don’t need to tell. But never, never, never do it again!”

“I won’t,” Johnny said soberly. “Here! Shake on it!” Their hands clasped for a space of seconds. Then, without another word, each turned and went his own way.

“Not so good,” was Johnny’s mental comment. “Swell way to lose a good

friend.”

His experiment in recording his own thoughts worked out in a more satisfactory manner. Having built up in his own mind a tale of mystery about the new pitcher and, having visited the electric shop and watched Goggles’ mechanical umpire with forty eyes perform, he hurried home, set up the camera, then fixing his thoughts on the publicity he wished to create for the two ball games, he sat quite still, staring at the wall for a full ten minutes.

“There!” he breathed at last. “The cake is done.”

With ever increasing enthusiasm he developed and copied his own personal think-o-graph.

“Gee! This is great!” He paused at last to gloat over the nearly finished product. “Am I the thinker! If only I could write as well as I think I’d become a great author right away.”

He carried his stories of the two approaching ball games to the slow-going, genial editor of the weekly paper.

“Let’s see it.” The editor put on his glasses. “Same old stuff I suppose. Have to do it all over before I run it.”

“Maybe it is.” Johnny gave himself a mental hug.

A moment later he saw the editor pouring eagerly over his copy. “Whew!” the editor exclaimed under his breath. Then, “Great Jehosophat, Johnny! Didn’t know you had it in you! Been seein’ you around your grand-pap’s for a good many years. What paper you been workin’ on?”

“No paper.” Johnny grinned broadly.

“Well, I’m surprised, Johnny. This is fine copy. Run it just as it is. Get you some fine crowds. I’ll say it will!

“Want you to know, Johnny,” he went on, “Want all the boys to know this paper’s for ’em. We want you to have that ball field, have it always.”

“Than—thanks, C.K.,” Johnny stammered. “That’s sure kind of you.”

“And look here, son!” The editor put a hand on his shoulder. “This stuff shows real talent. Keep on writing like this and you’ll get somewhere.”

“I—” Johnny had it on the end of his tongue to say, “I didn’t write it.” Fake glory was one thing Johnny had never craved. But then, if he did not write it, who did? That would require much explaining. He decided to leave well enough alone. “I—I thank you,” he muttered uncertainly. Then he was gone.

That evening he went to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and sat near to the rich and silent wise one, Wung Lu, for a long time. He liked this quiet place, full of treasures from the past. He loved to sit looking at that green-eyed dragon more than two thousand years old. He wondered what those green eyes could have seen when the world was very young. He wondered many things. But he did not forget to point his thought-camera at the silent, wise Wung Lu and to record his thoughts. He wondered what those thoughts were. This was not given to him to know. Wung Lu thought in Chinese. Only Tao Sing would read these. This made Johnny uneasy. He was almost ready to return the thought-camera to its owner—almost but not quite.

There were many things that might be done with that thought-camera. There were mysteries to be solved. Perhaps some day he would point it at that strange pitcher over at the laboratories. He wanted terribly to know his secret. And yet—one does not spy upon his friends. This young man promised to become a friend of Hillcrest and that meant he must be Johnny’s friend as well.

“Anyway,” he told himself, “I’ll keep it for another day or two.”

He carried the small round box containing the rich Wung Lu’s think-o-graph to the little room at the back of the Chinese spice store. There, in the semi-darkness, Tao Sing’s claw-like hand grasped it with such a nervous tenseness that Johnny was actually startled.

“Very good! Very good!” the little Chinaman cackled. “You will go again and again. Wung Lu is very wise. Soon we shall all be wise. Here are more—many more.” He pressed a bag of small metal boxes into Johnny’s hand.

As Johnny left the place to step into the cool air of night, he felt himself all but over-powered by a strange sense of Oriental intrigue and mystery. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be doing any of this,” he told himself. In the end, however, he succeeded in overcoming his misgivings.

The day for their second battle with the Centralia baseball team approached.

“We’ll win!” Johnny said to Meggy Strawn.

“We’ve got to,” was Meggy’s reply.

Johnny wondered if the thought-camera would help any. “Not a chance,” was his final decision. “But I’ll take it along anyway, just for company.”

Three times that week he sat in the great room with Wung Lu and the ancient dragon. Each time his uneasiness grew. Each time that he delivered the think-o-graphs, as he had come to call them, to the wrinkled Tao Sing, the little man’s enthusiasm increased.

“Wung Lu’s thoughts must be very wonderful,” was the boy’s mental comment. “And yet—” one more shudder. “Could it be that Tao Sing was learning things he had no right to know? And was he, Johnny, assisting him?” The thought gave him a start. “Secrets,” he whispered, “sometimes I think they’re no good.”

CHAPTER VII
MYSTERY SHIP

“I can’t get over the way that pitcher came to us,” Goggles Short murmured low to Johnny Thompson. They were seated in the bleachers. The Saturday game was about to begin. The new pitcher from the laboratories, cap drawn low, eyes gleaming, was putting over a few to the catcher.

“It *is* strange,” Johnny said. “Prince of India!” he exclaimed. “I gave him that name and I’m proud of it.” In his publicity produced by the thought-camera Johnny had played up the name “Prince of India.” He liked the sound of it. “He looks the part too! Look at that slim nose of his,” he went on, “those thin lips, that high forehead. You’d take him for a Frenchman, or perhaps an Englishman, if it weren’t for that dark skin of his. If he’s not a Prince of India, he should be. Watch him pitch!” The slender man on the mound, moving with the smooth agility of a cat, seemed to fairly slide the ball over the plate.

“Listen to the crowd!” Goggles cried. “And is it a crowd! That publicity stuff of yours was great! We’ll get nearly half the money we need for that first payment today. And Wednesday! It’s in the bag.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Johnny warned.

“Listen to that crowd!” Goggles exclaimed once more.

Led by Meggy Strawn, a streak of gold and blue that danced across the grass, the crowd was chanting:

A Prince! A Prince! A Prince!
No quince! No quince! No quince!
A Peach! A Peach! A Peach!
We win! Yea! Yea!

As for the “Prince,” he seemed totally unconscious of his surroundings as he slid one more stinger over the plate.

“It *is* strange,” Johnny said to Goggles, “strange about that pitcher, I mean. Colonel Chamberlain has had him working in his laboratories for more than three months. The pay-roll proves that. But who knew it? The pay-master and Colonel Chamberlain, that’s all. Queer, isn’t it? And now, when everything seems lost for old Hillcrest, he walks right into the picture. He takes the ball, and whang! How it pops into that old mit! Not a man will get to first. See! There goes one of ’em. Three strikes and out. Great, I’d say! Suppose he can keep it up?”

He did not wait for an answer. Instead, he allowed his eyes to seek a spot in the sky. Something up there interested him.

“Nope!” he murmured. “It’s not coming down.”

“What’s not coming down?” Goggles asked quickly.

“That airplane. It’s been circling way up high there for a long time.”

“I should hope it wouldn’t come down,” Goggles laughed good-naturedly. “What d’ye think? Think they’d come right on down and land square in the middle of the ball field?” He laughed again.

Johnny did not reply. Truth was, he did not know what he had expected. It was strange about that airplane. He had been watching it off and on for twenty minutes. All that time it had been circling above the ball field. At first it had seemed little more than a speck against the dull gray of a leaden sky. Moment by moment it had circled lower.

“Saw an eagle do that once,” he had told himself as a little thrill ran up his spine. “Old eagle soared and soared and soared until he was maybe a hundred feet from the ground. Then he folded his wings and dropped. And such a drop! Straight down! When he came up he held a half-grown rabbit in his talons. He’d had his eye on that rabbit all the time.”

Strangely enough, as he watched the airplane circle above the ball field where two fine teams were contending for high honors, fantastic as it might seem, he had gained the impression that this plane, circling as the eagle had circled, would

in the end make one straight drop to the ball field.

“What nonsense!” he whispered to himself. “Why should they do that? Crack up! Everyone in the plane would be killed. Eagle’s a different sort of bird. He could recover balance and rise again. That plane—”

All the same, the impression remained a haunting suggestion until, with the end of the first half, a shut-out for the opposing team, the Centralia boys went trotting off the field. Only then did the airplane go skimming away into the hazy distance.

“It is as if the eagle had been watching the rabbit only to see the rabbit scurry into his hole,” he told himself.

“But the rabbit will come out again? Another inning?” a voice seemed to whisper in his ear.

With that, for a time at least, he forgot the strange airplane and gave his attention to the ball game.

“Hello Meggy,” he said a moment later as she slid into the place beside him. “We’re going to win, Meg!” he cried.

Meg’s voice was low. “Yes, we must, Johnny!”

Suddenly Meggy pinched Johnny’s arm. “Look! He—he’s up to bat! Isn’t he mysterious! The—the ‘Prince of India’—that’s what they call him.”

Once again Johnny’s eye was on the ball. The opposing pitcher shot it through to the Prince, but it went high and wide. The dark-faced one never moved a muscle.

“Believe he can bat,” was Johnny’s mental comment. His practiced eye swept over the diamond. Arthur Lowe was on first, Fred Frame on second. There were two men out. No score on either side.

“Now,” he whispered hoarsely, “just one good swat! That’s all we need! Get a grand lead! We—”

He did not finish. Came the crack of a bat and the ball went soaring high and far.

“Yea! Yea! Yea!” The crowd sprang to its feet and howled madly. “Yea! Yea! Yea! Prince! Prince! Prince!”

When the crowd settled back to its seats the new pitcher was on third base. Two men had come romping home.

“Two to nothing!” Meg exulted. “Watch us climb!”

Little Artie Snow was up next. He swung wildly and fanned. The inning was over.

“Well!” Johnny stretched himself. “Looks as if we’d lick ’em all right.”

All Meggy said was, “Isn’t he mysterious?” She was thinking of the “Prince.”

Then, as her mood changed, Meggy seized her megaphone and, grasping Johnny by the arm, screamed, “Come on! Cart wheels!”

Johnny had done cart wheels with Meggy on many another occasion, but always in private. But now! Oh well, Meg was Meg. Her word was law. Cart wheels it was, an even dozen, then a rousing cheer led by Meg:

Yea! Hillcrest! Yea! Hillcrest!
Beat ’em! Beat ’em! Beat ’em!

Scarcely had Johnny got his breath than he discovered that the “Prince” was once more on the mound, the second inning about to begin. Quite automatically his eyes swept the sky. They came to a focus.

“The airplane!” he whispered excitedly. “Like the eagle, it is circling back.”

It was strange the excitement this stirred up within his being. Why was it? It seemed absurd, yet in his soul there was a feeling that the dark pitcher must hurry, that the men who came up to bat must go down as they had before, one, two, three, or else the eagle would drop. “What nonsense!” he muttered once more.

For all that, the airplane did circle lower and lower. There was too in the mysterious pitcher’s action a suggestion of tense nervousness that was hard to explain.

A bat cracked. A ball popped into the air. The pitcher had it. One man down.

A second man came up. Ball! Strike! Ball! Crack! Up went the ball again. Down it came, right into that pitching wizard's mit. Two out.

The plane circled lower. In the damp, cloudy air it seemed nearer than it really was.

Third man to bat. Strike! Strike! Strike! You're out!

"Just like that!" Johnny exulted. He did not so much as glance at the plane. He knew that once again it had gone skimming away.

"It's strange," he murmured.

"What's strange?" Meggy asked.

"Oh—everything," he evaded, "everything's strange today." How could he tell Meggy of this fantastic daydream?

Again the opposing team took their places in the field. Once more Hillcrest came to bat. And how they did bat! Inspired by rosy dreams of victory, they sent the ball spinning, right, left and center. By the time Centralia had them stopped, the score stood 5 to 0 in favor of Hillcrest, and the crowd had gone mad.

"We'll win!" Meggy screamed.

"We'll win!" Goggles roared.

As for Johnny, he merely murmured, "Wait!"

The wait was destined to be longer than he dreamed it might be. Four wild balls put the lead-off man of Centralia on first with no one out.

It was then that Johnny once more began noticing that haunting airplane. It had returned. Once again it was circling downward.

The mysterious pitcher was slipping, there could be no doubting this. A hard-hit liner put the second batter on base.

Then the pitcher seemed to tighten up. He fanned the third man.

“But that plane!” Johnny was truly startled now. The plane did actually seem to be in a nose-dive. Down, down, down it came, straight at that lone figure, the pitcher, on the mound.

“They—they—” In his excitement Johnny stood up. He crushed his cap within his tight clenched hands. “No! No! Thank—” He did not finish. With a burst of speed, a thunder of motors, the airplane righted itself, then shot upward. But what was that? Did Johnny’s eyes deceive him? Did he catch a gleam of fire—or was it only a brilliant flash of light? Half unconsciously he waited the report of a shot fired. It did not come.

“It’s the strangest thing!” he murmured as he settled back in his place. Already the airplane was a long way off.

So filled was the boy’s mind with wild speculations that he failed to follow the game. Perhaps this was just as well. Dame Fortune appeared to have deserted the mysterious pitcher. He walked another man. The bases were full.

“But look at him,” Meggy whispered in Johnny’s ear. “Look at him wind up! You’d think he was doing it in his sleep!”

Indeed, as Johnny focussed his attention upon this mysterious stranger, he appeared to waver, as if he might fall.

“Something awfully queer about that,” Johnny murmured.

With what appeared to be tremendous effort the pitcher hurled the ball. It would have cut the plate squarely in the middle had not a stout bat met it to send it high and far.

When the commotion was over, the score stood 5 to 6 in favor of Centralia. There were men on second and third. What was more, the “Prince” was walking unsteadily toward the bench.

“Listen!” Meggy exclaimed. “They’re calling for Fred Frame.”

“Something queer about that!” Johnny repeated as he turned to watch the “Prince” walk away toward the showers. “The eagle swooped downward, and now—” he did not finish.

“He walks as if he were half blind. Poor ‘Prince!’” Meg sympathized. “What could have happened?”

Johnny would have given much to know the answer. For some time to come it was to remain a veiled secret.

“The mystery ship,” Johnny thought as he watched that airplane glide away toward the clouds. Then he murmured low, “Mystery wings.”

“‘Mystery wings!’ What makes you say that?” Meg whispered.

“Because that’s the way I think of a plane,” he replied soberly. “You can’t say the planes of an airplane. Don’t sound right. Why not wings of a plane? And, for my part, every plane that passes over my head has wings of mystery.”

“You’re queer,” was Meg’s only reply.

CHAPTER VIII
STRANGE PASSENGERS

Among the Hillcrest fans feeling was running high. That something strange and rather terrible had happened to their new and quite marvelous pitcher, they appeared to realize. “But what did happen?” they were asking. “Who’s to blame? Who were the men in that plane?” Two men had been seen. They were not close enough to be recognized. Had the Centralia crowd hired them to heckle the new pitcher? This they found it difficult to believe. The friendliest of relations had always existed between the two small cities, even though there was a keen rivalry. “But who? Who? Who?” they were asking on every side. The mystery of the dark-skinned pitcher from the laboratories deepened.

As for Doug Danby, on whose shoulders rested Hillcrest’s hopes of victory, he found no time for solving mysteries.

“Fred, old boy,” he said to Fred Frame, “you’ll have to go in there and win the game. And you can!” He gave him a slap on the back. “If—”

“If my arm holds out,” Fred finished.

Tall, angular, red-headed, silent and droll, Fred was a universal favorite. He had been a successful pitcher until his arm had taken to going wrong. “I’ll go in,” he said simply, “and do my best.”

A loud cheer greeted him as he walked toward the mound. Despite all this, he felt a chill run up his spine. The score stood 6 to 5 against him. This wonderful crowd had turned out to see their team win. They had banked heavily on the mysterious “Prince.” In this they had lost. Would they lose the game as well?

“Not if *I* can help it!” Fred set his teeth hard.

“What if that plane returns?” He shuddered. “What if they do to me the thing

they did to the ‘Prince,’ whatever that was! Oh well!” He set his shoulders squarely.

But now the shouts of the throng brought him back to earth. Motioning the batter to one side, he prepared to “throw a few over.”

As his hand grasped the ball, as his muscles began playing like iron bands, as the ball went speeding to cut the plate and land with a loud plop in the catcher’s mit, all else but the game was forgotten.

“We must win!” He set his lips tight.

And indeed they must. They had lost one game, could not afford to lose another.

That he was in a hard spot he knew quite well. With the score standing 6 to 5 against him, with men on second and third and only one man out, the game might be lost with a single crack of the bat. It was with a rapidly beating heart that he motioned the batter up.

Yet, even as his arm went back, two questions flashed through his mind: “Who is this ‘Prince’? What happened that after such a brilliant start he was unable to finish?

“Something queer!” he muttered for the third time as he sent the ball spinning.

“Ball!” the umpire called.

Then, like a bolt from the blue came a thought. He made a sign to the catcher. They met half way between the mound and the home plate. After a few whispered words they parted.

Fred’s second offering went very wide of the plate. He did not seem to care. Then, just as he wound up for the third pitch, someone caught on.

“He’s goin’ to walk that batter!” a big voice bellowed from the bleachers of the opposing team. “Big League stuff! Walking Billy to get at Vern!”

At once there was a mad roar that ended in hisses and boos.

Little Fred cared for that. If he wished to walk Centralia’s toughest batter to get

at a weak one, it was his privilege. “And after that?” an Imp seemed to be whispering in his ear. All the same the passed batter went down to first. The bags were loaded.

“If I slip now—” he thought. “Just listen to them howl!” He gripped the ball hard.

“Wow! He’s got a rubber arm!” a big voice roared as the umpire called another ball.

There was silence as Fred slipped over a strike.

Again that roar with the second ball.

“Strike!”

“Ball!”

“There you are!” the big voice roared. “Two and three! Let’s see you get out of that!”

Fred caught his breath. Bases full. Three balls, two strikes, and—“If only the old soup-bone holds out!” he murmured.

His hand went out. It came back. He shot the ball straight from the shoulder. Then, without knowing why, he followed the ball. Lucky break! The batter connected. He sent a bouncer straight into Fred’s mitt and he half way to the plate. With a mad dash he was there to cut off the run to the plate. Next he sent the ball speeding to first.

“Double play! Double play!” the crowd roared. And so it was. The inning was over. For the moment, at least, all was well.

Inspired by his unusual success in pulling his team out of the hole, Fred pitched the remaining innings with the skill of a genius. He allowed only five hits, and left but three men on base. Hillcrest scored three runs in the seventh, to cinch the game. In the end Fred was carried from the field in triumph.

“Another big day Wednesday, and we’ll win!” exulted Doug Danby.

“Don’t get too much excited,” he warned Johnny and Meg as they came rushing up to congratulate him. “This is not the end. It is only the beginning. We must win again and again. It’s going to take a real campaign to gain our end.”

“Don’t worry!” Johnny laughed. “The way Fred pitched those last innings, there’s not a team that can stop us.”

“There’s where you’re wrong.” It was Fred who spoke. He had just come up to them.

“What do you mean?” Johnny asked in surprise.

“Well—” Fred paused to ponder. “Well, you know there are times when you do things and you say to yourself, ‘I can do this as often as I choose.’ Then there are times when you feel all sort of lifted out of yourself and you do things well without seeming to try. But when it’s all over you say, ‘That was great! But I better never try that again. If I do, I’ll fail.’ This afternoon was just like that. Johnny, I wouldn’t like to face that situation again, ever!” Fred’s tone was so serious that for a full moment no one spoke.

It was Fred himself who at last broke that silence.

“But then, there’ll not be the need.” He smiled. “Our old friend, the ‘Prince’ will lead us to sure victory next time.”

“The ‘Prince’!” Doug turned to Meggy. “Where did your uncle find him, Meggy? Who is he? Where’s he been hiding?” Meggy was Colonel Chamberlain’s favorite niece.

“I don’t know,” Meggy admitted.

“But your uncle said he’d been working down at his laboratories for more than three months!” Johnny protested.

“Ye-es,” Meggy replied slowly, “and I suppose that should make him my first cousin! But it doesn’t. I never saw him before, nor heard of him either. Uncle doesn’t tell me much about the laboratories. There are always so many secret investigations going on down there, so many processes being developed—things he can’t talk about—that—well, I guess he thinks it’s best to say nothing at all about any of it. And I suppose,” she added, “this pitcher is just one more secret.”

“But why would he hide out so?” Doug Danby asked.

“He just doesn’t wish to be recognized, that’s why,” Johnny said in a tone that carried conviction.

“In a town like this?” Doug exclaimed. “It sure does seem strange!” Had he but known it, those were the very words that were passing from lip to lip all over this quiet little city. “A strange pitcher! A mysterious dark stranger! And in a town like this!” That was what they were saying. And, almost without exception, the answer was, “Just think, in a town like this!”

“Well anyway,” Fred said, “he *can* pitch! And that’s just what we need. We’ll just have to have him next Wednesday when we go against Fairfield. They’re the toughest battling bunch we’ll play for a long time. You can’t count on me to lick them.”

“The ‘Prince’ only lasted two and a half innings,” Doug suggested.

“Yes, but some—” Johnny did not finish. What he started to say was, “Something rather terrible happened to him.” After all, he had only guessed that; could not prove it.

“Well,” Johnny said, “I gotta be anklin’ on home. Goodbye, Meggy. Goodbye, boys.”

A half hour later he was seated on a ridge that lay above the town. Beneath him was a long, low building.

“The laboratories!” he whispered. “Place of mystery. Home of the mysterious ‘Prince.’”

His whole being was stirred. It was not that he suspected any wrong of those who worked behind heavily glazed windows in the laboratories. Far from that. Colonel Chamberlain had always been counted among Hillcrest’s foremost citizens. The laboratories belonged to him.

“I’ll have to hunt up Goggles,” Johnny told himself. “Wonder where he went? He always knows a lot. He may know more than I do about this pitcher.”

Goggles was a thinker. He was the only boy ever entrusted with Colonel

Chamberlain's secrets. He alone, of all the town's boys, had crossed the threshold of the laboratories. Only he had seen something of that which went on inside.

"They test all sorts of things in there," he had confided to Johnny one day, "soap and silk, dyes, and all sorts of powerful drugs. They try to find things out, to do things that have never been done before, like making rubber out of crude petroleum or paper out of sunflower stalks. They succeed sometimes, too. See!" He had pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. "Made from a sunflower stalk. Pretty good paper, eh?

"When they make a real discovery," he went on, "they sell it to some great manufacturer.

"Colonel Chamberlain—" he had taken a deep breath. "He showed me a lot of things I can't talk about. He says maybe some day I can work with him in the laboratories. Boy! Won't that be grand!"

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if Goggles knows something about this 'Prince,'" Johnny said to himself now.

He broke short off to stare down at the laboratories. Someone had come walking down the gravel path. He walked slowly. "Seems to drag his feet," Johnny whispered. Just then the newcomer looked up toward the sun. Johnny got a full view of his slim, dark face. It was the 'Prince.' A moment more and the long, low place of mysteries had swallowed him up.

That evening Johnny searched in vain for Goggles. Goggles' mother did not know where he was, nor did anyone else. Johnny decided to go on a little detective cruise all by himself. Mounting his bicycle, he rode east nine miles to the Shady Valley landing field. In the office he found two men in aviators' uniforms playing checkers.

"Say!" he said in a subdued voice, "Did any of you fly a plane over the Hillcrest ball field this afternoon?"

"Yes, I did." The younger of the two men looked up quickly. "Why?"

"Oh nothing I guess." Johnny dropped into a seat prepared to watch the game.

Though for a full quarter hour he said never a word, the young aviator looked at Johnny in a queer way many times.

“Well, what about it?” he said, turning to Johnny when the game was over.

“Nothing I guess,” Johnny repeated.

“That *was* a queer business,” the aviator chuckled, “that flying over your field. Had two passengers, sort of hard lookers, but well-dressed. Said they lived in Hillcrest. They wanted to go over the ball game. Kept telling me to circle down, down, down. Then they’d say, ‘No! Not now! Up again!’ They repeated that little trick three times.”

“I know,” Johnny breathed.

“You know?” the young aviator stared.

“Of course I do. Go on.”

“Well—” the aviator cleared his throat. “The third time we went down closer than I like to. Then we flew away. Sort of queer, I’d say!” He shot Johnny an enquiring look.

“Did they carrying anything?” Johnny asked.

“Nothing that I saw.”

“No gun or anything like that?”

“Of course not. What do you think? Think we operate a bombing plane or something?”

“No, not quite that.” Johnny lapsed into silence.

“Queer business!” The aviator stared at him hard. “What do you know about it?”

“Nothing much I guess.” Johnny’s tone did not change. “Only thought I might.”

“But look!” the aviator exclaimed. “If you think that’s queer, listen to this one. A short while back I took a long trip, thousand miles or more. Flew it at night. Passenger told me where to go and where to land.

“Place we landed was all light when we were coming down. It went dark the minute we landed.

“Two men in uniform came rushing up. One said, ‘Say! Where do you think you are?’

“‘Don’t know,’ I said.

“‘Well, you’d better,’ one of them yelled. ‘This is a Federal prison. Move out of here quick!’

“‘Guess we’d better leave right away.’ That’s what my fare said to me.”

The aviator paused for breath. Johnny was staring.

“Wait! That’s not all!” The aviator waved a hand. “The lights came on, bright as day, just long enough for me to taxi across the enclosure and rise; then all went dark.

“And listen!” He paused once more. “When my fare left the plane, there was a man with him, a slim, dark-faced man. He came from that prison. I’d swear to it! Can you beat that?”

“Looks like a jail delivery.” Johnny spoke low. “Should think you’d be afraid!”

“I would,” the aviator settled back in his chair, “only the man who went with me that night, my passenger, was one of the best known and most highly respected citizens in this part of the country. I was hired by him.”

“Slim, dark-faced man,” Johnny murmured to himself, recalling the aviator’s words as he rode home a short time later.

CHAPTER IX
“WHO’S AFRAID OF A CHINAMAN?”

Next morning Johnny wandered over to the *Sentinel* office. He wanted to thank the editor for the fine publicity he had given the game. More than this he always had enjoyed a half hour in the box-like office of C. K. Lovell, or “old C. K.” as the people of the city had come to call him.

C. K. was something of a character. More than six feet tall, a broad-shouldered, slouching figure of a man, with masses of gray hair and bushy eyebrows, slumped down in his office chair, he resembled a shaggy St. Bernard dog basking in the sun.

“H’llo Johnny!” he greeted. “Fine game yesterday. Sort of queer, though. Rather unusual about that pitcher! And did you notice that airplane? What did you make of that?”

“Haven’t got it made yet.” Johnny dropped into a chair. “Tough about that pitcher though. It must not happen again.

“But say!” he enthused. “Wasn’t that a grand crowd! Boys owe you a lot.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” the editor laughed good-naturedly. “Boys deserved it. Fine lot of boys. Be a bigger crowd than ever next week. What about that electric umpire? Think it will work?”

“Sure will.”

“Call strikes and balls, and all that?”

“Sure will, C. K.”

“Dodge pop bottles too?” C. K. laughed.

“No. Pop bottles would be bad for his eyes. Got forty eyes, that umpire has.” Johnny laughed. “Guess the crowd will go easy on that, though.

“You see,” Johnny went on as the editor showed his interest by hitching up in his chair, “an electric eye is like a radio tube. When a beam of light is sent to it from across a space it stays just so until the light is shut off by some object, say a baseball. Then it sets up a howl. If you connect it with a phonograph attachment, you can make it call out ‘Foul ball!’”

“Interesting if true,” C.K. drawled. “Sure ought to draw a crowd.

“Say Johnny!” The editor leaned forward to speak in a tone little more than a whisper. “Heard anything about Federal agents being around town?”

“Federal agents!” Johnny stared. “No. What for?”

“I’ve heard they’re looking for a Chinaman, a little fellow—name’s Tao Sing, I believe.”

“Tao Sing!” Johnny started. A mental picture of Tao Sing in the small room at the back of the Chinese spice shop flashed into his mind.

“Thought I knew them all,” said C.K. “This must be a new one.”

“Why should Federal agents want a Chinaman? Who’s afraid of a Chinaman?” This last slipped from Johnny’s lips unbidden.

“Who’s afraid of a Chinaman!” C.K. sat up straight quite suddenly. “Plenty of people afraid of a Chinaman, Johnny. Plenty!

“A Chinaman looks dull and sleepy enough,” he went on. “So does a big old tom cat. But let a dog come around the corner and see what the cat does to him. A Chinaman’s like that. He’ll go up like a rocket most any time.

“I worked down near Frisco’s old Chinatown, Johnny, years ago,” he went on. “Got to be sort of an amateur guide. Went with the police when they raided Chinese gambling joints and opium dens. Say! I can hear the steel door bang yet when the first Chink gave the warning. Bang! Bang! Bang! And sometimes it wasn’t a door that banged either.” His voice dropped. “Johnny, things happened there I wouldn’t dare tell about—not even now. And that was a long time ago, a

long time ago.” C.K. settled back in his chair.

“Well, I—” Johnny got to his feet a trifle unsteadily. “Guess I better get going.”

“Don’t hurry, Johnny.”

“Got to go.”

Johnny did hurry. He was afraid he might tell what he knew about Tao Sing. He was not ready to do that—not just yet.

“But boy, oh boy!” he whispered. “Would what I know about that little Chink make front page stuff! First column in every city!” He could see it now: “CHINAMAN INVENTS THOUGHT-RECORDING CAMERA. NO MAN’S THOUGHTS HIS OWN.”

He was sorely tempted to release the story at once. On sober thought, however, he decided he was not ready to do that—not yet!

“So they’re looking for Tao Sing, those Federal agents,” he thought. “Wonder why? Wonder if the think-o-graphs and the thought-camera have anything to do with that?” He recalled his visit to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, of the pictures he had taken of Wung Lu’s thoughts and how he had delivered them to Tao Sing. The thought was disturbing. “Ought not to have been snooping round gathering up another fellow’s thoughts, then peddling them to someone else,” he grumbled. “And yet—” ah yes, and yet—if he had not done that he could not have had the thought-camera for his own use.

“I’ll use it a lot more,” he assured himself. “Find out all sorts of queer things for C.K. He’ll run them in his paper and make a scoop.”

But would he return to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce? Well, not right away. He recalled what C.K. had said of things that had happened in old Frisco’s Chinatown, and a chill ran up his spine.

“Fellow’d think—”

No matter what he’d think. Here was Goggles.

“Look here, Johnny!” Goggles exclaimed. “I heard you found out about that airplane that was over the ball field yesterday.”

“Didn’t find out much—just that a pilot from over at the flying field took two men up.”

“Who were they?”

“Wish I knew. The pilot said they were from Hillcrest.”

“If they were it should be easy to find them. Not many new people in Hillcrest. Only about half a dozen stop at the hotel. Rest live in houses. I’ll get ’em. Give me time.” Goggles’ big eyes gleamed behind his thick glasses. “I’m an amateur detective, Johnny.”

“Done a little of that myself,” Johnny said with a grin. “Not in a small city, though. Guess I’ll leave that to you.”

“I’ll find ’em, Johnny.” Goggles was away.

Johnny smiled as he watched him hurry down the street. Goggles sure was an interesting boy. He dug into everything just as a gopher digs into the earth. Chemistry, electricity, detective work, it was all the same to him.

“Little cities are surely interesting,” was Johnny’s mental comment. “In big cities everyone tries to be just like everyone else. People think alike, walk alike, dress the same, everything. In a little city everyone is different.”

Then he brought himself up with a jerk. There was the thought-camera. Somehow, since talking to C.K. about the Chinese, he found himself all but overcome with a desire to hide the thought-camera in some very dark and secret spot. In the end, after hurrying home, he buried it deep among the clothes in his trunk, locked the trunk, then hid the key.

“So they’re after Tao Sing!” he murmured low. “Wonder if they’ll find him. And if they do, I wonder—” he did not finish that last wonder.

CHAPTER X
CLUES FROM THE DUST

“In cases like this—” Goggles’ eyes bulged behind his thick glasses. His beak-like nose appeared to wrinkle and wriggle as a rabbit’s. “In a case like this,” he repeated, “one may learn a great deal from dust. Take a vacuum cleaner now. It’s queer. I’ve helped clean dozens of furnished houses and apartments after the tenants were gone. Some of them would scrub the place till it shone like a new dollar. But the vacuum cleaner! What do you think?” He paused. “Always half full of dust!

“And yes!” he exclaimed. “Same here. A good big lot of dust. I’m prepared. See!” He drew a stout paper sack from his pocket. Unfastening the cloth dust-bag from the vacuum cleaner, he proceeded to empty its contents into the paper sack.

“Dust?” said Johnny, “What can you do with dust?”

“You wait,” said Goggles, “You’ll see.”

“Well, you can have your dust,” Johnny grumbled. “Can’t see how that can help any.”

Since his visit to the landing field, Johnny had been more convinced than ever that the presence of that airplane above Hillcrest baseball grounds on that day when the mysterious “Prince” had somehow been forced from the mound, had meant something very strange.

“Up to something, that’s what they were!” he had told himself. “And I’m going to find out what.”

Recalling Goggles’ suggestion regarding the manner in which these men might be found, he hunted him up on the following day.

“Found out anything?” he asked.

“No, but I’m going to,” Goggles replied. “It should not be hard. They live here. They’re strangers in town. They’d rent furnished rooms. All we have to do is to check up on rentals.”

They had checked up and they had, they believed, found the very place they were looking for. The description of the two men who had rented a small furnished bungalow tallied with that of the men they sought.

There was only one hitch—the men had checked out of the bungalow.

“That’s too bad!” Johnny had mourned. “I hoped to catch up with them. It’s not so much what they’ve done as what they may do. It’s my theory that they have a grudge of some sort against the ‘Prince.’ He’s got to pitch some more games for us if we are to win. Those men will do something more, perhaps something a great deal worse.”

“What will we do if we find them?” Goggles had asked. “You can’t prove anything.”

“Proof is what we want.”

“You can find clues in an empty house,” Goggles had declared. “Plenty of them. It doesn’t matter that they’re gone. Left all sorts of clues behind. Take dust, for instance. You get the keys and we’ll go right over there.”

So here they were in the recently deserted bungalow. Here was Goggles industriously collecting dust while Johnny tiptoed softly from room to room, pulling out drawers without a sound and, after peering within, softly closing them again.

“Dust!” he mumbled, “What good is a lot of dust? You’d think—”

He broke off short to stare. In the drawer just before him his eyes took in two objects. One was a small dry battery of an unusual shape. On the end of this was a threaded attachment that apparently just fitted into the small end of the other object. This second object was a funnel-shaped tube a foot long. It was an inch across at one end and three inches at the other. The inside of this tube shone with an unusual brilliancy.

“Queer business!” Johnny murmured. These objects were quickly transferred to the inner pocket of his coat. The drawer was softly closed.

It would seem that he was not a second too soon, for from below came the sound of an opening door, then a gruff voice:

“Well son, you’re cleanin’ the place up a bit.”

The voice sent a chill coursing up Johnny’s spine. It was the voice of a stranger. He was talking to Goggles.

“Yes, I—” Goggles’ answering voice sounded unsteady and weak. “I do this sort of thing quite—quite a lot. Sort of—of dust up a bit.”

“Well now that’s fine!” (It did not sound fine to Johnny.) “But me and my pardners here moved out of this place a short while back. We came here to get a few things we forgot, didn’t we Joe?”

“Yep, that’s right,” a second gruff voice replied.

“Them shoes now,” the first voice went on. “We left ’em. See you got ’em all cleaned up for us.” Goggles had found a pair of shoes and had scraped the mud from them in search of clues.

“Yes, I—” Goggles’ voice faded out.

“Well that’s O.K., buddy,” said the first voice again. “We’ll just get on into the little bedroom and look for a thing or two.”

“The little bedroom.” That was where Johnny found himself at that instant. Like a rabbit that has sighted a dog, he was up and silently away. In truth he went out of the side door to vanish into the shadows of a broad old pine tree.

Well enough that he did too, for a moment later he heard one of the strangers say to Goggles in a tone not so friendly:

“Boy! We left something in a dresser drawer in that little bedroom. You cleaned in there yet?”

“No, I—I’ve not been out of this room.” Goggles stammered a little, but had

spoken the simple truth.

After looking him over from head to foot, the speaker turned on his heel and left the house. He was followed by his pardner.

“Whew!” Goggles breathed five minutes later, “What do you think of that?”

“I think,” said Johnny, “think—. Come on! Let’s get out of here! I got ’em in my pocket.”

“Got what?”

“The things they came back after.”

“Let’s see!” Goggles held out a hand.

“Not now. I say, let’s go!”

“All right,” Goggles agreed reluctantly. “Guess I’ve got all the dust I need.”

After locking the door, they hurried away to Goggles’ basement where he had rigged up a sort of laboratory and workshop.

“Now,” Goggles breathed, snapping on the light, “we’ll have a look at that stuff from the sweeper.” He emptied the contents of the paper sack into a sheet of wrapping paper.

“Now.” With a needle set into the end of an old pen-holder, he began dragging the stuff about, at the same time naming his findings: “Hairs, dark ones, three or four of them. Their hair is dark. That don’t matter; but here’s some coarse sand they tracked in. Say! What color is the stuff they have out on the landing field?”

“Red sand,” Johnny replied. “Brought it in trucks.”

“And here it is, some of it!” Goggles was getting excited. “Let’s have a look at this other bag.” He dumped coarse dirt on a second paper. “Came from the bottom of those shoes,” he explained. “Yes, there it is—red sand, some oil mixed in—just what you’d find on a landing field. They’re the men all right.”

“Well, that’s something,” Johnny replied quietly.

“What are we going to do about it?” Goggles asked.

“Nothing just now. You can’t keep people from flying over your head.”

“But you’d think—Say!” Goggles’ tone changed. “There’s some sort of chemical in this dust from the sweeper. Two kinds. One’s coarse and gray. Other’s a fine white powder.

“Yes.” He examined the contents of a small envelope. “Some of the white powder is in the dust I took from the pocket of an old coat they left. Must have rubbed it off his hands into his pocket. People do that without thinking.”

“Goggles—” Johnny found it hard to control his voice, “could you make a bright light by touching off two powders?”

“I’ll say you could! All kinds of light.”

“Goggles—” Johnny’s tone was deeply serious, “you separate those chemicals from the rest of the dust as well as you can, then keep them—both kinds. It—it may be important.”

“I’ll do more than that,” Goggles agreed. “I’ll take them down to the laboratories. I’ll ask someone to test ’em out and tell me what they are. Maybe I’ll ask the ‘Prince.’”

“You know the ‘Prince’?” Johnny was surprised.

“Talked to him twice. He isn’t half bad,” admitted Goggles modestly.

“Who said he was? I think he’s great!” Johnny put his cap on. “All right. Got to get going. See you later.”

Back in his own room, Johnny drew two objects from his pocket and examined them.

Then he closed his eyes. “The eagle soared and dropped,” he murmured. “So did the airplane. The eagle got a rabbit. The airplane got a man. It was no accident that the ‘Prince’ had to give up pitching. I know why he did—and—and I can almost prove it.

“Those two men,” he said slowly, “have it in for the ‘Prince.’ I wonder why? They’ll do something more. I wonder what?

“One thing’s sure,” he said stoutly, “I’m for the ‘Prince’ a hundred percent!”

CHAPTER XI
WHAT AN EYE!

That evening Johnny sat on his grandfather's porch staring at the moon and allowing the events of the past few days to glide across his memory as a panorama glides across a picture screen.

It was strange! Here he was in the quiet little city of his grandfather. He'd been here many times before. Nothing unusual had happened; but now there was the little Chinaman who apparently had been seen by no one but himself and who was now being sought by detectives. And there was the thought-camera. He wondered whether the little man was still in town, but had no desire to visit the spice shop to find out for sure—at least not in the dark. He recalled C. K.'s words, and shuddered afresh.

"And there's the 'Prince,'" he thought. "Queer sort of fellow. How did he come here?" He seemed to see an airplane landing within prison walls. Had the Colonel rescued him in that strange manner from a prison? "Of course not!" he whispered. "Perfectly absurd!" And yet, there was that air pilot's story. "Mystery wings!" he whispered low. How many mysterious things might be carried on high in the air—kidnaping, smuggling, daring robbers escaping from the scene of their crime. What had happened that day as the airplane soared over their baseball diamond? He had a rather definite notion. But was that idea correct? He meant to find out.

He thought of the coming ball game. The "Prince" would be there. He had promised to come. Meggy had brought word of this.

"Good old Meg!" he thought. "How I'd like to tell her about the thought-camera!" He was burning to tell someone. And yet, had he the right? Meg would keep the secret. Threats of death would not wring it from her. Good old Meg! And yet—. He wouldn't tell, not just now.

How was the ball game to come out? And Goggles' forty-eyed umpire? Would it work? They would get a crowd, he was sure of that. But would they be able to satisfy that crowd?

He stole a glance at his grandfather. As usual, he sat in his big chair dreaming of the past. Slipping up the stairs, Johnny returned with the thought-camera under his coat. He recorded one more chapter of the grand old man's life. Then he crept back upstairs again.

"Wonder how that thing works," he murmured as he once more hid the camera in the bottom of his trunk. "I'd give a lot to know." He had read of things scientists were doing with what they called the spectrum, how they divided it into different rays, red, violet, indigo blue, and how some rays were life-giving and some deadly. It might be something like that. If he knew the secrets of that camera he could become the richest person in the world. Perhaps some day he would know.

"But now," he laughed low, "the next thing is a ball game."

He was late to the Wednesday game. His grandfather had a hurry-up call into the country. Johnny drove the car. Twenty miles from town they got a flat tire. The bolts stuck. He was a full hour getting it changed. When he finally reached the ball grounds the game had been in progress for some time and, to his great surprise and consternation, this is what he heard:

"Oh! What an eye! Kill that umpire! Git a pop bottle! Git twenty pop bottles! Wreck him! Wreck him!" The cries were loud and persistent from every corner of the grandstand.

"Trouble is," Doug Danby groaned as Johnny came racing up, "they are liable to break loose any minute and do just that—'wreck the umpire.' And that umpire cost hundreds of dollars. How could we ever pay it back?"

Doug was, he believed, at that moment the most miserable person in the world. They were losing, losing the game they by all odds should be winning. And it was all his fault, or at least he accepted the blame. He, as captain of the team, had stood up for Goggles' mechanical umpire. "And now look!" He gave Johnny an appealing glance.

Johnny didn't want to look. Everyone else was looking; that is, everyone on the Hillcrest bleachers, and everyone was yelling: "Wide a mile!" or "Way below his

knees!” “Take out that umpire! Wreck him!” “Strike! Strike! Strike!” They began chanting this as a refrain, and clapping their hands in a rhythmic accompaniment.

“Johnny, something’s gone terribly wrong!” Meggy Strawn screamed this into Johnny’s ear above the din.

“You’re telling us!” Doug shouted back. “Terribly wrong! I’d say! Bill’s out on strikes and all three were balls. Dave’s got two strikes now, and there—no—that tin umpire called it a ball!”

“There!” Meggy jumped up and down. “Dave swatted it. It’s a two bagger! Rah for Dave!”

Doug did not shout. He was glad Dave had made second. But he was sure he’d never see home.

“You can’t beat a crooked umpire,” he groaned. That the umpire was crooked he could not by this time doubt. Yet, how could it be? A mechanical umpire with an eye a thousand times faster than the human eye, set to call balls and strikes impartially, all the balls to be outside the plate, above the shoulder or below the knee, a mere thing of electrical tubes and cells, of wires and steel mechanisms, how could that kind of an umpire be crooked? Doug could find no answer. Nor could Johnny. He could only stand and stare.

“Johnny,” Meggy whispered, “why does that Fairfield sub always stand leaning against that post while our team is up to bat?”

The post she spoke of stood before the bench used by the visiting team. It held one end of the wire cable that kept the crowd off the field.

“Probably leans because he’s the leaning sort,” Johnny chuckled.

“He’s done that for four innings.” Meggy’s tone was low, mysterious. Johnny missed that tone. He was too much absorbed by what was going on to notice it. “When his team comes up to bat,” Meg went on, “he goes back to the bench. Then when we are at bat again, he hops up, strolls slowly to the post and stands there until the inning is over. Johnny, I—”

“There!” It was Doug who interrupted her. “Steve struck out. I’m up. Watch me

fan! All I got to do is stand right still, and that tin umpire will call ‘Strike! Strike! Strike!’ and I’m out! You just watch!”

“Doug!” Meggy gripped his arm tight. “You—you’re being almost yellow. Buck up! Get in there and win in spite of odds. There’s something crooked about it. We all know that. But we can’t help it. At least not now. Listen! Uncle Rob told me once he’d seen a lot of crooked things tried in all sorts of games, but he’d found out this—if the straight player stood up to it and did his level best he’d win; but that a fellow who is crooked can never do his best—his conscience won’t let him. So you just get in there and swat that ball! Strike at every one. Boot it over the fence! And next time, when you’re up, I’m going to—”

She did not finish. Doug was gone.

With Meggy’s words ringing in his ears, Doug marched up to the plate. Ten seconds later he saw the ball coming. Figuring it would be “wide a mile,” he gave a quick side-wise lurch, swung the bat, struck the ball low and hard, then dashed for first base.

“Go! Go! Go! Go on!” came in a deafening roar. Nor did that call subside until he had crossed the home plate. He had boosted the ball clear out of the lot, a home run just like that.

“But even that won’t win,” he told Johnny gloomily. “The score is still 5 to 3 in their favor. And that tin umpire is set dead against us.”

This conclusion seemed fair enough, for when Tim Tyler, the best batter on their team, came up next he went down “One, two, three.” After that the Hillcrest players wandered gloomily to their places on the diamond.

Doug played right field. Since the men on the opposing team almost to a man batted right handed, he now had plenty of time to think. And those were long, long thoughts, you may be sure. “How could that electrical umpire be crooked?” he asked himself over and over. “It worked perfectly every time yesterday. If it wasn’t for the pledge that both teams made to see the thing through, I’d demand a new umpire. But thunder! We’d look fine throwing out our own umpire!”

Yes, they had tried the umpire out the day before. Goggles had secured the necessary equipment from the electrical shop which was really a laboratory for research work, and with the assistance of the head electrician had set the

electrical umpire in place on the ball grounds.

“You see,” he had explained before they started to test it out, “there’s a battery of ten lights shining out at the side beyond the plates. There are ten above the batter’s shoulder, and ten below the knee. These lights shine on electric eyes. The moment one of these lights is shut off, even for an instant, a red light will flash and a phonograph shout, ‘Foul.’ Two other batteries of lights watch for strikes. Another phonograph calls ’em. Now you fellows try it.”

They did try it. Tried it many times and not once had the mechanical umpire failed.

“It did not slip once yesterday,” Doug groaned to himself out there on the field watching for any chance fly that might come his way. “And now, today, when the Fairfield batters are up, it works perfectly, but when we are up it just squints its forty eyes and gives the pitcher all the breaks.

“Crowds,” the boy grumbled, “are queer. One minute they are with you, next they are against you.” It had been so with the crowd from his own town in regard to the mechanical umpire. When they had heard it call “Strike!” “Foul!” then “Strike!” once more, they had gone wild over it. “But now,” he groaned, “they’re all against it. May swarm onto the field any minute and smash it up. Worst is,” he grumbled on, “we agreed to abide by the decision of that brainless mechanical man—even put it in writing. Both teams signed it—so—”

He broke short off. There had come a wild shout from the enemy’s bleachers. A high fly came sailing his way. Judging it correctly, he turned his back and ran; then, whirling about just in time, put up a single hand to nab the ball. It was a beautiful catch. Even the rivals applauded.

“Fine! Great! Wonderful!” His teammates patted him on the back as they raced in for their turn at bat.

“Lot of good that will be,” Doug grumbled. “We’re beat right now; beaten by our own little tin umpire. What an eye! is right.”

Then Meggy’s words came back to him: “Go in and beat them anyway. Fellows that are crooked seldom win. Their conscience won’t let them.”

“We’ll win!” He set his teeth tight. “Win in spite of it all. We—”

His thoughts broke short off. What was Meggy up to now? She had walked away from her regular place, had crossed the field and was standing leaning against the white post just before the bench used by the rival team—the one she had said the Fairfield sub leaned on.

“You’d think she’s gone over to the enemy,” Doug whispered to Johnny. She hadn’t, though. He knew Meggy better than that. But what *was* she there for? Surely that was a puzzler.

Shortly after the “Prince” took up his batting position for old Hillcrest, the sub from the Fairfield bench moved forward to touch Meggy on the shoulder.

“Sorry, Miss, you’ll have to move. It’s this way. The boys back on the bench can’t see through you.” His tone was apologetic.

“Oh! Is that so?” Meggy’s pug nose turned fully half an inch higher. “Well then! Suppose they try sliding along on the bench.” She held her position.

The sub returned to his bench discomfited.

In the meantime, wonder of wonders, the electrical umpire of forty eyes had at last apparently taken pity on the Hillcrest team and was giving them a square deal. The “Prince” actually got a base on balls.

The fans on the bleachers ceased their fruitless razzing of the tin umpire and began to cheer. The opposing pitcher appeared to be losing his poise. After dealing out three more balls, he tossed Dave Dawson an easy one and Dave swatted it for a two bagger. Another walk, and the bags were loaded.

Fairfield changed pitchers. The fresh pitcher bore down hard. The result for that inning was one score for Hillcrest.

“Come on boys!” Doug yelled. “A shut-out this time! Then we’ll go after them. Two more runs and we got ’em. Something’s happened. I don’t know what, but at last we’re getting a square deal from our old tin ump.”

The shut-out was managed easily. The “Prince” did his part nobly. Two pop-ups and a strike-out did the work. All this time Doug was like one in a trance. Strange things were happening. The mechanical umpire had suddenly gone on the square. But poor Meg! She had apparently quite lost her mind. She was still leaning on that white post before the enemy’s bench. Had anyone been close beside her, however, he would have noticed that her attention was divided between a certain spot on the ground close to the post and a Fairfield player who had remained on the bench. The player was captain of the rival team. He had sent the sub out to take his place.

Hardly had the batting begun than this captain rose with some dignity to approach Meggy. “Sorry, dear child,” his air was patronizing, “but you’ll have to leave. This is our side of the diamond. Besides, you are in danger of being struck by a foul ball.”

“Oh! Thank you!” Meggy smiled sweetly. “I’m awfully good at ducking.”

“But you *must* leave!” The visiting captain’s tone was stern.

Meggy did not answer. Instead she turned her back upon him to cup her hands and shout across the diamond.

“Yoo-hoo! Johnny! Bring me that spade! There’s a dandelion, a great big one,

here."

The astonished Johnny did her bidding. The rival captain held his ground. A look of dread overspread his face. He seemed to be saying to himself, "What will this wild young creature do next?"

He did not have long to wait. Seizing the spade, Meggy hissed, "There! Right down there!" then sank her spade deep.

The captain made a move as if to stop her, opened his mouth as if to speak, then retired in apparent confusion.

There was no dandelion where Meggy sank her spade. The spot of gold that was a yellow "dannie" was fully a yard away. She did not trouble the dandelion at all. Instead, she sank her spade with a vicious poke of her stout young foot three times. Then, shouldering her spade as if it were a rifle, she marched back to her own bleachers and took up the task of cheer leader. She led the Hillcrest team to such a victory as the old town had never before witnessed. When the ninth inning was ended and Doug was borne in triumph off the field, the score stood 22 to 7 in favor of the home team. Doug, riding aloft on his fellow townsmen's shoulders, was disturbed by a vague feeling that Meggy was far more richly deserving of this ride than he. But why? This he could not tell. That was to come later.

"Meggy, you're holding something back," Johnny insisted as he sat with Meg and Doug on Meg's porch drinking lemonade late that evening.

"All right," Meg laughed, "then I am. And I suppose you'd like to know what. They say," she smiled whimsically, "that 'figures won't lie but liars will figure.' Well, Goggles may be able to make a perfect mechanical umpire, but he can't keep some other electrical shark from tampering with it.

"You see—" she leaned forward, eyes gleaming, "you set up your equipment yesterday. During the night some smart boy from Fairfield came over and cut in a switch that would turn half the eyes of old Mr. Umpire off when they wanted them off. That gave Mr. Ump only half sight. And of course they made him half blind every time our team came up. He couldn't see the balls."

"But I don't under—"

“Wait!” Peggy held up a hand. “The switch was by that white post. They’d buried the wires underground two or three inches. When I saw that sub stand there every inning, I guessed there was a reason. So—o, you see,” she laughed, “I took his place.

“He’d been throwing the switch off and on with his toe. Couldn’t while I was there. Bye and bye I discovered the switch, figured out where the wires ran, then chopped one off with that spade. After that old Mr. Ump could see very well all the time.”

“Meg!” Doug exclaimed, “You’re a whizz!”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” Meg laughed. “One thing I do know. The score wouldn’t have been so terrible if they hadn’t tried to cheat. Which all goes to show that the fellow that cheats can’t win.”

“Correct!” Johnny laughed. “Now how about another lemonade?”

“Well—” Doug sighed a happy sigh as he rose to leave a half hour later, “we got our thousand dollars and a little left over. So the old ball ground is safe, at least for a while.”

“Wasn’t the ‘Prince’ gr—and today!” Meg’s tone was rich and mellow. “Isn’t he mysterious!”

“He sure was good!” Johnny agreed. “And no one bothered him today. That airplane did not come back.”

“But it will,” a voice seemed to whisper in his ear. “You wait! Mystery wings!”

CHAPTER XII
THE VANISHING CHINAMAN

On his way home Johnny met Goggles. “Great work, Goggles!” he exclaimed with enthusiasm. “That stunt of yours sure drew a crowd.”

“Ye-a,” Goggles said with a drawl. “There was a time, though, when it looked as if the old ump and I’d be mobbed. That Fairfield bunch played a mean trick on us. Ought to be thrown out of the League.”

“Oh I don’t know.” Johnny paused for thought. “You couldn’t prove a member of their team did it. We licked ’em good and plenty. That should be enough. Anyway, they don’t stand high in the League. Centralia—there’s the team we’ve got to watch out for!”

“Say!” Goggles’ big eyes bulged. “I think Hop Horner and I have got a new pitcher for you.”

“A new pitcher?” Johnny stared. “What’s the matter with the ‘Prince’?”

“Nothing. Only—” Goggles’ voice dropped to a low, mysterious note, “this pitcher’s different.”

“He’ll have to go some if he’s as different as the ‘Prince.’”

“You’ll be surprised! Tell you what.” The young inventor’s tone changed. “You know that open space out in the center of the pine grove?”

“Yes, sure.”

“Meet me there day after tomorrow about two in the afternoon. I—I’ll bring this—this er—pitcher round. Let—well, sort of let him throw over a few.”

“All right, I’ll be there. But I don’t see—” Johnny looked up. Goggles was gone.

“Now what’s he up to!” Johnny muttered as he turned toward home.

“I’ll wander over to that Chink spice shop,” he told himself with sudden resolve. “See if Tao Sing’s there.” He felt in his pocket. Yes, the latest think-o-graph of the wise Wung Lu’s thoughts was there. He would give it to Tao Sing and then go right home.

“You want Tao Sing?” the clerk behind the counter asked as Johnny entered the shop.

“Sure.”

“No can do.” The Chinaman showed all his yellow teeth in a broad grin. “Tao Sing gone velly fast, velly far, mebby not come back velly quick.” He laughed a dry mirthless laugh.

“Oh!” Johnny’s eyes swept the place nervously.

“I—maybe I’ll come back some other time.” As he slid out of the place Johnny barely escaped bumping into two slim young men who had an air of watchful waiting about them.

“Federal agents, like as not,” was the thought that struck him all of a heap. Experience had taught him that the best detectives of today were likely to be young, slender and quick. These were of that sort.

Finding himself still free, he hurried away.

“Perhaps I ought to tell them,” he thought. And then, a moment later, “Tell them what?” What, indeed? What did he know about Tao Sing that Federal agents should know? Little enough, that was certain. “Know he wants to salt down some of Wung Lu’s wisdom,” he chuckled. Then of a sudden it occurred to him that the sort of knowledge he had secured from Wung Lu’s thoughts might not be that which wise men would record in a book of Chinese philosophy.

“Like to read just one of them,” he told himself. He fingered the small metal box in his pocket. “I can’t,” he sighed. “It’s all Chinese.”

Next morning Johnny, Doug, and old Professor George went to the bank and drew out a thousand dollars. “Whew! What a lot of money!” Doug whispered.

They carried it to Big Bill Tyson’s office.

“Here it is, William,” Professor George squeaked in his high-pitched voice. “Here’s your first payment on the baseball grounds.”

“Fine! Fine!” Big Bill’s eyes shone as if he were truly glad. And perhaps he was. Big Bill loved money. “Here’s the contracts you’ll have to sign.” He wheeled about in his swivel chair. “One for you and one for me. Don’t mind signin’ with them, do you Professor? Mere matter of form. Boys are under age, you know.”

“No. I’ll sign the contracts, William.” The aged professor’s smile was a fine thing to see. “I’m always glad to help the boys out. And William, I’m proud to see that you’re willing to do your part.”

Big Bill’s eyes squinted in a strange way.

“Oh! Yes!” His voice seemed unusually loud and a trifle off key like the dong of a cracked bell. “Yes, Professor, you and I must help the boys out when we can. Here—you sign right there, all three of you. And then this one.”

He stood up when all had signed. “Well boys, I wish you luck.” Just then, strangely enough, a cloud passed over the sun. It left Big Bill’s face in a shadow that to Johnny’s keen imagination seemed a mask. A moment later they were out in the open air and the sun had escaped from behind the cloud.

That evening Johnny got out the two strange objects he had taken from the deserted bungalow—the battery and the bright tube. He studied them a long time, screwing them together and unscrewing them many times. “I’d like to know,” he murmured. “Those were the men who flew over the ball field, I am sure of that. They had these. Wonder if Goggles still has those two powders. Hope he has.” With that he hid the battery and tube along with the thought-camera at the bottom of his trunk.

“Oh Johnny! Come in here a minute.” It was old C.K. the editor who called to Johnny from his door next day.

“Just thought I’d tell you,” C.K. said as Johnny took a seat in his office, “that,

mebby you didn’t know it, but Big Bill Tyson drove a sharp bargain with you boys and old Professor George yesterday.”

“A—a sharp bargain!” Johnny stared. “We didn’t pay too much did we?”

“N—no. The price is a fair one,” C.K. drawled. “But!” He sat straight up. “How you boys going to raise four thousand dollars in sixty days?”

“Four thou—”

“That’s the contract you signed. Doug showed it to me yesterday. Didn’t say anything to him about it. Wanted to think it over.

“Of course—” he sank back in his chair, “you boys can’t be held for it, but the contract is binding. Four thousand dollars in sixty days, five thousand more in three years—that’s the way it reads. And, as it stands Professor George is stuck for it. He signed you know. He’s got a little house and a few investments. I figure it will about clean him out. Tough, I’d say!”

“Why! I—it can’t happen!” Johnny exploded. “Big Bill tricked us!”

“Guess that’s right,” C.K. agreed. “Too bad! But a contract is a contract.”

“Four thousand dollars!” Doug groaned when Johnny told him of it. “And to think good old Professor George will have to suffer for our blunder! Of course he wouldn’t suspect Big Bill. Professor George is so honest and kind himself, he’d never suspect a trick. Johnny, we’ve just got to do something.”

“Sure we have,” Johnny agreed. “But just think! Four thousand in sixty days!”

“Four thousand. Sixty days,” Doug repeated after him. This was followed by a vast silence.

CHAPTER XIII
SECRET OF THE PINES

Next day, in keeping with his promise to Goggles, Johnny found himself seated beneath the broad-spreading boughs of a pine tree. All about him were other pines. He was not in a forest, but a grove—a twenty acre grove of pines. Old Colonel Pinchot had planted them there a half century ago. Now they were known simply as The Pines. The heart of The Pines was a marvelous place to think, and Johnny was thinking hard. When he went into anything he went in heart and soul, did Johnny. He had gone in for the Hillcrest baseball team for all he was worth.

“And now,” he sighed, “looks as if it were all off just because—well, because somebody wants what he wants and appears to have the power to take it. Four thousand dollars!” He gave vent to a low grunt. “How’s a fellow to raise that much in times like these, for a baseball team,—and in sixty days! It can’t—”

He broke short off to listen. A curious sound, for such a place, had struck his ear. It seemed to be the low rattle and chuck-chuck of a two wheel cart.

“Who can that be carting things about way out here?” he asked himself. The question soon ceased to interest him. His mind turned once more to strange happenings in old Hillcrest. The little Chinaman with his thought-camera and think-o-graphs, lurking Federal agents, the mysterious pitcher, and Big Bill Tyson—all came in for their share of his thoughts. He lingered longer on the question of Big Bill and the four thousand dollars than all the rest, but was no nearer a solution than before, when to his vast surprise he saw Goggles break through the pine boughs, dragging a heavy cart behind him.

“Whew!” the young inventor exclaimed, mopping his brow. “That thing pulls like a ton of bricks.”

“Then why pull it?” Johnny grinned. “Where’s your friend the pitcher?”

“Right in behind.” Goggles grinned broadly as he nodded at something covered with canvas.

“You don’t mean—”

“Give me a hand,” Goggles grumbled. “It—it—I mean he’s pretty heavy.”

The astonished Johnny saw him throw back the canvas to disclose several sections of a mechanical contraption that might have been just anything at all.

His astonishment was not very much abated when, some fifteen minutes later, he saw standing before him on an improvised pitcher’s mound a six-foot figure that to some degree resembled a man.

“Meet Irons O.” Goggles beamed. “He doesn’t walk very well. He’s quite stiff-legged. He’s quite deaf, so there’s no use talking to him. But he can bawl out the umpire something fierce. His eyesight is very bad, so someone has to catch the ball for him and throw bases. But boy! How he can pitch! With just a little training he could fan out Babe Ruth nine times out of ten.

“Here!” he said, handing Johnny a big baseball mit, “You just get down there about where the catcher would stand, and I’ll have him throw a few over to you.”

After placing a ball between four steel fingers and a cast iron thumb, Goggles touched a button and the thing began a low puff-puff-puff that resembled low, heavy breathing. Johnny was mystified and amused beyond belief.

“Watch this curve!” Goggles shouted a moment later. He touched a button. A steel arm rose in air, wound up for all the world like a professional pitcher, then let fly. The ball shot forward, took a sudden broad curve, then went thud against Johnny’s big mit. A second ball, then a third followed and all took that same sharp curve.

“You set the fingers,” Goggles explained in a matter-of-fact voice. “Look at this straight, fast one.” Once again the steel arm went through its motion. This time the ball, shooting straight ahead like a cannon ball, cut the plate squarely in the middle.

“That,” said Johnny solemnly, “is the strangest thing I ever saw. A mechanical pitcher!”

“Nothing less!” Goggles agreed.

“Whe—where’d you get him?”

“Hop Horner and I have been working on him down at the electric shop for months. You see there’s a little motor inside that generates electricity. Electricity runs him. All a fellow has to do is to set his fingers and operate the controls. As I said before, he can even rave at the umpire. Watch!” He punched two buttons and old Irons O began bobbing his outlandish head. His steel teeth cracked together again and again, while from his metal throat there came sounds resembling the complaints of a wildcat chased up a tree. “He—he’s almost perfect!” Goggles admitted proudly.

“Yes,” Johnny agreed, “but what good is he? You can’t expect another ball team to let you substitute a—a machine for a real flesh-and-blood pitcher.”

“No, you can’t do that,” Goggles agreed, “but you can do this—it came to me just last night. You can announce an exhibition game. Get Centralia to come over and play us just for fun—fun and profit. We’d have a complete sell-out. Can’t you see it? Big headlines: ‘Come and See Irons O, the Mechanical Pitcher, Perform!’ Why even Big Bill would have to come and see that game! That game would bring in the first hundred dollars or so toward that four thousand.” Goggles went hopping about in his excitement.

“Sounds good to me,” Johnny agreed.

And indeed it sounded good to everyone interested in the Hillcrest baseball team. The date of the game was set for the following Saturday. As Goggles had predicted, the thing became a headline story. Reporters were admitted to the evergreen grove for a demonstration. Everyone else was barred. Then Irons O went into seclusion; a seclusion however that was to prove not quite adequate for the occasion.

When the time came for calling the game every bleacher seat and all available standing space was packed. The fame of the mechanical pitcher was spread far and wide.

“It’s in the bag,” Johnny grinned broadly as he saw old Professor George tucking the day’s receipts, a fat wad of bills, into his pocket.

“Not yet,” Goggles warned. “Remember, we promised a perfect performance. ‘Nine full innings pitched by Irons O, or your money back.’ That’s the way the handbills were printed.”

For all this the young inventor wore a jaunty air as he marched out to the pitcher’s mound where his mechanical man awaited him.

Touching a button here, another there, he caused Irons O to bob his head from side to side, then let out a cry of defiance at the shouting throng. The crowd roared back its glee.

When this roar had subsided another reached Johnny’s ear. A huge bi-motored plane was circling to the landing field a half mile away. A shudder ran over him. He had not forgotten those “Mystery wings,” nor the two strangers who had done something terrible to the “Prince” on that other day. “Have trouble doing it to a mechanical pitcher.” He laughed in spite of himself.

Ten minutes later, as the players took their place on the field, Johnny saw three men in aviation caps crowding toward the front.

“Wonder who they are and what they want?” he thought to himself. Something seemed to tell him that their arrival was important. Why? He could not tell.

The great moment came at last, and “Irons O pitching!” the megaphone announced at the end of the line-up.

Goggles’ fingers trembled as he threw on an electric switch, then pressed the button. And well they might tremble for Irons O, instead of facing the batter and doing his plain duty, let out a defiant squeal, turned half about, wound up and let fly at the astonished second baseman who, taken off his guard, was struck squarely on the chest and knocked over like a policeman with a bullet through his heart. Instantly pandemonium broke loose. Goggles could not hear himself think for the wild tumultuous noise.

CHAPTER XIV
THE STEEL-FINGERED PITCHER

Next moment Goggles found himself experiencing one of the tragic moments of his young life. In a moment of confidence and enthusiasm he had agreed to direct his mechanical man, Irons O, while he pitched a nine inning game of baseball, and now before a crowd of three thousand or more, old Irons O, who had always been reliable in the past, had turned squarely about on the first pitch and had all but sent the second baseman to the hospital with a baseball in his heart. What was the answer?

“Someone’s been fooling with him,” Hop Horner shouted as he came running up. “Here! Give me the screw driver. That’s it. Now the wrench.”

“Time out!” a big voice roared, “Time out!” It was Big Bill Tyson. Everyone roared with delight; that is, everyone but those who were interested in the youthful inventor’s success. Good old Professor George did not laugh. Instead, he crowded forward to ask, “Anything I can do here boys? Anything at all?” As if a professor who had taught Latin all his life could do anything with a mechanical man! All the same it made Goggles feel good inside. A friend at a time like this—well that was something.

“Wires all twisted up,” Hop was grumbling. “Somebody messed ’em up.”

For fifteen minutes the two boys worked feverishly. Perspiration streamed down their faces. Their hands were black and oily, their knees trembling. “Hundreds of dollars gone,” Goggles was thinking, “hundreds gone if we fail. Hope for the baseball park gone perhaps.” Still Irons O would not swing his arms in a proper manner.

The crowd was getting out of hand. Some were swarming on the field. In one corner, led by a small dark man, a group was chanting in a maddening manner:

“We want baseball! We want baseball! We want Irons O! We want Irons!”

It was in the midst of this uproar that Goggles felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find himself looking into the friendly smiling face of a man wearing an aviator’s helmet. “He’s one of those men from the big plane,” he thought to himself.

“Look!” the stranger was saying, “Isn’t that wire, the short one with a pink thread in its insulation—isn’t it out of place?”

“Sure! Sure it is!” Goggles felt his thoughts clearing. Seizing a pair of pliers, he quickly made the change. “Now,” he breathed, “Now! Let’s try it.”

They did try it and old Irons O did his work perfectly.

“O.K. boys?” the stranger asked, still smiling.

“O.K.!” Goggles breathed.

Seizing a megaphone, the man roared, “Ready to go! Clear the field!”

Once again the crowd settled into its place. A look of pleasant anticipation flashed like a gleam of sunlight from face to face.

“S-strike!” the umpire roared. The game was on. And such a game as it proved to be! A plucky, good-natured young fellow cheerfully pitted his strength and skill against a thing made of iron, copper and steel.

The first Centralia batter went down, one, two, three in a row. Goggles, with Irons O’s aid, had given him two easy curves and a straight swift one. Perhaps the batter experienced stage fright at batting against such a pitcher. However that might be, he went down swinging and the crowd roared its applause.

The second batter came to bat wearing a confident grin. Nor did his confidence go unrewarded. He made first on a line drive and received his full share of fans’ approval.

Then Irons O appeared to lose his control. He gave the third batter three balls in a row.

“He’s afraid of him! He’s walking him. Boo! Boo!” came in good-natured banter. “Boo! Boo! Boo!” shouted the crowd. Whereupon Irons O, dropping his steel arm to his side, turned his head half around and, to the umpire’s surprise, let out wildcat howls that could be heard at the farthest end of the field.

“Get that umpire!” someone shouted. “Where’s that pop bottle?” But it was all in fun. The mechanical pitcher tightened up, pitched three sizzlers in a row. A moment later, a third man went out on a pop-up.

Johnny Thompson saw all of this inning. He saw very little of those that followed. In all that throng he was interested in just one man—the little dark fellow who had led the razzing when Irons O appeared to be down and out for good. Johnny had always been interested in the things people did and their reasons for doing them. This little dark man was a complete stranger to him. He wondered, at first in a vague sort of way, why he was such an ardent heckler. When Irons O had been put into service again, he thought he detected on the fellow’s face a look of disappointment and chagrin.

“What can he care?” Johnny asked himself.

All through the game he sat close to that man and watched him. He had once seen two large dogs fighting a battle for a bone. One had dropped the bone. It lay beneath their feet as they fought. A third dog, a sort of insignificant hungry-looking pug, had hovered near all during the fight, licking his chops but never quite daring to seize the bone. Somehow, in a strange sort of way, the expression on this little man’s face resembled that on the insignificant pug’s face.

“I wonder what his interest in this game can be!” the boy whispered. “I do wonder!”

As for Goggles, during his spare moments while his team-mates were at bat, he was wondering about an entirely different matter. The men from the big airplane had caught his attention at once. When one of them, evidently a skilled mechanic, had interested himself in their problem and aided them in solving it, he had completely won Goggles’ heart. But Goggles’ interest went farther than that. “They came here to see this game. Probably came all the way from the big city, three hundred miles away,” he told himself. “I wonder why?” For the time he could form no satisfying answer.

In the meantime the game went on. Bernard caught the ball as it came back from

the catcher. He caught a pop-up fly now and then and also threw bases. To the excitement of the throng, Irons O did the rest. He pitched a good game too, but no better than the smiling pitcher from Centralia. Goggles had always admired that Centralia pitcher, but never as now. Now, as he directed the pitching of Irons O, as the score went from 3 to 4, to 6-5; then from 7-8 to 8-10, his sympathies were evenly balanced between the man of iron and the man of brawn. Who was to win? Well enough he knew that in the end it was up to him to decide.

And so it turned out to be. At the end of the first half of the ninth inning the score stood 10-9 in the iron man's favor. At the beginning of the game they had tossed up to see who came first to bat. Centralia had lost, so now in the last half of the ninth they were up to bat.

"It's up to Irons O," Goggles breathed to Johnny as he went out on the field.

"Which means it's up to you!" Johnny smiled. He had read the story of struggle written on the other boy's face. He wanted his team and his iron man to win the game; yet, down deep in his heart he had a feeling that to set Irons O for a shut-out would be taking an unfair advantage of that smiling pitcher.

"I—I've got to give them a break," he murmured as he took his place behind the man of iron. He set Irons O's fingers for an easy curve, then pressed the button.

"St-trike! Ball! St-trike! Ball! Ball." The audience was on its toes. "Ball three! Strike two!" Irons twisted his head about and screamed at the umpire. Once again the audience went into near-hysterics.

Goggles set the fingers for a swift fast one. The man went down swinging.

Second batter up. Two curves went wild. A swift fast one would have cut the plate in halves had not a stout hickory bat sent it shooting away into centerfield for a two bagger.

"The tying run on second and only one out!" Goggles was thinking hard. "They can't have it, not yet!" he decided. He raised the speed of the iron pitcher's arm a couple of notches, then set his fingers for a very wide curve. A ball and three strikes. The third batter went down swinging.

"Pitcher's up next. They'll put in a pinch-hitter," Goggles thought. But no, here came that smiling pitcher. He was swinging three bats and smiling broader than

ever.

“It’s a sure thing,” the young inventor groaned. “But how can I?”

Mechanically he set the controls, gave the ball into the iron pitcher’s fingers, then whispered, “Now!”

And “now” was right. The ball, a slow straight one, was met squarely by the strongly swung bat. It rose high to go sailing away over the bleachers and out of the park.

“Home run, and the game’s over!” a thousand voices shouted. A wild roar of approval greeted the end of the game. Only the little dark man, who had occupied so much of Johnny’s attention, did not cheer. He sat in moody silence. “I wonder why?” Johnny murmured. Then he joined the throng that pressed on toward the spot where the mechanical pitcher stood.

A double rope barrier had been thrown about Goggles, Hop Horner and their strange invention. As for Irons O, he now bowed to the grown-ups who cheered him, and then screamed at the boys who shouted at him. Take it all in all, it had been a day of complete triumph for the Hillcrest boys and their iron pitcher. And the day was not over—far from it.

The crowd had thinned to a mere handful of over-curious boys, and Goggles was reaching for a wrench and pliers for unhooking and unscrewing his good iron friend when, as once before that day, a friendly hand touched his shoulder and smiling eyes met his.

“I’m back,” the stranger said simply. It was the man of the airplane. With him were his two companions. “You see,” he began to explain, “we didn’t just *happen* to come here. We were sent.”

“I—I guessed that.” Goggles’ heart leaped, though he scarcely knew why.

“You did?” The other seemed surprised. “Well,” he went on, “this is the story. Mr. Montgomery here, who is vice-president of the Northern Airways, read of this—this mechanical man of yours. He wanted to see it perform.”

“I wonder why?” Goggles repeated.

“This is it.” Montgomery, who appeared a quick nervous type of man, stepped forward. “We are anxious to advertise air travel in every way we can. We feel it to be safe and we know it’s a fast and clean way to travel. I said to the boys: ‘If that iron pitcher really works, we’ll pick him up with his whole ball team and carry him across the country in one of our big bi-motors, putting on exhibition games.’ This—this man of yours—what is it you call him?”

“Irons O.”

“Well, he put on a good show—a very fine show. What do you say?”

“I—I—” Goggles’ head was whirling. “I’ll tell you in two hours, if—if I can.”

“All right. Meet us at the airport.”

“We sure will!”

“Here, Hop!” Goggles threw his tools on the ground as the man walked away. “You take old Irons O and put him to bed. I’ve got business, plenty of it.”

“I’ll say you have,” Hop agreed.

“Across the continent!” Goggles thought as he dashed wildly away. “Across the continent in an airplane. Ball games perhaps in Denver, Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, Seattle! Boy! Oh boy! And a bag of gold from every port for our ball field.”

But could they do it? His spirits dropped. “Can we? It—it seems almost impossible. And yet, somehow, we must. We just must!”

“Goggles,” Johnny said to him later that evening when everything had been settled that they were to start on that marvelous airplane cruise. “I don’t like the actions of that little dark man.”

“What little dark man?” Goggles asked in surprise.

“Didn’t you notice him? But of course you wouldn’t have.” Johnny went on to tell of the little man’s part in that day’s game.

“It is strange that old Irons O should have gotten all mixed up inside.” Goggles

said this as if it were part of the story Johnny had just finished. “Oh well,” he concluded, “if that little dark man wants to make us trouble on our trip, he’ll have to hire a plane.”

“He’ll never do that,” Johnny replied. To his own surprise he found himself wondering, “What *will* he do?” Had he known the answer, he would have experienced an even greater feeling of surprise.

CHAPTER XV
THE WHITE FLARE

To the members of the Hillcrest ball team the days that followed were those of tremendous thrills and heart breaking disappointment. Whenever two members of the team met, wildly enthusiastic words regarding the coming airplane tour were exchanged.

“It’s a bi-motored plane!” one would exclaim, “a great silver ship of the air. Hundred and sixty miles an hour. And with a stiff wind behind you, boy, oh boy! What a ride!”

“And all the way to the Pacific coast!” the other would fairly shout.

On the other hand two games were played. Sad, tragic games they were indeed. Games that counted in the pennant race, they were lost. The “Prince” failed them. He did not show up. Everyone asked “Why? Why?” No one knew where he was; at least, if Colonel Chamberlain knew he did not tell.

Fred Frame’s arm gave out in the first of the two games. Leander Larson, who took his place, did his best. That best was not good enough.

“We are a whole game behind Centralia!” Doug Danby groaned. “Got one game with her next week. If the ‘Prince’ don’t show up we’ll lose, and that ends it all. What’s the good of a cruise with a steel-fingered pitcher, after we’ve lost the year’s contest at home?”

“You have to think of the money you’ll make,” Johnny reminded him. “Taking that cruise is the only thing that will save the ball field to the boys of Hillcrest. And that’s important. That will last for years and years and years. Why,” he cried, “that’s like setting up a monument to the team that’s playing just now! Better than a monument, I’d say! A lot better. You can only look at a monument.

A ball field you can enjoy using. Thousands will have a good time there every year. It's your grand and glorious opportunity."

"Why do you say 'you'?" Doug demanded. "You're going along, aren't you?"

"I can't," Johnny said soberly. "Grandfather has some government work to do, looking after the loaning of money. I've got to drive for him. Anyway, I'm not needed. Besides—"

He did not finish. He was about to say, "Besides, there's that missing Chinaman, Tao Sing, the Federal agents, and the thought-camera. I've got to see that thing through." He did not say it.

"Besides what?" Doug asked.

"Oh nothing," Johnny countered. "I'll not be with you, that's all. Goggles and his mechanical pal will have to go along. Those, with the team, will give the airplane a pretty good load."

"Meggy," Johnny said that same afternoon, "why didn't the 'Prince' come today?"

"That," Meggy whispered, "is just what I asked Uncle Rob. And do you know what he said?"

"No. What?"

"He said," Meggy whispered, "the 'Prince' is afraid! Afraid of what, Johnny?"

"I—I think I know," Johnny said slowly. "But I'm not quite sure. Sup—supposing I don't answer until I know?"

"That—that's all right, Johnny."

"Say, Meggy!" Johnny exclaimed, "Do you suppose you could get your uncle to let us go down to see—see the 'Prince' and take Goggles along?"

"I'm sure I could, Johnny."

"Tonight?"

“Maybe.”

“All right. You try, then phone me.”

At eight o’clock that evening three dark figures approached a door in the laboratories. Through the clouded glass of that door a pale light shone.

The smaller of the three, a boy, rapped three times. The door opened a crack. Shining eyes peered into the darkness. The door opened wider. The trio entered. Meggy, Johnny and Goggles found themselves being ushered into a dimly lighted room. The room was lined on all sides by test-tubes, beakers, retorts and all manner of instruments that belong to the fascinating and mysterious science of chemistry.

“You wanted to see me?” Something very like a smile played about the lips of the “Prince.”

“Yes,—er—it’s this.” Goggles drew two very small bottles from his pocket, then held them up to the light. Each vial contained a small quantity of some chemical substance.

Taking these, the “Prince” poured a little from each upon a bit of tissue paper. He pinched each, examined it under a pocket microscope, poked it about with a needle. Then straightening up, he said rather sharply, “Where’d you get it?”

“Jus—just now I’d rather not tell,” Goggles stammered.

“All right.” The chemist’s tone was brusque. “Want me to show you something?”

Without waiting for a reply, he left the room, returning in a moment with a rather curious triangle of metal set on a wooden handle. He scattered grains of two mysterious powders along the bottom of this triangular trough. Next he ran insulated wires with bared ends, one each from two directions along this trough. The ends almost, but did not quite, touch. He connected the other ends of these wires to a dry battery.

“Now,” he breathed. Methodically he fastened a pair of very dark glasses before his eyes.

“Now,” he repeated, “watch for a surprise! No harm. Just a bit of a shock.”

Too much thrilled to watch his next move, the children jumped almost to the ceiling when there came a dazzling white flash.

“All that from those few powders!” Johnny exclaimed. “And no smoke at all.”

“Yes,” the “Prince” said quietly. “A truly marvelous discovery. By adding more powder one may light up a square mile in the darkest night—a great boon to aviators. With such a powder at hand, no secret army movement at night in war time could be sure to succeed. A truly marvelous discovery!” he repeated. He did not say, “Where did you get it?”

“Perhaps he knows,” Johnny told himself.

“‘Prince,’ you—you’ll pitch for us next Saturday?” There was pleading in Meggy’s tone. “We need you badly. You—you just *can’t* fail.”

A shadow passed over the strange dark face. “I—I’ll try to be there,” the “Prince” replied. “And now,” he said abruptly, “I must bid you goodnight. I am working on something for the Colonel, some—something rather large for so unimportant a person as myself.”

“Thank you, ‘Prince.’” Meggy made for the door. “Thank, oh thank you,” came from the others.

Johnny was the last one out. Just why he should have looked back at the instant the door was swinging shut behind him, he could never tell. Enough that he did look back and that, from this looking through a crack not more than two inches wide, he received the shock of his young life.

He saw a leg, the leg of the “Prince.” His sock had slipped down. He was pulling it up. In doing so, he lifted his trouser leg so high that it showed his bared leg. *And that leg was not brown, but white as Johnny’s own.*

“He’s not naturally brown!” The thought shot through the boy’s mind like a flash. “His hands, arms and face are dyed; probably his hair is too. I wonder why?” He was to continue wondering for some time to come.

CHAPTER XVI
A TENSE MOMENT

When a mysterious stranger takes up his abode in any community, there is sure to be a difference of opinion regarding his true nature. To some he is certain to be a romantic figure, to others an evil menace. It was so with the “Prince.” There were those who said he was a famous young chemist working out a formula that was to be of vast benefit to all the world. There were others—and this was strange—many others who said, “He is an industrial spy! Colonel Chamberlain will find this out too late!”

But what is an industrial spy? Probably there was not one person in ten who could have told. And always the thing we do not understand is the one we fear most.

Having heard all this, Johnny, on the day following his visit to the “Prince,” buckled up his courage and walked into Colonel Chamberlain’s office.

“Hello, Johnny!” the Colonel greeted him. “What’s troubling you? Lost last week’s game? Well, you can’t win ’em all. You’ll win next time.”

“We sure will,” Johnny agreed, “but it’s not that.

“Colonel—” Johnny was sitting on the edge of his chair. “Colonel Chamberlain, what is an industrial spy?”

“An industrial spy?” The Colonel sat up. “He’s a man paid by one nation to steal industrial secrets from another nation—new inventions, new processes, new chemical inventions.

“But,” he added quickly, “if you think our J., the one you call ‘Prince,’ is an industrial spy, think again. He’s not!”

“I—I’m glad.” Johnny settled back in his place.

“But see here!” He was on his feet now. “Look at this, and this, and this.” He was dragging things from a paper bag.

“What’s it all about?” The Colonel smiled.

“I’ll tell—tell you all about it.” Johnny seemed out of breath.

When he got going, however, the things he said, the proof he gave for all the things he believed, left the good Colonel staring.

“If all you say is true—and of course it is—” the Colonel said slowly, “something should be done about it.”

He went into a brown study. He drummed the desk with his pencil.

“Tell you what,” he said at last, “Rome was not built in a day. Let’s not be in a hurry. The evidence you already possess convinces you and me. But would it convince everyone? We’ll just wait a bit and see if we cannot gather more. If those two men return they will do something else. We’ll be prepared to trap them. Let’s see if we can’t worry along until two weeks from—let’s see—” he consulted his calendar. “Yes sir! That’s the very day!”

Johnny knew he was speaking now of something strange and quite unknown to him.

“Yes sir!” the Colonel repeated, “You see if we can’t wait to spring this thing two weeks from next Saturday, after the game, the last of the season. And Johnny—” he leaned forward to whisper in the boy’s ear. “I think at that time I can tell you J.’s secret. Or—wait! Better still—I’ll have him tell it.”

“That,” said Johnny in a tone that carried conviction, “will be swell!”

A moment later he found himself once more in the street. His precious paper bag of “evidence” was securely tucked under his arm.

After taking a dozen steps he paused to look back. Strangely enough, in his mind’s eye he saw at that moment not a brick building, but an airplane landing. From the airplane two persons stepped. One slim and dark with a dyed face, and

the other was Colonel Chamberlain. Then his own words to the aviator on that night several days ago, came back to him: “Looks like a jail delivery.”

“But it couldn’t have been Colonel Chamberlain!” he told himself stoutly now. “Or, if it was, it surely was all right.” He was determined not to lose faith in a friend. “‘Thine own friend and thy father’s friend forsake not,’” he whispered.

Saturday afternoon came. The day was bright and clear. A brisk breeze from the west was blowing loose papers across the diamond. “Good!” Johnny exulted to himself. “There’ll be no soaring airplane today. But that ugly pair will be up to something!” His brow wrinkled. Once again he murmured, “I wonder why.”

The fame of the “Prince” had traveled far. The fact that he would once again appear had been highly advertised. There is nothing like a first class mystery to draw a crowd. The crowd was there for sure. The bleachers were packed and all available space overflowing long before the game was scheduled to start.

The umpire had taken his place, the mysterious pitcher was moving toward the box. Johnny was staring dreamily at nothing at all, when Goggles, with a strange look on his face, came sidling up to him.

“Jo—Johnny!” He stared through his thick glasses. He fairly stammered in his excitement. “Johnny, you didn’t see tho—those men who ca—came back to g—get something out of that bun—bungalow. Wan—want to see them? Well, th—there they are! Right over there, close to Big Tim Murphy!”

“Big Tim!” Johnny’s blood ran cold. Big Tim had once been the promoter of a Sunday baseball league. Could it be that Big Tim was trying to get the ball park, that these two were his aids?

It flashed through Johnny’s mind that he might be behind the group who were seeking to get control of their ball ground. “Can it be that Big Tim has hired these men to annoy our pitcher?” he asked himself. He hated to think this. Big Tim was not like Big Bill Tyson. He had very little money and he surely was not soft and flabby. Big Tim worked. “Must give him the benefit of the doubt,” he decided.

That the strangers sitting close to Big Tim were here for no good purpose became apparent at once. Hardly had the “Prince” taken his place than they began to razz him.

If the “Prince” heard them, he made no sign. The throng that gathered that day had never seen better pitching than came from his supple arm during the first four innings of that game.

For all this, the mysterious pair became more and more personal and cutting in their shouts at that silent figure on the mound.

“They should be put off the grounds!” Goggles fumed.

“Ought to mob ’em!” Johnny agreed.

The affair came to a sudden climax as, at the end of the fourth inning the “Prince” on his way to the bench passed close to the strangers. Then it was that the larger of the two, leaning far forward, called him a name. He spoke low. It was not a pretty name. Few heard it. Johnny heard. The pitcher too must have heard, for his lips turned blue and twitched in a manner painful to behold. He did not speak. He marched straight on.

Big Tim Murphy must have heard, for, slowly lifting his great bulk from his bleacher seat, he stood towering above the two strangers.

“Look a-here!” His tone was like the low rumble of a lion. “You’ve said enough. Fact is, you’ve said a few words too much.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been watchin’ these boys with their ball game. They’re puttin’ on a good, clean, honest show.”

Johnny felt a sudden ache in his throat. Big Tim was championing their cause! Big Tim!

“As for that pitcher,” Tim went on, “I don’t know him—reckon there ain’t many here that does. But I been watchin’. He ain’t done nothin’ to you. Not a thing! Not here. If he’s done things in other places, then you go there to settle ’em. You can’t spoil these boys’ baseball game.”

“*You* don’t look like a Sunday School scholar!” the larger man sneered.

“All right—” Tim’s voice boomed. “Just for that, you’ll apologize!”

He took a step forward. “You called that pitcher a name that in this town means an apology or a fight! You’ll beg that pitcher’s pardon. You’ve got three minutes

to do it. An' if you don't, I'll pop your heads together till they crack like pumpkins bustin' on the frozen ground!"

"He'll do it too!" Goggles whispered to Johnny.

"But two of them!" Johnny whispered.

"Don't matter. He'll do it."

Tim had dragged a huge watch from his pocket. The men were silent. The whole throng was still. The chirping notes of a robin in a distant apple tree could be heard distinctly. So a moment passed.

Big Tim did not move a muscle; just stood there watching the second hand go around. So another moment passed.

"All—all right." The larger of the two strangers wet his lips. "All right, you win. Call that fellow over. I'll tell him."

"Hey!" Tim roared, "You pitcher! Come over here! This fellow's got somethin' to say to you!"

The "Prince" came. The little ceremony was soon over. Then the game was resumed.

"Big Tim," Johnny whispered, "Even Big Tim is with us! What a wonderful town this is!" Then a thought struck him with the force of a blow. "If only I had the thought-camera I could take a picture of what's in those fellow's minds." He was away like the wind.

He was back in fifteen minutes, but the place where the strangers had been was vacant. "Gone!" he murmured as a wave of keen disappointment swept over him.

They were gone. But were they through? He doubted that. What would they do next? And why? There came no answer.

That was a red letter day for old Hillcrest. The gate receipts were wonderful. Never in the town's history had there been so many paid admissions to a ball game. This crowd had come to see a mysterious youth pitch a ball game. They

were not disappointed. The “Prince” lasted the whole nine innings. After the episode of Big Tim Murphy and the strangers, he pitched like one inspired. In the remaining innings only six men got on base and none came home. The score at the end stood 12 to 1. Again the Hillcrest rooters went wild. Once more Johnny sighed deeply as he murmured, “Only one more game, and the pennant will be won.”

That game was still nearly two weeks off. When that game was played the Hillcrest team would be back from their airplane cruise.

“Will it be a triumphant return?” he asked himself. “Will they bring home the money needed to make the ball field truly our own?” He thought of the short dark man who had seemed so determined that Irons O should not be a success. He thought of the two strangers, of the Chinaman Tao Sing, and of the Federal agents. “In that time,” he told himself, “anything may happen, just anything at all.” And, as you shall see, many things did happen.

CHAPTER XVII
A NARROW ESCAPE

“Look, Meg!” Johnny’s voice was close to a whisper. “See those two slim fellows that seem to be just hanging around in front of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce?”

“Sure.” Meg’s eyes shone. “Who are they, Johnny?”

“Don’t matter just now.” Johnny’s tone was full of mystery. “I want you to do something for me. Those fellows are looking for a little Chinaman named Tao Sing. I want to know why. You ask them why for me, will you?”

“Sure, Johnny.” Meggy laughed. She thought he was joking. “And they’ll tell me just like that!”

“No.” Johnny was serious. “No, Meg, they won’t. They’ll not tell you, but they will tell me.”

“Tell you?” Meggy stared.

“Sure. You know when you ask a person about a thing, he is sure to *think* the answer. He may not say it, but he thinks it all the same. That’s enough. I’ll be lurking in the shadow of that pillar. I’ll get the answer.”

Meggy gave him a long slow look. “Johnny, you’re queer! But I’ll do it.”

“Good!” Johnny gripped her hand. “Go ahead. I’ll be near by.”

Two minutes later, in her finest inquisitive-little-girl tone of voice, Meggy said to one of the strangers who, as you have guessed, was a Federal agent, “Mister, I heard you were looking for Tao Sing.”

“Yes.” The slender young man started. “Do you know where he is?”

“N-no,” Meg drawled, “not just now, I don’t. But I—I just wondered why you wanted that innocent looking little fellow.”

The Federal agent favored Meg with a searching glance. “Well, sister—” he returned her drawl. “Truth is that Tao Sing has been teaching all the little Chinks to play marbles for keeps. We don’t think it’s right to play marbles for keeps. Do we, Joe?”

“That’s right. We don’t.” His partner chuckled.

“Aw, you just don’t want to tell me.” Meggy put on a good imitation of goo-goo eyes. “What’ll you give me to find him for you?”

“Find him?” The agent was serious again. “Plenty, sister! Good and plenty! A new dress, a silk one, or a bicycle—anything. Just you bring him around.”

“All right. I’ll try.” Meggy glided away.

“Johnny,” she whispered a moment later, “did you get it? Did you read his thoughts?”

“Perhaps I did,” Johnny replied slowly. “And again, perhaps I didn’t.”

“Johnny, you’re queer.”

“Perhaps I am. Tell you what, Meg!” Johnny came to a sudden resolve. “Meet me at the heart of The Pines at eleven tomorrow morning. I’ll tell you a secret, Meg.”

“A secret?” Meggy thrilled. “How grand! I’ll be there, Johnny.” She vanished into the dark.

For days Johnny had been fairly bursting with his secret—the story of that strange and seemingly improbable, if not quite impossible, thing, the thought-camera. He could not bear to think of keeping that secret alone. He would tell Meggy.

Just now, however, a question was burning in his mind. Had he got a real picture

of the thoughts in that Federal agent's mind? Perhaps he should not have tried this. Perhaps it was his duty to walk right up to them and tell what he knew.

"May do that tomorrow," he told himself.

Of a sudden Johnny felt a wave of loneliness sweep over him. He sensed the reason at once. Early that morning a great silver airplane had come swooping down from the sky. It had gathered up the Hillcrest ball players, Doug Danby, Fred Frame and all the rest. Goggles and Hop Horner had stored the steel-fingered mechanical pitcher in the wings of the plane, then had climbed into the cabin with the others.

"I don't see the little dark man with you," Johnny had laughed. "The one you know who took such an interest in Irons O."

"No, you wouldn't," Goggles bantered. "We've stowed Irons O away with the baggage in the wings."

"All the same," Johnny advised, "keep an eye out for him, and don't take any wooden quarters at the gate. Goodbye and good luck!"

These last words had fairly stuck in his throat. How he wanted to join them on that trip! But that was impossible.

"Probably be exciting enough right here in old Hillcrest," he now told himself philosophically. He was not wrong.

He had turned his steps toward home when the many-colored lights from the windows of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce fell upon his eye.

"I'll just go in and have one more shot at that rich and wise old Wung Lu," he told himself. "May be more to his thoughts than appears on the outside."

He entered the big room just as he had done many times before. He found the rich and wise one sitting, as was his custom during the evening hours, contemplating the fat and smiling Buddha that stood against the wall.

Tonight, as he crept into a corner, Johnny thought there was in the smile of the Buddha something crafty and dangerous. This, of course, was pure imagination. The Buddha, which had been carved from the trunk of a great tree many

centuries ago, had never been known to utter a word.

Johnny did not care so much for the Buddha. Banners and dragons interested him more. He liked to think of small Chinese ladies working over the banners that hung on the walls—days, months, perhaps years, drawing marvelous pictures in silk, stitch by stitch. “Every banner says something,” Wung Lu had told him once. Tonight, as he sat staring at a blue and white banner, Johnny was seized with a desire to know its meaning.

“Pardon me, Mr. Wung Lu,” he broke in upon the wise one’s meditations at last, “what does that banner say?”

“It says, my son,” replied the Chinese merchant soberly, “that he who gets knowledge and discovers secrets by hard labor shall reap a reward, but he who obtains them some easy way will have cause for regret!”

Johnny started and stared. Did Wung Lu know of the thought-camera? Was this some sort of warning? He could not so much as guess the answer, for Wung Lu’s round face was as silent and expressionless as a placid lake at sunset.

The thought disturbed him. Soon he excused himself and started for home. While still in Chinatown, passing a narrow alley, he was startled by two dark figures leaping at him from the dark. Johnny was quick. He could run and dodge like a hare. This was his golden opportunity. Dodging to the right, he missed the two figures only by inches, caught a glimpse of their tense yellow faces, then shot away at a desperate pace.

He would soon have outdistanced them but for one thing. So startled was he that he at once lost his direction. Before he realized it, with his pursuers hot on his tracks, he found himself in a blind corner. The street, ending in a wall, closed him in.

“Got—got to get out of here,” he thought with a touch of despair.

The steel frame of a building in process of erection loomed above him. Before him, erected to keep onlookers out, was a high board fence.

One thing saved him. A large sign, POST NO BILLS, had been nailed to this wall. More than an inch thick, the frame about this sign offered a precarious hand and foot hold. He went up and over like a cat.

There were, however, others with climbing ability. Before he could catch his breath and ask himself, “What can they want?” the foremost of the men was atop the fence.

Before Johnny was the steel framework of the new building. So, up he went, one story, two, three, with the little yellow men only one jump behind. At the top was a swinging crane. From it a long chain dangled. Across a narrow space, not fifteen feet away, was the roof of a building. “Get the chain swinging,” he thought excitedly. “Swing over. Jump.”

At once the chain began to swing. His pursuer’s hoarse breathing came to him as he let go and swung out over space.

A breath-taking second over a hard pavement, and he dropped, still clinging to the chain, safely upon the roof at the other side.

Wrapping the chain about a flagpole, without turning to look back, he disappeared among the chimneys at the top of the broad apartment building.

Ten minutes later, still breathing hard, he entered his own home and went at once to his room.

“I’d give a lot to know what they wanted,” he thought soberly. “But that’s one time when the old thought-camera didn’t help a bit.”

After a full hour of serious thinking he decided on a very definite course of action which, he assured himself, should be begun on the very next day.

He had decided to confide all his secrets to someone older and he believed, much wiser than himself. This, we have reason to believe, is a wise course of action for any boy who finds himself bewildered by the strange circumstances that surround his life.

“But first I’ll keep my promise to Meg,” he assured himself before he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII
THE FLYING BALL TEAM

At the heart of The Pines next morning, Johnny found Meg seated on a log waiting. This spot, so quiet and secluded, disturbed only by the chirp of a robin and the chatter of a squirrel, held for them many pleasant memories. Here, as small children, they had tumbled on the grass. Here, in early ’teens, together with other playmates, they had done cart wheels and wild, hilarious Indian dances. Now it was a sober-faced, eager Meggy who awaited him.

“Johnny,” she exclaimed with a little catch of breath, “what are you going to tell me?”

“That you helped me a lot last night, that I can find out anything that any person is thinking, and that at this moment I’m scared stiff.” With a heavy sigh Johnny dropped to a place beside her.

“Why, Johnny?” She gripped his arm. “Why are you frightened?”

“It’s that Chinaman, Tao Sing! There’s a tong war, and I’m in the midst of it—or at least I’m likely to be. But then—” Johnny checked this wild flow of words. “I’d better start at the beginning. It all began when that little Chinaman loaned me that thought-camera.”

“Thought-camera!” Meggy stared.

“I—I’ll tell you all about it.” So, seated there in the sun with only a robin and a squirrel, as he supposed, listening in, he told Meg the amazing story of Tao Sing’s great invention and some of its startling revelations.

“And last night,” he said, pausing to catch his breath, “last night I squinted the thought-camera first at the Federal agent, and then at that wise old owl Wung Lu up there in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Then, after I’d been chased and

almost captured by some wild-eyed Chinks, I sneaked along home to develop those last think-o-graphs. And what do you suppose the thoughts of that Federal agent told me?"

"What?" Meggy's breath came quick.

"That a Chinese tong war has started with half a hundred Chinamen carrying big blue pistols, and any one of these ready to start popping at any moment, and—"

Johnny broke off abruptly. "What was that?"

"What?" Meggy was all aquiver.

"Something back in the pines."

Johnny sprang back into the pine boughs. He found nothing. "Perhaps it was a squirrel," he said quietly when he returned.

"So now you see," he whispered, "I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea. The thought-camera belongs to Tao Sing. He loaned it to me. I should return it. But where is he? A tong war is a terrible thing. It's a fight between two Chinese secret societies. If it gets going right, several people will be killed. On the Pacific coast two Chinamen have been killed. The thing is spreading. Tao Sing is at the bottom of it all. He's in this country without permission. These two Federal agents know he's been here—found his finger-prints at the back of the Chinese spice shop. Perhaps someone has told them I know about Tao Sing—I'm not sure. Someone *does* know I have the thought-camera, or at least they think I have. That's why I was chased last night. I'm sure of it." Johnny mopped his brow. "I—I suppose I helped Tao Sing discover secrets. Probably when I brought him Wung Lu's think-o-graphs he read what he wanted to know.

"Meggy," Johnny said solemnly, "there's no good in stealing anyone else's thoughts! This thought-camera! I'd like to give it back right now. But I can't. Tao Sing has vanished."

"Johnny, let me see it," Meg whispered.

Johnny drew the thought-camera from beneath his coat. Meg looked at it, starry-eyed as she might had she seen a ghost. "Johnny, where do you keep it?"

“In my trunk.”

“In your room?”

“In my room.”

“Well,” said Meg, shaking herself as if to waken from a bad dream, “it’s the strangest thing I ever heard of. It—

“There!” Her voice dropped. “I heard something back there!”

“Come on!” Johnny shuddered. “This place is haunted today.”

Together they hurried away through the pines and were soon upon the sunlit streets of old Hillcrest.

In the meantime the “Flying Ball Team,” as someone had aptly named it, had arrived at its first destination, and things were doing.

They arrived an hour before sundown, after a thrilling ride high in air, at the little city of Cannon Ball on the wheat-growing Dakota prairies.

The moment their plane came to a standstill, they were surrounded by a crowd of boys, shouting: “Where is he? Where is he? Show him to us!”

“Where’s who?” Doug asked with a smile.

For reply one boy held up a crumpled handbill on which had been pictured a grotesque mechanical man with sparks shooting from his finger tips and flames of fire pouring from his nostrils. Beneath were the words:

IRONS O, THE STEEL-FINGERED PITCHER WHO LIVES ON FIRE. SEE HIM PERFORM AT THE BALL FIELD TOMORROW!

At sight of this, Doug felt his knees sag. “Somebody,” he grumbled, “has been over-playing the thing. And now if we fail! Man! Oh man!”

“Where is he? Where is he?” the boys were still shouting. “Show him to us.”

“He goes to bed an hour before sundown.” Doug chuckled in spite of himself.

“He’s asleep in one of the plane’s wings now. You can’t see him until tomorrow.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” came in a disappointed chorus.

“It’s a good place to leave him,” Sheeley the pilot whispered to Doug. “Nothing like a little secrecy to make people keen for a thing.”

“But will he be safe there?” Doug’s brow wrinkled.

“Sure! Oh sure!” Sheeley assured him. “In a place like this, I roll up in my blankets and sleep on the cabin floor.”

So Doug and Goggles wandered away from the town to have a look at the glorious rolling prairies. Lit up as they were by the slanting rays of the setting sun, they offered the boys a view that time would never erase from their memories.

“Think of it!” said Doug, “tomorrow the wheat country; the next day the cattle country; then the gold-mining city. After that Spokane, and then the Pacific coast!”

“Don’t be too sure.” Goggles’ tone was a bit gloomy. “If we fail tomorrow, this place is our only destination.”

“You’re tired,” Doug said reassuringly. “You’ll feel better tomorrow.” He did; but not for long.

The fame of the mechanical pitcher who, with his steel fingers, could pitch a curve like a flesh and blood man, had spread afar in this land of golden grain. This was a slack period for wheat farmers. They began pouring in before noon.

“You have such a crowd as that there ball ground never saw before!” a tall, lanky lad in a ten gallon hat assured Goggles. You might believe this would stir up in the boy’s mind a feeling of joy. Instead, it made him feel shivery all over.

“We’ve got to be careful,” he said to Hop Horner. “Every crowd’s a mob. You can never tell what it’s going to do when things go sort of queer.”

“Everything’s going to be O.K.,” Hop said coolly.

The appointed hour arrived at last. Never had the boys from the quiet little city of Hillcrest seen such a crowd, and never had they looked upon such a sea of sun-tanned faces.

Irons O had been carried secretly to the grounds in a covered truck. Assembled within the shelter of the truck, he was then assisted with much ceremony and shouting to his place in the pitcher's box. Solemnly the Hillcrest boys took their places in the field.

"The zero hour has arrived," Goggles muttered to Hop. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Game! Game!" shouted a group of high school boys in a corner. "We want baseball! We want baseball!"

"Hey, Mister!" a small boy in the front row squeaked. "Make him spit fire, will ye?" Everyone laughed.

Only one person sat staring in silence. That was Doug Danby. Sitting alone in the bleachers, he had caught sight of a vaguely familiar face. At this moment he was staring at the person in open-mouthed astonishment. "How did he get there? How could he?" he was asking himself.

"But perhaps I'm wrong," he hopefully reassured himself. Something told him he was not. A voice seemed to whisper in his ear, "You're in for it, all right. That is really the same little dark man who caused you so much trouble at home—"

As for the little dark man himself, he sat staring at Irons O, and on his face was a look hard to describe. It was a look in which was mingled hate, contempt and triumph.

"Play ball!" the umpire roared. He was a western man of the old school. "Play ball!"

Goggles threw a switch. He pressed a button. With a circular sweep of his ludicrous head and a broad grin, Irons O lifted his good right arm; then, to Goggles' utter dismay, swung it around three times instead of once, to at last discharge the ball in the manner of a cannon. The batter and the catcher both saw the action and dodged, each in good time. Quite unembarrassed by the wire screen behind the catcher, the ball went right on through to lose itself on the

boundless prairies of the Dakotas. The crowd let out a terrible roar. But Goggles murmured weakly, “Something’s gone wrong again at the very start.”

CHAPTER XIX
A REVELATION IN CHINESE

That something had surely gone wrong with Irons O, the mechanical pitcher, there could be no doubt. After making a hasty adjustment, Goggles and Hop Horner gave him a second ball and one more chance. This time his behavior was worse than ever. Swinging his arm about in a circle four times, he sent the ball speeding over the catcher's head, on over the low screen netting, and away into the blue.

"Strike!" a big voice roared from the crowd. This was greeted with a wild scream of merriment.

"Our first stop on the grand tour!" Goggles groaned once more. "A failure here, and we're through." In his mind he saw the baseball grounds of his home town deserted on Saturday, but crowded to over-flowing on Sunday afternoons. He heard wild shouts disturbing the sober citizens' rest, saw autos full of pleasure seekers, shouting through the town. Then he muttered low: "We must not fail!"

"Hop!" he exclaimed, "There's someone back of all this trouble. I'm going to find out who it is."

For ten minutes both he and Hop worked feverishly, their trembling fingers serving them badly, when a quiet voice from behind them said: "Take your time, boys. Don't get excited. You are hoping to entertain a quiet peace-loving and patient people. They will not fail you." The speaker was a little man in steel-rimmed spectacles and a long black coat.

"An old-fashioned minister," Goggles thought, swallowing hard to keep back tears. "God bless him! Everyone here loves him, I'm sure."

The man went on talking slowly, quietly, reassuringly. "These Dakota farmers

plant wheat. If the hail does not beat it down, if a prairie fire does not destroy it, if a drought does not dry it up—they get a good crop. If there is no crop, they plant again next year. They are patient. They can wait now, and they will."

It is strange what confidence such quiet assurance can inspire in a boy's mind. Five minutes had not passed before the boys had things adjusted and old Irons O was ready to pitch a perfect game.

The boys from the wheat belt put up a game defense, but they were no match for the Hillcrest team and their steel-fingered pitcher. At the end of the game the score stood 14 to 8 in Hillcrest's favor.

"Well, you won!" Dave Tobin, who had come along as financial manager, exclaimed enthusiastically. "And say! You should see the wad of bills I have for the ball grounds at home!"

"Yes," Goggles thought a trifle wearily, "we won." Truth is, he was not thinking of this at all. Instead, he was asking himself, "How is it that Irons O gets his insides all mixed up before every game?"

"Mr. Sheeley," he said a half hour later, "our mechanical pitcher got all mussed up while he was inside one of your wings." (He always thought of the planes as wings.)

"How could it?" Sheeley was incredulous. "Locked up tight all the time. And I'm the only one that has a key. Fine lock too!"

"All the same," the boy thought to himself, "I'd like to ride to our next stop right there in that wing.

"But of course it wouldn't do," he thought a moment later. "Fantastic sort of notion. Sheeley wouldn't like it. And yet—'mystery wings.'" He whispered these two last words.

"We get a different crowd next time," Doug said. He had just come up. "Cattle men. Cowboys. Do you suppose they are a patient lot too?"

"Hope they won't need to be," Goggles smiled. "Cowboys! Well, you don't think of them as a quiet sort of people. Whirling over the prairie shouting enough to split your ears—that's my notion of them."

“Say,” Doug asked in a low tone, “who do you suppose I saw in the crowd?”

“Who?”

“The little dark man.”

“What! How’d he get here? Where is he now?”

“He’s vanished. Been looking all over for him.”

“Wonder what it means?” said Goggles. “Wonder if he’ll be at the next place?”

“Mystery wings!” he murmured once more as he hurried away. Why did he say that? Perhaps he himself could not have told.

That same afternoon Johnny took his secret regarding the thought-camera to good old Professor George. He did not tell him all he knew, not nearly all, but enough to, in a way, outline the problem. What he really wished to know was, just how much right he had to keep such a secret.

“That, I suppose,” the old man replied thoughtfully, “is a question you will have to decide for yourself. Secret knowledge is rather strange. What your rights are in regard to it has never been decided; that is, when the law does not come in. Of course, if it’s a question of someone breaking the law, then your duty’s clear. You’ve got to tell.”

Johnny started.

The old professor was very wise. “And Johnny—” he leaned forward quite suddenly. “Seems to me this affair between the two Chinamen needs looking into. Why should Tao Sing wish to know what Wung Lu is thinking? Does he want to profit by Wung Lu’s wisdom? Well, perhaps—if it has to do with buying and selling, making money. But pure wisdom, the wisdom of ancient Chinese scholars? Never a bit of it. It’s all written down where he can read it if he chooses to do so. I doubt if you have a right to carry Wung Lu’s thoughts to Tao Sing.”

“I—I’ve been wondering,” Johnny said uneasily.

Again the professor had spoken more truth than he guessed.

“You’ve got the think-o-graphs you made last night,” Professor George said quite suddenly, “the one you took of Wung Lu’s thoughts?”

“Why yes. I—”

“Let’s take it to Captain Gallagher.”

“To—to the police?” Johnny stared. “He couldn’t read it. It’s all in Chinese.”

“He has an interpreter who can. He’s to be trusted. I know him,” the professor replied calmly.

“We-l-l,” Johnny said slowly. Go to the police? He had asked this old man in to help clear things up. It looked now as if they were more tangled than ever.

Their visit to the police station had the most astonishing results. When the think-o-graph of Wung Lu’s thoughts had been placed under the magnifying lens, the tiny mechanism started, and when the Chinese police interpreter was told to look into the microscope-like affair and watch the words go by, the result was most startling. At first he just stood there squinting into the glass. Then of a sudden he let out a wild howl and went dancing around the room as if he had been stung by a bee.

Johnny stopped the mechanism and waited. When at last the interpreter had regained proper control of himself, he stepped to his place once more. But not for long.

Leaping into the air he let out one more wild howl, began calling out all sorts of strange Oriental names and would have bolted out of the door had not Chief Gallagher blocked the door.

Seizing the interpreter by the arm, the Chief dragged him into his private office and closed the door.

For a full quarter of an hour only the low rumble of voices from the inner room disturbed the silence of the police station.

When the Chief and his interpreter returned the Chinaman appeared a shade

paler, but seemed quite calm.

“Chief,” (Johnny had been thinking hard during that fifteen minute conference), “perhaps I should tell you, there’s a pair of Federal agents hanging around. I—I think they’re working on this.”

“As if I didn’t know!” the Chief exclaimed. “Fact is, we’re working with ’em hand in hand. That’s where I got a lot of my information. But Johnny!” His voice rumbled. “There’s no harm in givin’ the local police a break. Is there now?”

“Not a bit of harm.” Johnny grinned happily. He liked the Chief. Long years ago the Chief had saved him from a terrible beating by some older boys.

The Chief signaled Johnny to start the mechanism once more. The interpreter took his place and saw the thing through to the end.

“Johnny,” said the Chief, “do you think you could get one more of these—er—what is it you call ’em?”

“Think-o-graphs,” Johnny grinned, “of Wung Lu? Well, if—if it seems to be my duty.” Johnny shuddered slightly. “But not at night.”

“Any time you say.” The Chief’s face was sober. “It’s very important. I don’t mind telling you that you may have prevented a tragedy.”

“A—a tragedy. Yes,” Johnny replied quietly, “I had sort of guessed that. You wouldn’t mind telling me just a little, would you?” he asked timidly.

“Well now,” the Chief smiled, “if I don’t you will be turnin’ that mind readin’ machine on me an’ then there’s no tellin’ what you’d be findin’ out.

“I’ll tell you this much.” His voice dropped to a mere whisper. “You’ve heard of these Chinese secret societies called tongs? Well, it has to do with that. Your old friend Wung Lu belongs to a tong. He’s done somethin’ that’s displeasin’ to another tong. Probably nothin’ illegal, just short tradin’ or somethin’. So they’ve decided to get him out of their way.”

“Sho—shoot him?” Johnny stared. This had never occurred to him as a possibility.

“Somethin’ like that. Queer part is,” the Chief rumbled, “Wung Lu knows all about it but he won’t tell. They’re like a lot of boys, these Orientals. Just go about settlin’ their own affairs. But this is too serious to let them settle. We know the men we want and we’ve got to go get ’em. One of ’em’s this wrinkle-faced little fellow Tao Sing. He an’ his pals are in the United States illegally. We’ll just send ’em back where they came from—if we can catch ’em. And that,” the Chief ended, “is about all I can tell you just now.”

“All,” Johnny whispered to himself as he lay in his bed that night. “It’s enough to make a fellow’s head whirl.”

CHAPTER XX
ETHER AND MOTH-BALLS

“For once old Irons O is fit as a fiddle.” Goggles heaved a sigh of relief. Hours had passed. They had gone sweeping high above the prairies, had tilted the nose of their plane upward and had gone roaring over the Rockies. Now here they were in the little cattle-country city of Broken Bow, ready for the second game of their unusual tour.

The city was not marvelous but the crowd, the boy thought with a thrill and a shudder, was immense and rather terrifying. Banked in rows to the right of the narrow bleachers were hundreds of cowboys. They had not dismounted, but were seated easily in saddle, awaiting the opening of the game.

“Nothing’s wrong this time!” Hop Horner agreed. “But just to make sure, we’ll put a few over the plate.” He called to the catcher. Goggles set the levers, placed a ball between the steel fingers, then pushed a button.

“Never behaved better!” was Hop’s pronouncement after five minutes of practice that set the crowd to staring.

“Better give him a little gas before we start,” Goggles suggested.

“Right!” Hop took up a gallon can and poured half its contents into the small tank concealed in the iron pitcher’s back.

“Whew! What’s that queer smell!” Goggles exclaimed as Hop set the can on the ground.

“Something drifting in on the wind,” Hop said quietly. “Sort of smells like a hospital.”

“Bad sign!” Goggles laughed. He was more right than he thought.

Ten minutes later the teams were all ready to go. Goggles set the levers and threw the switch. From somewhere within the iron pitcher's strange being came an unaccustomed sound. "Don't breathe right." The boy was a trifle startled. "And look, he's really spouting fire from his iron nostrils. Some—something's gone wrong again! And we thought nothing could!" He was ready to give up in despair.

Hop threw off the controls, unbolted the back plate and started a careful inspection. He took plenty of time, testing out every wire.

"I tell you there's nothing wrong," he muttered.

All this had kept the crowd waiting and it was growing impatient. There were shouts of "Play ball! Play ball!" from every corner.

"What's to be done?" Goggles groaned. "The crowd will be on the field in a minute. But we can't let old Irons O burn up."

"Look! They're coming! At least one is." Hop pointed to a huge cowboy riding toward them.

"Well!" Goggles sighed, "We—"

"Look Buddy!" The big cowboy's tone was deep and mellow. "Do you all plan to play a ball game with that iron thing this afternoon?"

"We—we mean to."

"And this ain't no trick to git our money?" The big man looked him squarely in the eyes.

"It is not!" Goggles returned his look. "If the game doesn't start in twenty minutes, you'll all get your money back."

"Fair enough!" The big man wheeled about and rode away.

"Hop!" Goggles said suddenly, "Do you suppose it's the gas?" Seizing the gallon can, he removed the cap and, holding it up, took one big sniff of its contents. Next instant both boy and can went tumbling to the earth.

Goggles was down for only the count of ten. He came up sputtering. “Ether! Ether and moth-balls! Someone has loaded up our can. Drain the tank. Throw that can away. Get some real gas, then we’re off.” And they were!

“Ether and moth-balls!” Sheeley the air pilot chuckled to Goggles a half hour later. “That’s a rare combination. Load a flivver up with that stuff and it’ll think it’s a Rolls Royce or an airplane right off.”

“Wonder who could have done that?” Goggles said thoughtfully.

As for the game, from that time on it was a huge success. Never had the boys and their iron pitcher received such a hand. Nor did Irons O lose any of his popularity when, for some unknown reason, he got a trifle wild, gave two bases on balls, let in a runner with a wild pitch, and finally lost the game 9 to 7.

“You’re real sports!” the big cowboy complimented Doug and Goggles later that evening. “You came all this way in a big airplane to play our boys a ball game, then you give ’em a break and let ’em win.”

“We didn’t *let* them win,” Goggles said quite frankly. “They just took it.

“Of course,” he added with a smile, “even an iron pitcher has his off days. Old soup-bone gets tired don’t you know.”

“You’re all right!” The big fellow grinned broadly. “Wish you all sorts of good luck!”

“Luck!” Goggles said to Hop. “That’s what I’m going to need, for sure as my name’s Goggles I’m going to ride to the next stop inside one of those wings of mystery, right along with our old iron pal.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Hop stared.

“Why not? Plenty of room. Safe there as anywhere.”

That was all there was said about it, but when they took off a few hours later, Goggles did not occupy his accustomed seat in the airplane cabin.

Pilot Sheeley had offered no objection to the boy’s plan of riding inside the airplane’s wing. “You won’t find it very exciting. It’ll be a bit bumpy. You won’t

be able to see a thing, and we'll be passing over some gorgeous country."

"May see enough!" the boy replied. "Someone has been tampering with our iron man—done it three times. I'm going to find out how and why."

He recalled his own words as, lying flat along the inside of the plane, he felt the throb of motors and knew they were on their way. "I wonder if I shall!" he whispered.

At the back of him were the parts of the steel-fingered pitcher. Before him, and on the other side of the trapdoor through which he had crawled, was a large roll of canvas. "Probably used for covering the motors in severe weather when there is no hangar near," he thought.

What did he expect as he lay there feeling the lift and drop of the plane as she swung along through the air? He hardly knew. He suspected that somehow, someone had a means of getting into the plane after the ship was on the ground.

Whatever he expected, he had not long to wait, for all of a sudden as he stared at that roll of canvas, a head appeared above it. A small figure dragged itself over the canvas into the space before it. The boy barely escaped uttering an audible gasp. It was the little dark man.

That night as he slept in his second-story bedroom of his grandfather's house, Johnny was troubled by strange dreams. He seemed to be riding on a limitless sea in a cockle-shell of a boat. The wind began to whisper across the small waves. It blew a whiff of air into his face. Then, with astonishing speed, it rose into a gale, driving damp spray against his cheek, and set his frail bark rocking perilously. The little craft climbed a wave, another, and yet another. It rose, then seeming to rear on high, came splashing down to dive, prow foremost, into the foam.

It was just as Johnny caught his breath, prepared to withstand this chilling plunge, that he awoke.

For a full moment, quite bewildered, he stared about him. At last, shaking himself, he murmured, "There was no storm. It was a dream. I am in my grandfather's house."

Then with a sudden start, he sat up wide awake and staring. It was true there was

no storm and no sea. For all that, the wind was blowing strongly into his window. “It’s wide open!” His bare feet hit the floor. “And I left it open only a crack!”

Leaping to the window, he looked down. “Ah! I thought so!” A tall ladder leaned against the house. It reached his window. Whirling about, he looked where his trunk had been.

“Gone!” he muttered. “My trunk’s gone!”

He had not thought of that as a possibility. Now he realized how absurdly easy it had been. His trunk was small—an old army locker. The window was large. “What could be easier?” he whispered.

Slipping on his trousers, he crept down the stairs and out on the dew-drenched grass.

In a shadowy spot at the back of the house he found the trunk. The frail lock had been pried up. The thought-camera and his entire collection of think-o-graphs were gone. “As if they had never been,” he murmured.

Shouldering his trunk, he climbed the ladder and slid it back into his room. After that he carried the ladder to its place on some hooks against the wood-shed.

“Fellow’s foolish to keep a ladder outside his house,” he grumbled. “Invites thieves.”

For all that, as he tiptoed back up the stairs, he experienced a surprising sense of relief. The thought-camera, he supposed, was gone for good, and with it a great deal of his responsibility in the matter.

CHAPTER XXI
LIQUID AIR—ALMOST

In the wing of the airplane, sailing high above the western prairies, Goggles was in a tight place. He had never been in a tighter one and never expected to be in the future, if indeed there was to be a future.

Just what had he expected when he crawled into that narrow place? Certainly not this. Perhaps he had hoped that someone would unlock the trap door after they landed. Then he would catch him. But now, as he thought all this, and his head went into a whirl, the little dark man looked up and saw him. For one full minute he did not speak or move; only his beady eyes bored into the boy's very soul.

"So you're here!" he said at last. "Don't you think I did a good enough job messing things up? Well then, you and the Big Shot are agreed. But what's he want?"

"I don't know." Goggles spoke slowly. He was thinking hard. He was, as we have said, in a tight enough place surely. Securely sealed up in a duramen tube a half mile in air with no means of communicating with his friends and with this enemy staring him in the face, his situation was anything but pleasant.

"Why do you want to spoil things for us?" he asked in as quiet a tone as he could command.

"I—why, now I don't." The little man laughed mirthlessly. "I'm paid to do it. I do what I'm paid to do."

All this time the boy was thinking, "I've got to get the better of him. I must do it. But how?"

He moved a little. Something poked into his side. What was that? Oh yes, he remembered. A bottle! A sudden desperate plan came to him.

“Well,” he spoke slowly, “as long as we’re here, we may as well talk about something. Let’s make it liquid air.”

“Air ain’t no liquid,” the little man protested.

“Sometimes it is.” Goggles’ courage was growing. “You can make it liquid by putting it under very high pressure and getting it down to 216 degrees below zero. When it gets into liquid form you may keep it in a bottle for three or four days.” At this point he pulled the flat bottle from his pocket. It was half filled with a pale liquid. The little man stared at the bottle. “Liquid air is strange stuff,” Goggles went on. “It’s cold, colder than the North Pole. Put a fresh rose in it for a second, take it out and you can pinch it into a powder. Put a steel clock spring in it, take it out and it will snap like glass. Stick your finger in a bottle of it and I’ll break it off like an icicle.” He thrust the bottle out before him. The little man seemed to shrink back.

The boy’s tone did not change. He might have been a professor lecturing to a class. “Yes, liquid air is strange. I could pour it over my hand, or even put it in my mouth and, providing I got rid of it at once, it would not harm me. One minute of holding a spoonful in my mouth would mean death.

“If I were to pour even a small amount down your neck—” (he drew himself forward ever so little), “which I could—I’m strong. Much stronger than you think. I have strong fingers and arms. If I poured a quarter of a bottle down your back you would die. No one would guess what killed you. The liquid air would turn to gas and there you’d be. You—”

A strange look of terror came into the little man’s eyes as he cried in a shrill high-pitched voice, “You let me be! Don’t touch me! I’ll leave at the next stop, and you’ll never see me again. So help me, you won’t!”

Goggles settled back in his place. As he did so, his right hand was closed about the bottle, carefully concealing a printed label.

After that the big bi-motored plane with its flying baseball team in its cabin and that curious cargo in its wings sped across the land. Not once did Goggles relinquish his hold on that magic bottle. From time to time the little dark man spoke. His words were always in the nature of a confession. He had been hired by Big Bill Tyson to break up this trip. He had not been told why—he had only been paid to do it. He knew about locks. Locks had always been easy for him.

He had a key to the lock on the door to this place. How? Well, that did not matter. He hadn't succeeded in breaking up the cruise. Now he was going to quit.

"Yes," he said, rolling his eyes horribly as he took one more look at the magic bottle, "yes, I'm going to quit! Just let me out of this place and you'll never see me again."

"If he only knew!" Goggles thought with an inward shudder. "If he knew, I wonder what would happen?"

Ah, well, he had this little dark fellow within his power, that was enough. So the plane sped on.

Never in all his life had the boy experienced such a sense of relief as, after the plane had bumped on some landing field, then gone gliding along to a stop, he saw the little dark man slip like a snake through the small door and disappear.

He grinned a broad grin as he dropped the flat bottle back into his pocket. "Lucky break!" he murmured. "Wonder if Sheeley missed it?"

"Old Irons O will do his full duty at this place," he assured Doug as he came out to meet him.

"Are you sure of that?" Doug was still in doubt.

"Sure as anything. But just to make it a cinch, ask one of the boys to watch this plane while I go for a cup of coffee. I'm starved."

The guard was arranged for at once. As the two boys hurried away, Goggles pulled a bottle out of his pocket. "Just read the label on that, will you?" he said. "I packed my glasses in my bag by mistake."

"Sure!" Doug took the bottle. "It says, 'Dr. Jordan's Face Lotion. Good for sun-burned and chapped skin.'"

"It's good for more than that—sometimes," Goggles chuckled.

"What do you mean by that?" Doug demanded.

"Tell you sometime," Goggles chuckled again. "Belongs to Sheeley, that bottle

does. He left it in his room by mistake. I brought it along, and I—I'm glad I did.

"Do you know," he said after a while, "it pays to know a little about a great many things. If you get sort of—well sort of shut off from the world with someone else, you've always got something to talk about. Take liquid air for instance. There's a grand little topic for conversation."

"Huh? Yes, I suppose so," Doug grunted. He was already lost to the world in his contemplation of that day's game.

He need have had no fear for that ball game. Never had Irons O performed so well as on this day. Not only did he pitch a big league type of game, allowing only seven hits and no runs, but he kept the crowd in an uproar of laughter with his bobbing head, his ludicrous grimaces, and his wild-cat screams at the umpire.

"A perfect day!" was Goggles' enthusiastic comment when it was over. "And the little dark man kept his word. He was not about."

He had not, however, seen the last of the little dark man—not quite. As, hopeful of receiving a letter from his mother, he hurried into the post-office, he ran squarely into him. "See here!" he exclaimed, "I thought—"

Ignoring his thoughts, the little dark man waved a telegram in his face. "From the Big Shot!" he exclaimed. "You know, him that's paid me. He says for me to quit! He says that! Can you beat it?" At that, he darted from the door and was lost to the boy's sight forever—or at least for a very, very long time.

"Big Bill's called him off," Goggles thought. "That's sure good news. But I wonder why?" He was to wonder this many times in the days that were to come and then, in the end, was to know the answer.

Who can describe the joy of those days? Seeing the world from an airplane—Salt Lake City, Spokane with her magnificent falls, the green timbered Cascade Mountains, and then Seattle and the Pacific—all this came to them. To play ball with the finest sort of fellows from ranches, saw mills, canning factories, all entertained and amused by the perfectly behaved Irons O—all this was joy indeed. But to know that this joyous excursion was fast driving away clouds of doubt and fear, to know that the big payment on the home ball grounds was fast being collected—this indeed brought deep, satisfying and lasting joy to the weary boys.

One day, after a long drive with his grandfather, Johnny Thompson wandered down to the deserted baseball field to sit in the bleachers in the sun. Meggy spied him from afar, and came tripping down to take a place beside him.

“They’ll be back soon,” Meggy said.

“Yes,” Johnny agreed dreamily. “Their trip has been a success. The ball ground is safe. What’s better still, old Professor George told me this morning that Big Bill Tyson had turned over a new leaf. He’s going to give us a deed for the land as soon as the four thousand dollars is paid.”

“Johnny! That’s wonderful!” Meggy cried. “But Johnny! What made him change?”

“Don’t know,” Johnny replied. “Guess each man in the world has just so much capacity for meanness, same as a barrel will hold only so much water. Bill must have reached his limit.”

“Johnny—” Meggy suddenly changed the subject. “Did they ever find that little Chinaman and the thought-camera?”

“Tao Sing?” Johnny said soberly. “No, not yet I guess. But then,” he added, “you couldn’t very well prove he took that camera and the think-o-graphs. What I figure is that someone heard us talking there in the heart of the pines that day, then came and got ’em that night.”

For a time after that, there was silence. It was Meggy who spoke at last:

“The boys will have to be back soon. The last big game is next Saturday—the final battle for the pennant. Johnny, do you think the ‘Prince’ will pitch?”

“Your thought is as good as mine,” Johnny smiled.

“Isn’t he mysterious!” Meggy thrilled as of old.

“You don’t know the half of it, Meg.” Johnny chuckled. “Know what?” he exploded in a sudden burst of confidence, “That fellow isn’t brown! He never came from India. He’s as white as you or I!”

“Whi—white? How could he be?”

“His face and arms are dyed. I saw him pull up his sock, back there in the laboratories. You just wait and see!”

“Mystery—sweet mystery,” Meggy whispered after a time.

A moment more, and she was off on another tack. “Johnny, do you think those two terrible men will come back to bother the—the ‘Prince’ if he does pitch?”

“If they do—” Johnny stood up. “If they dare, we—we’ll give them plenty! We —”

“Listen!” Meggy sprang to her feet. “An airplane! And see! Over there. A big silver ship! The boys are coming home!” She dragged at Johnny’s arm. They were away like a flash, ready to celebrate the heroes’ return.

CHAPTER XXII
THE SMOKE SCREEN

“I have a feeling—sort of dread—” Doug Danby’s voice dropped. “I believe they’ll try that trick of theirs again today—those two fellows who go after the ‘Prince’—in a different plane. If they do, then—” he did not finish. His voice trailed off.

“And I too have a feeling—” there was a suggestion of hidden knowledge in Johnny Thompson’s voice. “I have a feeling that if those two ill-wishers, who’ve been trying to break up our game every time the ‘Prince’ is on the mound, try any tricks today, they’ll get fooled!”

He cocked his head on one side as he murmured, “Wind’s in the west, what wind there is. Not much of any. Cloudy and damp. Just right, I’d say.”

“Just right for what?” Doug was curious.

“Don’t ask me. Just wait.” Johnny lapsed into silence.

Doug waited, and as he waited he thought. They were long, long thoughts, I assure you. The opening hour for the last game of the season was approaching. Today the championship of the series was to be decided. The crowd exceeded that of any preceding game. Excitement ran high.

Meggy Strawn, garbed in her brightest and best, was already on the sidelines, ready to lead in the cheering. Little wonder that chills and thrills coursed through her. Was this not the greatest day old Hillcrest had ever known? Had not the four thousand dollars been paid in full? Was not the ball park their very own—theirs to have and to hold for many a year? Yea! Yea! And yet there was mystery in the air.

“Something will happen today.” One might hear this whisper in many a corner.

“Something strange, perhaps something quite terrible will happen.”

“Would it?” Meg wondered.

In the meantime, on foot, by train, by auto, the crowd continued to pour in.

“All paid attendance.” Old Professor George rubbed his hands together. “You boys are doing wonders! Hurray for old Hillcrest!”

“Yes!” Doug was truly happy. “But we must win today, Professor. We truly must!”

But would they? Centralia, the opposing team, their ancient rival, was first up to bat. As the mysterious “Prince” strolled out upon the diamond a strange hush fell over the assembled throng.

There were those in that crowd who had said quite boldly that this mystery should not be allowed to continue, that the pitcher should reveal his true identity or stay out of the game. “Only evil people wish to hide their identity,” this was their argument.

So, with the “Prince” in the box, the game began. For three innings he pitched a faultless game. Only two men found their way to first base. They “died” there, Hillcrest scored twice. Hopes ran high. Even Johnny Thompson, sitting on the bench and expecting almost anything, began to smile.

And then, out of the west came a gray streak.

Just as he expected, as on that other day the airplane began to circle. Down it came, lower and lower.

The “Prince” did not glance up. “But he knows,” Johnny whispered. “He’s—he’s beginning to break from the strain.”

Surely this must be true. “Men on first and second; only one out!” Johnny groaned. “They—they’ll make it. Sure to. And then—”

But what was this? A fire? To the west, hardly three blocks away, a dense column of smoke appeared. Rising higher and higher in the all but quiet sky, it at last drifted slowly over the ball grounds. So dense was it that it cast a deep

shadow over all.

“Hurray!” Johnny sprang to his feet. “Hurray! That beats ’em!”

This, considering the “Prince” had just walked a man, filling the bases, seemed sheer madness.

“They’ll think I’m out of my head,” was Johnny’s second thought as he sank back into his place.

That Johnny was right was soon enough demonstrated. Seeming to find fresh power flowing through his veins, the mysterious pitcher stiffened his pace. The two men who came up next got three pitches each. They fanned the air. The inning was over.

“We arranged to put up a smoke screen,” Johnny whispered to Meggy. “Set a lot of old tar paper on fire. That checkmated those fellows in the airplane. They couldn’t see through it, nor—nor do anything else!”

“But Johnny! Who’s in that plane?”

“You’ll know tonight, per—perhaps,” was Johnny’s reply.

Three times the airplane circled. Three times a pillar of smoke rose to meet it.

“That airplane is from River Forest,” Big Bill Tyson said to Colonel Chamberlain. “Hate to take you away from the game; but if we’re to be there when they land, we’d better be travelin’.”

Three minutes later a long gray car shot away to the east. In it rode Big Bill and Colonel Chamberlain. Big Bill was at last truly interested in the boys of his city.

Johnny saw them leave the field. He knew why they were going, and smiled.

The boy who received the greatest surprise, however, was Fred Frame, the one-time star pitcher. As the team came in for its turn at bat, Doug Danby sidled over to him at the end of the sixth inning and said in a low tone:

“You are to pitch next inning.”

“Why! What?” Fred’s brain whirled. Was he to finish this last game? Score 2 to 0 in Hillcrest’s favor! The championship at stake! He to pitch! He could not understand.

Nor was he to know more save that the “Prince,” a trifle more stooped than usual, but walking with a firm, proud tread, was leaving the grounds.

Slowly a buzz like the swarming of bees sounded through the crowd. Then all was still.

It was well that Fred did not come up to bat that inning. He surely would have fanned.

As at last he stood in the pitcher’s box, he found above him a cloudless, smokeless sky where no airplane soared and circled.

“Think I’m small fry!” he muttered. “Not worth bothering with! I’ll show ’em!”

The seventh and eighth innings passed without a score on either side.

In the ninth, two Centralia men fanned. The game seemed over. Then came a two-bagger, followed by a single that brought in a run. By taking wild chances, the runner on first base stole second, then third. So there it was, last inning, two men down and the tying run on third.

Wildly Fred’s eyes searched the crowd for the familiar figure of the “Prince.”

“He’s gone,” a voice seemed to whisper. “You may never see him again. Perhaps he is no real person at all—just a sort of imaginary being. It’s up to you, and you alone!”

Then the catcher gave him a signal. For such a time as this, it seemed a piece of madness, that signal. But Fred was desperate. He took the chance.

Winding up, he sent the ball spinning. It was a wild throw—a perfect wild throw, if wild throws you want. By one mad leap the catcher was able to knock it down. Even so, he did not stop it. It went on rolling. He was after it in a mad scramble.

Shooting down the course came the tying run.

But not so fast! Francisco the catcher had the ball. He was on the home plate. The runner turned to dash back. He all but fell into Fred's arms. And Fred had the ball. Francisco had passed it back to him.

This mad play, so cleverly planned and executed, had won! The game was over. Hillcrest was champion!

The crowd went wild. Seizing Fred, they tossed him to their shoulders, shouting: "Hurray for Fred! Hurray for Fred!" He tried to shout, "The 'Prince'!" but his cries were drowned by a roar.

It was an interesting group that gathered in Colonel Chamberlain's office two hours later. There was Johnny and Goggles, Fred Frame and Meggy. Besides these there was Big Bill Tyson and close beside him, grim and sullen, sat the two strangers who had caused so much trouble. There was too a tall, slightly stooped young man. At first the boys stared at him in wondering silence. "Who is he? Who can he be?" they whispered.

"I see you do not recognize a friend," Colonel Chamberlain smiled. "I am surprised.

"This—" he paused to smile once more. "This is your old friend J., the one you have called the 'Prince.' Today, for the first time, he is able to remove the dye that might have concealed his identity from some people."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" came as in one breath.

"And now," the Colonel said, turning to J., "perhaps you will tell them your story. Only," he warned, "be brief. There's a big feast of real good things to eat in store for us after it is told. Tonight the business men of Hillcrest are giving a banquet to all the boys who have fought so bravely for the honor of their city."

"Tell us! Tell us!" they all pleaded.

"I shall be glad to," the "Prince" replied.

"You see," he began, "I've always been fascinated with chemistry. My native home is in Europe. Three years ago I was allowed to enter another country as a student. At once I was successful with my chemistry. Men said I had made some remarkable discoveries.

“Well,” he sighed, “success brings enemies. There are those who wished to possess my secrets.

“The part of that strange country I was in,” he went on after a period of silence, “was disputed territory. In time it became known that it was to be controlled entirely by this nation that was not friendly to my native land. This meant that I must leave. Many men came to me demanding to know my scientific secrets, which—pardon my pride—were very valuable.

“I refused. They threatened to have me sent to prison. I defied them and finally, with my secret formula hidden away in my garments, I escaped to America.

“But they followed, still threatening me. I put on that disguise, which has deceived some. Unfortunately it did not deceive all. So tonight I am removing it. Tonight I have taken out my first papers as an American citizen. Soon I shall belong to your wonderful country.”

“Good! Good! Fine! Wonderful!” came from the throats of his hearers.

Only two were silent—the two strangers.

“And you!” The “Prince” made a dramatic gesture. “Why do you still persecute me?” He had turned upon the silent pair.

“I think,” said the Colonel when the men did not reply, “it is because of greed and a deplorable race hatred. You need not, however, fear them any longer. They have done enough to send them to prison.”

“This,” the “Prince” exclaimed, “I do not wish! Only that they shall pledge themselves never to disturb me again.”

“Very well,” said the Colonel, “you shall be the judge.”

He turned upon the strangers. “Do you promise?”

“Yes, yes sir. We do!” was the answer.

“Very well. You may go.”

“Any other questions?” The Colonel turned to his young guests.

“I—I’d like to know what happened that day when the—the ‘Prince’ was obliged to leave the pitcher’s box,” said Meggy, “that first day.”

“That—” Johnny sprang up, “let me try to explain that.”

He held out a long tube with a very bright inside, also a small battery and two small bottles of powder. “You put the two powders in the tube, then touch them off with the battery. This makes a blinding flash that may be directed like the shot of a gun at any single individual. That’s what they did to the ‘Prince’ from the airplane,” he explained rapidly.

“What I can’t understand,” he went on in a puzzled tone, “is why it should spoil your game.” He turned toward the “Prince.”

“I will explain,” said the “Prince.” “I once was in a terrible chemical explosion. My sight was saved only as a sort of miracle. Since then, a flash of light half blinds me for hours. These men, knowing this, invented that instrument of torture. So now,” he added, smiling, “you know.”

“But why did you leave the game today?” Meggy asked.

“Oh that!” The “Prince” smiled a rare smile. “That was a case of *noblesse oblige*. The team was yours. The game yours too. How could I, a stranger, truly win it when that plucky boy of yours had tried so nobly? It was a duty of honor.”

“That—” Johnny’s eyes were dimmed. “That’s what I call sporting!

“One more question!” Johnny was on his feet. “This may seem strange, but ‘Prince,’ were you ever in prison in America?”

“No.” The “Prince” smiled a strange smile. “I have not had the honor.”

“Just one of my bum guesses,” Johnny thought to himself. He was thinking of the story told to him by that air pilot.

“And now,” said the Colonel, springing to his feet, “I call you all to a banquet.”

The banquet was all that anyone could ask, but, as for Johnny Thompson, his mind was on other things. As he was hurrying to this meeting, Chief Gallagher had called to him: “Come in and see me as soon as you can. I’ve got something

big to tell you."

"It has to do with the little Chinaman Tao Sing and the thought-camera," Johnny assured himself more than once. As soon as he could, he was away to the Chief's office.

"You're right the very first time, Johnny," the Chief laughed when Johnny hazarded a guess. "We caught up with that little Chink this afternoon. He and two others were tryin' to make a getaway in an airplane. Guess they didn't savvy that plane. Anyway, that plane didn't get far. Those Chinamen had parachutes. They landed safely. Our men picked them up. Plane came down in flames.

"Queer part—" he rumbled, "that little fellow wanted to jump right into the flaming wreck. Said he wanted to save something—only one in the world. Man that made it was dead—all that stuff.

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, "my men wouldn't let him commit suicide that way. He'll go back to China with those other fellows. The tong war is over."

"That thing he wanted to save," said Johnny soberly, "must have been the thought-camera. And I—you know I'm sort of glad it's gone and that there are no more in the world. For you know—it's no fun at all to take pictures of other people's thoughts. And to have other people taking pictures of yours—why that would be simply terrible!"

"Yes," the Captain said with a laugh. "It sure would be!"

Johnny enjoyed a few peaceful days in Hillcrest. After that he was off for fresh adventure. If you wish to know of these adventures look for our new book, *Red Dynamite*.

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