

A Mystery Story For Boys

The **Firebug**

Roy J. Snell

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The Firebug

Mystery Stories for Boys

The Firebug

By
ROY J. SNELL

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THE FIREBUG

CHAPTER I

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

It was midnight. The room in which Johnny Thompson sat was a place of odd noises and strange flashes of light. Here in the corner a tick-ticking was followed by a yellow light that curved upward, over, then down; upward, over and down again. A gong sounded from overhead. A shadowy form moved across the floor. Instantly came the clatter of a score of instruments sounding as one and a score of yellow lights curved up, over and down; up, over and down again. After that a voice said:

“Cross and Fifty-fifth Streets. The Arlington Flats. The Arlington Flats. Cross and Fifty-fifth Streets.”

There followed twenty seconds of silence; then in a hollow tone, as if coming from the heart of a tree, there sounded the repeated words:

“Cross and Fifty-fifth Streets. The Arlington Flats. Cross and Fifty-fifth Streets.” Then again there was silence.

All this while, on a great board above and before him, Johnny saw a hundred and fifty glowing spots of light. The spots of light seemed like eyes—red, white and green eyes that stared and blinked at him. Even as he looked, two of them blinked out—a red one and a white one.

As he read the meaning of those extinguished lights he again caught the click-click from the corner and saw again the yellow light shoot up and over and down.

This time, however, he heard a voice from another corner say:

“Johnny, that’s one of yours. School at Fourteenth and Van Buren.”

With one bound Johnny was out of his chair and across the room. The next second found him aboard an elevator, dropping through space. Ten seconds from the time the alarm had sounded he was in a long, low built, powerful car, speeding westward.

It would have been difficult to guess Johnny’s age as he sat erect in the car which the city’s Fire Chief drove like mad. He might have been in his late teens. His small stature suggested that. He might have been twenty-two; his blue fireman’s uniform with its brass buttons would have seemed to prove this. But for all his uniform Johnny was not a fireman. The Chief had a very special reason for allowing him to wear that uniform.

For a week, night and day, Johnny had haunted the room he had just left. During all that time the powerful red car had waited below, parked outside the door.

That room of many odd noises and strange lights was the central fire station of a great city. Every fire alarm turned in night or day in this city of three million people came to this central station. The tickers told of fire-box calls. The telephone was ever ready for the call of some woman who had upset her grease can on the stove, or some person who had discovered a blaze coming from the sixteenth floor of a skyscraper. Tens of thousands of calls a year; yet this untiring ear, listening by day and night, hears and passes on every one. And it was in this central station that Johnny had waited so long. More than a thousand calls had come ticking and ringing in, yet he had turned a deaf ear to them all until the man at the phone had said quietly: “That’s one of yours. School at Fourteenth and Van Buren.” Then he had leaped to his duty. And now he was speeding westward.

Johnny was after a firebug. A firebug is a person who willfully sets fire to property, whether his own or another’s. They’re a desperate lot, these firebugs. Some are hired for a fee. Some work for themselves. All are bad, for who could be good who would willfully destroy that which cost men hundreds, perhaps thousands, of days of toil? Yet some are worse than others. Some burn for greed or gain, while others light the torch in the name of some mistaken idea of principle.

The firebug Johnny had been sent out to catch certainly had some strange bent to

his nature. Two schools, a recreation center and a bathhouse had been destroyed, and here was another school fire at night. And in all these fires the firebug had neither been seen nor traced.

The police, fire inspectors and insurance detectives were all on his trail, yet all were baffled. And now the Fire Chief had called Johnny to his aid. "For," he had said, "sometimes a youngster discovers things which we elders are blind to."

So, with their clanging gong waking echoes in the deserted midnight streets, they sped westward to Fourteenth, then southward. Before they had gone two blocks in this direction they caught the light of the fire against the sky.

"It's going to be a bad one," said the Chief, increasing his speed. "In the very heart of the poorest tenement section—have to turn in the second alarm at once. We can't afford to fool around with this one."

These words were scarcely out of his mouth when they reached the edge of a throng drawn there by the fire.

The car came to a sudden stop. The Chief sprang to a fire-box and instantly in that room Johnny had so recently left a ticker sounded and a yellow light rose up and over. The second alarm had been sent.

Ten seconds later, on the wall of that strange room, two red spots and two white ones blinked out, then one that was half red and half white, and then a green one. At the same instant three fire engines, three truck and ladder companies and an emergency squad made the night hideous with their clanging bells and screaming sirens. The second alarm had been heard. Reinforcements were on the way.

Johnny thrilled to it all. It was, he told himself, like a great battle; only instead of fighting fellow human beings, men were fighting the enemy of all—fire.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" rang up and down the streets.

In Johnny's whirling brain one fact remained fixed; this fire had been set. By whom? How? These were the questions he had pledged to answer.

To Johnny, battle with a fire was always fascinating and inspiring. He knew well enough how this one would be waged. The enemy was within, and must be rushed, beaten back, defeated. There were three entrances. These would be

stormed with men and water. There was a great central stairway to the very top of the six story building. The fire, if freed from the room in which it had its origin, would go leaping and laughing up those stairs. The top of the building must be reached at once. The poisonous fumes of the fire must be freed there and its flames beaten back. The roof might be reached from the fire escape. Already a line of rubber-coated men were toiling upward.

Ah yes, it was all very fascinating, but Johnny had his part to do. How had the fire started, and where? This he must discover if possible. One more thing; if the fire had been set, was the firebug still about the place? It is a well known fact that these men frequently linger about the scene of the fire.

“If he’s here mingling with the throng could I recognize him?”

As Johnny asked himself this question, he realized that the answer must almost certainly be “No.” And yet there was a chance. An expression of the face, a movement of muscles, might give the man away.

“But first the fire,” Johnny exclaimed as, leaping from the car, he sprang for the already battered down door of the front entrance. Gripping a hose that was being slowly dragged forward by the line of plucky firemen, he struggled forward with the rest. Beating back smoke and flames, they battled their way forward against the red enemy who even now might be seen leaping madly up the stairs.

Unaccustomed as he was to the smoky fumes, half suffocated, eyes smarting, Johnny found himself all but overcome; yet he fought his way forward.

When the line of firemen halted he battled his way to the side of the foremost man. To go farther would be foolhardy. He could but pause here to study with burning eyes the location of the fire, to imprint upon the cells of his brain a mental sketch of the building, then to back slowly away.

As he staggered blindly into the outer air he all but fell over a boy who, as boys will, had escaped the guard and was at the very door.

“See here,” said Johnny, collaring him.

“You leave me be,” said the boy, struggling to free himself.

“Tell me,” said Johnny, tightening his grip, “how did the fire start?”

“How’d I know?” Another yank.

“Where did it start?” A tighter grip.

“You could see if you had eyes.”

“Where?” with a shake.

“In the office, of course.”

“In the office, huh,” Johnny loosed his hold a trifle. “Come on back out of the way of the firemen.”

The boy obeyed reluctantly. The moment he was released he darted from sight.

“So much, so good,” Johnny murmured. “Only thing I can do now is to watch faces; see if I can spot the man or the woman. Lots of women firebugs they say, but not on a thing like this I guess. Takes a man to burn a school, and such a school, in such a place.”

Even as his gaze swept the circle he caught sight of hundreds of white, frightened faces peering from windows of rickety tenements—veritable tinder boxes waiting the red, hungry flames.

“And yet,” Johnny muttered, “poor as they are, they are homes, the best these people can afford. And this is their school, the hope of their children, the thing that promises to lift them to better places in the future. Who could have set a fire like that?”

The fire was gaining headway. It burned red from the fourth floor windows; sent partitions crashing dismally within and belched forth great showers of sparks from the roof.

Reinforcements were coming. Bells jangled, hose uncoiled on the hot pavement; a water screen from a dozen nozzles poured upon the steaming homes to the lee of the fire.

And all this time Johnny Thompson wandered back and forth in front of the line of staring and frightened men, women and children held back by a rope line hastily established by the police.

When his eyes were tired and he had told himself there was no hope of finding his man, he drifted wearily back through the line and into a small shop that stood open. There on the top of a barrel he sat down to think.

For a moment or two he was entirely unconscious of the other occupants of the room. When at last he cast a glance about him it was to give a great start that all but threw him from his seat.

Before him, staring out of the window at the fire, was one of the most peculiar men he had ever seen. An albino, men would have called him, yet of unmistakable white blood. His hair was white and soft as a baby's. His face was quite innocent of beard and, what startled Johnny most, the eyes of the man were pink as a white rabbit's. To accurately judge the age of such a man was impossible. Johnny told himself that the man might be twenty-five or he might be forty.

Most astonishing of all was the expression on the man's face. Johnny had seen just such an expression on the face of a boy when he had done something he thought of as extraordinarily clever. Even as Johnny looked at him the expression changed to one of fear and dismay.

"Look!" the man exclaimed. "A child! There at the window on the sixth floor!"

It was true. At a window, staring wild-eyed at the throng below her, was a girl of some twelve years.

"A child in the school house at midnight, and on the attic floor!" Johnny exclaimed. "What can it mean?"

The next instant his mind was on fire. Two thoughts fought for occupation of his brain. The child must be saved. All escape from within was shut off by flames; yet she must be saved; yes, she must be saved, and after that she must be questioned.

"It may be," he told himself, "that she knows something regarding the origin of the fire."

In this he was not entirely wrong.

CHAPTER II

A THRILLING RESCUE

It was a dramatic moment, such a moment as comes at times to the lives of firemen. Had the building been a tenement it would have been searched from cellar to garret; had it even been a business block, little less than this would have been done. But a school house! Who would have suspected it of housing a child at midnight?

Others in the throng had seen the child and now great shouts came up from the crowd that surged the line.

Coolly, methodically, as is the manner of those whose business it is to save lives, the firemen backed a ladder truck into position. After a speedy measurement with his eye, the Chief marked a spot sixteen feet from the building, and there the base of the ladder came to rest. Then, up, up, up, as if by magic, the ladder ascended in air. Not touching the building, but ever mounting, it reached the level of the third floor, the fourth floor, the fifth. A mighty shout arose when it came to the level of the window where the child, leaning far out, waved her slender arms in mute petition.

As yet the ladder was far out beyond her reach. A fireman must climb the ladder to bring her down. Johnny Thompson was no player to the grandstand, but a sudden thought had struck him and the next second had set him into action.

“If I go up—if I save her,” he thought to himself as he dashed for the ladder, “she will think of me as her friend. She’ll tell me all.”

“Here!” he exclaimed, reaching out a hand for the truck as the Chief was about to detail a man, “Let me go up.”

Had the Chief not known Johnny so well; had he not realized that the boy had lived all his life in such a manner as would fit himself for a moment like this; lived clean, grasped every opportunity for practice that makes a fellow active and physically fit, he would have pushed him aside—this was no moment for playing. But now, knowing Johnny as he did, he only rumbled:

“All right, Johnny.”

The next moment, agile as a monkey ascending the side of his cage, Johnny was leaping upward.

Through his mind, as he climbed, passed many shadowy questions. Was the ladder set right? Would it fall to position, or would it buckle to send him crashing to the pavement? Such a thing had happened; might happen now. Still he climbed. The slender reed-like ladder swayed as he climbed.

One story was passed, another, another, and yet another. Who was this girl? How had she come to be on the top floor of the school at such a time? Had she set the fire and then, frightened at her deed, fled to a place of hiding?

The ladder swayed more and more. Then, just as he reached the level of the fifth floor it swung slowly in and came to rest against the sixth floor window ledge.

“Oh! Ah!” Johnny sighed.

Less than a moment after that, with one arm about the child’s slender waist and with her arms about his neck, he found himself descending. Far below the crowd was shouting mad approval.

“Listen, little girl,” he said, talking in the girl’s ear that he might be heard above the hubub of the street, “where do you live?”

The child started, then stared up at the burning schoolhouse as if to say: “That’s my home.”

What she said was: “Not anywhere.”

“No home?” Johnny said in astonishment.

The girl nodded.

Johnny was nonplussed. Here was a new mystery, and there was no time to solve it. At last he was at the base of the ladder.

“Here, Tom,” he said to a stalwart fireman who sat at the wheel of the truck, “take care of this child. Don’t let her get out of your sight. She may be a valuable witness. I’ll be back soon. I want to look for—for a man.”

He dropped to the street where glowing and sputtering bits of wood floated on rivers of water.

The girl’s attention was instantly caught by a strange creature that rested on the fireman’s shoulder—a large monkey.

“That’s Jerry,” smiled Tom. “He’s our mascot. Came to us of his own free will. Tenement burned on the near west side. After everybody was out an’ the walls was totterin’ Jerry comes scamperin’ down a drain pipe, hopped on my shoulder, and he’s been there lot of times since. Nobody’s ever claimed him. He’s been with us three years, so I guess nobody ever will claim him.”

Sensing that the conversation was about him, the monkey evidently decided to show off a bit. Leaping from Tom’s shoulder, he made the towering ladder at a bound and was half way up before the child could let out her first scream of delight. Then, as the ladder began to double in upon itself, he raced down again, to at last make one mighty leap and land squarely in the girl’s lap.

In the meantime Johnny was fighting his way through the throng toward the store where he had seen the pink-eyed man.

The crowd was increasing. He made his way through it with great difficulty. Then, just as he reached the outer edge of it, there came a cry:

“Back! Back!”

Wedge in between a fat Jewish woman with a shawl over her head and a dark Italian with a bundle on his back, Johnny found himself carried backward, still backward, then to one side until a passage had been made.

Through this passage, like a young queen in a pageant, the girl he had rescued rode atop the truck. And by her side, important as a footman, rode Jerry, the monkey.

Hardly had the truck moved to a place of safety than again came the cry:

“Back! Back!”

Once more the crowd surged away from the fire. High time it was, too, for the brick walls, trembling like a tree before its fall, threatened to topple over and crush them.

For a long moment it stood tottering, then instead of pitching headlong into the street, it crumbled down like a melting mass of waxen blocks.

A wail rose from the crowd. Their school was gone. This was followed almost at once by a shout of joy. Their homes were saved, for were not a score of nozzles playing upon the crumbled, red-hot mass, reducing it to blackness and ashes?

Such was the burning of the Shelby School. Who had set this fire? Where was he now? These were Johnny Thompson’s problems. Unless they were speedily solved there was reason to believe that within a month, perhaps within a week, or even a day, other public buildings would be burned to a heap of smouldering ruins. Who was this firebug? What could his motives be?

He thought of the pink-eyed man and of that expression he had surprised on his face. He fought his way back to the store in which he had seen the man. The store was dark, the door locked.

“No use;” he told himself, “couldn’t find him in this crowd. Probably never see him again. Probably nothing to it, anyway. Some people are so constituted that they just naturally enjoy a catastrophe. They’d smile at the burning of their own home. Nero fiddled while Rome burned.”

In this he was partly wrong. He was destined to see this pink-eyed man again, again, and yet again; and always under the most unusual circumstances.

But now his thoughts turned to the child. She had said she had no home. How could that be? What did she know about the fire? Had she been in the building at the time it was set? That seemed probable. Could she answer important questions? That seemed probable, too. He must question her; not now, not here, but in some quiet place. She needed rest and probably food as well. Where should he take her? He had no relatives in the city. His own room would not do. The fire station would be too public and the little girl would be too greatly

alarmed to talk well there.

“Mazie,” he thought to himself, “Mazie will take us in.”

Ten minutes later, he and the girl were speeding toward the home of Mazie, the girl pal of Johnny’s boyhood days.

It was a very much surprised Mazie who at last answered Johnny’s repeated ringing of her bell, but when she saw it was Johnny who called she at once invited him to join her in the kitchen, the proper place to entertain a friend who calls at three in the morning in a grimy fireman’s uniform.

Mazie was a plump young lady. The bloom on her cheeks was as natural as the brown of her abundant hair. A sincere, honest, healthy girl she was—just the kind to be pal to a boy like Johnny.

“Mazie,” said Johnny as he entered the kitchen and sat down to watch her light the gas, “this is a little girl I found. I have a notion she’s hungry—are you?” he turned to the girl.

The girl nodded her head.

“What’s your name?”

“Tillie McFadden.”

It was a strange story that Tillie McFadden told over Mazie’s cold lunch and steaming cocoa. She truly had no home. Weeks before—she did not now how many—her mother had died. Neighbors had come in. They had talked of an orphan asylum for her. She had not known quite what that was, but it had frightened her. She ran away. A corner newstand man had allowed her to sell papers for him. With these few pennies she had bought food. For three nights she had slept on a bed of shavings in a barrel back of a crockery store.

Then, while prowling round a school house at night, she had discovered a basement window with a broken catch. She had climbed in and, having made her way to the upper story which was used as a gymnasium, had slept on wrestling mats. Since this was better than the barrel, like some stray kitten that has found its way out of the dark and the cold, she had made her home there.

“And now,” she exclaimed, her eyes growing suddenly wide with excitement, “it’s all burned up!”

“What time did you go to sleep to-night?” Johnny asked.

“I—I think I heard the tower clock strike eleven.”

“And were you up there all the time?”

“No, down in the office mostly.”

“The office?” Johnny leaned forward eagerly. That was where the fire had started.

“Yes.”

“What were you doing in the office?”

“Looking at picture books. Lots of them down there, and I could read by the light from the street lamp.”

“But didn’t you hear any sound; smell smoke or anything?”

“N—o,” the girl cast upon him a look of puzzled eagerness. It was plain that she wished to help all she could.

Further questioning revealed the fact that she had nothing more of importance to tell. The sound of fire gongs and sirens had wakened her. She had gone to the window to look down. Then, realizing her peril, she had dashed for the head of the stairs, only to find her way cut off by flames and smoke. She had returned to the window. The rest Johnny knew as well as she.

After the child had been put to sleep on a couch in the living room, Johnny and Mazie sat long by the kitchen table, talking. Johnny told of his new task and of his hopes of capturing the firebug.

“Of course,” he said, “the police and fire inspectors are working on it. They’ll probably solve the mystery first. I hope they solve it to-morrow. No one wants the city’s buildings burned and lives endangered by fire. But,” he sighed, “I’d like to be the lucky fellow.”

“I wish you might,” said Mazie loyally. “I—I wish I could help you. Oh, Johnny, can’t I? Couldn’t I come down and stay awhile in that strange central station where all the alarms come in? It must be fairly bewitching.”

“I guess there’d be no objection to that,” said Johnny thoughtfully. “As for your helping me, I’ll welcome all the help I can get. Looks like I was going to need it. Didn’t get a clue except—well, there was the pink-eyed man.”

“The pink-eyed man?” Mazie exclaimed in amazement. “Who was he?”

Johnny told her about the man in the store. “Probably not much to it,” he added at the end.

“But, Johnny,” said Mazie suddenly, “if Tillie was in the office until nearly eleven o’clock, how could the fire, which started near the office, have gotten going so strong before the firemen arrived? It takes some time to start a big blaze, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it must,” answered Johnny thoughtfully. “Doesn’t seem that the firebug could have accomplished it in an hour. It might have been—” he paused to consider—“it might have been set by a mechanism such as is sometimes used on a time bomb, but how could it have been gotten in during the day? Tell you what!” he exclaimed, “I’ll go back there as soon as the fire cools and look about in the ruins. That side of the wall fell outward. If a mechanism was used, its remains should still be there. I may discover something.”

He did go and he did discover something. At the time of this discovery the thing appeared insignificant, but Johnny’s motto was, “You never can tell,” and so he filed it away in his memory.

Mazie did go down to the central alarm station on the very next night, and that night there came in over the wires the thrilling third alarm.

CHAPTER III

THE FALSE ALARM

After receiving Mazie's assurance that the little waif of the schoolhouse would be properly cared for, Johnny went at once to his own room, where he caught ten winks before the sun was high.

After a hasty breakfast, he returned to the scene of the fire. He found heaps of charcoal and broken timbers smouldering beneath piles of brick, but fortune favored his search. The section of basement that had been directly beneath the office was entirely free from fire and bricks. He was soon busily poking round in the ashes.

"A mechanism"; he thought to himself, "a thing of wheels and a spring like an alarm clock is what I'm looking for—a thing that runs just so long, then starts something."

"But not necessarily so complicated," he thought a moment later as he recalled the story of a firebug who, having soaked a common wooden mouse trap with kerosene, had baited it carefully and had so attached a match to the spring of the trap that when a mouse sprang it the match would light. He had then set the trap at the bottom of a huge waste paper basket into which the papers and scraps from noon hour lunch boxes had been cast.

"Simple, but possibly effective," he said to himself. Then, almost humorously, he began keeping an eye out for the heat reddened wires of a mouse trap.

Not even these rewarded his search. Only the things common to a school office were to be found. Pencil ends, the remains of a pencil sharpener, metal backs to loose-leaf blank books, the charred remains of a telephone, blackened electric light fixtures and wires, wires, wires running everywhere.

“Nothing to be learned here,” he told himself.

Picking up the metal base of the telephone, he examined it idly. Then of a sudden he looked at it with a keen interest.

“That’s queer,” he muttered, “two sets of wires running from it, one heavier than the other. Wonder what that could mean. Trace ’em out.”

He did trace them out. He found that one pair, as the usual wires always do, led to a small pipe outside the wall. The other pair, fine and short, not more than fifteen feet long, ended in nothing at all—just broke off abruptly.

“Huh!” he mused, “that’s queer!”

“Not so queer after all, perhaps,” he added after a moment’s thought. “Most likely ran to a bell jack in another room. Then if the clerk or principal were working in that room and the phone rang, the bells would repeat the call. Nothing simpler than that. Nothing to it, after all.”

“But where’s the jack,” he thought again. “The box would burn, but there are fine coils on a spool inside. They wouldn’t burn; neither would the bells.”

A careful search brought no reward. If there had been a bell jack the metal parts had vanished. This puzzled Johnny but he placed little importance on the circumstance.

“Doesn’t mean anything,” he muttered as he lifted himself up from the basement. “Just have to check this fire off as a complete loss, unless the discovery of that pink-eyed man means something. I may see him sometime. And then, of course, what Tillie McFadden told me about being in the office almost up to the time of the fire seems to show that the fire was arranged for in advance. But how? That’s the question. All I’ve got to say is, this firebug is no ordinary rascal. He’s a man of keen mind. He’ll be hard to catch.”

He took the car downtown. It was his intention to go to the central station and report to Chief McQueen, but as he was about to change cars he chanced to notice a head and a pair of shoulders ahead of him that looked familiar. At that moment the man turned his head. Johnny saw his eyes. They were pink. Somewhat unsteadily he dropped back in his seat.

His thoughts raced. The man was his pink-eyed stranger of the night before. What should he do? Call a policeman? This thought was instantly abandoned. A man could scarcely be arrested for the look on his face, and that was really all he had seen amiss in the man. Follow him? If possible, learn something of his haunts? That was better. He'd do that.

Scarcely had he settled back comfortably in his seat than the man pressed the button, then rose to get off. Johnny followed.

Once off the car the man struck directly across the street, walked a half block, then turned to the right. He was now at the river. He went down a narrow, dirty sort of boat landing that skirted the river. Johnny could not follow here without being noticed, so, walking out on the bridge, he kept a watch from the corner of his eye.

About a block from the street the man turned again, this time to vanish. He had entered a door.

After carefully counting first the windows, then the doors in that block, then noting the type of building the man had entered, Johnny left the bridge to follow the street. Then, after turning the corner, he came up to the front of the building the man had entered.

Before that building he paused. "That's it," he murmured. "Funny sort of place to be going into."

The place did seem strange. It was a store front, but the room on the street had not been used for months. The dust was so thick on the windows that one could discern objects within only as through a fog. The doorway was littered with heaps of dirty bits of paper deposited there by the wind.

"Been a commission merchant's place sometime," was Johnny's mental comment as he caught a glimpse of dust blackened banana crates within. "Ships brought in produce and landed it at the back. Business didn't thrive. Too far east on this street."

"Well," he sighed, "guess that's about all for this time. Won't forget the place, though, nor Mister Pink-Eyes either," and with that he turned and headed for the central fire station.

“Johnny,” said the Chief as they sat in his office that afternoon, “I hope you realize the importance of the work you are attempting to do.”

“I hope so too,” said Johnny.

“You’re not a detective, Johnny. Your work is more that of an inspector. An inspector looks into the cause of fires and tries to prevent them. Man’s best friend, and worst enemy, is fire. It’s a case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The Mr. Hyde side of fire is a heartless brute. We are constantly attempting to destroy that side of his nature. All men should be enlisted on our side. Unfortunately, all are not. Those who go over to the enemy must be treated as enemies. They must be captured and imprisoned. There are times when I think the worst of them should be shot.

“It’s not the loss of property that’s the worst of it, but the loss of human life. And life, Johnny,” the inspector laid a hand on Johnny’s knee, “human life is the most precious thing in the world, and any man who has the slightest disregard for the ‘least of these’ isn’t fit to live. It would be better that a stone be tied about his neck and that he be cast into the midst of the sea. That’s what the Good Book says, Johnny, and it’s true, almighty true.”

“Coming up to the central alarm to-night?” he asked after a moment’s silence.

Johnny nodded.

“Good.”

“Going to bring a friend,” said Johnny, easily.

“Who?”

“A girl pal.”

“Girl?” The chief frowned.

“Wait till you know her,” grinned Johnny.

Eleven o’clock that night found Johnny and Mazie in the place of the central alarm. The Chief was there too and was as much pleased with Johnny’s choice of a pal as he might have been had Mazie been his own daughter.

As for Mazie, she was thrilled to the tips of her fingers by this place of ticking instruments, clanging gongs and leaping light.

“See those red, white and green spots of light up there?” said the Chief. “Well, those are located on the map of the city. They stand for fire stations. Red is for a fire engine, white for a hook and ladder company. If a spot is half red and half white it means that the station houses two companies, one engine and one hook and ladder. Green is for an emergency squad. When a fire alarm is sent in we know that certain companies will go out, say 12, 18 and 30. By moving plugs I darken their lights. We can tell by a glance at the map just how our forces stand.

“Fighting fires,” he smiled, “is just like directing forces in a war. It chances that I am commander-in-chief. I arrange my forces just as a great army commander does. If an alarm comes in, say from the stock yards, four companies, 5, 13, 23 and 40 go out at once. Their absence leaves a dark spot on the map.

“It proves to be a bad fire. The marshal sends in the second alarm. At once companies 7, 41, 63 and 70 go out. A broader spot is darkened. I am beginning to think of reinforcements. The fire spreads. The third alarm. Companies 16, 29, 86 and 94 go out. More darkness on the map. Time for reinforcements, for, should a new fire break out in that area, there would be no one to respond. At once I send out an order for 103, 109, 31 and 42 to move up to the positions previously occupied by 16, 29, 86, and 94.

“Oh, I tell you,” he enthused, “it is a wonderful war; not against one’s fellow, but a war against one of the manifestations of nature. It’s a clean fight, with no one’s blood on your hands when the battle’s won.

“The pity is,” his voice dropped to a low rumble, “that some of our fellow men go over from time to time to join the enemy. It’s a shame and a disgrace. It’s such traitors as these that are keeping Johnny and me awake nights now, as you know all too well,” he said turning to Mazie.

“Wha—what’s that?” exclaimed the girl.

A yellow light had leaped up, over and down, up, over and down. An instrument had begun to chatter.

“It’s the first alarm; close in,” said the Chief. “May be serious; may be only a false alarm.”

“Barney & Kuhl warehouse, 18th and Michigan,” the operator droned into the receiver, “18th and Michigan, the Barney & Kuhl warehouse.”

A moment later, like an echo, his message came back to him through the megaphone.

“That’s a big place. May be serious. I hope not, though. I——”

The chief’s speech was checked by the stutter of an instrument.

Leaping toward the instrument he seized the narrow white tape which, moving out from the instrument, was marked with red dots and dashes.

“The second alarm,” he murmured. “Looks bad. Marshal Neil signs. He’s one of our best. Companies 1, 17, 42, 71 and 98 go out on the call. That makes ten companies in all.

“Leaves a rather large area unprotected.” His brow wrinkled as he studied the broad dark spot on the map.

For a moment he stood there as if in deep thought. Then, to the operator:

“Finley, call 3, 10, 14, 21 and 104 to the positions of the companies just called out.”

Instantly there came the flash of a light, the clatter of instruments, and the thing was done. Well done, too, for a moment later, into the startled silence of the room, came the clatter of the third alarm.

“The third alarm. Five more companies. I must go!” exclaimed the Chief. “Will you go, Johnny? It may be your chance.”

“And Mazie?” asked Johnny.

“Crowd her in,” grumbled the Chief.

A moment later they were speeding southward.

Down deserted streets they sped, past groups of night prowlers, round corners, by slow-moving milk wagons, their gong ever clearing the way.

“Strange,” murmured the Chief, straining his eyes ahead. “Don’t see much smoke. No blaze. No blaze. Mighty queer.”

Then as they whirled around a corner the whole truth came to him in a flash. He had been tricked. Three alarms had been turned in; three, and every one of them a *false alarm!* The perpetrator knew what Marshal Neil signed. He knew the call. Before them, lined up for three blocks, was a red row of fire fighting trucks, but no fire.

“It’s a plot,” the Chief muttered through tight set teeth. “I wonder what it means?”

He had not long to wait, for the answer came quickly. This broad area had been cleared of fire fighting equipment that a clean break might be given to another blaze that had been set. Certainly this must be true, for even as they stood there wondering they heard the distant siren of a fire engine.

“It’s the reserves I called up!” the chief exclaimed. “Thank God for them. They have answered the alarm of the real fire. Soon we will all be on our way. Straight ahead!” he exclaimed to his driver.

The car shot ahead and in less than a moment they were amongst the throng of bewildered fire fighters.

“It’s a real fire and a bad one,” said the Chief two minutes later as they came for the first time that night in sight of a furnace-like glow.

CHAPTER IV

JERRY TO THE RESCUE

“That,” exclaimed the Chief, turning to Johnny, “is one of yours. It’s the old Garrity School.”

“That’s right,” Johnny answered. “It’s not a school now; sort of a social center for downtown folks. The fire starts in the office as usual.”

“Sure enough it does. You’re a wizard.”

“No need to be a wizard to tell that. This is the fourth fire on city property and every one started near the office. Time we were learning something from that one fact, something about how the fires are set. I dug up a bit of evidence in that last fire; couple of wires in——”

“You won’t learn much about this fire until it’s burned out,” broke in the Chief. “Look at her shooting toward the sky. That dirty trick they played us lost us time.” He leaped from the car and was at once in the midst of it, quietly issuing orders.

“Going to be bad,” he said to Marshal Neil. “If we save the Simons Building we’ll be in luck. Wind’s strong from the lake. It’s fireproof, but has no shutters. Full of furniture, new furniture. Burn like stove wood. Get all the lines you can spare playing on that side. Beat it back if you can.”

“Corigon,” he turned suddenly to the driver, “go send in another alarm. Call up the fire boat. She’s got twelve lines. It’s pretty far to the river, but she’ll do in an emergency.

“Neil, tell the boys to get up the fire tower. Clear the Simons Building. Not many

people in there, I guess. Some cleaners, though. Better be safe. She'll go fast if she goes."

There *were* people in the Simons Building; three at least—Johnny, Mazie and the pink-eyed man whom Johnny suspected of being the firebug. Johnny and Mazie had left the car and had been skirting the engines for a better look at the fire when Johnny had suddenly brought Mazie up with a shrill whisper:

"There he is!"

"Who?"

"The fire—the—the pink-eyed man."

"Where?"

"There. He's just crossing the street. I believe—yes, yes. C'mon."

In imminent danger of being run down by a fire engine, they darted across the street and into the Simons Building.

"You wait here in the corridor," whispered Johnny. "He went in. I saw him. Want to shadow him."

"No. I might lose you. I—I'll go along."

"C'mon, then."

On tiptoes they explored the corridors. Then, having found no sign of the man, and having come upon an unlocked stairway door, they started up.

There were no open doors at the second, third or fourth floors, nor at the fifth, nor sixth. Johnny had about decided to turn back when he discovered the seventh floor door stood ajar.

Tip-toeing silently forward, they entered the corridor, a long tunnel-like affair extending as far as they could see, both to the right and left, and lighted only by some small red lamps.

"Down this way. I heard him," Mazie whispered.

At that identical instant Johnny actually caught sight of a movement in the opposite direction. Without thinking that his companion would do other than follow, he tip-toed down the corridor.

The person, whoever he was, moved silently down the hall to at last suddenly disappear through a door or a side hall to the left. Stealthily Johnny followed on. As for Mazie, being actually confident of her discovery of the person and supposing as a matter of course that Johnny would follow her, she had gone tip-toeing in the opposite direction.

She had not gone a dozen paces when, on hearing a sound at her left, she found herself looking down a corridor darker than the first and which ran off at right angles to the one she was following.

By this time she had discovered that Johnny had vanished; but lured on by slight sounds and spurred forward by the tang of adventure, she followed on down this corridor, then turned into another one to the right, and after that a great way to the left again. When at last she came up square against a door at the end of this last corridor and found that there was no right nor left for her now, she began dimly to sense the fact that she was lost.

She did not realize this in all its fullness until she had started to retrace her steps. Then, to her consternation, she discovered three corridors running to the right.

“Three,” she whispered as her heart skipped a beat, “and which one was it that I came down?”

At that precise moment a fresh suggestion of horror set her knees trembling. Her delicate nostrils had detected smoke! There could be no doubt about it!

“The fire’s just across the street,” she thought, “and the wind is right this way. This building may be on fire at this very moment.”

Her only thought now was of escape. But what was the way out?

She thought of the door at the end of the hall.

“Probably opens on a stair,” she told herself.

It did, but the stair went up, not down. By this time, quite thoroughly frightened,

she took the up-going stairs. She had climbed three flights before she realized her folly. At that time she found herself at a door leading down the corridor.

“Follow it to a stairway that is open all the way down,” she told herself.

She had gone a hundred feet or more when light from a room attracted her attention.

There was, she found, no lamps lit in the room. The light entered through the window—the glow of the fire.

Impulsively she rushed to the window and threw up the sash. The sight that struck her eye staggered her like a blow upon the head. Dizzy depths below was the street where the struggling firemen toiled, and half way up to where she stood, and off a hundred or more feet to the right, her own building was belching forth flames.

“How—how am I ever to escape!” she breathed as she dropped limply by the window sill.

All this time Johnny Thompson had not been idle. The clue he followed had led him at last to a room that was open, and in that room he had found, not the man of the pink eyes, but an Italian cleaner waxing the floor. He at once warned the man to leave the building.

Chagrined at his failure to locate his man, he turned about to look for Mazie. Then, for the first time, he knew they were separated.

Realizing the danger of remaining in this building too long, he hastened back over his trail. Having come to the place where they had been separated, he made his way first to the right, then to the left. Calling her name, but receiving no reply, he wandered back and forth for some time. Then, catching the first faint sign of smoke, he hurried back to the head of the stairway and fairly flew down it. He was going for aid. A number of searchers might find her where one would fail.

Into the street, thronged now with firemen, laced and interlaced by lines of hose, soaked and slippery with water, for some time he found no one whom he could feel sure was in charge of men. At last he came upon Marshal Neil. The Marshal

was kindly, but inflexible.

“Men have been sent to warn workers out of the building,” he said. “Doubtless they will come upon the girl and bring her down. No others can be spared.”

Sick at heart, Johnny was about to retrace his steps and again enter the building when an exclamation from the man nearest him attracted his attention. The man was not a fireman. Johnny recognized him instantly as the cause of all his present trouble. It was the pink-eyed man. But, having followed the man’s upward glance, he saw that which drove all other thoughts out of his mind. There, in the tenth story window, waving her arms frantically, was Mazie.

What had happened? Simply this: As calmly as her wildly throbbing brain would permit her, Mazie had made her way down every corridor that suggested a possible exit. She had found only two. These two were blocked by smoke and fire. Her only hope of escape lay through that window; a window that was far above the reach of the tallest ladder.

Johnny was struck dumb. How was she to be saved?

“Why not send the monkey up?” calmly suggested the pink-eyed man.

Johnny stared at him blankly. What could the man mean? He must be a madman.

As Johnny thought of this the man began dragging a large ball of strong hempen twine from his pocket.

“Send him up with the end of this,” he said, as calmly as if he had been suggesting tying a parcel with it. At the same time he gave a sidewise nod toward Jerry, the monkey mascot of the hook and ladder company.

Instantly Johnny was at the side of the truck. Here was a chance, though a slim one.

“Did Jerry ever scale a wall?” he asked of the driver.

“Many’s the time. Guess he must’a belonged to an organ grinder.”

“Would he take the end of this to her?” asked Johnny, looking up at the window.

“Mebby. Then what?”

“We’d attach the lower end to a rope from the emergency wagon.”

“And then what?”

“She’d draw up the rope, attach it to something inside the room, and come on down.”

“Hand over hand?”

Johnny nodded.

“A girl?”

“Yes, a girl!” Johnny shouted fiercely. “She’s a girl, but not the soft kind. She’s got nerve, Mazie has. And when she was a kid she could climb a rope. I know. She was my pal. She’s not forgotten how. Question is, are you going to send Jerry up?”

“Sure I am.”

The driver climbed down from his wagon with alacrity, then working his way through the scorching heat to a place beneath the window, he looked up to the window where the girl was plainly visible, patted Jerry on the head, and said:

“See her up there? It’s roasted chestnuts and a box of chocolates fer you if you get up to her.”

With almost human intelligence the little creature took the cord firmly in his teeth and with a leap was away, scurrying up from window ledge to window ledge, making progress where even a squirrel would not have attempted to go.

Mazie, on her part, could not so much as guess what was going on below. She was trapped. They knew that. They would save her if it was humanly possible. She knew that, too. She had caught the bright gleam of the monkey’s cap as he was carried to the wall, but what could the monkey have to do with her rescue?

Strangely enough, in this moment of excitement and great danger, she felt a desire to sing. It often happens that way. And the songs that came to her mind

were songs of peace.

“I have a sweet peace that is calm as a river,” she sang softly.

And then:

“I tell Him all that troubles me,
I tell Him what amays;
And so we walk together,
My——”

Her song broke short off. Had she seen a vision? No, there it was again, Jerry’s jaunty red cap bobbing down there above a window, half way between her own window and the ground.

It was strange what a comfort she found in the company of such a small creature, for he truly was company. Was he not much closer to her than any other living thing? Even as she watched, the monkey drew nearer, leaping from ledge to ledge, climbing higher and higher.

Without in the least understanding what it all meant, Mazie found her heart in her mouth as the dauntless little creature, leaping from a window sill, caught a stone ledge with but one hand, balanced there for a second as if about to fall, and then threw himself with a fine show of skill to another and wider ledge where he might pause an instant for breath.

An instant only, then he was at it again, climbing, climbing. Clawing here, leaping there, swinging to a window, up—up—up, until at last, with a sigh of relief, the girl seized him and dragged him in.

The instant she saw the end of the string she understood and hope came ebbing back.

Not a second was to be lost. The fire, which was working toward the center of the building and up, was now only four windows to the right and five down. Had the building not been fireproof it would have burned like a torch. As it was, the fire, fed by the contents of offices and store-rooms, worked its way from room to room.

Rapidly she drew in the cord, and with it the rope attached to the end. When at last she held the end of the rope in her hand she carried it to a heavy table and wrapped it about the top. Then she dragged the table to the window.

At once the monkey, as if to show her the way, went scampering down the rope.

All this had taken time. When at last the girl, with a little prayer for protection on her lips, gripped the rope firmly and glanced down, she saw that fire had burst forth from the window two rows to her right and six stories down. Would the window directly beneath her soon be belching flames? Would it burn off the rope before she had reached the ground?

Panic seized her for an instant. Then, calmly, she finished the song she had begun a moment before:

“And so we walk together
My Lord and I.”

Then, calm as a May morning, she wrapped her feet about the rope and began the descent, hand over hand, right, left, right, left. It was painfully slow, but there was no other way. To slip was to come to a terrible death.

CHAPTER V

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH

The strain on Mazie's arms as she let herself down the rope which hung from the window of the burning building seemed greater than she could bear; but with the grim determination of near despair she worked her way down, hand over hand, hand over hand.

The palms of her hands burned like fire. In spite of her greatest efforts her hands slipped a little, an inch here, an inch there, and the effect of these slips was like the grasping of a red hot iron.

One window she passed in safety, another and another. As she reached the sill of the fourth her feet touched it. With a dizzy faintness she steadied herself there and looked down.

The sight that met her eyes was appalling. The window directly under her belched forth a sudden burst of red flame. Then, as the wind shifted, the flames were sucked in again. Was there hope in that? No. The rope had caught fire!

Clinging desperately to her place, she hoped for a clearer moment of consciousness—and was granted it.

Calmly she looked down. What was to be done? She dared not pass that window. A sudden burst of flame would destroy her. Besides, she could not. The rope was all but burned in two.

For a time, because of the smoke, she could not see below. Then of a sudden it cleared and she saw firemen ranged around a white circle directly under her.

“A net,” she breathed.

At the same instant she heard Johnny Thompson's booming voice:

"Go down the rope as far as you dare, then drop."

"Drop?" she echoed, "how can I?"

Then, as if to mock her, smoke shut off her view and in the center of the smoke were darting red flames.

"I can, and I will!" she breathed through tight set teeth. With hands that ached she gripped the rope and began once more that agonizing hand over hand descent.

Having gone as far as she dared, she dangled for ten seconds in midair. At that instant she caught the sound of Johnny's voice:

"It's all right, Mazie. Drop!"

He could not see her, but he knew she was there. A lump rose and stuck in her throat. Then, with a little upward swing of her feet, she let go.

It was all over in one wild instant. Smoke, fire, a mad rush, then a sudden springy shock, followed by an upward toss, a second bump, and then Johnny Thompson was helping her support herself on her unsteady feet.

"That," said Johnny, "was a very narrow squeak."

Hardly had Johnny led Mazie to the emergency wagon, where her hands were treated and bandaged, than his mind was once more at work on his problem—the origin of this fire and of all those other fires. It was not that he was unmindful of the welfare of his friend—Johnny was one of the best of friends—but the problem was assuming gigantic proportions. But for the fireproof building standing directly in its way, this very fire, Marshal Neil had assured him, would have swept across the city for a mile and would have left ten thousand homeless ones in its wake.

"The man who sets these fires," Johnny said to himself savagely, "has no heart, and no sense. What could be his motive? What could the city have done to him bad enough to deserve such a revenge? What could the people of the city have done? Somehow, somewhere, we must find him!"

He thought of the pink-eyed man. In the excitement of the rescue he had lost him. Nor could he find him now, though he searched diligently for an hour.

“I’ll visit his place down there by the river,” he told himself. “I may discover something there.”

He had given up the search and, having returned to Mazie’s side, was standing watching the firemen as they battled with the blaze which at last was giving way before them. Then he noticed a man within the lines who did not wear a fireman’s uniform.

“Queer looking chap,” he whispered to Mazie, pointing as he spoke.

The man did look queer. He was an extraordinarily tall man and stooped almost to the point of deformity. His nose was large and hooked like a beak. He limped slightly as he walked. His clothing fitted loosely. His stiff hat was dented in three places.

“See here, you!” said a policeman, stepping up to him, “you can’t stay inside the line.”

“Dot’s all right, mister.” The man showed his white teeth in a grin, but it wasn’t a pleasant grin.

“You’ll have to go outside the line.”

“Dot’s fair enough, mister.” The man moved away. As he passed Johnny and Mazie he shot them a piercing glance. Even after he had gone back to the line of staring spectators, Johnny felt that his gaze held something of hatred for him. What was the meaning of that look? How had the man gotten within the lines, where only firemen were allowed? What had he wanted there? He resolved to keep an eye out for that man in the future. It was well that he did—very well indeed.

After seeing the fire under control and putting Mazie in a taxi, Johnny went directly down to the river front. After following a narrow walk at the river’s brink for some little distance, he stopped to flatten himself against the wall close to the door.

“This is the place,” he whispered to himself.

The spot he occupied was completely in shadows. The night was dark. The uncertain light from the distant bridge lamps did not reach him. A person standing ten feet away could not have seen him. He was at the entrance to the building which he supposed to be occupied by the pink-eyed man. He had hurried to the place as rapidly as possible in the hope that the man was still out and that returning to his lair he might reveal something of himself.

As Johnny stood there in the shadows he could catch the gleam of reflected light on the surface of the river. The sight charmed him. A slow, deep, dirty, sullen sort of stream, was that river. Flowing between walls of brick, stone and cement, where once it had meandered across a great sweep of marshes, it seemed a prisoner chafing at his bonds.

As Johnny pictured the marshes, whose rushes had waved over the very spot where he now stood, he thought of other marshes south of the city where in hours of idleness, or at times when he wished to think unmolested, he at times poked a flat-bottomed boat down the narrow channels that ran between the rushes.

“It’s a great place to think things through,” he told himself. “If nothing comes of this I’ll go down there to-morrow afternoon.

“Yes, that’s what I’ll do. I’ll sleep till noon, then catch the twelve-thirty train out there.”

For an hour he waited there in the darkness. Then, growing restless, he gave up hope of the man’s return and decided to do a little investigating.

Drawing a small flashlight from his pocket he lighted his way down a narrow passage that lay between this building and the one next to it.

On this side, rather high up, he discovered a small, square window, but large enough to let a person through. Down the passage he saw two discarded packing boxes. Working silently, he put one box on the other, then climbed on top. He was now on a level with the window. Flashing his light on the panes, he found them too dirty to see through. Laying his flashlight on the top of the box, he tried the window and to his surprise found it unfastened. It swung in at his touch like a door on hinges. At the same moment he felt a slight movement at his knee, then heard a thud.

“My flashlight!” he grumbled. “Rolled off. Just have a feel inside anyway.”

Swinging his feet over the sill, he sat there for a moment thinking. Should he enter. If he did, what would he discover? Would he be in danger?

To his surprise he found that his feet touched something and without thinking much of what he was doing he stood up. The next instant, with a rolling and a crashing that was appalling, the whole world appeared to sink and go thundering down beneath him.

A moment later, his nostrils filled with dust and with something resting on his chest, he lay quite still and listened.

He caught a faint sound but concluded it was only scurrying wharf rats. After that the place was so quiet that he fancied he could hear the settling of the dust.

What had happened? What was this on his chest?

He laughed silently to himself as he put out a hand to touch it. A barrel—that was all it was, an empty barrel. He sensed what had happened in an instant. He had stood upon the top of a pyramid of empty barrels. The bottom of the pyramid had caved in and the whole heap had gone thundering, carrying Johnny along.

Two minutes later he was stealing out of the passage. He had had quite enough of that place for one night.

Three o'clock next day found him in the center of a marsh whose dark waving bullrushes stretched away for a mile or more in every direction. With his coat for a pillow he lay sprawled out the length of his flat bottomed boat. A pair of oars and long pole lay at his side. These would bring him back to shore when he chose to come. A cold leg of chicken, a swiss cheese sandwich, a piece of apple pie and a bottle of milk would appease hunger when hunger came. He was at peace with the world and quite prepared to solve all the problems of the universe with which he had anything definite to do.

It was a dreamy day. White clouds moved slowly across the sky. Cobwebs floated in air. Now and again a gentle breeze made a softly sighing sound in the rushes. Just as he was dreaming himself off into a cat nap a dark shadow passed over him, then broke suddenly into a hundred little shadows that were not

shadows at all.

Surprised by this phenomena, which he had felt rather than seen, he opened his eyes. What he saw was a large flock of black birds. Contrary to their usually noisy custom, as if to avoid disturbing the Sabbath quiet of the place, they settled every one upon a swaying bullrush without so much as a single “O-ka-lee.”

“Good old birds!” Johnny sighed. And well he might, for beyond doubt they had been directed there by the all seeing eye that they might, in a very short time, be instrumental in saving his life—or at least in giving him a fighting chance.

Knowing nothing of this, he settled back into his place and once more closed his eyes. These nights of fire chasing had cost him much sleep.

This time he had fallen quite asleep when, with a start, he found himself sitting bolt upright.

It was the action of the birds that had wakened him. With a shrill cry of alarm the birds had leaped from their swaying perches and had flown away.

“Now I wonder—” Johnny murmured to himself.

He was given scarcely ten seconds to wonder, for of a sudden a shot rang out and a bullet whizzed so close to his cheek that he felt the sting of it.

“That was meant for me!” Johnny breathed tensely.

The next instant he lay flat on his back, his trembling hands gripping the pole.

“Got to get out of here,” he thought. “Got to get out quick, and got to do it lying down.”

Even as the pole silently touched the water, then sank to grip the bottom, he speculated on his chance of escape. He was unarmed. At times he had brought a shot gun to the marsh. Not to-day. There were no ducks—to early in the season.

“Only chance is to lose him,” was his mental comment as he drove the boat forward into the channel. At the same time he felt an almost uncontrollable desire to see the face of the man who had fired the shot. He had a notion that were he an artist he could paint the man’s picture, even though he did not see

him. In this he probably was mistaken.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK SHACK

As Johnny gave the pole at the side of the boat a vigorous shove, then another and another, he found no time for thoughts other than directing the silent maneuvering of his clumsy bark. A prod or two on this side, then as the boat swung to the right the same number of pokes on the other side, and he moved silently down the narrow channel. A division in the narrow course was greeted with delight. If the man who had fired that shot was following he could not follow both channels at once.

“That gives me a fifty-fifty chance of escape,” Johnny thought as he chose the right fork.

It is hard work, this poling a boat while lying flat on one’s back. Johnny found himself perspiring at every pore. Yet he persevered, and his perseverance was rewarded for, as he moved slowly forward, he came to a place where the channel was cut squarely across by another.

“A four corners,” he rejoiced. “I might go straight ahead, or to the right or left. The natural thing to do would be to turn right, so I go left.”

Skilfully he maneuvered the turn and went gliding down the new channel.

Ten minutes later, still lying on his back and looking up at the clouds, he lifted his pole without a sound into the boat and then allowed himself time to think matters through.

Who was this intruder upon his privacy; this would-be killer? What had been his motive? Was he connected with the firebug affair? It would seem so, for in this city Johnny had not gone against the wishes of anyone save that firebug.

“Well, old boy,” he whispered, setting his teeth tight, “you’ll not get me, and what’s more, give me time and I’ll bring your dishonorable occupation to a sudden halt. See if I don’t!”

For a time after that he lay there looking up at the slow moving clouds, but they brought him no peace. He was annoyed at the situation that had so suddenly presented itself. He had come here to think things through; yet how does one dare to engage in an all absorbing chain of thought when at any moment some form of craft may come gliding in upon him and—bam! his head is blown off!

Manifestly there was no thinking to be done. What then was to be his course?

“Shall I lie here baking in the sun till dark, then sneak away home? Hanged if I do!” he exploded almost out loud. “This channel has some sort of an end that brings a fellow to shore. I’ll poke along down it and when I’m there I’ll make a break for it.”

In this undertaking he was more fortunate than he had hoped. He had not poled himself a hundred rods when he came to the piers of a low railroad bridge that crossed the swamp.

“Huh, easy enough,” he breathed.

Sitting up, he drove his boat under the bridge and out on the other side. After that, knowing that the embankment must hide him from the enemy if he were still on the marsh, he stood boldly up, poled his boat to shore, drew her up beside the railway, then crept up the bank to peer over at the other half of the marsh. He was now well above the tops of the rushes and could plainly see every foot of the marsh.

“Huh, fellow’d say I dreamed all that,” he grunted. The place was completely deserted. Even the black birds were gone.

Off on the far side of the marsh he made out a shack he had never seen there before. A rude black frame set on posts, it seemed oddly like some dark ghost of a house that had walked to the edge of the swamp in the hope of seeing its reflection in the water.

“I wonder if that shack’s got anything to do with—anything,” he mused.

Even as he thought this a man came out of the place and walking around a corner of the house disappeared at the back. He was a large man; that Johnny could tell plainly enough. And it seemed that the man limped slightly. But of that he could not be sure, the distance being too great.

It was a thoughtful Johnny who walked back down the track to the nearest station, then took the train for the city. Matters were getting serious, very serious indeed, and he had not thought things through at all.

“I must go over to the scene of that last fire,” he told himself. “Do it as soon as I get to the city. May learn something there.”

He did go there. It was night when he arrived. The great, black, burned out skeleton of the Simons Building loomed above him as he searched, and its vacant window holes stared at him like the empty sockets of a skull. Somehow they seemed to accuse him of slowness and stupidity. He fairly flinched beneath their stare.

His search did not last long. Where the office of the one time recreation center had been was now a twenty foot pile of smouldering rafters, plaster and brick.

“Nothing to be learned there,” he murmured as he turned away.

At that same moment he caught sight of a dark shadow that flitted past the corner of the Simons skeleton, and after that he distinctly caught a chuckle which ended in well formed words:

“This is only the beginning.”

Johnny shuddered. But courage did not desert him. With a dash he was around that corner. His bravery was to no avail. If there had been a figure there other than a ghost, it had vanished. Nor did a careful search reveal any living creature.

“Only the beginning,” he murmured at last. “This calls for hustle. In the future I shall use different methods. If I see a suspicious character, the pink-eyed man or the man with hooked nose and limp, I shall have him arrested and look for a reason after. But maybe I won’t see them again.”

That night brought good fortune. As the clock struck twelve, Johnny was walking through the zoological garden and there, quite by chance, ran square

into what was to prove to be one of the most spectacular fires of history.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!” came ringing out upon the night.

One sweep of the horizon, then a surprised exclamation escaped Johnny’s lips. “The Zoo is on fire!” He then made a dash for it.

Fortunately he was not far away; most opportune, too, was the fact that he knew a great deal about the Zoo. Endowed with a natural interest in all living creatures, especially those of strange lands, he had many times visited this particular place.

He knew at a glance just where the fire had its origin. The building was extremely long and low. Birds and beasts were arranged in order according to size. First the monkeys, then wolves, hyena and the like; then lions, tigers and all other large creatures. At the extreme west end were two large rooms inhabited by no living thing. One room was a sort of office used by the keeper and the other a store room for a great quantity of material of anthropological interest, mostly from the Arctic. This material, no longer upon display, lay heaped pile upon pile; garments, blankets, spears, harpoons—all dry as dust and food for flames. It was in this store room that the fire was already fiercely raging.

“Perhaps there is yet time,” Johnny panted as he came racing up.

“Time for what?” demanded a policeman who had arrived before him. “Where’s the fire department?”

“They’ll be here in a moment.” Johnny tried the office door. It was locked. With a spring he was away, then back, shoulder first, at the door with a blow that splintered a panel.

“Here, don’t do that!” shouted the policeman, springing forward.

He was a second too late, for Johnny had once more rammed the door. The door went in, and he with it.

The thing he did then would have seemed strange had there been anyone by to see it. The fire, already bursting through the partitions, scorched his face and hands, but into the smoke he plunged, to drag away, not some object of great value, but a very ordinary desk telephone. Gripping the wires of the phone he

yanked them free, then with this trophy under his arm he made a dash for safety.

Under the screen of smoke he escaped the eye of the policeman. Having hurried to the edge of some bushes, he examined the thing under his arm for a moment, then with a grumbled: "I thought so," began coiling the wire about the phone.

Having done this, he shoved the whole affair far under the bushes, then turned his face again toward the fire.

By this time the tumult was appalling. Vying with the shrill scream of approaching fire sirens and the clamor of gongs, was the mad roar of frightened lions and tigers, while above it all sounded the wild trumpeting of the elephants.

"It's going to be a terrible fire," Johnny shivered. "Too terrible to tell."

At that moment he darted suddenly forward. He felt sure he had recognized a familiar stooping figure in the gathering throng. Johnny had decided that it was about time to begin making a few arrests and ask questions later.

CHAPTER VII

THE BURNING OF THE ZOO

One moment Johnny sighted the familiar, stooping figure, the next he had lost him in the throng which appeared to have sprung up from the ground. However, he did not despair of finding him again. As for the fire, it was now none of his affair. Terrible as it promised to be, he could do nothing to stop it. That was the firemen's part. Already they were stretching their hose. After a single thought given to the safety of the trophy he had hidden under the bushes, Johnny bent his every thought and energy toward the finding of that man.

"For," he told himself, "it may result in the unravelling of a great mystery and bring to a sudden end a series of great catastrophes." At that he lost himself in the throng.

With the firemen came Mazie. She had gone to the central alarm station in the hope of finding Johnny there. Instead she had found the Chief. When the first and second alarms came in from the Zoo alarm box, the Chief had bundled her into his car and they had raced for the park.

Hardly had she alighted from the Chief's car at the scene of the fire than she felt a slight touch on her shoulder and, on looking up, saw that Jerry, the firemen's monkey mascot, was on her shoulder.

She was not surprised at this, but so pleased that tears glistened in her eyes. From the time Jerry had saved her life by bringing a rope to her in the burning building, he had apparently thought of her as his especial charge.

Seeing the Chief about to enter the burning Zoo behind the firemen with the spurting hose in their hands, Mazie took his arm to enter with him. Though he frowned at her, he did not say no. It was a terrible sight that met her eyes. Just as

they entered, the fire broke through the wooden partition between the office and that portion of the Zoo set apart for birds. The fluttering and screaming of frightened birds was almost more than she could stand. Beautiful yellow canaries, brown warblers, parrots of gorgeous green, magnificent birds of paradise, tropical birds with plumage as varied as the hues of the rainbow—they one and all beat their wings against their cages and cried for freedom as they never had cried before in all their captive lives.

“And all in vain,” the girl fairly sobbed.

“It’s no use,” muttered the Chief grimly, “we may save the animals, but this part of the Zoo is doomed. C’mon. Let’s get out.”

Reluctantly the girl turned away. As she did so she saw a single yellow canary in a small cage near the door—the commonest bird in the world. Why he was there alone she could not tell. She only knew that out of all that priceless collection here was one that might be saved. Seizing the cage, she tore it from its hanging, then followed the Chief into the outer air.

“Dear little bird,” she whispered, as she hung the cage high on the limb of a tree well away from danger, “I have given you a new bit of life. May you sing long and sweetly for that.”

Once more she joined the fire-fighting throng. She was hoping all the time to come upon Johnny. This was the kind of fire he was supposed to investigate. He must be here, but where?

“He might be in there,” she thought to herself as she followed a band of fire fighters into the long, low compartment occupied by the monkey tribe. Jerry, who was still on her shoulder, let out a scream of delight at sight of so many of his kind. His scream was answered by one long wail of terror, for at that very moment a broad tongue of fire came licking through the thin wooden ceiling of the room.

“It’s the garret,” muttered the fireman. “There’s a garret running the length of the building. There’s a company coming against the fire from up there. We can probably stop it here, but this place is doomed. Unless we can get ’em out, every monkey of the lot will burn.”

There had been times when, in her dreams, Mazie had seen human faces

distorted with fear, peering down from windows where flames reached out to grip them. But nothing she had ever dreamed of could be as bad as the sight of hundreds of monkeys, baboons, apes and chimpanzees, clinging to their cages and uttering plaintive cries and wild shrieks while their man-like faces were shrunken with fear.

In vain did their keepers attempt to call them down to the doors through which they might escape.

It seemed that they, like the birds, must meet a terrible death. But just when matters were at the worst, Mazie felt a tearing at the shoulder of her coat and turned to see Jerry snatched from his place there. To her surprise and consternation, she saw that the man who held the mascot tightly in his right hand was none other than the pink-eyed man whom she and Johnny suspected of being the firebug.

“Stop him!” she fairly screamed.

But she was too late. The man was already well away and up to the side of the great cage of monkeys. In his left hand he held a fireman’s axe.

The thing Mazie witnessed in the next three minutes impressed a picture on the sensitized film of her brain that she will never forget.

Holding Jerry up to the cage, the pink-eyed man allowed him to cling there for a full half minute. During that entire time the strange little creature kept up an incessant chatter that could be heard even above the screams of the frightened prisoners.

What it was he said, Mazie could not tell. She did realize that this monkey speech of his had an extraordinary effect upon the other monkeys. By the time his half minute speech was up, the screams had died down nearly to a whisper.

It was at this psychological moment that the pink-eyed man made his next move. With a single stroke of his axe he cut a perpendicular gash four feet long in the heavy wire screening of the cage. A second slash made a horizontal one quite as long. By turning out the ragged corners he made a large hole there. On the edge of this hole he placed Jerry.

Then came the astonishing thing. Jerry seemed to understand his part for, with a

twist of his head toward the nearest monkey, he appeared to say: "C'mon." Then, catching hold of the cage, he executed a swinging jump and landed on the floor. The foremost monkey in the cage followed his example, then another and another.

Calmly the pink-eyed man slashed the side of cage after cage and out of each leaped all those man-like creatures, and man-like still, as if obeying orders, they each and all joined the procession led by Jerry. The procession grew and grew and grew until at last there was not a living creature in the cages.

There arose a hoarse shout of approval from the firemen. Mazie looked around for the hero of the hour—the pink-eyed man. He had vanished!

As she made her way once more into the open air of the park that surrounded the Zoo, she found the trees full of happy chattering creatures who were enjoying to the full such freedom as they had not known for years.

For a time she stood there staring at the burning building. As she turned to go, there came a chatter from the tree above her, followed by a thud on her shoulder.

It was Jerry. With cap gone, his red coat scorched and torn, he still appeared to be the happiest monkey in all the world.

The firemen by this time had the fire somewhat under control, but the mingled sounds of screams, roars and trumpeting which came from the other end of the Zoo was all but deafening.

Having always had a desire to know how different wild animals acted under stress of danger, Mazie decided to re-enter the Zoo and pass through it until stopped by the fire. She could not do this without considerable fear and trembling, nor was this entirely unwarranted. The time was to come, and that within the next quarter of an hour, when she would regret so rash an undertaking.

In the meantime, what had become of Johnny? While all these things were happening to Mazie and her strange companion, Jerry, what success had he had in finding his man?

It is not easy to locate a particular person in a throng of five hundred or a thousand people at night. Johnny thought he knew all about that. He had entered

upon just such a task more than once before. More than once, too, he had found himself baffled, beaten back by the mob, in the end defeated. This time he was determined to win.

But even as he entered into the search he asked himself seriously whether or not he had any business with the man he sought.

“I may, and I may not,” he mumbled to himself at last, “but one thing is sure—this thing has got to stop. When the police can’t pin a thing on a particular man they go out looking for suspects and bring in every suspicious looking character. That’s what I’ll have to do.”

At once his mind was at work on possibilities. Two men had come under suspicion; the pink-eyed man and the man with the hooked nose and the limp. If either was the firebug, which was it most likely to be? Johnny remembered the look he had seen on the face of the pink-eyed man the night of the school house fire. It was a look of pleasure which had seemed to say: “I set the fire. Isn’t it grand!” And yet, had he read that look correctly? One thing was sure—a moment later the look had vanished from the man’s face and he was showing an active interest in the saving of a child from the school building.

“And that,” thought Johnny, “would tend to make a fellow love him.”

“On the other hand,” he mused, “he lives in a disreputable looking place; at least I saw him go in there. And he was at that second fire. What’s he doing at every midnight fire if he has nothing to do with them?”

As for the man who limped, he had seen him at but one fire, and that time there was nothing of a suspicious character revealed other than his presence behind the lines.

“And yet I have a sneaking notion,” Johnny mused, “that it was he who shot at me out there on the marsh.”

“Not much proof for that conclusion, either,” he murmured a moment later.

His mind went back to the double telephone wires he had found in the burned schoolhouse and the one he had hidden beneath the bushes but a few moments before.

“Might be something to it,” he said suddenly and quite out loud. “Might——”

He broke short off. Over to the right he had caught sight of his man—the one who limped, and to his great joy he found the fire Chief close beside him.

“See!” he exclaimed, gripping at the Chief’s arm, “See that man! Get that man! He—he—perhaps he’s the firebug!”

The Chief made a lunge toward the man. Johnny followed. It did look too as if he had spoken the truth, for the instant the Chief made a move in his direction the suspected man was away. Not fast enough, however, to escape Johnny’s keen eye.

“This way, Chief,” he exclaimed, then dashed straight away from the fire toward the shore of the lake, whence came the dull roar of rolling breakers.

CHAPTER VIII

MAZIE AND THE TIGER

With fear in her heart Mazie again entered the burning Zoo. This was the most spectacular fire she had ever known anything about and she was determined to see it through to its very end.

Giving a wide berth to three elephants who were blowing hay in air, trumpeting and threshing madly at their chains, with a gulp of pity she passed the patient camels who, seeming resigned to their fate, stood with heads hanging low.

She shuddered as she saw the restless pacing and heard the deafening roar of lions, and started back in fear when a great black leopard leaped squarely against the bars that held him.

The bars were strong. She saw the mad creature drop back stunned, then she pressed on into the room where the firemen were doing noble battle with the flames.

“You’re winning,” she said to a grimy fireman. There was admiration in her tone.

“Yes,” he smiled, “it’ll soon be over now. But,” he added, “we wouldn’t have saved the monkeys if it hadn’t been for Jerry. He’s a wise little rascal.”

“Jerry and—and that man,” said Mazie.

“Yes; old Pinkie.”

“Who is he? Do you know him?” Mazie asked eagerly.

“No, Miss, I can’t just say I know him, but all of us have seen him often. Regular fire fan. Seems like he goes to every fire that’s of any consequence. He’s a queer one. Seems to have a heart of gold, though. I’ve seen him risk his life to save an alley cat.”

“Then he couldn’t be—” Mazie suddenly cut herself short.

“Couldn’t be what, Miss?”

Mazie didn’t answer. “How long have you seen him around fires?” she asked instead.

“Seems like it’s been three years or more. I recall the first time. It was——”

“Oh! Look!” Mazie’s eyes opened wide with terror. And well they might. A tall chimney, undermined by the fire, had come crashing down through the roof. It had not stopped at the roof but had come on through, crushing an iron cage where were imprisoned two royal Bengal tigers. So thoroughly mashed was the cage that it resembled a bird cage which has been stepped on by a large man.

“Look out!” Mazie screamed, as with a growl of rage and pain the larger of the two captives sprang through an opening, free!

And what of Johnny and the Chief? They had gone rushing after that man whom Johnny had so rashly named the firebug. He had led them straight away across a level stretch of grass, across a drive and through a clump of bushes to the shore of the lake. There, with a speed that was astonishing in so large a man who was at the same time a little lame, with cold spray drenching him, he ran on along the stone breakwater to a spot where a second breakwater ran off at a sharp angle to the first. This wall of stone which ran between two stretches of foaming water reached to a fill some distance out in the lake. It was incomplete. Only rough and jagged piles of rock marked its course; as yet there were no beams.

At such a time as this, when seas were running high, it was little less than suicide to venture out upon it; yet the mysterious man did not hesitate an instant. One second he was on the solid shore, the next he was balancing himself on a jagged pile of rocks five yards out to sea, and then he was lost to view in a cloud of spray.

The man had probably figured that his pursuers would not dare to follow. In this he was partly wrong. Johnny's foot was on the foremost rock when the Chief's firm hand pulled him back.

"Wait," he rumbled, "he can't make it. He'll have to come back."

They did wait, and for a time it seemed that the Chief was certainly right; that the man would never succeed in making his way to the broad stretch of filled land which ran for more than a mile along the lake front, and where he might either hide or make his way back to land over some pier or safer breakwater. But, as the spray cleared, they saw him twenty yards out, now thirty, forty, fifty, sixty. Then, for a long time, as the water boomed against the rocks, the spray completely hid the fleeing form.

Then, of a sudden, the moon came out and the spray cleared for a moment. At that moment, after sharply surveying the length of the breakwater, the Chief and Johnny turned to stare at one another.

"Gone!" said Johnny.

"Not a living thing there now."

"He can't have made his way to the fill."

"Probably not. Might have."

"If he didn't?"

"He's gone. Nothing could save him. No one could climb back upon that breakwater once he was washed off. May God rest his soul."

For a full ten minutes they stood there watching the surface of the water, then turning silently about, started back toward the scene of the fire.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

Many of the expected thrills and terrors of life never materialize. It was so with Mazie and the tiger. If the tiger had been roaring in a manner fit to curdle the blood of a pirate, it was because he was afraid. The instant he was free from his cage, acting for all the world like a cat that has suddenly been drenched with cold water, he went slinking away down the long rooms of the zoo.

It was a simple enough matter to drive him into a portable cage, and there the affair ended.

An hour later, Mazie came upon the Chief, who told her of Johnny's experience but could not inform her of his whereabouts. Failing to find him, she decided to go home.

After taking Jerry back to his master, she returned to the tree where she had placed the rescued canary. Wrapping her cape about the cage to shield the bird from the chill night air, she hailed a taxi and sped along home, content to call it a night.

Johnny was not at all convinced that the Chief was right in saying that the stooped man with the hook nose and a limp had fallen into the lake and been drowned.

"You don't get rid of a man that easily," he told himself. "They do it in the movies; but in real life, not once in a million times."

The more he thought of it, the surer he became that he was right. The moon had been under a cloud for a long time, long enough for the man to have escaped

over the breakwater to the made land.

“And besides,” Johnny reasoned, “he was just as likely to fall in on the side of the breakwater away from the spray as he was on the dangerous side. On that side it would have been no trick at all to swim to the shore of that made land.”

Having convinced himself that the affair would bear looking into, he retraced his steps to the lake shore. The wind had gone down. The moon was shining. The breakwater appeared to offer a safe passage to the land beyond.

“I’ll chance it,” he murmured to himself.

As the reader already knows, the unfinished breakwater was composed of sharp edged limestone rock, together with broken fragments of cement taken from old sidewalks and cellar walls. To cross from shore to shore was no easy task, even now. More than once Johnny was obliged to drop on his knees to save himself a slide into the water. As he saw how perilous the passage was he was all but forced to believe that the Chief’s conclusion was correct, that the fugitive had been drowned.

“And if he did,” Johnny thought to himself, “and if he was the firebug, then this chase is ended and, what’s more, he took his secret with him to the bottom of the lake.”

This thought left him a feeling of disappointment so keen that it threw him into a fit of despondency. He knew well enough that he should be glad that the man was gone. The city would then see the end of the havoc that had added so much to the discomfort and unhappiness of its people.

“But all the same,” he told himself defiantly, “that fellow had some secret method for setting fires, an unusual and unknown method. It is decidedly disappointing, after you had been for so long a time hot on the trail, to have that secret buried from your sight forever.

“Well, what is to be, will be,” he mused as he picked his way across the final rugged stretch of cold, wet rock.

When at last his feet touched solid dry land again, his feeling that the man had certainly been drowned left him. Such experiences are not uncommon. One’s feeling toward all of life during a time of peril is always different from that

which he experiences in a place of comparative safety.

Strange to say, however, Johnny was, at the moment he stepped on that made land, in greater peril than he had been at any time while crossing the slippery breakwater. Being quite unconscious of this, he struck boldly down the length of that narrow stretch of land.

It was a curious sort of island on which he stood. A city that had built skyscrapers to its very water front, becoming dissatisfied with the waterscape that lay out before it, had decided that a few islands off its shores would add to the decorative effect of its view. So, with the fearless, Titan-like soul that possesses American cities, it had decided to build islands here and there along its shores. This narrow stretch of land, a few hundred yards wide and a mile long, was their first attempt at altering the face of nature.

At the present time, like the world in its beginning, it was “without form and void.” Upon the great mounds of dripping sand raised up from the bottom by dredges, had been hauled all manner of refuse from the land. Loads of clay, great heaps of tin cans, dump loads of broken brick and mortar, caused this man made island to look like the side of a volcano after an eruption.

Johnny found it a very difficult place to walk. One moment he was climbing a mound of clay, the next he was wading knee-deep in soft sand, and after that rattling through a whole desert of tin cans.

For all that, there was a certain thrill to be had from walking there. He was upon an island. As far as he knew the island was without an inhabitant. Certainly two years before it was entirely unknown to the civilized world.

He chuckled at the thoughts he had thus conjured up. “And yet,” he laughed, “the island is within gunshot of one of the largest cities of our land.”

If he had concluded that the place was entirely deserted, he was destined to a rude and shocking disillusionment. Suddenly, out from behind a tall heap of rubbish, a large figure launched itself at him with such sure effect that it sent him crashing to the ground.

Now Johnny, as you will know well enough if you have read our other book “Triple Spies,” was not the sort of a fellow to take the count on the first down. It would have been a nimble tongued referee who could have counted three before

Johnny was getting to his feet.

Thoroughly aroused and angered by this sudden, cowardly assault, he was now quite ready for trouble.

He did not have long to wait for it, either. At once the man came at him. This time someone received a surprise, and it certainly was not Johnny. Came a sound as of a wagon tongue ramming an automobile, and the huge hulk of a man who had started the row, staggered backward. Boxing was the one thing Johnny knew a great deal about. Long years ago his father had taught him a great deal about defending himself. He had added to this knowledge as the years went by.

Johnny had not the slightest doubts of his ability along these lines. But that he was in grave danger, he knew quite well. While his assailant paused before resuming the attack, he allowed himself a few darting thoughts as to how this affair would end. Who was this man? Could he be the man they had driven out upon the breakwater, or was he some tramp who had come out here to sleep? Was he armed? If he had a knife or gun the affair would probably end shortly and tragically. Was it best to run? Probably it was, but being Johnny Thompson, he did not propose to run. He'd stand his ground and fight, and since fight he must, why not on the offensive? No sooner thought than done. With muscles tense, every nerve alert, he leaped squarely at the astonished giant.

Johnny's chance came and he took it. As the man threw up his hands in an involuntary motion to shield his face, Johnny landed a haymaker square on his chin.

There are few men who can withstand such a blow but this man appeared to be made of uncommon stuff. He staggered like a drunken man but he did not fall. The next second he set his huge fists swinging.

As Johnny stepped back he stumbled over some hard object and all but fell. The obstacle suggested a way out, but he did not take it. In this ten seconds of confused thought he was suddenly seized in a death-like grip. The man, so much heavier, bore him to the ground with a crash that all but knocked his senses out of him.

In the struggle that followed his hand was pressed against something hard at the man's belt.

“A knife!” Johnny thought excitedly.

The next instant his hand was on the hilt. Ten seconds of struggle and he had freed the hand with the long-bladed knife gripped tight.

Wildly his heart beat. The advantage was his. Should he follow it up? One thrust, perhaps two, and the struggle would end.

A second of thought. “No! No! Not that!” Suddenly his hand shot up and out. The knife, executing the arc of a circle, clanged to the ground some distance away.

A short, tense struggle followed, then again Johnny was free.

Breathing hard, hair disheveled, face bloody, clothes torn, he backed away to allow his mind three more flashing thoughts: “What next? Fight or flee? How will it end?”

He would fight. The man might be the firebug. If he could but subdue and capture him, the prize was won. Besides, had not the man set upon him from ambush? Did he not deserve a drubbing?

Suddenly he felt a strong desire to see the man’s face. If he were the man he thought him, he would recognize him. The man’s back was to the moon. Johnny executed a flank movement, that the moon might give him a view of that face. Again he tripped and all but fell. One hand touched the ground. It rested for a second on half a brick. Should he seize the brick? It was a weapon! But he had always fought fair.

“No! No!” he breathed.

He had always fought fair. Little did he know of the ruthless warfare of the underworld, of those denizens of crime who seize any weapon, who strike any creature—even the defenseless and weak—whose creed is ruthlessness and cruelty, and who know neither honor nor pity.

Well had it been if Johnny had known, for hardly had his hand left the brick than another came crashing against his own head, sending him crumpling down like an empty sack.

Consciousness did not entirely desert him. He had lost the power to move, but could still hear, feel and think. He caught the heavy thud of the villain's footsteps as he approached, felt his hot breath on his cheek, then saw him lift the very brick he himself, but ten seconds before, had rejected as a point of honor.

His thoughts ran rampant. All his past lay before him, all his hopes for the future. He had expected to die sometime, somewhere, but not like this, not alone on a island built up by dump carts and scows.

"No! No! Not here!"

At the instant when all seemed lost, he heard a sudden compact, saw the big man go hurdling over him, and then to his vast surprise heard him struggle to his feet to go clump-clumping away.

Then, as a clearer consciousness came ebbing back, Johnny opened his eyes to see a face looking down upon him; a strange, wizened, full-bearded face that seemed the face of an overgrown owl.

For a time he felt that he must have become delirious, and was seeing things in mad dreams. Just then the man spoke.

"Hurt much?"

"N—no. Guess—guess not," Johnny said, struggling to a sitting posture.

"All right. When you feel like it I'll help you over to my house."

"Your house? Where is it?"

"On the island, just round the corner here."

"A house on this island?" Johnny whispered to himself. "Why, then, this surely is a mysterious island."

CHAPTER X

BEN ZOOK

“Who are you?” Johnny asked as he sat staring at this strange little man.

“Ben Zook’s my name. What might be yours?”

“Johnny Thompson.”

“What was you doin’ on my island, Johnny?”

“Looking for a man.”

“Find him?”

“I—I’m not sure. I was trying to find out whether I had found him or not when he hit me with a brick.”

“It probably was him,” said Ben thoughtfully.

For a moment the two of them sat staring away at the dark waters of the lake. Then Ben spoke:

“Well, if your gyroscope’s workin’ sufficient well to let you navigate without too much of a list to starboard, we might set sail. I’ve got some coffee, and I guess there’s still a fire. It will do you good.”

“Yes,” said Johnny, struggling to his feet and standing there unsteadily, “yes, I think it would. Lead on, friend. Sort of map out the route for me, will you? I’m a stranger in these parts.”

“Thought you might be,” chuckled Ben. “Don’t have many visitors, I don’t, an’ most of ’em’s what you’d call of an undesirable class—bums that’s been run off the parks, mostly. Me—I’m no bum. I earn my living. I feed the chickens.”

Johnny thought that a rather strange occupation in a city of three million. Since he was too busy watching his steps over the irregular surface of made land to give attention to other things, he let the thing stand as it was for the present.

“Probably just a way of saying something else, I guess; hasn’t a thing to do with real poultry,” was his mental comment.

In a surprisingly short time Johnny found himself nearing that side of the island next to the lake, and a moment later was led to a spot where red coals glowed in a sort of out-of-doors fireplace fashioned from broken bits of brick.

“Here’s my house,” said Ben Zook, a touch of pride in his tone. “It’s not everyone that lives in a brick house these days.”

At first Johnny thought he referred to the rude fireplace and was prepared to laugh; but, as he turned about he caught sight of a dark, cavern-like hole in the side of a great mound of clay. Even as he looked his newly found friend lighted a candle. The mellow glow of this tiny lighting plant revealed three walls of brick and mortar and a roof of wood. The whole place was not over ten feet square, and the ceiling was barely above his head. There were no windows and no door, but the end next to the fire stood open and that served the place of both.

“What do you think of it?” asked Ben Zook.

“I think,” said Johnny heartily, “that had Robinson Crusoe come upon a home like this on his island he would have wept for joy.”

“Why, so he would, Johnny, so he would!” exclaimed Ben, more than pleased by this compliment to his extraordinary abode.

A half hour later, Johnny’s slight wounds having been quite skilfully dressed by his surprising host and his spirits revived by a strong cup of black coffee, the two sat staring out at the lake.

“Do men come out here often?” Johnny asked.

“Not so often. It ain’t safe crossing on the breakwater. I’ve got a sort of flat bottomed boat I paddle across with every morning when I go over to feed the chickens.”

There it was again. “The—the chickens?” Johnny stammered.

“Yes. I got a regular job. Don’t pay very big, but it keeps me, and besides, when a chicken gets sick and looks like he’d die, they give him to me. I bring ’em out here and dope ’em up. Then if they get all right I take ’em back and sell ’em. I’ve got five chickens, a guinea hen and a goose right now.”

“Where are these chickens you feed?” Johnny asked, more perplexed than ever.

“Commission house. South Water Street. Come in by car loads and in crates and have to be fed, you know. I feed ’em an’ water ’em. That’s my job. An’ this island, it’s my chicken ranch. Roam all over it, my poultry does, in the daytime. At night I shut ’em up. I’d like a better place, where there was grass an’ shade, but seems like a fellow can’t save enough for that. This here island, it don’t cost me nothin’. They just let me stay here, the park folks do. An’ the house, it didn’t cost nothin’ neither, only the price of a bag of lime. Sand came from the lake; bricks I picked up from rubbish piles. Pretty neat, ’eh?” He proudly surveyed his three walls.

“Pretty neat,” Johnny agreed.

“I like it best with the end open to the fire. It’s more healthy. But if folks are goin’ to come out here at night, ’taint goin’ to be safe. I’ll haf to build a door. Not folks like you, but that other fellow’s kind. Seems like I’ve seen that man out here before.”

“Big man—with a stoop and a limp?” Johnny asked.

“That was him.”

“And a hooked nose?”

“Didn’t see his face.”

“What was he doing?”

“Standin’ with his back to the island and his face toward the city, an’ far’s I could tell he was standin’ there a shakin’ his big fists at the city an’ a swearin’ fit to kill.”

“That was just what he would do if he is the man I think him to be,” said Johnny, quietly.

“Would he now? What’d anybody do a crazy thing like that for?”

“You tell me,” said Johnny. “There are some like that.”

“Crooks and cranks,” said Ben. “Why didn’t you hit him first?”

“I did, but he had a hard head.”

“Hit him with a brick?”

“No, my fist.”

“Never do that to a crook, Johnny. They wouldn’t do that to you. Put ’em to sleep with the best thing you can grab, then argue with ’em after they wake up. Talk about honor among thieves; there ain’t none. They’re a low lived lot, too lazy to work. Half of them have got heads like kids and the other half are full of hop. A dirty bunch of low lived cowards who take knives and guns to rob people.

“An’ look at the stuff they write about ’em in them there paper books and magazines. You’d think they was high class gentlemen down on their luck and doin’ an honest turn by robbin’ some one just so as to get back on their feet again, wouldn’t you? Or mebbly goin’ in for it as a sort of sporting proposition. Livin’ dangerously, they’d call it. Danger! It’s their victim that gets the danger! Honor! Romance! Living dangerously! Bah! Hit ’em first, that’s my motto!”

“And that,” said Johnny, rubbing his bruised head, “is going to be my motto in the future.”

When the next opportunity presented itself Johnny did not forget this resolve. He followed it through, and with the most astonishing results.

“Ben,” said Johnny a moment later, “I want to keep in touch with you. That fellow may come back.”

“That’s what I been thinkin’ an’ I don’t like it.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. And if he did you’d want him taken care of.”

“Certainly would, Johnny, unless I could get close enough without him seein’ me to take care of him with a brick.”

“Don’t do anything rash,” Johnny continued. “If he shows up, let me know. I’ve got a room facing the water front. I’ll bet you can see that window from the place where you work. There’s a door at the back of the building. You’ll know the place; the first building to the right after you cross Wells Street bridge. That back door isn’t locked. In a dark corner behind the door is a small box with a slot in it. If that man comes back you just hop right over there and slip an orange wrapper in that box. There’s plenty of them in South Water Street. That will be a message to me, and it won’t tell a thing to anyone else, even if they rob the box.”

“All right, Johnny, I’ll do that.”

For a time they sat there staring at the lake. Then slowly their heads drooped, and with arms crossed like their primitive ancestors, the ape-men, they sat on this strange island so near and yet so far from a great city, sat by the fire asleep, but ever ready at the slightest sound to seize a club or a stone in defense of their lives and Ben Zook’s crude home.

CHAPTER XI

JOHNNY GETS A TIP

“Johnny,” began the Chief as Johnny entered the office late that afternoon, “there’s a man in town I want you to watch. I want——”

Suddenly he paused to stare at the swollen side of Johnny’s head. “Who hit you?” he asked.

“I—I got a bump there.” Johnny did not wish to tell the Chief about his island experience. He was afraid the Chief would not like his going against advice; and besides, if something came of this little excursion, something really big, he felt that he had a right when the time was ripe to spring it as a surprise. He was truly relieved when the Chief did not press the question.

“As I was about to say,” the Chief resumed, “there’s a man come to town recently, a man I want you to get in touch with if you can. That is, I mean locate and shadow him. The fact that he wasn’t here at the time this series of fires started doesn’t necessarily prove that he hasn’t a hand in them. The brains of a gang is not always on the spot all the time.

“This man,” he leaned forward in his chair, “is credited with a dozen big blazes in New York, and now he’s come to Chicago.

“He’s been credited with them but, shrewd as the New York police are and persistent as were the insurance patrols, not one of these fires has been surely pinned on him. So here he is in Chicago.

“His name is Knobs Whittaker; at least Knobs is what he goes by. The reason for the name is that on each side of his bald head, well above his ears, is a sort of knob. You’ve seen cattle that had their horns treated when they were calves and

had no horns to speak of—just knobs?”

“Yes.”

“Well, his knobs are like that.”

“Sort of a dehorned Devil?”

“Exactly that, from what I hear.”

“There,” said the Chief after fumbling about in the pigeon holes of his desk, “is the address where he was last seen. He was seen entering the door that leads up the stairs to the second floor. I wish you’d go over there this morning and give the place the once over. You may see Knobs, though I doubt it. Anyway, fix the building in your mind and find out all you can about it.”

“Right,” said Johnny as he pocketed the slip of paper handed to him.

The place, he noted, was on Randolph near Franklin, not five blocks from his own room.

“Right down town,” he thought to himself. “Lot of wholesale shops in there; shoes, plumbing goods, machinery, and the like. Very respectable place. You wouldn’t look for anything queer in there; but then, you never can tell.”

In this conclusion Johnny was right.

The building to which he had been directed, and where Knobs had last been seen, proved to be a narrow four-story structure with a small square hallway at the front. On the right side of this hallway one might read the names of the occupants. On the first floor was a manufacturing chemist; on the second a wholesale diamond merchant; on the third a publisher of cheap juvenile books; and the fourth had been taken over by the National Novelty Company, whatever that might be.

Johnny was studying this board and beginning to wonder in a vague sort of way if the top floor had been taken over by Knobs and if he thought his business of setting fire as being in a way a distinct novelty, when a broad shouldered, smooth shaven man of neat appearance alighted from the small elevator and, as men will do, removed his hat to dust his bald head with a silk handkerchief.

Johnny took in the top of that head at a glance. With great difficulty he suppressed an exclamation of surprise. Above each ear there was a distinct, glistening knob.

With the greatest of effort he tore his gaze from the man and, leaping into the elevator, called hurriedly:

“Third floor.”

He had taken the elevator because he did not wish to fall under the suspicious glance of that man. He had chosen the third floor because he was quite sure books were safe; this notorious firebug would have nothing to do with them.

“So that,” he thought to himself as the elevator crept upward, “is Knobs!”

He found himself tremendously impressed by the appearance of the man. He had personality, which is more than one may say of most of his kind. He looked dangerous, a square-jawed villain who would stop at nothing.

Because he had been so greatly impressed and also because Knobs had twice been seen in the building, Johnny made a careful survey of the premises. The diamond merchant’s place on the second floor, he discovered, was well wired with a noted burglar insurance company’s apparatus.

“I don’t wonder at that,” he told himself. “With such men as Knobs about, it’s highly necessary.”

On the third floor he found a hallway leading to a back window. The window looked down upon the roof of a two-story building.

“One could reach that roof at a leap if he found it necessary,” he told himself.

He had not expected to find the Novelty Company open for business. They weren’t.

“Guess that’s about all I can discover for this time,” he concluded as he once more entered the elevator and dropped to the ground floor.

The Chief was well pleased with his report. “Johnny,” he said, “you’d make an inspector, give you time. There’s one thing you wouldn’t know, though, so I’ll

tell you. A chemist's establishment or a drug store is one of the most dangerous risks an insurance company can take. That's because if it gets on fire it goes up like a flash. There are likely to be dangerous fumes that drive the firemen back, and perhaps an explosion; too many chemicals about and in time of fire they raise the very deuce!

"You don't understand why that is, eh? Well, that's because you're no chemist. I've dabbled into it a bit, and you'd better when you get time. It pays to know a little about many things, and a lot about one thing. That's what makes a useful citizen out of a man.

"I'll tell you about those chemicals. There's always lots of chlorides and sulphur about a chemist's shop. If the chlorides are heated at all they give up oxygen, and oxygen will make anything burn—a wrought-iron pipe or a steel crowbar. The sulphur mixes in and that makes a fire that nothing can stop. It laughs at water. As for chemical engines, it gives them the roaring Ha! Ha! When a fire like that burns out it don't much matter what you had in the beginning; all you've got in the end is ashes, and mighty fine ashes at that."

Johnny listened to this lecture with intense interest. When it was over he sat in a brown study from which he emerged to exclaim:

"That's queer!"

"Nothing queer about it," protested the Chief, "just nature takin' her course, that's all."

"That's not what I meant," said Johnny. "I meant it was queer that there'd be a diamond merchant's place above a chemist warehouse. Queer combination, don't you think?"

"Yes, queer enough, but you do get some queer ones. Diamond merchant has his fire insurance, though, the same as others. Rate would be high; but low rent probably makes up the difference. Besides, chemists' places are not as dangerous as they used to be; there are laws regulating the amount of the dangerous stuff they may keep in any one place."

"Are inspections frequent?"

"Not as frequent as they should be."

“Honest inspectors?”

“I don’t know. That doesn’t come in my department.”

There the discussion ended, but Johnny pondered long over that diamond merchant’s place above a chemist’s shop. In the end, however, he forgot it to think of his flat-bottomed boat and the marsh south of the city. He had promised to take Mazie out there late this afternoon. She had listened eagerly to the story of his adventure out there, and had said she thought the place must be “perfectly bewitching.”

Johnny was not so sure about that. He had a wholesome awe of the place since that shot.

“But of course,” he had said at last, “that fellow just happened to run across me before I left the city, and followed me out there. There’d be no danger a second time—no danger at all.”

So in the end he had promised to go. They planned to take their lunch along, to arrive about an hour before sundown and to stay for a look at the moon rising over the marsh.

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERY MAN OF THE MARSH

The moon was just rising out of the marsh; turning the dark rushes to a deep bottle green and spreading a bar of gold down a channel. For two solid hours Johnny had managed to throw off his problems and worries and the strange grip of mysteries that had held him so long. In those two delightful hours he had been just a boy, paddling about an enchanted marsh in twilight and gathering darkness.

With his good pal Mazie, he had eaten the lion's share of a lunch such as only Mazie could prepare; strangely delicious little sandwiches and cake that melted in your mouth, pears from a glass jar, cold chicken, and a thermos bottle of steaming cocoa. Johnny had enjoyed all this.

And now, side by side on the narrow seat of the flat-bottomed boat, they sat through a half hour of deep enchantment, watching the moon rise. For a long time they sat in silence, and who can know what were the long, long thoughts that came to them?

Whatever they were, they were destined to come to an abrupt end. Suddenly, as his ear caught an unaccustomed sound, Johnny put a finger over Mazie's lips, then stood straight up to allow his eyes to sweep the marsh. The next instant he motioned Mazie down as he dropped flat in the bottom of the boat. For a moment they lay very still.

"Wha—what is it?" Mazie whispered.

"Sh!" Johnny's all but inaudible whisper answered back. "Not so loud. Some men can shoot accurately at sound. It was often done during the war. I heard the dip of an oar and caught the gleam of a rifle. It's—it's the mysterious one! It

must be. Lie perfectly still. Not a sound. Perhaps he didn't see me."

"I—I won't move, Johnny."

Johnny knew that Mazie was frightened, for he felt the wild beating of her heart against his shoulder. But he knew she was game, too, and was proud of her for that.

Fifteen minutes they lay there in the bottom of the boat. Speaking in the lowest whispers, scarcely daring to breath, they listened intently, but caught no further sound.

"Listen, Mazie," whispered Johnny at last, "we can't stay here all night."

"No, we can't."

"Are you afraid to stay here alone for a minute or two?"

"N—no. But what are you going to do?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"I'm going after that fellow."

"Johnny! You'll be killed!"

"He'll not harm me. It's the only way out. I'm going."

With a grip of her hand he signalled farewell, then with astonishing dexterity he got over the side of the boat and into the water without a sound.

Swimming down the channel until he was opposite the spot where he judged the man to have been, he at last began parting the rushes and making his way slowly through them. He had not gone ten yards when he caught sight of a black form directly before him.

"That's him!" he breathed. "He's in a boat. There's a channel there."

Lest he be detected and fired upon, he worked his way back to his own channel, swam rapidly up this channel and then crossed the stretch of rushes to the other side.

For a time after that he swam noiselessly in the shadow of rushes down the

channel toward the mysterious one's boat, swam until he made out the form of an oval bottomed, clinker-built boat. A tall man was standing up in it. Johnny again caught the gleam of a rifle barrel.

Johnny took one deep, silent breath, then disappeared under the water.

Swimming strongly under water, he came up to the right of the boat and almost directly beneath it. He could hear the man's deep breathing and caught fragments of husky mutterings.

"Now's the time," Johnny thought to himself.

Gripping the edge of the boat he gave it a sudden upward thrust which all but capsized it. There followed at once a small splash and a large one.

"His rifle goes—now he takes the plunge," thought Johnny as his heart went racing.

"He's safe enough now. He'll not find his rifle at the bottom in this darkness. He's a tiger without his fangs."

Johnny even had the temerity to lift himself up as high as he could in the water and peer over the boat.

It was then that he got a real shock. The man was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh! He can't have drowned," Johnny reasoned.

The next instant a thought struck him which set him doing the Australian crawl with a vengeance. The man may have known the general direction of their boat and might have gone for it. If he had, what of Mazie?

After three minutes of breathless swimming, Johnny arrived in their channel to find his fears unfounded. Everything was as serene as when he had left it.

"Come on," he said to Mazie as he climbed into the boat, "we're going to get out of here."

Seizing a long pole, he stood boldly upright in the boat and sent it shooting through the water. Ten minutes later he beached his boat, then dragged it to a low

shed which served as boat-house.

As he turned about from snapping the padlock, the moon came suddenly out from behind a cloud and shone down one of those long channels of the marsh. In the midst of a channel was a clinker-built boat—and a man was standing in it.

“That’s him,” Johnny chuckled, “I—I’m sort of glad he didn’t drown. Bet he hasn’t got his rifle, though. I’d like to swim back there and beat him up.”

He did not yield to this mad impulse. Mazie was pulling at his sleeve and saying in her most persuasive tone:

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

“All right,” smiled Johnny, slapping the water from his soaked trousers, “guess we’d better.”

“All the same,” he mused, “I’d like to know where that fellow stays and how he always happens to be about the marsh at the same time I am.”

“It’s something more than a happening,” said Mazie seriously, “and since you don’t learn anything by coming, it might be well to stay away.”

“Might,” agreed Johnny.

“But for all that,” he thought to himself, “I’m going back out there some time and prowl about the edge of the marsh a bit. That fellow may live out there somewhere.” He thought of the black shack at the edge of the marsh.

“Johnny,” said Mazie as they rode home, “let’s go somewhere to-morrow night; some place where we won’t be bothered and where we can have some fun.”

“For instance?”

“Why not Forest City?”

“I don’t mind. Chute the chutes, roll down the roller coaster, and everything; good old stuff that never grows old.”

“Something like that,” smiled Mazie. “Anyway, it’s a lot of fun to see people

having a roaring time of it. And they really do enjoy it. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Johnny, "and I might as well admit it, I enjoy it myself; makes me think of the picnics and county fairs I used to go to when I was a small boy. All right, we'll go."

CHAPTER XIII

JOHNNY REPORTS TO THE CHIEF

“How much progress are you making on your investigation?” the Chief asked Johnny as he came in next morning.

“Three suspects and no arrests,” smiled Johnny.

“Tell me about them.”

“There’s the one you gave me—Knobs.”

“Know anything new about him?”

“Not a thing.”

“And the others? Tell me about them.”

Johnny told of the pink-eyed man and the tall stooped one who limped. Without thinking much about it, he told the Chief for the first time of his visits to the marsh, of his mysterious assailant out there, and of his fight with the unknown man on Ben Zook’s island.

The Chief listened intently. “You don’t always take another’s judgment about things, do you?”

“In—in what way?”

“I told you I thought that the man who went out on the breakwater toward that made land you call Ben Zook’s island had been drowned.”

“Why—yes, that’s what you did.”

“You didn’t think so?”

“I thought he might not have drowned.”

“What do you think now?”

“He didn’t drown.”

“You can’t prove it.”

“No, but I will. You’d know the man if you saw him again? Or his picture?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll prove it, then. Just give me time.”

For a moment the Chief sat wrapped in deep thought. Then of a sudden he said:

“You have a rather unusual method of picking suspects.”

“In what way?”

“When the police have a criminal to catch, a crime to clear up, they go over the list of criminals who work at such crimes, then they check up on those persons, possibly shadowing them for days. But you—you simply go to a fire and pick a man who seems particularly interested in the fire. You say to yourself: ‘He might be the man.’ Then you start shadowing him.”

“But if you see him at three or four fires? Doesn’t that look bad?” Johnny asked.

“Not necessarily. Some persons are just natural cranks when it comes to fires. They’d get out of bed at midnight to go to one. For instance, take that pink-eyed fellow you’ve been telling about. It’s a well known fact that those pink-eyed people, albinos they are called, are like owls; they see best at night. The bright light of day appears to blind them, so they like to prowl around at night. This fellow may be that sort and may have taken up with the running down of fires as an innocent hobby.”

“That’s right enough,” said Johnny, “but on the other hand some clever gang of

criminals may have noticed his night prowling and may have induced him to join them in setting blazes. And besides, these fires are different, aren't they? Did anyone ever go about the task of setting fire to all the city's property before?"

"No."

"Or any other city's?"

"Not that I know of."

"It's a very special case then, and a special case requires special methods. When I see a man at four fires I'm going to watch him. And, believe me, if I ever see one of those two again I'll have him arrested. And that goes double for old limpie hooknose! When you see a man at fire after fire; when you chase him and he risks his life to escape from you; when someone very much like him, in a place where you suspect him of being, leaps out at you and all but does you in; when someone very like him twice hunts you in a marsh where you're trying to enjoy yourself, you can't help but feel that you're on the right track."

"Does sound like there was something in it," argued the Chief. "But, after all, you have positively identified the man only twice, at the two fires, and on neither of these occasions was he doing anything he could be arrested for. If he were to walk into this room at this very moment you might take him to jail, but unless he happened to be carrying damaging evidence on his person you'd have to turn him loose. You really haven't anything on him—and you can't hold an innocent man."

"He ran when we chased him."

"Honest people often do that."

"Well," Johnny paused in thought, "you wait. Give me time. I'll bring you something yet, see if I don't!"

That evening as Johnny descended to the ground floor on his way to keep his appointment with Mazie, he was surprised to find an orange wrapper in the box behind the door. So Ben Zook had remembered the signal!

"Ben Zook," he whispered, "he has something to tell me. That man has been back on Ben's island. I must go out there. I wish—" he paused, irresolute, "no, I

promised Mazie, and I won't go back on my word. I'll go out and see Ben Zook when I come back—if it's not too late, and I imagine it's never too late for him.”

CHAPTER XIV

JOHNNY'S DARK DREAMS

Forest City was a place of many marvels; at least so it had seemed to Mazie in the days when, dressed in rompers, she had come there to play. The moment you entered the gate you came in sight of two very merry giants, reposing upon a carpet of green and dressed in suits of red and white checkers, six inches to each checker, each with his head propped upon an elbow and putting out a red tongue at you.

The giants of course were made of stucco, and the field they reposed upon was the side of the building, also made of stucco. That mattered little. The place was one of enchantment and the merry giants guarded the pleasant mysteries of it all.

Immediately behind the giants was a great room where, for a single thin dime, you might purchase any number of thrills. You might try walking through a revolving tank; walking up a stairway that went down as fast as you went up; sliding down a wooden chute that had ten times as many bumps in it as a dromedary has humps. You might try any number of things that would set you screaming with delight or thrilling with sudden and quite groundless fear.

Nor was this all. There was the skating rink and the City of Venice where you glided in slow moving boats amid stately plaster-of-Paris castles and ancient ruins of the same general composition. There was the palace of mirrors; the chute the chutes; the ferris wheel, and, best and most terrible of all, the roller coaster, a contrivance that, providing you had never ridden upon it before, was capable of crowding a great many thrills into a short minute of time.

To Mazie and Johnny, who, after all, were yet quite young, this place had never lost its charm. They entered into the gayety as wildly as the rest; at least Johnny

had on every other occasion. This time Mazie found him every now and again pausing to stand and stare at the teeming thousands of men, women and children. He would stare for a full minute, then with a sudden start would say:

“C’mon, let’s go in here,” or “Let’s go over there.”

At last, after leading him to a refreshment stand where they ordered a cooling drink, Mazie turned to him with a sudden question:

“What’s the matter with you to-night?”

“I don’t know,” said Johnny slowly. “Mazie, do you believe in premonitions?”

“What’s that? Some new religion?”

“No. It’s seeing things before they come to pass.”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Well, it’s strange. C’mon, let’s go over there and sit down.”

“There!” he exclaimed a moment later as they sat on a bench, with the throngs marching, parade-like, past them, “There! I saw it again!”

“It’s like this,” he said, mopping his brow. “I’ll be walking along here looking at those faces—mostly happy faces, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“They ought to be happy. This is their play time and their play place.”

“Yes, Johnny, but what then?”

“Why, then of a sudden I see the look on those faces change. A look of terror comes upon them. I seem to see them crowding and crushing, trampling upon one another as they try in mad despair to escape from something.” Again he mopped his brow.

“Escape from what, Johnny?” Mazie whispered.

“Fire,” Johnny whispered tensely.

Then, gripping the girl's arm until it hurt, he fairly hissed: "Mazie, I tell you this place is doomed! I can see it all too plain. It's a premonition, a warning of the firebug. If only I knew when and how!"

"You only dream it," said Mazie. "The old fires and firebugs have got on your nerves."

"No, Mazie," said Johnny more soberly, "it's more than that. Perhaps you might call it a hunch. It's all of that. It's the thing to expect. That firebug has burned school houses, a recreation center, the zoo. He seems to be bent on destroying everything that brings happiness to people. Why not this place next? And think what it would mean, Mazie! Think of ten thousand, maybe twenty or thirty thousand people, half of them children, gliding in boats through the City of Venice; children on the roller coaster and the chute the chutes; children a hundred feet in air on the Ferris wheel; board walks thronged with people; and then, of a sudden, the cry of 'FIRE! FIRE!' My God, Mazie, think! Think! Mazie, somehow I must get that man!"

"Johnny," said Mazie, "are there any people in the world who hate happiness?"

"Plenty of them, I suppose; enemies of happiness."

"Don't you think your firebug is one of them?"

"He might be."

"If he isn't, what could be his motive? He has nothing to gain."

"No; that's right. Most fires that are set are set for gain. A man secretly moves his insured stock away, then sets fire to his building, or hires some firebug to do it, that he may collect insurance on goods that were not burned. There is nothing of that in this. Sometimes revenge is the cause. But what could one man have against a whole city?"

"What could he?"

"Nothing. Our firebug must be an enemy of happiness."

"Why don't you have the Chief round up all such persons? Your firebug might be among them."

“That might work. I’ll suggest it. Those people, though, are hard to find.”

“Come on,” said Johnny after a moment’s thought, “let’s get out of here, it makes me uncomfortable staying here. I’m afraid I’ll see it again.”

They left the grounds and took a car for Mazie’s house. There, amid the cushions in Mazie’s cozy corner and with a cup of steaming cocoa before him, Johnny managed to snatch from this night of unhappy dreams one little moment of happiness.

After that, having thought of his resolve to visit Ben Zook yet that night, he rose and bade Mazie good-night.

“Good-night, Johnny,” she smiled as they parted, “and good luck.”

“Let us hope for it,” Johnny’s smile was a dubious one.

CHAPTER XV

BEN ZOOK'S DIAMONDS

In the earlier days of Johnny's experiences on the Chicago river, he had made many strange friends. Among them was an old man who owned a boat, a clumsy but quite seaworthy craft in which he was accustomed to paddle about the river and at times even on the lake. This boat had been kept in a small brick structure close to the base of a wharf. The old man had once shown Johnny where he kept the key and had told him to help himself to the boat whenever he needed it for a short trip. He had not seen this old man since his return to the city.

"Wonder if he's still alive, and if his boat and the key are still there?" he said to himself as he neared the river. "If it is, that's the surest way to get out to Ben Zook's island."

A few moments' walk brought him to the spot. The key was there in its old place and, once the door was open, Johnny found the boat in its place and in good repair. The grips of the oars were worn smooth from recent use. A warm feeling swept over Johnny at this discovery. In this ever changing world it is good to discover that an old time friend is still in the land of the living.

"Just take you out for a little exercise," he whispered to the boat as he sent her gliding into the water.

It was a glorious night for a row. A low-hanging, golden moon, a lake that was ripply but not too rough, and balmy night air—who could ask for more? Johnny's splendid muscles relaxed and expanded, expanded and relaxed with the harmony of a well directed orchestra.

"Fine!" he breathed, "I'll soon be there."

He was, too; almost sooner than he wished. He regretted the necessity of bringing this grand little trip to an end, but the hour was late.

Just as he turned to leave the boat a faint delicious odor smote his nostrils.

“Hot dog!” he exclaimed as he went racing over the rubbish heaps that lay between the shore and Ben’s cabin.

In his eagerness he forgot that Ben Zook was not expecting him.

The look of alarm which appeared on the little old man’s face as he sprang to his feet at sound of footsteps sent a stab of self-reproach to the boy’s heart.

“It’s only me, Ben, only Johnny Thompson!” he shouted reassuringly.

The next moment he was shaking the island hermit’s hand and sniffing delightedly.

“Hot dog!” he said again.

“Yep, Johnny, you diagnosed the case. Old man eatin’ hot dog this time of night. Ought to die of indigestion. Draw up a chair and help yourself.

“Don’t fall over my heatin’ plant,” he warned as Johnny, taking a step backward, struck something that gave forth a hollow sound.

“What is it?” he asked.

“My heatin’ plant; goin’ to be when I get her installed. Goin’ to be good’n cold out here this winter. House is too small for a stove. Goin’ to be stylish, I am; have a outside hot water plant. That old tank is good as new. There’s old pipe enough round the dumps to make my coils and radiation. I’ll borrow tools some day and put her together.

“Johnny,” the old man exclaimed as he helped him to a piping hot frankfurter on a stick, then settled back in a huge arm chair, “you’d be surprised at the things that get brought out here. This chair now; pretty nifty, eh?”

“Looks all right.”

“Found her out here. There’s about everything you want out here; bricks, coal, wood, milk bottles, cookin’ utensils, three or four baby buggies an’ everything else.

“And, Johnny,” his voice dropped almost to a whisper, “the other day I found something that looks real valuable. Mebby you’ll take it over town an’ see. Mebby you would, Johnny. They wouldn’t think nothin’ of it if you had it, but if I took it over an’ it was the real thing, they’d take me by the neck an’ say: ‘Ben, you been stealin’.’”

Going back into the back corner of his house, he loosened a brick in the floor and drew out a small black velvet case.

“There’t is, Johnny. Saw it stickin’ out from the end of a heap of ashes. Wind’d been blowin’ middlin’ stiff an’ had blowed a lot o’ fine stuff away so it showed. Open her up.”

Johnny started as the lid was lifted. A flash of light that made the firelight seem dim had struck his eye.

“Diamonds,” he breathed.

“I dunno, Johnny. I thought it might be so.”

Reaching up, Johnny took a small mirror from the wall. Then, taking a diamond set in a pin from the case, he drew it across the glass. There followed a scratching sound. As he lifted the diamond away he saw a distinct white line on the glass.

“Looks like the real thing,” he said in a low tone. “Can’t be quite sure. And what a lot of ’em! This one, a brooch with six; a lavalliere with four; two ear-rings with one each; and four loose ones. If they’re real, they’re a fortune. Been stolen, I suppose?”

“That’s what I figured, Johnny. Stole, then the thief had a hard time to make a clean getaway. He hides ’em in a ash can, intendin’ to come back for ’em. The ashman comes along and away they go.”

“Might be right,” said Johnny.

“You’ll take ’em over and see about ’em, Johnny?”

“Glad to.” He put the case in his pocket.

“Have another hot dog, Johnny?”

“Sure will.”

“You got my message? The orange wrapper?”

Johnny nodded.

“He’s been at it again.”

“Who? At what?”

“That big stooped man with a limp. He’s been out here again, standin’ on the shore close to the city an’ shakin’ his fists an’ cursin’ worse’n a pirate.”

“He has?” Johnny was surprised. “What did you do?”

“Well, I tried to get close to him but a stone rolled under my foot an’ I guess he heard me. Anyway, he went lopin’ off like a antelope, an’ that’s all I saw of him.”

“Queer he’d come back out here,” Johnny mused. Then of a sudden a thought struck him. Perhaps this man was not a firebug at all, but a thief. Perhaps this case of diamonds had not been brought out here in a dump wagon, but by this strange man. Perhaps he had hidden it here. Perhaps there were other cases hidden on the island. He thought of the diamond merchant’s place on Randolph Street, and of that man Knobs haunting the same building. What if Knobs and the hooked nose man with the limp were in a partnership of crime? Well, at least it was something to think about.

“Do you know, Johnny,” said Ben Zook, suddenly changing the subject, “I’ve got to sort of like this island. ’Tain’t much account as it is, all broken bricks and dust, but in time grass would grow on it—tall grass that waves and sort of sighs in the breeze. I’d like it a lot, then, Johnny.” Ben’s voice grew earnest “I’d like to own this island; like to have it always to myself.”

“You don’t want this island, Ben,” said Johnny quietly. “Let me tell you what it’s going to be like, and then I’m sure you wouldn’t want it all to yourself. Ben, bye-and-bye all this rough ground is going to be smoothed down. The island will be broadened and fine rich dirt will be hauled on. Grass will be sown and pretty soon it will all be green. Trees will be planted and squirrels will come to live in them.”

“I’d like that, Johnny.”

“There will probably be a gravel walk winding in and out among the trees,” Johnny continued. “Tired women with little children, women from those hot cramped flats you know of in the heart of the city, will come here with their children. They’ll sit on the grass and let the cool lake breeze fan their cheeks while their children go frolicking away after the squirrels or throw crumbs to pigeons and sparrows.

“There’ll be a lagoon between this island and the shore, a lagoon of smooth, deep water. There will be boat houses and nice clean-hearted boys will bring nice girls out here to take them riding in the boats.

“And perhaps on a fine Sunday afternoon there will be a band concert and thousands will come out to hear it. But you know, Ben, if you had it all to yourself they couldn’t do any of these things. You don’t really want it now, do you, Ben?”

“No, Johnny, I don’t.”

For a time Ben was thoughtful. When at last he spoke his voice sounded far away.

“I’ve tried never to be selfish, Johnny. Guess mebbe if I’d held on to things more, not given so many fellows that was down and out a boost, I’d have more of my own. That’s a fine dream you got for Ben Zook’s island. I’d be mighty proud of it, Johnny. I shore would.” Again he was silent for a long time.

“Johnny,” he said at last, “do you see that path of gold the moon’s a paintin’ on the lake?”

“Yes, Ben.”

“Sort of reminds me of a notion I had when I was a boy about the path to Heaven. Foolish notion, I guess; sort of thought when the time come you just walked right up there.

“Foolish notion; but Johnny, here’s a sort of idea I’ve worked out settin’ thinkin’ here all by myself. It’s a heap of fun to live, Johnny. I get a lot out of it; it’s just like I’d never grown up, like I was just a boy playin’ round.

“And you know, Johnny, when I was a boy there was a big family of us and we always had a lot to do. I’d be playin’ with the other boys, and then suddenly my mother’d call:

“‘Ben, come here.’

“Just like that. And I’d go, Johnny; always went straight off, but before I went I’d say:

“‘Well, so long, fellers, I got to go now.’ I’d say it just like that.

“And you know, Johnny, I’ve been playin’ round most of my life an’ havin’ a lot of fun, even if other folks do call it workin’, so when that last call comes from somewhere way up above I sort of have a feelin’ that it’ll come from someone a lot bigger an’ wiser than me, just like my mother was when I was a boy. An’ I hope I’ll be brave enough to say, just as I used to say then:

“‘Well, good-bye fellers, I got to go now.’ Don’t you hope so, Johnny?”

“I hope so, Ben,” Johnny’s voice had grown husky.

“An’, Johnny, when my mother called me it wasn’t ever because she felt contrary and wanted to spoil my fun; it was always because she had something useful she wanted me to do for the bunch. I’m sort of hopin’, Johnny, when that last call comes it’ll be for the same reason, because the one that’s a lot bigger an’ wiser than me had got somethin’ useful he wants me to do for the bunch of us. Do you think it’ll be that way, Johnny?”

“I—I’m sure it will, Ben. But Ben, you’re not very old. That time’s a long way off.”

“I hope so, Johnny. It’s a grand privilege to live. But you can’t tell, Johnny; you

can't, can you now?"

For a long time after that they sat there in silence. Johnny was slowly beginning to realize that he liked this strange little Ben Zook with his heart of gold.

"Look, Johnny!" Ben exclaimed. "A fire!"

"What! Another?" cried Johnny.

"Down there by the water front."

Johnny followed his gaze to the south where there was a great blaze against the sky.

"It's queer," he said after ten seconds of watching. "It doesn't really seem to be on the shore. Looks as if it were on the far end of this island."

"The island, Johnny? What could burn like that out here? Look at her leap toward the sky!"

"All the same, it is. Come on, Ben. We may learn something. Arm yourself, Ben. It may mean a fight."

As he said this Johnny picked up a scrap of gas pipe two feet long. "I've not forgotten what you said about striking first and arguing after," he chuckled.

"I'll take the hand grenades," said Ben, loading an arm with half bricks.

Thus armed, they hurried away over a rough path that ran the length of the island.

They had not covered half the distance to the end when the flare of light began to die down. It vanished with surprising rapidity. Scarcely had they gone a dozen paces, after it began to wane, when the place where it had been, for lack of that brilliant illumination, appeared darker than the rest of the island.

"What about that?" Ben Zook stopped short in his tracks.

"Come on! Come fast!" exclaimed Johnny, determined to arrive at the scene of this strange spectacle before the last glowing spark had blinked out.

As he rushed along pell-mell, stumbling over a brick here, leaping a mound of clay there, quite heedless of any danger that might surround him, he might have proven a fair target for a shot from ambush.

No shot came, and in time he came to a comparatively level spot of sand in the center of which there glowed a few coals.

After bending over these for an instant he scraped away the last remaining sparks with his bit of gas pipe, then stood there silently waiting for the thing to cool.

“What was it?” Ben asked as he came up.

“Don’t know.”

Johnny drew a flashlight from his pocket and threw its circle of light on the spot.

“Listen!” whispered Ben, pulling at Johnny’s coat sleeve and pointing toward the lagoon. Faintly, yet quite distinctly, Johnny heard the creak of oar locks.

“A boat,” he whispered back.

“Yes, Johnny, they was somebody out here. And I bet you it was—that man!”

“The limping man?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what do you suppose was the reason for the bonfire?” Johnny bent over to pick up a fragment of black cardboard heavily coated with black paint. This was curved about, forming the segment of a circle. The inside of the circle was black and charred like the inside of a giant firecracker that has been exploded.

Immediately Johnny’s mind was rife with solutions for this fresh mystery. The men were thieves. They had come to this deserted spot at night to divide their loot and to burn any damaging evidence, such as papers, wrappers and whatever else might be connected with it. They were smugglers. The flare of light was a signal to some craft lying far out on the lake, telling them that all was clear and that they might run in. Other possible solutions came to him, but not one of them seemed at all certain. So, in the end, having pocketed the one bit of evidence, he

walked back with Ben to his shack. There he promised Ben to return soon to sit out a watch with him on the island; then going down to his boat, he pushed her off.

An hour later he was in his own bed fast asleep, with Ben Zook's diamonds safe under his pillows.

His last waking thought had been that if those were real diamonds there would be a reward for their return, and that the reward should go to Ben Zook. It would at least be a start toward the purchase of his long-dreamed-of poultry ranch in the country.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STRANGE BLACK CYLINDERS

The forenoon was all but gone when Johnny stirred in his bed, then sat up abruptly to stare about him. He had been dreaming, and woven into the web of his dreams was the face and figure of his one time fellow adventurer, Panther Eye, known familiarly as "Pant." He had dreamed of seeing the dark fights and narrow escapes, and had dreamed of seeing red lights against a night sky, and blinding white flares. In his dreams he had again fought a mountain feud. All this with Pant at his side.

"I wish he were here!" Johnny exclaimed as he threw back the covers and leaped from his bed. "He'd put the thing together letter by letter, word by word, like a cross-word puzzle, and somehow make a whole of it. The fire at the school; the pink-eyed stranger; the more terrible fire that endangered Mazie's life; the big stooping man with a limp; the fire at the Zoo; my experience at Ben Zook's island and at the marsh; for him all these would fit together somehow. But to me they are little more than fragments of the sort of stuff life's made of. Where's the affair to end? I'd like to know that."

Seizing a pen, he wrote a telegram to Pant. Pant, as you will remember from reading that other book, "The Hidden Trail," had remained behind to finish a task he had begun in the Cumberland Mountains.

"No," Johnny said to himself after reading the telegram, "he wouldn't come," and he tore the paper in four pieces and threw it in the waste basket.

Drawing the fragment of a black cylinder from his pocket, he studied it carefully.

"That ought to mean something to me," he mumbled, "but it doesn't; not a thing in the world."

From a box in the corner he dragged a desk telephone, the one he had salvaged from the Zoo.

“This,” he said, “would tell a story if only it could talk. And why can’t you?” He shook his fist at the instrument. “What’s a telephone for if not for talking?”

Since the instrument did not respond, for the twentieth time Johnny unwound its wires and sat there staring at them. There was the usual pair of rather heavily insulated wires and a second pair of lighter ones, about twenty feet long.

“I ought to know what those second wires are for,” he said again, “but I don’t. I told the Chief of Detectives about it, and he laughed at me and said: ‘Do you think there’s someone with a tongue hot enough to set fire to a house just by talking over the telephone? There’s some hot ones, but not as hot as that!’ He laughed at his own joke, then saw me politely out of the room, thinking all the time, I don’t doubt, that I was a young nut with a cracked head. So, old telephone, if your secret is to be revealed you’ll have to tell it, or I’ll be obliged to discover it.”

Putting the telephone back in the box, he took the jewel case from beneath his pillow. As he saw the jewels in the light of day he was more sure than ever that they were genuine.

“I fancy,” he mused, “that the Chief of Detectives will be a trifle more interested in this than in my telephone, though in my estimation it’s not half as important. But of course there’s sure to be a reward. I mustn’t forget that. It’s to be for Ben Zook.”

The Chief of Detectives was interested, both interested and surprised. He set his best clerk working on the record of stolen diamonds. In less than five minutes the clerk had the record before him.

“These diamonds,” he said, looking hard at Johnny, “were stolen from Barker’s on Madison Street two weeks ago last night. The value is four thousand dollars.”

“And the reward?” said Johnny calmly.

“Eh, what?”

“How much reward?”

“Nothing’s been said about a reward.”

“All right. Good-bye.” Calmly pocketing the case, Johnny started from the door.

“Here! Here! Stop that young fool!” stormed the Chief of Detectives.

“Well,” said Johnny defiantly, “what sort of cheap piker is this man Barker? It’s not for myself, but for a friend who needs it.”

“Tell me about it,” said the detective, bending over and beckoning him close.

Johnny told the story so well that the Chief got Barker on the wire and pried an even five hundred dollars out of that tight fisted merchant before he would promise the return of the diamonds.

“That’ll set your friend Zook up in business,” smiled the Chief of Detectives as a half hour later he handed Johnny a valuable yellow slip. “And say, weren’t you in here a day or two ago with some story about a telephone and a firebug?”

“Yes sir.”

“Didn’t take much stock in it, did I?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“You bring that back and tell me about it again. I thought you were a fresh kid and a bit addled, but by Jove, you’ve got a head on your shoulders and it ain’t stuffed with excelsior above the ears, either.”

“I’ll do what you say,” said Johnny, “but first I’d like to run down another hunch if you don’t object.”

“No objections. Run down as many as you care to. Bring ’em all in. Mebby I can help you, and more’n likely you can help me.”

Johnny left the place with a jubilant heart. He had enough money now to buy Ben Zook a small ranch. He knew the very place, a half acre, ten miles from the city limits, a sloping bank with oak trees on it and a cabin at its edge, and a touch of green pasture land with a brook at the bottom. Wouldn’t Ben Zook revel in it? And wouldn’t his salvaged poultry thrive there?

He wanted to row right out and tell Ben about it at once. Had he been able to read the future he would most assuredly have done so, but since he could only see one step ahead, and had planned to revisit the marsh and have a look at that black shack at its edge, in the end he cashed the check for five hundred and deposited it in a savings account for safe keeping. After that he took a train for the marsh.

An hour later, with a feeling of dread that was not far from fear, and was closely connected with his startling and mysterious experiences on two other occasions, he found himself approaching the black shack.

Since this shack was built on the side of the marsh nearest to the lake, it was flanked by low, rolling sand-dunes. This made it easy for Johnny to approach the shack without being seen by anyone who might be inside.

After crawling to within fifty feet of it he lay down behind a low clump of willows, determined to watch the place for awhile. After an hour of patient watching, his patience deserted him. Gripping something firmly in his hand, he advanced boldly forward until he was within arm's reach of the building.

There for a time he stood listening. His footsteps on the sand made no sound. If there were people in the shack they could not be aware of his approach.

Nerving himself for quick action and possible attack, he stepped round the corner to look quickly in at the window.

Then he laughed softly to himself. There had been no need for all this precaution. Inside the shack was but a single room. In that room there was one person, and that person lay stretched full length upon a couch with his face turned toward the wall. To all appearances he was sound asleep.

Seeing this, Johnny proceeded to make a calm survey of the room. In one corner stood a table and chair. On the table were dirty dishes, an empty can, and a loaf of bread.

In a back corner stood a rifle, and across from that some strange looking black cylinders. It was the cylinders that interested Johnny. But realizing that he could get a better look at them from the only other window of the place, he contented himself, for the moment, with a careful look at the man. The face could not be seen, but there was about the large, heavy frame and rounded shoulders

something vaguely familiar. Still, after all was said and done, Johnny could not be sure that he had ever seen the fellow before, and certainly he did not feel disposed to waken him to find out.

He passed around to the other window and for a full five minutes studied those black cylinders. They were strange affairs, about four inches in diameter and two feet in length. They resembled huge firecrackers coated black. Instead of fuse, however, each one had on its end two small shiny screws such as are found at the top of a dry battery.

“Probably what they are,” was Johnny’s mental comment, “just big dry batteries.”

Yet he could not quite convince himself that this was true. In the end, however, he concluded that was the nearest he could come to it at a guess, and since a guess was all he was to get that day, he moved away from the cabin and was soon lost in the sand dunes.

“Never saw any batteries half that big,” he grumbled to himself as he trudged along, “and besides, what would he be doing with them out here?”

Again he trudged forward for a half mile in silence. Then, of a sudden he came to a dead stop, turned about, made as if to retrace his steps, then appearing to think better of it, stood there for a moment in deep meditation.

“It might be true,” he murmured to himself. “It don’t seem possible, yet it might be, and if it is, then the fellow could be miles away when the thing happens. And if it is true, then that solves it.”

“But then,” he added thoughtfully as he resumed his march toward the station, “it seems altogether too fanciful.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNANSWERED CALL

Since there were no new clues to be followed out, and because he had grown tired of haunting the central fire station with its incessant clatter of telegraph instruments and its eternal flashes of light, at ten o'clock that night Johnny went again to the river and taking his old friend's boat from its place of concealment rowed slowly toward Ben Zook's island. The lake was calm as a millpond and there was no reason for strenuous rowing. Then, too, he wished to think as he rowed. Johnny was one of those fellows who thought best in action.

His thoughts that night were long, long thoughts, long and tangled. It was as if he had a half dozen skeins of yarn all tangled together and was trying to find the ends of each and to disentangle it from the others.

His mind was still working upon those black cylinders out in the black shack. He had a feeling that the man he had seen asleep out there was none other than the one who had twice gone gunning for him out there in the marsh. If that were true and if he were the man who had been at the Simons Building fire and at the Zoo and later on Ben Zook's island, then those black cylinders must have some significance.

He smiled at this complicated chain of circumstances. "Fat chance!" he murmured to himself. "And yet that might be true, and if it is there's some connection between the telephone with double wiring and that scrap of black pasteboard we found on the island after that blaze.

"Black pasteboard!" he exclaimed suddenly. "That's it! The piece we found is part of one of those cylinders!"

"But if it is," he said more soberly a moment later, "then why would they burn it

out here on Ben's island? Lot's of sense to that!"

So in the end he got nowhere in his thought unravelling process. However, his arms were working mechanically all the time and he was nearing the island. As he thought of this he suddenly sat straight up and, as if eager to reach his goal, began to row with all his power.

He was eager, too, for he suddenly recalled that he was bound on a very pleasant mission. Was he not to tell Ben Zook that at any time he wished he might leave the island for a place of trees, green grass, flowing water and a real cabin of fair dimensions? Small wonder that he hurried.

As he neared the shore his heart warmed at thought of the smile that would come to the face of the kindly, cheerful, little old man.

"Surely," he thought to himself, "in spite of the fact that he's a bit strange and uncouth, he's a real gentleman after all and deserves a great deal more than is coming to him."

He smiled as he thought of the little chicken coop Ben Zook had showed him. A low-roofed affair with a roost of bars about three feet long; five chickens on the roost, blinking at the light; a single goose in a corner with his head under his wing; this was Ben's poultry house and his brood. There'd be more to it now—a real chicken house and perhaps a hundred fine fowls. It would be a Paradise for Ben Zook.

As he mused happily on these things his boat touched the shore. Springing out nimbly, he dragged the boat up the beach and turned his face toward Ben's house.

At that moment, as a cloud passing over the moon sent a chill down his spine, something seemed to whisper to him that all was not well. That he might dispel this dark foreboding, he lifted up his voice in a cheery shout:

"Ben Zook! Oh, Ben Zook, I'm coming."

The distant skyscrapers, like some mountainside, caught his words and flung them back to him, seeming at the same time to change his "Oh" to "old."

"Ben Zook! Old Ben Zook!"

Again and again, more faintly, and yet more faintly:

“Ben Zook! Old Ben Zook. Ben Zook—Zook.”

As the echo trailed away in the distance, a foreboding came over Johnny. There had come no answering call.

Still he tried to cheer himself. “He’s asleep,” Johnny told himself. “Little wonder, too. I was out here till near morning.”

After that he trudged in silence over the piles of broken brick, sand and clay.

As he came at last within sight of Ben’s place he was cheered by the sight of red coals on the grate.

“It’s not been long since he was here, anyway,” he said.

Yet his feeling that Ben was not in his house proved true. The place was empty.

“Probably gone for a stroll down the beach,” was his mental comment as he dropped down in Ben’s big arm chair.

The chair was a comfortable one. The fire, with a chill breeze blowing off the lake, was cheering too, yet there was no comfort for Johnny. He had not been seated two minutes when he was again upon his feet.

“I don’t like it,” he muttered.

The next moment he was chiding himself for a fool. “He’ll be here in a moment and I’ll tell him about the reward.” Johnny smiled at the thought.

Walking to the tiny poultry house, he opened the door and, flicking on his flashlight, looked within. The calm assurance of chickens on their roost, of the single goose who did not so much as take his head from beneath his wing, did much to allay his fears.

“Just look about a bit, anyway,” he mused. “May find another case of diamonds,” he added with a forced chuckle.

As he stepped over the first mound of clay he thought he detected a sound

behind him. Stopping dead in his tracks, while little tufts of hair appeared to rise at the back of his neck, he said in a low, steady tone:

“Ben. Ben Zook.”

There came no answer, no other sound.

He crossed another mound, and yet another. Then again there came a sound as of a brick loosened from a pile.

“Ben. Ben Zook,” he called softly. Once more no answer.

Then, just as he was about to go forward again, having thrown his light ten feet before him, he started back in horror. There at his feet lay a dead man!

Trembling in every limb, feeling sick as if about to fall in a faint, yet battling it back, he stood still in his tracks for such a space of time as it might take to count one hundred.

Then, finding he could once more trust his wobbly knees, he moved forward three paces, threw his light at his feet, took one good steady look, put out a hand and picked something up, held it for ten seconds, bent low for a better look, then like one who had seen a ghost he went racing and staggering across the piles toward the shore and his boat.

Fear lent him wings. Nor did he stop at the shore. With one motion he shoved the boat into the water; with another, regardless of wet feet, he sprang aboard and before he could think twice found himself well out into the lake.

There at last he dropped his oars to sit staring back at the island and to at last slump down in his seat.

His mind, first in a whirl and next in a dead calm, was trying to tell his senses something that seemed impossible.

At last, raising his face to the sky, he said solemnly:

“Ben Zook is dead! Poor, harmless, golden hearted Ben Zook! Someone killed him. I’m going after the police boat now. The police will do what they can to find the man. But, by all that’s good, I will find the murderer and he will pay the

price for his cowardly crime.”

Having thus made his vow, he found that strength, hope and courage came ebbing back. Seizing his oars he rowed rapidly toward the city.

From that time until the end Johnny conducted his search with such reckless daring that it could bring but one of two things: A crown of triumph or a quiet six feet of sod in a church-yard.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RETURN OF PANTHER EYE

After accompanying the police boat to the island and having watched in silence the investigation made by the police, which was followed by a short search for the man who had visited the island with such tragic results, Johnny returned at once to the city and there made straight toward the river bridge.

Imagine his surprise when, upon setting foot on the bridge, he discovered light shining through the crack left by the closed shutters of his window.

“Waiting for me,” he muttered. “Wonder which of them it is? Well, let them wait,” he added fiercely, “I’m not so defenseless as I might seem.” He put a hand to his side pocket. A friendly policeman, finding Johnny unarmed as they searched the island, had pressed a small automatic upon him and had forgotten to take it back. Johnny was now thankful for the oversight.

Without a second’s hesitation, but keeping a sharp lookout that he might not be ambushed by some guard stationed outside, he crossed the bridge, dodged down a narrow alley and having reached the ground floor door that led to the back stairs, paused to listen.

Having heard no sound, he pushed open the door, closed it noiselessly behind him, then went tip-toeing softly up the steps. At the second landing he paused to listen, yet he heard no sound.

“That’s queer,” he whispered as he resumed his upward climb.

As he reached his own door he recalled an old copy-book axiom: “Delays are dangerous.” So, gripping his automatic with one hand, he turned the knob with the other and threw the door wide open.

Imagine his surprise at seeing a single figure slumped down in a chair, apparently fast asleep.

The person had his back to him. There was something vaguely familiar about that back. Slowly a smile of pleasant anticipation spread over Johnny's face.

"If it only were," he whispered.

Tip-toeing to a position which gave him a side view of the still motionless figure, he stared for a second, then there came upon his face an unmistakable smile as he exclaimed:

"Pant! You old trump you!"

It was indeed Pant, the Panther Eye you have known for some time, that strange boy who had accomplished so many seemingly impossible things through his power to see in the night and to perform other magical tricks.

"Why, it's you!" said Pant, waking up and dragging off his heavy glasses to have a good look at Johnny. "I figured you'd be back sooner or later."

"Pant," said Johnny, lowering himself unsteadily into a chair, "there was never a time in all my checkered career when I was so glad to see you."

"You must be in pretty deep," grinned Pant, "'powerful deep,' they'd say in the mountains."

"But Pant, what happened?" asked Johnny. "How does it come you left the mountains so soon?"

Pant put on a sad face. "Those mountain people are superstitious, Johnny, terribly superstitious."

"Are they?"

"Are they? Why look, Johnny, we were having a school election down there, regular kind. Everybody wanted his sister or his cousin or his daughter in as teacher. We were about evenly divided and were fighting it out fair enough with the great American institution, the ballot, when an argument came up in which Harrison Crider, their clerk of election, knocked Cal Nolon out of his chair.

Right there is where things began to start. There were fifteen or twenty on a side, all armed and all packed in one room twenty feet square. You can see what it was going to be like, Johnny.” Pant paused to go through the motion of mopping his brow.

“They were all standing there loaded and charged, like bits of steel on the end of a magnet, when a strange thing happened.” He paused to stare at the wall.

“What happened?” asked Johnny.

“Well, sir, it was one of those queer things, ‘plumb quare,’ they’d call it down in the mountains, one of those things you can’t explain—at least most people can’t.”

“But what did happen?” Johnny demanded.

“That’s what I’m coming to,” drawled Pant. “Well, sir, believe me or not, there came such a brilliant flash of light as was never before seen on sea or land (at least that’s what they all say. I didn’t see it; had my eyes shut tight all the time). And after that, so they say, there was darkness, a darkness so black you couldn’t see your hand. ‘Egyptian darkness,’ that’s what they called it, Johnny. You’ve heard of that. It tells about it in the Bible, the plague of darkness.

“It only lasted three minutes; but would you believe it, Johnny, when the three minutes were up there wasn’t a bit of fight left in them? No sir, limp as rags, every man of ’em. And the election after that was as calm and sedate as a Quaker sewing society.

“But, Johnny,” Pant’s face took on a sad expression, “would you believe it? After it was all over those superstitious people accused me of the whole affair; said I was a witch and that I produced that darkness by incantation. Now Johnny, I leave it to you, was that fair? Would you think that of me?”

“No, Pant,” said Johnny with a grin, “I wouldn’t. I know you’re no witch, and I know any incantation you might indulge in wouldn’t get you a thing. But as for creating that darkness, I’d say it was a slight trick compared with others I’ve seen you do.”

“Ah, Johnny,” sighed Pant, “I can see the whole world’s against me.”

“But Johnny!” he exclaimed, changing suddenly from his attitude of mock gloom to one of alert interest, “what’s the lay? To tell the honest truth, I’ve been bored to death down there. I knew if I could find you I’d be able to mix in with something active. So here I am. What have you to offer?”

“Plenty!” said Johnny. “And, thank God, you’re here to take a hand.”

CHAPTER XIX

A DEN OF THE UNDERWORLD

After dragging the Zoo telephone from its box and taking the scrap of black cardboard from a shelf, Johnny sat down to tell his story. He told it, too, from beginning to end; from the school fire to the discovery of Ben Zook, dead upon his island.

When the story had ended Pant sat for a long time slumped down in his chair. From his motionless attitude and his staring eyes, one might have thought him in a trance.

He came out of this with a start and at once began to reel off to Johnny the story he had just been told; only now there was association, connection, and a proper sequence to it all. He had put the puzzle together, piece by piece. No, it was more than that. The fires were one puzzle; Johnny's affairs at the island another; and those at the marsh still another. After solving each of these separately and putting each small part in its place, Pant had joined them all in one three-fold puzzle board that was complete to the last letter.

"Sounds great!" said Johnny breathlessly as Pant concluded. "If all that is true we have only to find the man."

"Find that man!" said Pant in a tone that carried conviction.

Twelve o'clock the following night found Johnny and Pant in a strange place. Standing with their backs against the unpainted and decaying side of a frame building, they were watching a door.

The frame building formed one wall to an alley which was in reality more path than an alley; a path of hard-beaten mud that ran between two buildings.

Although the path ran through from street to street, the hard beaten part of the path ended before the door which the two boys were watching.

“Here comes another,” Pant whispered, drawing Johnny back into the shadows.

“And another,” Johnny whispered back.

Two shadow-like creatures, appearing to hug the darkness, came flitting down the hard-trodden path. As each reached the end of the path the door opened slightly, the shadows flitted in, and again the door went dark.

“Like shades of evil ones entering their last, dark abode,” whispered Johnny with a shudder.

They were watching that door because they had seen a certain man enter it—a tall, stooping, slouching figure of a man who walked with a decided limp. They had picked up his trail in a more prosperous neighborhood and had followed him at a distance through less and less desirable neighborhoods, down dark streets and rubbish strewn alleys, past barking dogs and beggars sleeping beneath doorsteps, until of a sudden he had turned up this path and entered this door.

“Come on,” Johnny whispered impatiently, “it’s only a cheap eating place. I heard the dishes rattle and caught the aroma of coffee. They’ll pay no attention to us.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Pant grumbled. “Looks like something else to me. But—all right, come on. Only,” he continued, “take a table near the door.”

The place did prove to be some sort of eating place. There were small round tables and steel framed chairs placed about the room. Around some of these tables men and women were seated, playing cards. Openly roaring at good fortune or cursing an evil turn of the deck, they paid no attention whatever to the newcomers.

The card players were for the most part situated in the back of the room. Tables at the front were covered with dishes. Men and women, engaged in eating, smoking and talking, swarmed about these tables.

Indeed, the place was so crowded that for a time Johnny and Pant were at great difficulty to find chairs. At last, as they were backing to a place against the wall,

a small animated being, a slender girl with dark, vivacious eyes, rose and beckoned them to her table. She had been sitting there alone sipping dark coffee.

Bowing his thanks, Johnny accepted a chair and motioned Pant to another. The table was not as near the door as he might have liked, but “beggars cannot be choosers.”

A waiter appeared.

“Coffee and something hot in a bowl,” said Johnny. “You know the kind, red Mex. with plenty of pepper.”

“Make it the same,” said Pant.

“And waiter,” Johnny put out a hand, “something nice for her,” he nodded his head toward the girl. “Anything she’d like.”

“The gentlemen are kind,” said the girl in a foreign accent, “but I have no need. I will have none.”

Since their new-found friend did not accept of their hospitality and did not start a conversation, the two boys sat silently staring about them.

It was a strange and motley throng that was gathered there. Dark Italians and Greeks; a few Irish faces; some Americans; two Mexicans in broad sombreros; three mulatto girls at a table by themselves and a great number of men and women of uncertain nationality.

“There! There he is,” whispered Johnny, casting his eyes at the far corner. “And there, by all that’s good, is Knobs, the New York firebug! They’re at the same table. See! I can’t be mistaken. There’s the same hooked nose, the identical stoop to his shoulders.”

“Together!” exclaimed Pant. “That changes my conclusions a little.”

“Don’t appear to see them,” whispered Johnny. “What are we to do?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps a police raid. But not yet; I want to study them.”

Their bowls of steaming red Mulligan had arrived. They had paid their checks

and had begun to sip the fiery stuff, when of a sudden there came cries of “Jensie! Jensie!” and every eye was turned in their direction.

Johnny felt his face suddenly grow hot. Had he been recognized? This beyond doubt was a den of the underworld. Was this a cry which was but a signal for a “Rush the bulls”?

Since he could not tell, and since everyone remained in his seat, he did not move.

“If the gentlemen will please hold their bowls,” said the girl, smiling as she handed each his bowl.

What did this mean? They were soon to see. Stepping with a fairy-like lightness from floor to chair, and chair to table, the girl made a low bow and then as a piano in a corner struck up a lively air she began a dance on the table top.

It was such a wild, whirling dance as neither of the boys had seen before. It seemed incredible that the whole affair could be performed upon so small a table top. Indeed, at one time Johnny did feel a slight pat upon his knee and realized in a vague sort of way that the velvet slippared foot of this little enchantress had rested there for an instant.

No greater misfortune could have befallen the two boys than this being seated by the dancer’s table. It focussed all eyes upon them. Their detection was inevitable. They expected it. But, coming sooner than they could dream, it caught them unawares. With a suddenness that was terrible, at the end of the applause that followed the girl’s performance, there came a death-like pause, broken by a single hissed-out word.

The next instant a huge man with a great knife gleaming in his hand launched himself at Pant.

Taken entirely unawares, the boy must have been stabbed through and through had it not been for a curious interference. The man’s arm, struck by a sudden weight, shot downward to drive the knife into the floor.

The next instant, as a tremendous uproar began, there came a sudden and terrible flash of light followed by darkness black as ink.

Johnny, having struggled to his feet, was groping blindly about him when a hand gripped his shoulder and a voice whispered:

“This way out.”

At the same moment he felt a tug at the back of his coat.

Moving forward slowly, led by Pant and being tugged at from behind, he at last came to the door and ten seconds later found himself in the outer semi-darkness of the street.

Feeling the tug at his coat lessening, he turned about to see Jencie, the dancing girl.

“Do you know that she saved your life?” he whispered to Pant. “She leaped squarely upon that big villain’s arm.”

“Rode it like I might a mule,” laughed the girl. “And you, Mister,” she turned to Pant, “you are a Devil. You make a terrible light, you then make terrible night. You are a wonderful Devil!” and with a flash of her white teeth she was gone.

“Now what?” asked Johnny.

“We cannot do better than to follow. They will be out at us like a pack of rats in another minute.”

“How about a police raid?”

“Not to-night. It wouldn’t do any good. The birds have flown.”

At this Pant led the way rapidly out of the narrow alley into more frequented and safer ways.

Little did Johnny dream as he crept beneath the covers that night that the following night would see the end of all this little drama in which he had been playing a part. Yet so it was to be.

As for Pant, who slept upon a cot in one corner of Johnny’s room, he was dreaming of a slender figure and of big, dark, Gypsy eyes. He was indulging in romantic thoughts—the first of his life. That Gypsy-like girl of the underworld

den had somehow taken possession of his thoughts. Many times before had he barely escaped death, but never before had his life been saved by a girl.

“She’s a Gypsy,” he whispered to himself, “only a Gypsy girl. But me; who am I? Who knows? Perhaps I am Gypsy myself.”

Through his mind there passed a wish that was more than half prayer: “May the time come when I can repay her.” This wish was to be granted, far sooner than he knew.

CHAPTER XX

JOHNNY STRIKES FIRST

At a quarter of six next evening, at the request of the Fire Chief, Johnny was lurking in the shadows back of the building on Randolph Street that housed such a strange collection of commodities: chemicals, diamonds, juvenile books, novelties and Knobs, the suspected firebug.

Earlier that day a phone call had tipped off the Chief. According to the call, Knobs Whittaker would bear a little extra watching that night. While putting little faith in this tip, the Chief had no desire to neglect the least clue which might assist in bringing to an end the series of disastrous fires which were reflecting great discredit upon his department. Acting upon the tip he had stationed men at every point which Knobs had been seen to frequent.

Johnny's station was this building. He had come around behind to have a look at possible exits there. Having satisfied his mind in this matter, he was about to make his way back along the wall to the street when he was halted by the sudden sound of a truck entering the alley.

Slinking deeper into the shadows, he waited. To his surprise he saw the truck back up at the door of the very building he was watching.

"Going to take something away," was his mental comment.

This thought was at once abandoned when he noted that the light truck was already loaded to capacity.

Climbing down from the seat, the driver and his assistant walked to the door. Finding it locked, the driver beat a tattoo on it with his fist.

“What’s wanted?” demanded a voice as a head was thrust out of a window to the left of the door.

“Open up!” growled the driver. “Got a consignment of chemicals for you.”

“What you coming round this time of day for?”

“Came all the way from Calumet. Had a blow-out.”

“There’s no one here but me,” said the young man, reluctantly unbarring the door. “Boss is gone. Chief clerk’s gone. His assistant is gone. I’m only a sort of apprentice. Haven’t any authority.”

“Well, we can’t dump the goods in the street, can we? It’s going to rain.”

“No, I suppose you can’t,” said the young man, scratching his head doubtfully. “Suppose you’ll have to dump them in here until morning. You’ll have to come round then and check up on them.”

“That’s jake with me.”

The apprentice began clearing a space at the back of the shop. The carters tumbled off bags and boxes, to pile them in the cleared space. After this had been done the steel night doors were closed and the truck drove away.

“They drive as if the devil were after them,” thought Johnny.

Without quite knowing why, he lingered for a time back there in the deepening shadows and as he lingered he caught an unusual sound from one of the rooms above.

“That’s odd, sounds like something heavy being rolled over the floor; a piano, or—or maybe a safe. Wonder why anyone would be doing that this time of the day?”

As it had grown quite dark by this time, he moved around to the front.

From the moment the matter had been called to his attention, this building with its strange assortment of occupants had held a profound interest for Johnny. He suspected Knobs of holding an interest in the Novelty Company, in truth

suspected that floor of being his hangout. He was more than interested in the diamond merchant's place, too. Indeed, he felt that somehow there must be a connection between Knobs and the diamonds.

"Perhaps he means to steal them?" he told himself now as he lingered in the shadow of the building. "But then, there are the burglar alarms. How is he to get around them? Well, we'll see."

An eddy of air sweeping up the street showered him with dust and paper scraps.

"Ugh," he grunted, as he made for the door of the building to escape this little whirlwind, "we're in for a blow; perhaps rain."

"Fiddle!" he exclaimed a moment later, "I promised to go to Forest City with Mazie to-night. Carnival! Last of the season. Told her I'd do it if nothing turned up. But something has turned up, at least the Chief thinks it's going to turn up."

And just then things did turn up; at least one thing did, and not so small either. Treading on air, as if afraid of disturbing the spirit of his dead grandmother, there came tripping down the stair no less a person than Knobs Whittaker!

"Put 'em to sleep with a brick and argue with 'em afterwards," Johnny seemed to be hearing poor old Ben Zook saying.

Knobs was carrying a square black satchel in his hand. His right hip bulged. He did not see Johnny, who stood well back in the shadows. Just as his feet touched the ground floor, as if drawn by a rocket, Knobs shot straight up from the floor to at last topple over in a heap. Johnny's good right hand had spoken. He had obeyed the instructions of old Ben Zook.

Knobs' sleep lasted for scarcely more than ten seconds; long enough, however, for Johnny to explore his hip pocket and draw forth an ugly-looking blue automatic. When Knobs opened his eyes he looked into the muzzle of his own gun.

The art of escape is sometimes cultivated to such a degree of perfection that it becomes automatic. The street door was open. With a motion that could scarcely be called rolling, leaping or gliding, the prostrate man went through that door. Before Johnny could block his escape, or even press the trigger of the automatic, Knobs was gone. One thing was against the fleeing one, however; he had left his

gun and his black case behind.

“Evidence here,” Johnny whispered to himself. “Valuable evidence, beyond a doubt.”

Then, following a rule he had laid down for himself: “Always do the thing that’s least expected,” instead of following the man, he picked up the black bag and sprang lightly up the stairs and out of sight. He did not stop at the first landing, nor the second; but continued to the third, where, after hurrying down the hall, he threw back the iron shutters of the hall window, tossed the bag out, and jumped to the flat roof below. After that he lost no time in making his way down a fire escape to the ground.

After a hasty glance up and down the alley, he gripped the handle of Knobs’ automatic with his right hand, and carrying the black bag in his left, walked with a leisurely and nonchalant air down the alley and out on the side street. To all appearances the street was deserted. Apparently no one had seen him emerge from the alley. He was thankful for that.

Hardly had he walked a dozen paces on that street when there struck his ears a cry that had grown familiar:

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!”

“Fire!” he said to himself. “I wonder where now?” He was to know soon enough.

There is something strange about a city street. Though it be deserted from end to end, let one cry of “Fire!” ring out upon its deserted stillness, and within the space of thirty seconds it is thronging with people. It was so now. In a moment the place was swarming with people.

Johnny Thompson did not join the throng. He was far too wise for that. The black bag he carried contained something of vital interest to that smooth villain, Knobs. Knobs would want it back. Nor would he be alone. There might be twenty of his gang in that crowd. For them to surround Johnny and beat him up in such a mob would be a simple enough matter. He would leave no chance for that. Turning, Johnny sped down an alley, crossed a street, shot down a second alley and, reaching the river, he raced along the wall that lined its banks, climbed the bridge, then to the back of a building, paused once more to listen, then

climbed the stairs to his room.

“Shook them!” he puffed as he bolted the door and carefully placed the black bag under the bed.

His next move was to throw back the steel blinds to his own windows and to look in the direction of that building on Randolph Street that he had just left.

The sight that met his eyes brought an exclamation to his lips.

“Pant!” he called, “Pant! Wake up! If you want to see a fire that is one, come here!”

Tumbling from the cot where he had been sleeping, Pant stumbled toward the window. Then he, too, stared in wonder.

“Talk about quick burners!” exclaimed Johnny. “Did you ever see anything quicker or hotter than that?”

“No,” said Pant solemnly, “I never have.”

The building, filled with chemicals, diamonds, books and novelties, was a white hot furnace. Johnny had seen blast furnaces, open hearths, and the white flames of the Bessemer, but never had he seen a fiercer, hotter flame than this one. Even at this great distance it seemed to fairly scorch his face.

“Enough chemicals in that place to stock an army for the next war,” he said aloud.

At once he thought of the truck load of chemicals that had arrived at a quarter of six, and of the heavy rolling sound he had heard shortly after the truck drove away.

Never in all the history of Chicago had there been a hotter fire. Johnny could see the firemen, forced from one position to another, fall back, back, and back again. They made no attempt to quench this white fury. The best they could do was to throw a water screen against the buildings next to this to prevent disaster from spreading to the entire business district.

“Oh man!” exclaimed Pant. “Only look! Red flames, white flames, purple,

yellow and blue. Must have burned its way through the crust of the earth and turned the thing into a volcano.”

“Chemicals,” said Johnny. He had been looking for an explosion; such an explosion as would wreck every building in the block and perhaps cross the river and shake bricks down upon his own head. But as the moments passed, he began to hope that it would not come. When a quarter of an hour had worn itself slowly away and the fierce flames began to die down, he knew that it would not come, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness for that.

“Pant, I promised Mazie and that little girl we saved from the school fire that we’d go out to Forest City to-night. This is the last night of the Carnival. It’s not too late yet. There’s nothing I can do about that fire over there until it has cooled down. Want to go?”

“I don’t mind,” said Pant. “In fact, I’d rather like to go.”

“All right. Throw on your glad rags and come on.”

A little later, as Johnny locked the door on the outside, he hesitated for a moment. He had thought of the black bag he had thrown under the bed.

“Safe there as anywhere in the world,” he told himself. “I’ll break the lock and look inside to-morrow.”

Then he followed Pant down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI

A TRIP TO FOREST CITY

As the elevated train rattled noisily along over the low roofs of cottages and between endless rows of apartment houses, Johnny Thompson sat staring dreamily at the lattice-like covering of the floor of his car.

He was allowing the events of the past few days to move before his mind's eye. It seemed much like a moving picture. There was a scene showing the central fire station with its leaping yellow lights. A click, a flash, and there was a fire, a city school building burning, a pink-eyed man, a child in the school loft, a tall ladder, he ascended, descended, then searched for the pink-eyed man.

A second flash of light, a second fire; this time the great Simons Building, and Mazie in a tenth-story window. There was the fireman's monkey, and again the pink-eyed man, also for the first time the man of the hooked nose, the stoop and limp.

Once more a flash of white film: a boat in a marsh, black birds and a mysterious rifle shot.

A third fire, the Zoo. A wild chase ending at the breakwater, and after that a fight on the island and little old Ben Zook.

Then again the marsh, a boat and Mazie, and after that the mysterious assailant. Then came that tragic scene, the death of poor, old Ben Zook.

The den of the underworld, the dancing girl, Jencie; the attack, Pant's life saved by the girl, the mysterious light, mystifying darkness, then the outer air.

The building on Randolph Street, the mysterious load of chemicals, the fight

with Knobs Whittaker. Flight. The fire that seemed hotter than the flames of a volcano.

“And here we are,” he whispered to himself. “How does it all connect up? Or does it? Sometimes it seems to; at others it appears not to. How is it all to end?”

Pant suddenly interrupted his reveries.

“Johnny,” he said, “men don’t know much about light, do they?”

“I suppose not, Pant.”

“Of course they don’t. It’s all sort of relative, isn’t it? If I have a torch in a dark room it seems a brilliant light. Take it into the sunlight and it dwindles to nothing. Now if an extraordinarily bright light struck your eyes for a second and the next second vanished, the lights of a room might seem no light at all, just plain darkness?”

“Possibly,” said Johnny, without really thinking much about it.

Since this was the last great night of the greatest carnival ever held in the city’s most popular pleasure resort, though the hour was late, the cares were here and there given bits of color by the costumes of pleasure-seeking revelers.

The journey was scarcely more than half completed when the car filled, and Pant felt compelled to give his seat to a slender girl who, like himself, was headed for the scene of gaiety. Dressed as a Gypsy, with red shoes, red stockings, a bright colored striped dress and a crimson shawl, with a mask completely covering her face, she would have been difficult to recognize even by her most intimate acquaintances. But the keen eye of this unusual boy, Pant, detected something vaguely familiar. Mayhap it was the slender, red stockinged ankles, or the constantly bobbing feet that suggested a dance, or the long, artistic fingers that constantly plaited her dress.

He studied her until they left the car. As he turned to leave at Mazie’s station, he felt a sudden tickle above his collar. Turning quickly, he surprised the Gypsy girl concealing the colored end of a feathery reed beneath her cloak.

“Ah there,” he breathed, “I thought I knew you. Here’s hoping I see you at Forest City.”

Quick as thought the girl's fingers went to her belt, then to the bosom of her dress. She snipped a small red rose from a bouquet at her belt and pinned it to her dress.

The next instant Johnny gave Pant such a pull as drew him half down the car. Two seconds later they were on the platform and the car was speeding away.

"What was holding you?" demanded Johnny.

"That Gypsy girl."

"What of her?"

"I recognized her."

"Oh! You did?" said Johnny. "Well, come on, we go down here. It's late. Mazie and the little girl may not wait. Let's hurry."

Mazie and Tillie McFadden had waited. Since the amusement park was only six blocks from Mazie's home, they walked. In a short time they were mingling with the fun-mad throng that flowed like a many colored stream down the board walks of Forest City, a city which Johnny had once said was doomed. As he entered it now he asked himself whether this were true. The answer was: Who knows?

The mingled sounds that strike one's ears on a night like this are stunning in their variety and intensity. The dull tom-tom of some Gypsy fortune teller inviting trade by pounding a flat-headed drum; the steady challenge of men who invite you to risk your small change on the turn of a spindle wheel; the inviting shout of hawkers; the high-pitched screams descending from the roller coaster as a car pitches down through space; the minor shouts of revelers on the board walks; all this, blended with the dull rumble of wheels, the clank of machinery, the splash of boats, the murmur of ten thousand voices, produces a sound which in the aggregate blends into a mad jumble that leaves one with no conscious thought of sound. No one sound seems to register above the others. It is all just one great *noise*.

The sights that strike your eye are scarcely less impressive. Great streamers of confetti, red, white, blue, yellow and green tissue ribbons hanging from wires, from plaster-of-paris domes, from windows, from electric lights, from every spot

where a sparrow might rest his wings; bushels of bits of paper flying through the air like a highly tinted snow storm; and the amusements—here a car rushing through space, there the whirling invitation of an airplane, and there again the slow and stately Ferris wheel. Beneath all this the colorful throng that, like some giant reptile, moves ever forward but never comes to an end. These were the sights that thrilled the four young pleasure seekers.

The sensations of touch, too, added to the frenzy that appeared to enter one's very veins and to send his blood racing. A wild group of revelers, playing a game that is little less than crack-the-whip, wrap themselves about you, to at last break up like a wave of the sea and go surging away. A single frenzied reveler seizes you sharply by the arm, to scream at you and vanish. A tickler touches your ear; a handful of fine confetti sifts down your neck; you are caught in a swelling current of the crowd to be at last deposited with a final crush into a little eddy close by some game of chance, or booth where root beer and hot dogs are sold.

They had been cast aside by the throng into such an eddy as this when, finding herself without other occupation, Mazie focused her opera glasses, which hung by a strap at her side, on a wooden tower two hundred feet high. This tower, lighted as it was by ten thousand electric lamps, seemed at the distance a white hot obelisk of steel. The tower stood in the center of the place and there were six bronze eagles at the very top of it.

“How plainly I can see them,” Mazie murmured to herself. “I can even see the copper wire that binds them to the pillars.”

Little did she dream of the awe-inspiring and awful sights she would witness on that tower, with those glasses, on this very night.

It was at this moment that Pant noticed little Tillie McFadden's eyes, full of longing, fixed upon the roller coaster.

“Ever ride on that?” he asked.

The girl shook her head.

“Want to?”

“You bet I do.”

“You’re on!” exclaimed Pant. “When shall we four meet again, and where?”

“In just an hour,” said Johnny. “Meet us beneath the statue of the two fools.” This immense statue, made of cement, stood near the exit.

“All right, we’ll be there,” smiled Pant. “Come on, Tillie. We’ll do the city right, roller coaster, City of Venice, ferris wheel and all.” Then they were swallowed up by the crowd.

CHAPTER XXII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

As for Johnny and Mazie, they had visited the park many times before. The amusements were an old story, but the crowd was not. No crowd is ever tiresome to a person who has a keen mind and a true interest in the study of his fellowman.

For these two it was enough to watch the actions of these people—of this crowd in their disguises. Many of them were dressed in ridiculous costumes and nearly all were masked. Thus, with their true natures for the time apparently hidden by a mask, each person gave himself over to the seeking of pleasure in the way most natural to him. Many were truly merry; some merely sordid, and a few were brutal in their manner of extracting pleasure from those about them.

As they drifted in and out among the throngs, Johnny and Mazie were finally caught in a narrow place and forced along against their will.

When, at last, the throng broadened and separated, they found themselves before another table of chance. This time, instead of the spindle wheel there was a board. In the lower end of this board, which was perhaps two feet wide by four long, there were eight holes. Beside each of these holes were numbers. At the top of the board were four balls. The balls rested upon a narrow board. To play, one has but to tip the narrow board and allow the balls to roll to the bottom, where they settle themselves in holes. One then adds up the numbers before the balls and consults a table of numbers before him. This table is composed of red and black numbers. If the sum reached by adding up chances to correspond to a red number, the player wins a watch, a camera, a silver cream pitcher or any other article he may choose.

“Looks easy enough,” smiled Johnny as he watched the operator roll the balls. “Too easy. There’s a trick somewhere.”

Now Johnny got a lot of fun out of discovering tricks. “Mind if we watch him a little while?” he asked.

“Not a bit,” answered Mazie, putting a hand on his shoulder as the crowd pressed about them. The man in the booth, a tall, broad shouldered man, gave them a quick look. Johnny blinked under that look.

“But after all,” he told himself, “we’re masked. If he has seen us before he’ll not recognize us now.”

He looked at the man and started. There was something vaguely familiar about him. Yet he, too, was heavily masked. There was little chance of telling who he might be.

For fifteen minutes Johnny studied the game. Men played, women played and boys as well. There were plenty of red numbers; but only once in all that time, while the operator hauled in the money, did red turn up. Yet, when for a moment the business lulled, the man behind the table could make red come up easily enough.

“It’s strange,” said Johnny, scratching his head. “It seems so absurdly simple. One would say it couldn’t be doctored at all, and yet it is. Ah well, what’s the use? Let’s go on.”

He was turning to go when a long arm reached out from behind the board and touched his shoulder. It was the operator. There was greed shining from the small black eyes that peeped evilly through the holes in the mask.

“See, mister,” the man was saying, “I give you a roll. It don’t cost you noding. I don’t gives you noding. See! It is free.”

“No, I don’t want a roll,” said Johnny, starting away again.

“Dot’s fair enough, mister,” replied the man.

This last remark went through the boy like an electric shock. Those words, that accent, the whole thing—where had he heard it before? Strive as he might, rake

down the walls of his memory as he did, he could not recall. And yet something within told him that he should recall, that here was a key to something important; something tremendously big.

“No,” he whispered to himself, “I can’t recall it now, but I can stick around. It may come to me all of a flash.”

“All right,” he thought to himself, “if I have to, I’ll play.”

Fortune favored him. He was not obliged to play, but could watch.

“Set ’em up!” said a stranger, producing a shiny quarter.

“Count ’em,” he said a moment later as the last ball dropped into its hole.

“Four, nine, sixteen, zwenty-zree. Dot’s black. Try again. Anoder times you are lucky.”

The man did try again, again and yet again, and always he lost.

And then, like a flash, the trick of the game came to Johnny. If the balls were carefully placed in certain definite positions on the narrow board, they would always escape falling into holes marked 7 and 11. These numbers were needed if the result was to be a red number.

As if by accident, he brushed the board with his elbow. This moved a ball slightly to the right.

The result was another black number. But by a sudden movement the operator showed that he was startled.

The stranger fed in two more quarters before Johnny tried the trick again.

This time the operator looked at him and uttered an audible snarl before he began to count. He knew he was beaten.

“Three, nine, fifteen, zwenty-zoo. Dot’s red,” he muttered.

And at the sound of that low mutter Johnny remembered.

So struck was he at this revelation, that he could barely repress an audible

exclamation. The stranger chose a small pocket camera, and the game went on.

From this time on the question of whether the stranger won or lost did not count. Johnny was trying to think; to plan a course of action. He knew now where he had heard that man's voice before—at the fire in which Mazie barely missed losing her life.

As he looked at the man he knew he could not be mistaken. The hooked nose was covered by the mask, but the stoop was there and the voice was the same. If he needed further proof it was not long in coming. As the man stepped back to take down the small camera, Johnny noticed that he walked with a decided limp.

“He's the man,” Johnny thought to himself. “He's the man who burned the school houses, the welfare center and the zoo, who attempted to kill me, and did kill poor old Ben Zook!” As he thought of Ben Zook he found it difficult to hold himself in hand. He wanted to leap across the board and throttle the man where he stood.

“No! No!” he told himself. “I must not. I must be calm. I must remain here. I must watch the play until I have thought what next to do. One thing sure, I must not bungle my chances now. Too much hinges on doing the right thing.”

CHAPTER XXIII

FOREST CITY'S DOOM

Johnny was up against the most puzzling problem of his whole life. A tensely dramatic situation, a novelist would have called it. Having long since abandoned the theory that the pink-eyed man was the firebug, he had fastened upon the hook-nosed man as the real culprit. With this in mind, he had connected past events into an almost unbreakable chain of circumstances. He had now but to find the man. And here he was. He had found him. But under what strange circumstances! What was to be done? If he called upon the revellers to assist him in apprehending the man they would laugh merrily, thinking his request a joke. The man, on the other hand, would not think it a joke. He might choose either to vanish or to put a bullet in Johnny's heart. That he would do one or the other Johnny did not doubt, for this man was a criminal.

One thing was in Johnny's favor; since he was masked and there was nothing particularly distinctive about him, it was not probable that he had been recognized.

In vain he looked about him for a passing policeman; in vain racked his brain for a way out.

Then of a sudden there came the flash of a suggestion. He would at least have a picture of the man. Only a few days before he had given a small camera to Tillie McFadden. In his pocket was a film and some flash-light powders he had meant to give her. The camera the stranger had but this moment won was the same size. The films would fit. The man, though not playing now, was still in the crowd. He would borrow or buy it.

Without at all knowing what it was about, the stranger parted with his camera for

a five dollar bill, then went back to play.

Johnny gave Mazie the camera, then pressed the film into her hand as he whispered:

“Load the camera. Press my hand when you’re ready.”

She knew about the flash-light powders and appeared to understand, for she squeezed his hand assuringly.

The stranger was again at the board. He rolled again. By some freak of chance, this time he won.

“Zwenty-four. Dot vins,” said the faker. “Vot do you choose?” His voice held a note of irritation.

“What would you suggest?” the stranger asked, turning to Johnny.

It was with the greatest of difficulty that Johnny focussed his mind on this simple task which at other times and under different circumstances would have been a pleasure.

Then a sudden inspiration came to him. At the far corner, and on the top shelf, was a silver pitcher. If the stranger asked for that the man’s back, while he was taking it down, would be turned long enough for Johnny to prepare a flash.

“I’d take that pitcher,” he said steadily, at the same time pointing to the pitcher.

“Are you ready?” he whispered to Mazie.

“Ready,” she answered back.

“When he turns,” he whispered. There followed ten seconds of suspense which was ended by a loud pop and a blinding flash of light.

The silver pitcher fell with a thump at Johnny’s feet. The astonishment and rage of the man conducting the game was a thing to marvel at. His face went white, then purple. As if to snatch the camera away, he leaped at Mazie. She forced her way back into the crowd. Then, just as it seemed that matters were at their worst, there came a wild cry:

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!”

For a second Johnny believed that someone had been unduly frightened by his flash and was spreading a false alarm. One glance toward the far end of the park told him the terrible truth. A building at that end, a sort of office, was all ablaze. He had long felt that the place was doomed, and doomed it was!

“And on such a night, with such a throng!” he murmured.

The fire held his eye but a second. The man—he must get that man! He was gone—no, there he was. He was racing before the fear-mad mob that threatened to run him down. In a twinkling Johnny was on his trail.

He had not followed him twenty paces when, to his astonishment, he saw the man turn and dart through the only door of the great wooden tower which loomed two hundred feet in air.

“He—he’s trapped!” Johnny panted. “He trapped himself. I wonder why?”

Who could tell? Had a mad fear of the mob driven him into that place as the hounds drive a deer over the precipice? Had he hoped to slip safely out a little later?

Whatever the reason, there was little chance of escape. With but one thought in his mind, Johnny Thompson was close behind.

By a single flash of his electric torch Johnny located the man some twenty steps up a rickety winding staircase that led to the very top of the tower. The next second, with his torch off, in utter darkness, Johnny put his foot on the lower step. A roaring furnace of fire was not far behind him; a dangerous man before him; but come what might, he was prepared to do his whole duty.

CHAPTER XXIV

FERRIS WHEEL AND FIRE

Forest City was on fire. The wind was directly behind the blaze. Before it, beckoning it on, were tons of confetti, board walks, dry as tinder, and flimsy structures of stucco and lath. Nothing could save this play place of the frightened thousands.

Realizing this, and fearing death from the blaze, the throngs that but a moment before were screaming with merriment now raced screaming and shouting with fear toward the back of the park where there were no exits, but where flimsy board fences would offer little resistance to their mad onrush.

To add to the terror of the moment, the powerhouse was at once attacked by the unhindered blaze. The cables were burned. Every chain, every cable, every wheel of the place suddenly stopped. The moving platform which bore the gondolas of the City of Venice majestically on their way, came to a sudden halt. The men, women and children who crowded the gondolas were obliged to leap into the water and to battle their way as best they could through the maze of plaster-of-paris castles, humble homes and shops toward the faint spot of light which marked the exit. This spot of light was but the glare of the fire, for all lights had burned out with the cable.

Only the glare of burning buildings lighted the awe inspiring scene that followed. The roller coaster, pausing with a sudden jerk in its mad rush, left some merrymakers stranded on light trestles, and others so tilted on a down glide that they were standing more on their heads than their feet.

There came the screams of women who had lost their way in some strange place of entertainment and mirth. In this throng were women in thin ball-room

costumes; boys and girls with roller skates clanking on their feet; performers from the outdoor stage, dressed in little more than tinsel and tights, and all pushing and shoving, screaming and praying that they might reach the far end and break away into wider spaces beyond before the fire was upon them.

And the fire. Having started in the offices, it has leaped joyfully on to the powerhouse and thence to the Palace of Fools. The faces on the statue of two fools are seized with a sudden pallor. They become yellow and jaundiced, then turn suddenly black. Then of a sudden they assume a very ruddy hue. As quickly after that they crumble to nothing and fall, a mass of dust. Johnny and Mazie will not meet Pant and little Tillie McFadden beneath the statue of two fools tonight. No, nor on any other night.

And what had happened to Pant and Tillie McFadden? Up to the last few terrible moments they had been having the time of their young lives. Up and down, under and over, they had rushed through space on the roller coaster. With all the solemn majesty of a trip to Europe they had ridden through the City of Venice. For a time they had wandered upon the board-walk. It was during this walk that Pant had caught sight of a familiar figure, a slim girl with a red rose pinned on her breast. He had watched her for but a moment when he was made sure by her skipping step, which was more a dance than a walk, that she was the dancing girl who had saved his life that night in the den of the underworld. Just as he had been about to put his hand on her shoulder, a screeching mob of revelers had come swooping down upon her and, as a torrent of water bears away a leaf, had carried her away.

“Ah well,” he had sighed, “I will come upon her again.” At that he had turned to Tillie McFadden, who was standing staring at the Ferris wheel with the fascination of a child.

“Want to go on there?”

She nodded.

“Come on, then.”

They had waited their turn, had gotten aboard and had gone up over and down, up over and down again, and were starting on their third round when the cry: “FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!” high pitched and shrill, sounded above the shouts and screams of the revelers.

“Sit right where you are,” said Pant reassuringly, as the little girl, frightened by the cries and the sight of leaping flames, started from her seat. “The fire is a full block away from us. Long before it reaches us we will have reached the ground, leaped from this cage and scampered away.”

The wheel turned about at a snail-like pace, stopping and starting, stopping and starting again. As they mounted higher and higher, the flames, led on by great masses of confetti which acted like a fuse, leaped from building to building, coming ever nearer, nearer, nearer! Pant became truly alarmed. At last they reached the very highest point and here the great wheel came to a sudden stop. Pant knew, from the nature of the stop, that here they would stay, and his consternation was complete. There they were, swinging in the air a hundred feet from the ground, with a raging conflagration racing madly toward them and with only steel rods and bars between them and the ground.

Johnny Thompson was at that moment in a scarcely less perilous position. Having followed the firebug a distance of fifty feet up that rickety stairway, he had paused to flash on his light, only to discover to his intense horror that the man, crouching on a small landing not ten feet above him, was engaged in aiming a knife with a ten-inch blade directly at his head.

Had he not been Johnny Thompson, he would have perished on the spot. Trained for every emergency, he leaped clean of the stairs, but holding firmly to the rail of the bannister. The next instant the knife went clanging against the wall.

For a moment, in utter darkness, the boy clung there. Then, hearing the man he hunted again begin the ascent, he swung back upon the stairs and followed.

In that moment he allowed himself a few darting thoughts as to how the affair would end. His purpose was to get that man! True enough; but how? This he could not answer, nor could he resist the desire to follow. So follow he did, step by step, circle by circle, up, up, up, to dizzy heights. The tower had no windows. He could not see the fire, nor could he realize by what leaps and bounds it was fighting its way toward that very tower.

“Tillie,” said Pant as he saw that the Ferris wheel had made its final stop and had left them high in air, “I am by nature a cat. I have lived in the jungles with great cats. There is one thing a cat can do supremely well—climb. I can climb. I can

go down those rods and take you with me if you can but cling to my back. Can you?"

For answer, the girl leaped upon his back to cling there with such tenacity that her nails cut his flesh.

"That's the girl!" he smiled approvingly.

Cautiously he lowered himself over the edge of the car to grasp a bar of iron. It was at this instant that he heard a shriek from the car to the right. Turning about, he saw a slender girl dressed as a Gypsy, clinging to the side of her car with one hand while with the other she appealed to him for aid. She had torn the mask from her face. He recognized her at a glance—the girl who had saved his life in the den of the underworld.

"Afraid," he told himself, "afraid of great heights, but not afraid to leap upon the arm of a villain with a knife."

"Stay where you are," he shouted, "I'll be back."

Rash promise. To catch at a rod here, at a bar there, to swing from bar to bar as an ape swings from branch to branch, going down, down to safety; all this was hard enough, but to ascend, with the fierce glare of the fire upon you—that would be next to impossible! Yet he had promised. He owed his life to that girl and he must fulfill his promise.

As he reached the hub of the wheel he could feel his strength waning. If he covered the remaining distance to the ground he could never return.

"Tillie," he said soberly, "there is a bar going directly to the ground. Do you think you could grip it hard enough to slide down it without falling?"

The girl's face went white. One glance at the pitiful creature above her, and courage returned.

"I—I'll try."

The next second her arms encircled the bar.

Following on the heels of his man, a hundred and fifty feet in air, Johnny came at last to an open balcony above which a great cupola reared itself to the sky. In his mad fear the firebug had already begun mounting the stair in the cupola. As for Johnny, he paused to consider. It was well that he should.

As he looked down a sudden shudder shook his form like a chill. The fire, leaping across a roof more than a hundred feet below him, was already licking at the wooden foundation of the very tower on which he stood. Even in a vain attempt to retrace his steps, a whiff of smoke borne up from below told him that in a brief space of time the tower would be a roaring chimney of flames. What was to be done? Leaving the unfortunate culprit in the cupola to his well deserved fate, whatever it might be, he turned his every thought to ways of escape. There appeared but one, and that all but impossible. But there was no choice. Sitting calmly down, he pulled off his shoes, then climbing over the railing, disappeared at a point directly above one corner of the tower.

While Tillie McFadden, with no further harm than a few scratches and bruises, was making her way to the ground, Pant was performing what seemed a mad feat. He was battling his way upward on the wheel. Here he gripped a rod to swing outward and upward, there climbed straight up where a real cat must have failed, and then, leaping quite free from any support, flew through the air to grip a rod ten feet away.

Up, up, up he climbed until, utterly exhausted, he dropped in the box occupied by the girl.

For ten seconds he lay there panting. The fire, roaring like a volcano, sent flames two hundred feet in air, scorching their cheeks and showering them with sparks. In a moment Pant was himself again.

Snatching the girl's cape from her, he consigned it to the flames.

"Your arms about my neck, your feet about my waist," he ordered, "and down we go."

He was instantly obeyed, and down indeed they went. Though that girl may live two lifetimes, never again will she experience a ride like that. With the breath of the fire beating upon them, they swung from rod to rod, shot through space, glided and slid until with a final terrible bump, they came to solid earth and went

racing away after the fast disappearing throng.

CHAPTER XXV

THE HUMAN SPIDER

Strangely enough, as Johnny crept over the railing that hung out over one hundred and fifty feet of empty air, he chanced to think of the black bag beneath the bed in his room.

“What a numbskull I was to throw it there and not tell anyone about it,” he thought to himself. “I shall probably not get out of this alive. The bag may stay there for weeks. Then it is likely to be found by the wrong person. And I am all but certain that it contains evidence which would go far toward putting Knobs Whittaker behind the bars.”

During all this time his friend Mazie, ignorant of the fate of her three friends, had at first been jostled and pushed by the fear-maddened throng until at last she had fought her way out into a little open space where she was allowed to pause for breath.

Stationing herself in a secluded spot, she had watched the little drama played by Pant and his two friends. Without knowing who they were, she had screamed her approval with the others.

Having caught sight of two figures moving about at the top of the tower, and happening to think of her opera glasses, she drew them from her pocket and focussed them upon the top of the tower.

A look of surprise spread over her face as she recognized the topmost man. It was the hook-nosed, stooped figure of the firebug. The glasses dropped from her nerveless fingers as she recognized the other one as her friend Johnny, who was at this moment crawling over the railing with the apparent intention of leaping to the ground.

“He’ll be killed!” she fairly screamed as she closed her eyes to shut out the sight.

When at last she summoned up enough courage to look again she was astonished to see, some twenty feet below the balcony where she had last seen Johnny, a figure that clung to the corner of the tower and appeared by some miracle of skill and strength to be moving downward.

She snatched up her glasses to look again and again came little short of dropping them the second time. The figure clinging to the corner of the tower was Johnny!

Seldom is it given to man to witness such a human spider act as she was privileged to watch during the next five minutes. The chance that Johnny had seen was a slim one, yet it was a chance. At regular intervals of a foot, two double rows of incandescent lamps ran down the corner of the tower. The two rows on the south side were four inches apart; those on the east the same. These lamp sockets protruded for about three inches, and using them as steps to his ladder, Johnny was slowly but surely climbing downward. There was great peril in the undertaking. A broken socket, a sudden slip, and all would be over. Never in all his eventful life had Johnny undertaken a feat which required so much skill and daring. Yet, once he had committed himself to the undertaking, there was no turning back.

By great good fortune, the sockets which held the lamps had been fastened with long nails instead of screws. The wood was strong. One by one the sockets supported his weight. Like a bat, gripping with both hands and feet, he moved cautiously downward. As Mazie watched him she measured the distance:

“A quarter done, a third, a half, a—but there,” she cried, “there’s a flame shooting out below him!”

Johnny saw it, too, but there was no turning back. Trusting to good fortune, he continued steadily downward. Fortune did not desert him; a breath of air sucked the flame back and the next moment he had passed the spot.

Again Mazie resumed her eye measurement. It was a mad thing to do, but it was all that was left to her.

“Two-thirds of the way; three-quarters. But there’s a lower balcony! How is he to pass that?”

How indeed? This balcony, some six feet in width, left no opportunity to climb over its rail and down. Some forty feet from the ground, it threatened to stop the boy's progress and condemn him to a terrible death.

As Johnny reached this balcony, flames were leaping at him from every side. Directly before him, however, was a clear space. Through that space he caught sight of what at first appeared to be flames, but what proved in the end to be but the reflection of the fire in the pool of water used by the chute. It was fully forty feet below him.

Johnny's keen brain worked like lightning. One look, and then a racing leap. With arms and figure set for a dive, he shot far out and down.

He disappeared from Mazie's view, nor could she ascertain his fate. To go there to see would have been sheer madness. Half burned off at the bottom, the two hundred foot tower was already tottering to a fall.

A moment it hung there in space, a second, and yet a third. Having once more trained her glass on the top of it, Mazie saw a figure standing upon the topmost pinnacle. It was the firebug! For twenty seconds he hovered there between earth and sky. Then, just as the tower bent to a rakish angle, he toppled over and fell headlong.

"It's as well," she sighed, dropping her glasses and brushing a tear from her eye. "There can be no pain in such a death. Poor fellow! His brain must have been addled."

For a time she stood there alone, thinking of many things. Then, realizing that the hour was late and that there was little chance of finding her friends even if they were still alive, she turned her face toward home.

"If they are still in the land of the living," she told herself, "they'll come straggling in. A cup of hot cocoa will do them good. I'll have the water ready."

CHAPTER XXVI

SAFE AT HOME

In the meantime alarms had gone in. At the central fire station the third alarm came in before the megaphone had repeated the second. Clanging and screeching, forcing their way down streets swarming with people, the firefighters came. These ranged themselves along the outer walls of that famous place of play and mirth. No attempt was made to save Forest City. It was useless. The home of riotous joy was doomed. All the firemen could hope to do was to beat back the flames and prevent them from spreading to other parts of the city.

Long after the last structure of the vanished "City" had gone crashing down and the great throngs had crept away to their homes, a solitary figure stood in a dark recess between two buildings, watching the heaps of red ruin and desolation.

A short, sturdy fellow, he stood there hatless, and as the heat from the fire played upon his clothes they appeared to smoke, but it was only steam.

His keen eyes, for the most part watching the center of the fire swept area, now and again went roving up and down the outer lines as if searching for someone.

And then, as if fire were not enough, from the sky there came a sudden deluge of rain. One of those sudden torrents that come sweeping up from the lake in summer, it passed as quickly as it came, but in its wake it left black, smouldering desolation.

The hatless figure had moved to a place of shelter, but as the storm passed he came out again and stood staring at the ruins. As he stood there a shudder shook his frame. It was indeed a thing to shudder at. Two hours before, twenty thousand joyous mortals had rioted there, and now only charcoal and ashes marked its place, while above it all there loomed a blackened and twisted spectre

which had once been the Ferris wheel.

“I knew it was doomed,” he murmured at last, “knew it days ago. If only I had got him in time! But now, please God, it is over. There will be no others of this kind.”

At that he turned and walked rapidly away.

Tillie McFadden was the first to arrive at Mazie’s home; indeed, she arrived before Mazie. Mazie found her curled up on a couch in the corner, fast asleep. Her hands were scratched and bruised, there were tear stains on her cheeks, but for all this she slept the peaceful sleep of a child.

Mazie felt an almost uncontrollable desire to waken her, to ask her what had befallen her, what she had seen of the fire, and what had become of Pant. She conquered this desire, to murmur as she spread a blanket over the sleeping girl:

“No. Why waken her to the horror of it all? A long sleep, and she will have forgotten it. Oh, to be a little child again!”

At that she sat down to anxiously await news from her comrades.

In half an hour Pant arrived. As Mazie opened the door he came slouching in without so much as looking at her. That was Pant’s way. But to-night he moved as one in a trance, or perhaps like one who had travelled so far against the wind in a snowstorm that his senses had become so benumbed that he no longer thinks clearly.

It was not a cold night, but Mazie had kindled a little fire in the grate. Without speaking, Pant found a seat by that fire. At once he appeared to fall into a doze.

When the girl touched his arm to offer him a steaming drink he started as from a dream.

After he had gulped down the drink he appeared more alive.

“I carried her down,” he grumbled, half to himself. “Gar! That was hard! We landed on the ground. Then we ran for it, and in the crowd I lost her. Do you think I will see her again?”

“See who?” asked Mazie.

“The Gypsy girl.”

“Who is she?”

“Why, don’t you know? But of course you wouldn’t. She—she’s the one who saved my life and I—I carried her off the Ferris wheel. She would have burned. The car burned before we touched the ground.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mazie. “Then you were the one who performed that marvelous feat on the wheel? I might have known. No one else could have done that.”

“You—saw us?”

“Yes. But tell me about that other time, the time the girl saved your life.”

Pant told her the story.

“Do you think I’ll ever see her again?” he asked eagerly as he finished.

“You can’t tell,” said Mazie slowly, “you never know. It’s a strange world we live in. There are a hundred million of people and more, in our land. How many do you know? A few. There are eight miles of homes between our house and the heart of the city. Walk the whole distance, eight miles, twelve blocks to the mile, twenty homes to the block, probably two thousand homes. Ten thousand people live in those homes. How many of them do you know? None, perhaps. We live in little worlds of our own. Our little worlds are like ships at sea. We meet and pass others, like ships that pass in the night. You deserted your little world for a night and entered the Gypsy girl’s world. She left hers for a night and entered yours. Now she’s gone back to hers and you to yours. Will you meet again? Why should you?”

“Sure enough, why should we?” echoed Pant.

“Someone at the door!” exclaimed Pant.

Mazie was so overjoyed at sight of the one she found at the door that it was with difficulty that she refrained from throwing her arms about his neck. It was Johnny.

His story was soon told. His dive from the lower balcony of the tower had been successful. Having landed in the water without so much as being stunned, he had done the Australian crawl to the far end of the pool where was a landing. There he had leaped to his feet and gone racing away. Scarcely a moment had elapsed after he reached a point of safety, when the tower came crashing down on the very spot where he had stood.

Having seen the leap of the man he had followed into the tower, he had watched to see if by any miracle of circumstance he might have landed in the pool and followed him to safety. Since this did not seem humanly possible, he had given the man up for lost, but had lingered about the scene until the torrent had reduced the fire to charcoal. Then he had come away.

“Well, here we all are, safe and well,” smiled Mazie.

“And the firebug is dead,” said Johnny.

“How do you know that?” Pant challenged.

“I watched the burning pile until it was done. I tell you he was killed by the fall, crushed by the building that came crashing down upon him. He should be dead enough from all that.”

“But how do you know he was the firebug?” persisted Pant. “You can’t really prove it.”

“I can,” said Johnny positively, “and to-morrow I will.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CONTENTS OF THE BLACK BAG

Johnny found the fire chief in a sour mood next morning. Two disastrous fires in a single night, both probable cases of arson. One had been tipped off to him beforehand and he had sent Johnny and some of his best men to watch. Yet they had found nothing. It was enough to break the staunchest heart.

“Buck up, Chief,” smiled Johnny, “the firebug’s dead.”

“He is, is he!” roared the Chief. “Didn’t I see him not two hours ago? Ain’t he goin’ to get out of jail unless we can pin something definite on him?”

It was Johnny’s turn to lose heart. The firebug in jail, about to escape for lack of a charge? What did this mean?

“Where—where did you catch him?” he stammered.

“Where’d you expect? By the fire he set, to be sure; the Randolph Street fire.”

“Oh!” Johnny breathed more easily. “You got Knobs Whittaker?”

“Who’d you think? Wasn’t he the man I set you to watch?”

“Why yes—one of them.”

“And didn’t we catch him wandering round in the crowd, big as life and staring round as if he was looking for somebody he’d lost?”

“Did he describe the man he was looking for?” Johnny smiled as he asked this.

“No, why should he? Why should we care?”

“Probably you shouldn’t. Only I thought it might be me he was looking for.”

“You? Why?”

“I had a bit of property of his.” At this Johnny held up the black bag that he had taken from Knobs.

“Where’d you get that?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Johnny, calmly sitting down.

He did tell, and after the Chief had listened with all his ears he exclaimed at the finish:

“Open it up. You’re right, it may contain some evidence and evidence is what we need.”

“Do you know, Johnny,” he said as the boy struggled to break the lock, “that was the hottest fire I ever experienced. There were enough chemicals in that lower story to charge a volcano. It’s a wonder there wasn’t an explosion. Those boys will forfeit their insurance.”

“I might have a little evidence on that point, too,” said Johnny. “You remember my telling of the truck that unloaded there just before the fire? Well, that may have been a plant. Perhaps the company had not ordered those chemicals. Knobs Whittaker may have had them put there.”

“Why?”

“How did the diamond company’s property fare?”

“Total loss. Never saw anything to equal it. Safe just over the chemicals. Dropped right into the mess of those flaming chemicals. The safe was melted to a solid mass.”

“And the diamonds?”

“Diamonds? In the safe, I guess. Or maybe they melted, too. Diamonds are

carbon you know, same as coal. Wouldn't expect them to withstand the heat, would you?"

"Not if they were there," said Johnny. "I thought it might be——"

At this moment the lock to the black bag gave way. Johnny threw up the cover.

"Shade my eyes!" exclaimed the Chief. "What have we here?"

"Looks like diamonds to me," said Johnny with a grin.

"So they are!" exclaimed the Chief, seizing a small case and examining its contents closely. "And that was the game. Knobs was in with the diamond merchant! Man! What a haul they would have made!"

The next instant he dashed to the telephone.

"That you, Cassidy?" he said a moment later. "The Fire Chief speaking. Hold Knobs without bail. We've got the goods on him. A dead open and shut case. He'll do twenty years for last night's work.

"Now," he said to Johnny after resuming his usual composed manner, "what was this you were telling me about the firebug being dead?"

"That was something else."

"Another one?"

"The one who set fire to Forest City, and all those other places of public pleasure, the enemy of happiness. Do you remember the tall stooped man with a hook-nose and a limp that I spoke to you about?"

"Yes."

"That was the man."

"Can you prove it?"

"I think I can."

"Well, if you can you're mighty well off. You're well off as it is. I'll make the

insurance companies come through with a fat reward on this,” he patted the black bag. “But there’s a reward offered by the city for the firebug. If you can prove that his work is over you’ll be doing yourself a service as well as every law-abiding citizen of this old town.”

“I’ll do it before dark.”

“Go to it, Johnny. More power to your good right arm.” The Chief grasped his hand in a hearty grip, then escorted him to the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FIREBUG'S SECRET REVEALED

“Johnny,” said Pant, as their train sped along, “what did Knobs Whittaker have to do with that string of fires—the schools, the Zoo, and Forest City?”

“Not a thing, I guess. It was that man with the hooked nose who set them all.”

“You haven’t proved that.”

“That’s why we are now on our way out to the black shack by the edge of the swamp. I think we’ll find some proof out there.”

They were on the train speeding southward toward the marsh.

“If Knobs wasn’t in with old hook-nose, why were they together in that dive where I came near getting bumped off?” asked Pant.

“Doubtless they were acquainted. Men of the same trade, even if it’s of a criminal nature, usually are. Birds of a feather, you know. It may be, too, that Knobs was encouraging this other man. If the fires set by him could keep the eyes of the police and inspectors off Knobs, then he would have easy going.

“His big game, though, was the diamond shop. It looked easy. To plant all those chemicals beneath his safe, to set a fire, then beat it with the diamonds, leaving everyone to believe they were lost, seemed simple enough. It would have been, too, if it hadn’t been my luck to hit him behind the ear. Got that picture?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes.”

Pant took a small snapshot from his pocket and handed it to Johnny.

“Pretty good, even if it was taken under difficult circumstances,” he said, holding it up to the light.

It was a picture of a large man wearing a mask and holding a silver cream pitcher in his hand. It was the picture he and Mazie had taken at the booth just before the fire started.

“Mask sort of spoils it, but I think they’ll recognize that stoop.”

“Who?”

“The people who have seen him before.”

For a time they rode in silence. Then Johnny spoke again.

“If there is any reward for all this work, Tillie McFadden gets half of it. She gave me the first good hunch.”

“What was the hunch?”

“That the man who set the fires wasn’t in the building when they were set.”

“You expect to prove that?”

“To-day.”

“With a mechanism?”

“No other mechanism than you’ll find in any building of consequence. Here we are!” he exclaimed suddenly.

They were at the station near the marsh.

A half hour later found them creeping on hands and knees, making their way from sand dune to sand dune. In his hand Johnny gripped the black automatic he had taken from Knobs.

“One more dune,” he breathed, “then we’ll have to make a break for it.”

As he rose to creep forward again he caught sight of the roof of the black shack.

The next moment, somewhat excited and breathless, they were dashing for the shack.

Once within the shadow of its side they paused to calm their wildly beating hearts. Then gripping his automatic hard, Johnny popped his head up before the window.

“Huh!” he grunted a second later. “I thought it might be that way. Not a soul here.”

The lock on the door was a simple one and they were soon inside.

“It’s the hook-nosed one’s shack all right,” said Johnny. “I’ve seen him wear this long rain-coat.” He took the coat from its hook. “Bring it along as evidence. And these.” He walked to the corner where were four black cylinders standing on end. They were what remained of the pile he had seen there some time before.

Handling them with great care, as if afraid they might explode, he first wrapped them in a piece of paper he had taken from his pocket, then buckled a strap tightly about them.

For a moment he stood looking about the cabin. Then turning toward the door, he said:

“Come on. I think we have all that is of any value to us here.”

Once back on the beach, they did not return directly to the station, but paused first to interview some fishermen who were mending their nets, and then later to knock at a cabin farther down the beach.

At the cabin a woman said that a man resembling the one in the snapshot had sometimes come to her house for milk. The fishermen were even more positive in their identification.

“Yes sir,” said one of them, “that was his shack out there by the marsh. I’ve often seen him. But what’s the mask for?”

“Carnival,” said Johnny.

“Oh!”

“So you think it was old Hook-nose who shot at you and went hunting you and Mazie out here on the marsh?” said Pant as they walked on.

“I am sure of it. And I’m equally sure that he killed poor old Ben Zook. The last evidence against him will be put to the test this afternoon in the Fire Chief’s office at three. Will you be there?”

“I sure will.”

True to his promise, Pant was there at the appointed hour. So were Mazie and the Fire Chief.

“Now,” said Johnny, as if about to perform some scientific experiment, “I’ll ask you to examine this scrap of black cardboard which Ben Zook and I found on his island after the mysterious blaze out there. Compare it with the outer covering of the four cylinders I have here. Same material, isn’t it, Chief?”

“I’d say it was the same.”

“Now,” said Johnny, “take a look at this telephone which I took from the burning Zoo. As you will see, it is equipped with two pairs of wires. The ends of the smaller wires are scorched.

“If you don’t mind, Chief, I’ll just disconnect these wires and hook them up with your own phone.” He unstrapped the tubes and, selecting one, set the others some distance away. “Now I will connect the other ends by means of the screw contact points which you will see already conveniently placed at the top of this black tube.

“Now,” he smiled, as he stepped back quickly as if expecting something sudden, “if you will be kind enough to take down your receiver and ask the operator to give you a ring?”

For a second the Chief hesitated, then complied with his request. At the same time Mazie crowded herself into the most remote corner.

“Operator,” called the Chief, “give us a ring, will you?” His hand trembled slightly as he hung up the receiver. In the room, for the space of seconds, all was

silence, a silence so complete that the buzzing of a fly far up on the ceiling sounded distinctly.

Then came the jangle of the bell. Instantly, as if by magic, the black tube split straight down the middle into two perfect halves, toppled over, revealing a fan-shaped mass of tissue paper which promptly burst into flame. So suddenly did it all happen that had not Johnny seen to it that there was a chemical fire extinguisher right at hand, the Chief might have found himself in the embarrassing position of being obliged to turn in a fire alarm from his own office.

As it was, the fire was soon out. After that Johnny's three friends sat staring at him.

"The explanation is simple enough," he smiled. "In the case of every fire set by this misguided man—who was a crank and perhaps a radical as well—he pretended to be a telephone wireman. Having in this way gotten inside, always just at closing time, he connected his wires with the phone, then planted a fire trap such as this in some store-room where there was plenty of combustibles. After making sure that he was the last one out, he left the building.

"Since everyone associated with the office knew that everyone in the office left at a definite hour, there were no phone calls after the trap had been set.

"At his appointed hour, ten, eleven, or twelve o'clock at night, the firebug, by this time perhaps ten miles away, would go to some phone and calmly call the number.

"And Bam! The telephone rings; a spark traveling down one of those fine wires, loosens a spring that throws the trap open, tissue paper unfolds like a fan, a taper is lighted that fires the trap, and all is prepared for the fire alarm."

"What a pity that so much ingenuity should be used for so dire a purpose," said the Chief.

"So you think this firebug is dead?"

"I know it. I have a report to that effect, and plenty of proof that he was the man."

“You shall have the reward. You deserve it.” The Chief turned to grasp his hand.

It would probably not have seemed strange if Johnny Thompson, after such strenuous experiences as these, should have decided to take a long rest. So he did decide, but fate ruled differently. By chance, on that very night, he walked into the shop of an old man who was a wizard at working in wood—ebony, mahogany, teak and rosewood. He showed Johnny some marvels and in the end told him a tale that set Johnny’s blood racing fast.

It was this tale that led the boy off on a most thrilling adventure, which you will find recorded in our next book, “The Red Lure.”

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