A MYSTERY STORY FOR BOYS

WHISPERS *at* DAWN

ROY J. SNELL

Title: Whispers at Dawn

Or, The Eye

Author: Roy J. Snell

Release Date: September 9, 2013 [eBook #43677]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

E-text prepared by
Stephen Hutcheson, Rod Crawford, Dave Morgan,
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team (http://www.pgdp.net)

A Mystery Story for Boys

WHISPERS AT DAWN

or *The Eye*

By
ROY J. SNELL

Author's Logo

The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Fantastic as the happenings recorded in this book may at times seem, they are, nevertheless, a fairly exact recording of the feats of magic already accomplished by the electrical wizards of our time.

ROY J. SNELL.

CONTENTS

WHISPERS AT DAWN
or *The Eye*

CHAPTER I
THREE BLACK BOXES

As Johnny Thompson put out a hand to ring the door bell of that brownstone house facing the deserted grounds of the Chicago Century of Progress and the lake, the door opened without a sound. He looked up, expecting to see a face, hear a voice, perhaps. The voice came: “Step inside, please.” But there was no face. The space before him was empty.

A little puzzled, he stepped into the narrow passageway. Instantly in a slow, silent manner that seemed ominous, the door closed behind him.

The place was all but dark. Certainly there was no lamp; only a curious blue illumination everywhere. A little frightened, he put out a hand to grip the door knob. It did not give to his touch. Indeed it was immovable as the branch of an oak.

“Locked!” he muttered. Then for a space of seconds his heart went wild. From the wall to the right of him had flashed a pencil of white light. Like an accusing finger it fell upon something on the opposite wall. And that something was an eye, an eye in the wall,—or so it seemed to the boy. And even as he stared, with lips parted, breath coming short and quick, the thing appeared to wink.

“The eye!” he whispered, and again, “the eye!”

For a space of many seconds, like a bird charmed by a snake, he stood staring at that eye.

And then cold terror seized him. In the corner of the place he had detected some movement. It was off to his right. Whirling about, he found himself staring at—of all the terrible things in that eerie light—a skeleton.

And even as he stared, ready to sink to the floor in sheer terror, the skeleton

appeared to move, to tremble, to open and close its fleshless hands.

He watched the thing for ten terrible seconds. Then a thought struck him with the force of a blow.

“That—” he whispered as if afraid the thing might hear, “that is me! That is my own skeleton!”

Of this there could be no doubt. For, as he lifted his right hand, the skeleton did the same. As he bobbed his head, the thing before him bobbed. And if further evidence were lacking, the thing had a crooked third finger, and so had he.

Then, as if ashamed of being discovered, the terrifying image vanished and the eye in the wall blinked out. Instantly the door at the inner end of the hall opened. There, standing in a flood of mellow light, was a girl of about his own age. She was smiling at him and shaking her mass of golden hair.

“Come in,” she welcomed. “But—but you seem so frightened!” She stared at him for a second.

“Oh!” There was consternation in her tone. “Felix left that terrible thing on! How can you ever forgive us?

“But please do come in.” Her tone changed. “You came about Father’s books? How generous of you. Poor Father! His head is so full of things! He is always forgetting.”

Johnny stepped inside. The door closed itself noiselessly.

“What kind of a house of magic is this?” he asked himself. “Doors close themselves. Eyes gleam at you from the wall. You see your own skeleton in the dark!”

The room he had entered seemed ordinary enough—plain furniture, a davenport, chairs, a table. But the light! He stared about him. The room was filled with mellow light, yet there was not a single lamp to be seen.

“Comes from everywhere and nowhere, that light,” he whispered to himself.

“Let me take your hat.” The girl held out her hand. She seemed a nice sort of

girl, rather boyish. When she walked it was with a long stride, as if she were wearing knickers on a hike.

“I—I’ll call Father.” She marched across the floor.

Johnny started from his chair, then settled back. Had he caught the gleam of an eye blinking from the wall? He thought so. But now it had vanished.

The girl was still three paces from the door at the back of the room when, with a silence that was startling, that door swung open.

Johnny looked closely. The hall beyond was lighted. There was no one to be seen.

As if this was quite the usual thing, the girl marched straight through the open door. At once it closed behind her.

Johnny was alone.

If you have followed his career in our other books you will know that Johnny is no coward. He had been in tight places more than once. Persons much older than he had said he bore up under strain remarkably well. For all that, this place gave him the creeps. That it was not in the best part of the city he knew well enough. This brownstone house, as we have already said, was just across from the deserted Century of Progress grounds, and faced the lake. Back of it were shabby tenements and dingy shops where second-hand goods were sold and where auctioneers hung out their red flags.

“Rather senseless, the whole business,” he mumbled to himself. “Fellow gets into all sorts of strange messes trying to fight other people’s battles for them. And yet—”

His thoughts broke off. A small red light like an evil eye flashed above the outer door, then blinked out. A faint buzzing sound came from a clock-like affair on the wall. Then all was silent as before.

“The professor’s house,” he muttered. “Queer place! Why did I come? Couldn’t help it really. It was the boxes—the three black boxes.”

Ah yes, those three black boxes! First they had intrigued him, then they had

aroused his interest and sympathy. After that there was just nothing to it. He had invested all but his last dollar in those three black boxes. Now he was trying to get his money back and do someone else a good turn as well.

“But it seems,” he whispered to himself, “there are dragons in the way, gleaming eyes, skeletons. All—”

The red light flashed again, three times. The clock buzzed louder.

“Wish she’d come.”

He rose to pace slowly back and forth across this room of many mysteries.

It was truly strange, he thought, the course of events leading up to this moment. After a considerable stay in the wilds of Michigan he had returned to the city of Chicago. On his arrival he had gone at once to the shack. The shack, on Grand Avenue, as you will know if you have read “Arrow of Fire,” was occupied by Drew Lane, a keen young city detective, and such of his friends as happened to be about.

To his great disappointment, Johnny had found the shades down, the door locked. “Must be away,” he told himself. At once he found himself all but overcome by a feeling of loneliness. Who can blame him? What is lonelier than a city where one has not a single friend?

Johnny had other friends in Chicago. Doubtless he would chance upon them in time. For the present he was completely alone.

“Be rather amusing,” he told himself, “to try going it alone. Wonder how long it will be before someone will slap me on the back and shout, ‘Hello, Johnny Thompson!’”

Having recalled the fact that at noon on every Tuesday of the year a rather unusual auction was held, he had decided to dispel his loneliness by mingling in the motley mob that attended that auction.

There for an hour he had watched without any great interest the auctioneer’s hammer rise and fall as he sold a bicycle, a box of clocks, a damaged coffin, an artificial arm, three trunks with contents, if any, two white puppies in a crate and a bird in a cage—all lost or damaged while being carried by a great express

company.

It was only when the Three Black Boxes were trundled out that his interest was aroused.

“This,” he heard the auctioneer say in a low tone to a man seated near, “is a professor’s library. He hasn’t come to claim the shipment, so we are forced to sell his books.”

“A professor’s library! Poor fellow! What will he do without his books?” Johnny had said to the man next to him. “A professor without books is like a juggler without hands.”

“A professor’s library.” The words had intrigued him. The very word professor had a glorious sound to him. They had been so good to him, the professors of his college.

Without more than half willing it, he had begun bidding on those three heavy black boxes filled with books. In the end they were his, and his pockets were all but empty.

After the affair was over he had hunted up the auctioneer and secured the name and address of the professor.

“I’ll sell the books back to him,” he said to the auctioneer. “Surely he *must* have some money, or will have in a month or two.”

“Well, maybe.” The auctioneer had shaken his head. “Lots of folks pretty poor these days. Too bad!”

“And this,” Johnny told himself as he continued to pace the floor of that mysterious room, “is the professor’s house. Seems more like the haunts of an evil genius.”

He felt an almost irresistible desire to find his way out of the place and make a dash for it. But there were the books. He must manage to get his money back somehow. He had hoped the professor might be able to pay him the money and take the library.

“Cost hundreds of dollars in the first place, those books,” he murmured. “You’d

think—”

Again he broke off to listen and stare. Strange noises, curious flashes of light, and then the door swung open. The golden-haired girl appeared. The door closed behind her.

“He—he’ll be here soon.” She seemed breathless. “He—he’s working at something, a—a sort of trap. Do you know,” she whispered, “this is a terrible neighborhood—truly frightful! That is why we live here.”

“Curious sort of reason,” the boy thought, but he said never a word, for at that instant the clock-like affair on the wall began buzzing loudly, the red light blinked six times in quick succession.

“Oh!” There was consternation in the girl’s voice.

Seizing the astonished boy by the arm, she dragged him to a corner of the room. There he found himself looking at what appeared to be a narrow strip of mirror.

Upon that mirror moving objects began to appear. Before his astonished eyes these spots arranged themselves into the form of two skeletons, one tall, one short. Dangling from the hip-bone of the tall skeleton was what appeared to be a long knife. Again the girl whispered, “Oh!”

But the short skeleton! Trembling so it appeared to dance, it slipped a knife along its bony wrist to at last grip it firmly in its skeleton fingers.

The girl touched a button here, another there. The thing on the wall buzzed. Words were spoken outside the door, indistinct words. The skeletons disappeared. There came the sound of a door closing.

“They—they’re gone!” The girl sighed.

Catching a slight sound of movement behind him, Jimmy whirled about to find himself looking into a pair of smiling blue eyes. “Here,” he thought to himself, “is the girl’s father, the professor.” There were the same features, the same shock of golden hair.

“I am Professor Van Loon,” the man said in a voice that was low, melodious and dreamy.

“Beth here tells me you bought my books,” he went on. “That was kind of you. We’ve been moving about a great deal. The books have followed us here and there. Charges piled up. Until quite recently money has been scarce. Then, I confess, I forgot. In these days one is likely to forget his choicest treasures.”

He turned to the girl. “Beth, who was at the door just now?”

“Two men.” She trembled slightly. “They carried knives, so I opened the door on the outside. They—they hurried away.”

“I dare say!” The professor chuckled dryly.

“Press the button, Beth,” the professor said, nodding his head toward the right wall. “Our guest will stay for cocoa and cakes, I am sure. That right?” he asked, turning to Johnny.

“I will, yes,” Johnny agreed.

The girl pressed a button like a lamp switch in the wall.

The boy’s feelings were mixed. He wanted to stay. These people interested him and there were a hundred mysteries to solve,—living skeletons, eyes blinking from the walls, self-opening doors, lights that gleamed and clocks that buzzed.

A fresh mystery was added when five minutes later the girl pressed a second button and a tray laden with cups, saucers, a plate of cakes and a pot of steaming cocoa appeared.

“The ‘Eye’ did it for us,” the professor explained in a matter-of-fact tone. “In these days one scarcely needs a servant even when he is able to afford one.”

Perhaps Johnny would have said, “What is the ‘Eye’?” but at that moment the door at the rear opened and a tall youth with tumbled red hair appeared.

The professor rose. “Son, meet Johnny Thompson. Now we are all here.”

When, two hours later, Johnny left this place of enchantment, his head was in a whirl.

“Just goes to show,” he chuckled to himself, “that when you do an unusual stunt

anything may happen—just anything at all."

Several things *had* happened in the last two hours. He had come to have a high regard for the professor and his family. He had received payment in full for the professor's library and a ten dollar bill thrown in for good measure.

"Boy alive!" the professor had exclaimed when he hesitated to accept this extra ten. "If some shark that haunts those auctions had got my books it would have cost me a small fortune to redeem them."

All this had happened, and much more.

"Best of all," Johnny whispered to himself, "I am no longer alone. I've made a place for myself." Just what sort of place it was, he did not surely know.

"I should like to have you cast in your lot with us," the professor had said. "A boy who thinks of others, as you have done in this library affair, is sure to be of service anywhere.

"We do strange and interesting things here." The professor's eyes had twinkled. "Sometimes they are useful and practical; sometimes they are not. Always they are absorbing, at times quite too startling. At times we have money, at others none. Just now we are quite rich." He chuckled. "Someone offered us a great deal of money for an electric contraption that sorts beans, sorts a car load a day. Who wants that many beans?" He chuckled again. "Anyway we have money and they can sort beans. Money means material, equipment for fresh experiments. You will come with us?" He squinted at Johnny.

"Yes. Yes, sure." Johnny scarcely knew what leg he was standing on. "Queer business!" was his mental comment.

"We will exact only one promise," the professor continued. "You'll not pry into our secrets. Such secrets as we entrust to you you will divulge to no man. Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"You'll learn a lot and enjoy the work a heap," the son had said to Johnny.

"I want you to know," the professor had added in a sober tone, "that if you come

with us you may be in some danger; in fact I'm quite certain that I can promise it, yet it will never be foolhardy nor reckless danger. You'll come to live with us. That is necessary."

"That's O.K.," Johnny had agreed.

And now Johnny found himself outside in the cool air of night, the lake breeze fanning his cheek, wondering if it all—the living skeletons, eyes blinking in the wall, the self-closing doors—all had been a dream.

"No!" He crushed the roll of bills in his pocket. "No, it was real enough. I—"

Suddenly two shadows materialized from a doorway, one tall, one short.

"The—the two men of the living skeletons, the ones that girl and I saw in the mirror!" he whispered, catching his breath sharply. If there had been any question in his mind regarding this last conclusion it was dispelled instantly. An inch of white steel, a knife blade, protruded from the short person's sleeve as he muttered menacingly, "Stand where you are!"

CHAPTER II
SOMETHING RATHER TERRIBLE

Johnny Thompson was no weakling. He was a lightweight boxer. He had made his way over the frozen wastes of Alaska and through the jungles of Central America and many other wild places as well. This city held little terror for him.

As he faced the two strangers in the semi-darkness of the street, he considered tackling the little man.

“If I tackle low I’ll catch him off his guard, bowl him over like a tenpin. But the other, the tall one?” Ah, there was the rub! He carried a knife at his belt.

The boy could run, but at thought of that he seemed to feel a twinge of pain from a knife in his back.

As he stood there, nerves all aquiver, oddly enough he thought of the mysterious eye blinking out of the wall back there in the hall. He wondered vaguely what it all meant and how this affair was to end.

And then quite suddenly the affair of the moment ended. The tall man uttered a low grumble which Johnny did not understand. Next instant the pair faded into the darkness, leaving him free to go his way in peace.

“Strange business, all of this,” he murmured to himself. He felt for the roll of bills that had been paid him for the professor’s library. Yes, they were still there.

“He said, ‘Come back tomorrow.’ The professor said that,” he mumbled as he hurried away. “Said I would meet dangers. W-e-l-l—”

He walked three blocks in deep thought. The whole business had thus far been very strange. What of the future?

How little he knew! Tomorrow lay before him, and after that tomorrow and another tomorrow. The task he had agreed to undertake was strange beyond belief.

Yet, for the most part ignorant of all this, he slept well that night and appeared next morning, suitcase in hand, ready for work at the door of that mystery house. In the broad light of day the place had lost much of its air of mystery.

He was relieved to find Felix Van Loon sitting on the doorstep waiting for him.

“Won’t have to run the gauntlet of eyes in the wall and submit my skeleton for inspection this time,” he whispered to himself.

“Come on in and have a cup of coffee with me before we get down to work,” the other boy welcomed.

“Be glad to,” Johnny answered.

“Watch!” Felix said a moment later. He pressed a button, then shot a wooden panel to one side, revealing a recess.

In that dark hole in the wall things began to happen. Two electric coils began to light up. At the same time Johnny noted with a start that two red eyes were gleaming from the darkest corner.

“Eyes,” Felix murmured. “They’ll do your work if you let them.”

Felix made no further comment. Johnny did not feel free to ask questions about the riddle of the “Eye.”

Dropping into a chair, Felix stared for a full two minutes at a crack in the floor. Then with a start he sprang to his feet, threw open a second panel and proceeded to draw forth a steaming pot of coffee and a plate of toast. Johnny recalled the professor’s remarks regarding the “Eye” but said nothing.

“It’s a queer place,” he told himself.

As if reading his thoughts, Felix put down his cup. “Father’s what they call an electrical wizard,” he said. “He does things no one dreams of. Enjoys it a lot, he does. So do I. But Father has a deep purpose in it all, thinks electricity may help

to save the race; anyway that's what he calls it."

Once more he lapsed into silence. Johnny searched the dark corners of the room for peering eyes, but could find none.

"Through?" Felix asked quite suddenly. "All right then, let's be on our way." He strode across the room to catch up a kit of tools.

A moment more and they were in the street marching south. They had passed one brownstone building and were approaching a second when Felix drew Johnny into a doorway.

"Ought to tell you, I guess." His voice was low. "Sort of warn you in case anything happens. Bit irregular, the thing we are about to do. If it frightens you after I've told you, just say so. Every fellow has a right!

"You see," he got a fresh start, "Father was once in the secret service. He became interested at that time in working out devices for trapping criminals. And they *should* be trapped." His voice rose. "Ninety per cent of all crimes are committed by men who never work. Professional criminals, they make life unsafe for everyone. But Father doesn't trap 'em. He just works out the traps. He's too much interested in making things to think much about using them himself. See that brick place, second door over?" His voice dropped. "Some queer ones live there—a tall one and a short one."

"Tall one and a short—! I—"

"Not much time." Felix held up a hand. "Sleep late, those two, but not too late. Got to get in and do some things before they come downstairs.

"We're supposed to be changing some electric light switch boxes, you and I. That is, if we're caught. You're my helper. No breaking in or anything like that. Got the key from the owner. But if they come down, that tall one and the short one, they might get a little rough. See? Question is, are you still with me?" he concluded.

"Hundred per cent!" There was no hesitation in Johnny's tone. For all that, there was a sense of dizziness in his head. He was seeing again the living skeletons, one with a knife on its hip, the other with a blade hanging from its bony fingers.

“All right,” said Felix, “let’s go!”

“But why should we change the switch boxes in that place?” Johnny asked.

“Rule one of our clan is, ‘No questions asked’!” Felix chuckled.

A moment more and a key turned in a lock. They found themselves in an ancient parlor. The place was dark and silent, reeking with mystery.

“Here you are.” Felix handed Johnny a large flashlight. “Just focus that on my hands while I work. Won’t try to raise the shades. Might disturb our friends upstairs. Might—Sh! Listen!” The red-haired boy backed against the wall.

Involuntarily Johnny gripped the handle of a hammer with his free hand. The memory of a knife blade protruding from a sleeve was fresh in his mind.

For a space of seconds the two boys remained motionless.

“Thought I heard something.” Felix moved forward. A moment more and his long capable fingers, trembling slightly, were busy removing an electric punch button from the wall.

“Good!” he whispered. “Hole’s large enough.”

Diving into his kit, he brought out a small metal box wrapped about with wires.

After unwinding these wires, he stood again at attention. Catching no sound, he resumed his work. Pushing the wires through the hole left by the removal of the punch button, he slid them down between the walls, then prepared to fit the black box into position.

“Perfect,” he sighed. “Couldn’t have been better! I—”

He held up a finger for silence. There had come a faint sound from above.

“Like a bare foot touching the floor,” Johnny thought. Once more he gripped his hammer handle hard. If they were attacked he would do his bit. But would that be enough? Strange business this! A chill crept up his spine.

Felix resumed his work. His fingers flew. “There!” he sighed. “They’d never

know a thing has been changed. And yet—”

A moment later he disappeared into the depths of a large closet. What he did there Johnny was not permitted to know. For a full quarter of an hour, alternately chilling and thrilling at every sound that reached his ears, Johnny stood there on guard.

“Now,” the other boy at last whispered in his ear, “we go this way.” They passed through a door and down a stair into a cellar dark as night.

“One minute here, and then for the outer air.” Felix moved forward cautiously. For all that, his foot struck some object that gave forth a low, hollow roar. At the same instant there came from above an unmistakable sound of movement.

“Coming down the stairs,” Felix breathed. “Going out to breakfast, perhaps. If they don’t, we’re trapped like rats!”

Five long minutes they cowered there in the dark. Then, satisfied that all was well, Felix tucked some wires through a crack in the wall, and they were away.

“You’re all right!” A moment later in the broad light of the street the inventor’s son offered Johnny a slim hand. “I—I just wanted to make sure. You weren’t much afraid, were you?”

“Do you mean—” The muscles in Johnny’s face hardened. “Mean to say there really wasn’t any danger back there?”

“Danger?” Felix stared. “Of course there was danger! Those men were there, somewhere, no doubt about that. They’re bad ones too! Up to something rather terrible, I imagine. But then,” he added as a sort of afterthought, “we’re not detectives. I only wanted to get some things in there to try them out. You may have a chance to help at that. There’s a lot of things to do.

“But not tomorrow.” His brow wrinkled in thought. “Father and I will be away tomorrow. Tell you what—that’ll be all for today. Why don’t you come back day after tomorrow? We’ll try something out then, something rather thrilling, I’d say.”

It was to be thrilling, that thing they were to try out; but the thrill was to be of a different sort than that expected by Felix. Fate too would step in and change the

date for them. Fate has a way of doing that little thing, as Johnny had long since learned.

Gripping Felix's hand, Johnny hurried away to catch a bus.

"Just in time for one more auction," he thought to himself. "That other auction brought me luck and promise of adventure. Why might not another do the same? Might go to the shack and see if Drew Lane is there," he told himself. "Do that after the auction is over."

He was going to the shack right enough, but not in just the manner he would have chosen.

CHAPTER III
THE BATTLE

“There! That’s the one! The one up next!” Johnny sat up with a start. Arrived at the auction house where all manner of strange things lost, damaged or stolen, are sold, he had taken his place among the bidders. He had found himself crowded in between a thin man and a stout one. He knew the stout one slightly; they called him John. The slim man was new and quite strange for such a place. His clothes were new and very well kept. His face was dark. His lips were twitchy, his slim fingers ever in motion. There was on his left cheek a peculiar scar. Two marks, like a cross, as if someone had branded him, so Johnny thought.

And now, to his great astonishment, after dozing through a half hour of uninteresting auction, he found this stranger whispering shrilly in his ear. Before the whisper had come he felt a sharp punch in the ribs. The punch may have been made with a sharp elbow. Johnny had an uncomfortable feeling that the business end of some sort of short gun had been stuck into his side.

“Say!” he whispered back. “What’s the big idea? This is an auction house; not a hop joint!”

“I know! I know!” came in an excited whisper from the slender, nervous-eyed man. “But listen to me!” One more prod in the ribs. “You’ll remember it the longest day you live! You *bid* on that next package! And *get* it! Take it away from ’em, see? Take it away! Me? I’m broke,” the stranger went on hurriedly. “But I got a hunch. An’ my hunches, they’re open and shut, open and shut. Just like that! So you bid! See?”

The package in question seemed about as uninteresting as it well could be—a, plain corrugated box tied round with a stout hempen cord. There were scores quite like it. Some were larger, some thinner, some thicker. Johnny had seen many such packages opened.

“Broken bits of statuary,” he thought to himself, “or old clothes, like as not, or jars of cheap cosmetics. What do I want of that package?”

But the stranger was insisting. “Bid! Bid! See, I got a hunch!”

“Bid?” Johnny grumbled in a whisper. “What for?”

The auction room was warm. He guessed he must have fallen asleep. Always after a nap he felt cross. He wouldn’t bid on the silly package. What if this fellow did have a hunch? He had a mind to tell him so.

Strange to say, when the package went up, he did bid. “One dollar! Two! Three dollars!” And he had it.

He turned about to look into the slim stranger’s face; wanted to see how he felt about it. To his surprise he found the seat empty.

“That’s queer!” he thought with a start. “Perhaps I dreamed the whole thing!... No, not all of it,” he amended ten seconds later. “Here comes the collector after my deposit. I’ve got a good mind to tell him I didn’t buy the package.”

This notion too he abandoned. Digging into his watch-pocket, he dragged forth a crumpled dollar bill.

“O.K., Buddie, you get your package after the auction.” The collector went his way.

Johnny had not meant to stay the auction through. Now he must, or forfeit his dollar. He debated this problem and decided to stay. The package did not interest him overmuch, but his money was up. He would have a look.

Losing all interest in the auction, he spent his time thinking through his unusual adventures of the night before. Closing his eyes, he seemed to see again that frightful wavering skeleton which in time he came to believe was his own. Two other skeletons he saw, one with a long-bladed knife wavering in its hand.

“I saw them later on the streets, those men,” he told himself, “only they were all dressed up in flesh and had their skins on—clothes too. It’s a queer business! Eyes staring at a fellow from the wall!” He shuddered. “Fairly gives you the creeps! Wonder why I agreed to join up with such an outfit as that old professor

and his children."

"People," he whispered after a long period of deep thinking, "certain people have a way of getting inside of you and making you like them. They may be very good and they may be very bad, in certain ways, but you like them all the same. And you'll follow them as a dog follows his master. Queer old world! The professor is like that, and so's his daughter. Fellow'd come to like the boy too.

"Wonder what we were up to in that strange house," he mused. "Good thing we got out of that cellar before anyone showed up! I doubt if that boy's much of a fighter.

"Dumb!" He stirred impatiently in his seat. "Got a lot more to sell at this auction. Radios, somebody's trunks, 'with contents if any,' some puppies—hear 'em squeal!—pop-corn in a sack, six broken lamps and a hundred more things. Guess I'll get out. Buzz around here after awhile and pick up that package."

When he returned to the auction room two hours later darkness was falling. A dull, drab fog had come creeping in from the lake. Lights glowed through it like great staring eyes. They reminded him of the eyes in the wall at the professor's house.

"Bought a package here," he grumbled to the clerk. "Some busted thing, I guess. Here's the ticket and the rest of the money."

"Here you are!" The parcel man handed out his prize package.

The thing was heavier than he had expected. Prying up a corner of the box, he thrust in a hand. He touched something round, smooth and hard. "Like a skull," he whispered.

"Only some sort of electric lamp," he decided after further exploring. "Metal affair made like a jug; broken, probably. Oh well, might as well take it along."

Leaving the auction room, he came out into the street and headed west.

That portion of the city is not inviting, nor does it seem particularly friendly to well-dressed strangers. During the day, when the weather is fair, the cross streets swarm with men who once worked, who may work again, but who for the present stand and idly stare or wander up and down.

This night was damp and chill. The street was all but deserted. Halfway through a block a chance flash of light from a passing car revealed four well-dressed men standing at the entrance to an alley.

One look, and Johnny sprang back. The movement was purely instinctive. He had seen faces like theirs before, in court rooms and behind iron bars. Three of the men were in full view, one in the shadow.

Unfortunately the chance revelation of that passing car came too late. Before he could turn and show them his heels, they had him surrounded.

That there would be a fight he did not question. Why? He had not the remotest idea.

Johnny did not mind a fight, a clean fight. He kept himself fit for just such an occasion as this. He was always in training.

“But four of them!” He groaned.

No ringside rules here. One of the men was fat. Like a battering-ram, Johnny aimed his head square at that one’s stomach. The man went over with a groan. But not Johnny. Regaining his balance in a flash, he swung his good right arm to bring his heavy package squarely down upon a second man’s head.

The package flew from his hand. In a fair fight with one man, or even two, Johnny needed only two well-formed fists. As the third man sprang at him, he squared away to give him an uppercut under the chin that closed his jaws with the snap of a steel trap and put him out for a count of twice ten.

But at that instant something crashed down upon Johnny’s skull. The fourth member of the gang, he who had hovered in the shadows, had gone into action.

Ten minutes later when a detective threw the beam of his flashlight down that alley it fell upon a lone figure huddled against the wall.

He was about to pass on, thinking it was some poor wanderer fast asleep, when something about the person’s clothes caused him to look again. Two long strides and he was beside the prostrate form.

“Johnny Thompson, as I live!” he muttered after bending over for a look.

“And somebody’s got him! I wonder if it’s for keeps?”

CHAPTER IV
BACK IN THE OLD SHACK

Johnny was not out for good. But his return to consciousness was gradual. He began to hear things dimly as in a dream. There was a certain melody and harmony about the sounds, like a pipe organ played softly at night. This was shot through at times by a loud pop-pop-crack. Had memory returned, the boy might have thought they were fighting it out over his prostrate form, those men and the police.

Memory did not return. A drowsy feeling of painless well-being swallowed him up. He did not struggle against it, did not so much as wish to struggle. For all that, his eyes began seeing things—one more step on the way to full consciousness.

Like someone seen dimly in the clouds, as they do it in the movies, a vaguely familiar face appeared above him. A narrow, rather dark, tense face it was, with large eyes that seemed to burn with a strange fire.

“Joy—Joyce Mills,” his lips whispered.

“Yes, Johnny. We’re glad you’re back.”

“Back?” He pondered that last word. “Back to what?”

He began to feel things—a third step in his return to the realm of reality. The cold fog was gone, he knew that. The darkness too was gone. A subdued light was all about him.

“Back,” he thought once more, “back to what?”

Then, as if reading this thought, the girl said, “You are back in the shack on Grand Avenue. Don’t you remember?”

At that all his memories came flooding in. The shack, Drew Lane and Tom Howe, keen young detectives, his staunch friends; Newton Mills, the one-time derelict and veteran detective, and Joyce Mills, his vivacious, ambitious daughter who at times had proven herself the keenest detective of them all.

“The shack!” he exclaimed, making a brave attempt to sit up. “The shack! How—how wonderful!” He sank back dizzily. A sharp pain had shot across his temples.

When this pain was gone, he gave himself over entirely to memories. The girl’s face had vanished. Something told him, however, that she was seated close by his side.

Memories, gorgeous, thrilling memories! They would be with him until he died. He and this slim, dark-haired girl had not been lovers; much more than that, very much more. They had been pals. And as pals they had shared dangers. They had dared together and had won. Drew Lane had been with them, Newton Mills too, and Tom Howe. Men there had been who would gladly have killed them. Yet, standing side by side and fighting for the good of all, they had won.

“And now?” He said the words aloud.

“Now you have only to rest,” came in that same melodious voice. “Someone hit you rather hard on the head. That’s what you get for going it alone. You might have known we were still in Chicago. You did not look us up. You can’t go it alone. No one can—not in this world of today. We stand shoulder to shoulder, or we don’t stand at all.

“But now—” the girl’s voice fell. “Now you are here in the shack and Drew Lane is here. Others are not far away. You must rest.” Her voice trailed off into silence.

Johnny wanted to tell her he had tried to find Drew Lane at the shack and had failed; that he had not wished to go it alone, that he did appreciate his friends. But somehow the words would not come. His thoughts were all mixed up with dreams, dreams of eyes blinking from the wall, animated skeletons and mysterious packages. Truth was, he had fallen asleep.

* * * * * * * *

“I went to an auction.” Five hours Johnny had slept on a cot in the corner of the large room at the back of the shack. Now he was sitting up on the cot, talking eagerly. From beneath his crown of bandages his two eyes gleamed like twin stars. “I bought a library, a professor’s library, bought it at auction. Because he was a professor I had to get it back to him.

“I found his address. I went there. I was in the hall. Eyes gleamed at me. A skeleton danced before me, my skeleton. I—”

“Your skeleton?” Drew Lane, the keen detective, grinned at him.

“Sure it was my skeleton! Don’t you suppose a fellow knows his skeleton when he sees it?”

Drew Lane laughed, a low laugh, but made no reply.

“Then,” Johnny went on rapidly, “a girl opened the door, a taffy-haired, boyish sort of girl, and said she was sorry. It is a house of magic, the ‘House of a Thousand Eyes.’”

“Eyes?” Joyce Mills leaned forward eagerly. “What sort of eyes?”

“That,” said Johnny, “is what I don’t know. They seem to do things, those eyes, open doors and shut ’em, make coffee maybe, I don’t know. That’s why I’m going back. I want to know. Oh! Don’t I though!”

“So you’re going back?” Drew smiled.

A large man sitting before the fire, a man Johnny had never seen until that night, turned and looked at him in a strange way.

“Sure I’m going back. I’m to help them!”

“Help them at what?” Drew Lane was curious.

“Don’t know.” Johnny’s brow wrinkled.

Had Johnny been a little wider awake and a little more alive, he would have realized that the young detective and Joyce Mills were humoring him as they might a drunken man. “He was hit on the head in that alley—I found him and

brought him here," Drew was saying to himself. "He's slightly cuckoo from that terrible bump he got. All this stuff he's talking is sheer nonsense. He's delirious. He'll come round all right." Joyce Mills was thinking much the same. Not knowing their thoughts, Johnny rambled on:

"We put some wires and things in a place nearby. Two queer ones live there, a long one and a short one. One carries a knife up his sleeve."

"Nice friendly sort." Drew grinned. "Was he the fellow that hit you?"

"Hit me?" Johnny's hand went to his head. "I—I doubt that. It—it was a different place."

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, "they might have followed me all that time. But why? I hadn't done anything to them—not yet."

"Not yet? Are you going to later?" Joyce Mills gave him a look.

"Something tells me I am. Fellow gets hunches, you know that. That old professor interests me and so does that 'House of a Thousand Eyes.' He said there'd be danger. But who cares for danger?" Once more his hand went to his head. "They—they didn't get me, not yet. But if I find that fellow who hit me with that iron bar—and I *will* find him, don't doubt that—when I find him, well —" He did not finish.

"Did you see him?" Drew asked eagerly.

"Not out there in—"

"In the 'Wild Garden of Despair'?" Drew laughed low. "That's what they call West Madison Street. You didn't see him there, did you?"

Drew was beginning to believe that Johnny was all right in his head after all.

"He's the only one I didn't see." Johnny's tone was thoughtful. "All the same, I have a notion I've seen him right enough. Unless I've got him all wrong, he sat beside me in that auction house and prodded me in the ribs, telling me to bid on a package I had no notion of buying."

"Did you buy it?"

“Sure did.”

Johnny told of his experience in the auction house, then of the battle in the “Garden of Despair.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Drew said slowly when the story was told. “The fellow who talked you into buying that package may have belonged to the gang that beat you up in that alley. Package was gone right enough when I found you. You’re sure there was nothing in that box but a broken lamp?”

“I wouldn’t swear to that.” Johnny dropped back to his place on the cot. “I didn’t untie it; just explored it with my hands.”

“It’s a toss-up,” Drew concluded. “Man who carries a knife up his sleeve, or the fellow who made you buy what you didn’t want. One of these hit you. Which one? Nice little riddle. We’ll help you solve it, won’t we, Joyce?”

“Yes, and let me in on it!” The large man by the fire stood up.

“Johnny,” Drew said, and there was a note of deep respect in his voice, “this is Captain Burns, a chief in the detective bureau. He—he seems to like being here in our shack now and then. But keep it dark,” he warned. “There are people who would like to meet the Captain here in a very unsocial way—boys of the underworld who’ve felt his steel. Right, Captain?”

“Maybe so,” the Captain rumbled. “Anyway, I wouldn’t want our happy retreat broken up.

“But this ‘House of a Thousand Eyes’?” He turned to Johnny. “Tell me more about it.”

“I will,” said Johnny with a broad grin, “when I have more to tell.”

CHAPTER V
PAST AND PRESENT

Several hours later, having quite recovered from his severe headache, and apparently not so very much the worse for the terrible thump he had received on the head, Johnny sat before the open fireplace in Drew Lane's shack on Grand Avenue. About that same fire were gathered his friends of other days, Drew Lane, Tom Howe and Joyce Mills. With them was the ruddy-faced, smiling Captain Burns, one of the best known and most feared officers of the law in that city.

If you have read "Arrow of Fire" you will know that the "Shack" was the one remaining structure of days long gone by when the east end of Grand Avenue—which, after all, has never been very grand—was at the edge of a sandy marsh where in the autumn one might hunt wild ducks.

This shack was now surrounded by tall warehouses. Hidden away and quite forgotten, it made a perfect meeting place for such as Drew Lane and his little group of crime hunters.

Drew Lane was still young. With his derby hat, bright tie and natty suit, he looked still very much the college boy he had been. Endowed with great strength, trained to the limit, with a brain like a brightly burning lamp, he was the despair of evil doers. Scarcely less effective was his team-mate, Tom Howe. Small, freckled, active as a cat, silent, full of thoughts, Tom planned, while, more often than not, Drew executed.

Joyce Mills, as you may know, had become a member of this group quite by accident. Her father, Newton Mills, after many years of distinguished service as a detective in New York, had at last fallen a prey to strong drink. Johnny and Drew had found him in Chicago drinking his life away. They had saved him to a life of further usefulness. Joyce, deeply grateful, and always at heart a "lady

cop,” had cast her lot with them. And now here she was.

“But your father?” Johnny was saying to her at this moment, “where is he?”

A shadow passed over the girl’s dark face. “Haven’t seen him for two months.

“But then,” she added in a lighter tone, “you know him. Gets going on something and forgets everything else. He’ll show up.”

“Yes,” Johnny agreed, “he’s bound to.”

Johnny was thinking of the time the veteran detective had turned himself into a gray shadow and had, all unknown, dogged Johnny’s heels, saving him from all manner of terrible deaths. The time was to come, and that soon enough, when he was to wish the “Gray Shadow” back on his trail.

“Drew,” Johnny said, turning to his sturdy young friend, “I came here the moment I reached the city. How come the place was locked up and dark?”

“Been on a vacation; just got back.” Drew’s face lighted. “Went to the Rockies. Had some wonderful hunting—grizzly bears. Can’t say that’s more exciting than hunting crooks, though,” he laughed.

“Met a girl you’d like on the way back.” Drew Lane turned to Joyce. “Came on the bus. People in a bus, traveling far, get to be like one big family. Funny part was—” He gave a low chuckle. “She’s coming here to help her uncle. He has a store on Maxwell Street. Maxwell Street! Can you imagine?”

“Rags, scrap-iron, poultry in crates, fish smells and noise—that’s what Maxwell Street means to me!” Joyce shuddered.

“Just that!” Drew agreed. “This truly nice girl from somewhere in Kansas is going there to help in her uncle’s store. She doesn’t know a thing about Chicago. Thinks Maxwell Street is all the same as State Street, I’m sure. Believes her uncle’s store is anyway six stories high. Well, she’s in for a terrible shock. I feel sorry for her. Have to get round and see her—gave me the address. She asked me what I did in Chicago.” Drew chuckled once more.

“What did you tell her?” Joyce asked.

“Said I looked after people, lots of them.”

“And for once you told the truth,” Johnny laughed.

“But Johnny!” Joyce exclaimed. “Tell me some more about this ‘House of Magic’ you’ve discovered. Sounds frightfully interesting. We all thought you were a little delirious when you first talked of it. But now—”

“Now you begin to believe me.” Johnny’s eyes shone. “It’s a truly wonderful place.”

“Tell us about it.” Captain Burns insisted from his corner. “Heard about some of these things before. Shouldn’t wonder if they’d do things in the end to lift the load off us poor, over-worked detectives.”

“I’ll tell you all I know, which isn’t much,” Johnny agreed.

And here I think we may safely leave our friends for a little time while we look in upon Grace Krowl, the girl from somewhere in Kansas. She had found her uncle’s store on Maxwell Street. And how she had found it!

CHAPTER VI
A STORE IN CHICAGO

A slender mite of a girl, barely past her eighteenth birthday, Grace Krowl was possessed of an indomitable spirit and a will of her own; else she would not have been walking down Maxwell Street in Chicago hundreds of miles from her home, in Kansas.

The look in her eyes as she marched down that street where all manner of junk and rags are mingled with much that, after all, is pleasant and desirable, was one of utter surprise.

“A store,” she murmured, more than once, “a store in Chicago. And Maxwell Street. I am sure I can’t be wrong. And yet—”

Arrived at the street number written on a slip of paper in her hand, she stood staring at the narrow, two-story building with its blank windows and unpainted walls for a full moment. Then, a spirit of desperation seizing her, she sprang up the low steps, grasped the doorknob, then stepped resolutely inside.

Once inside, she stood quite still. Never in any place had she witnessed such confusion. What place could this be? Her mind was in a whirl. Then, like a flash, her eyes fell upon an object that threw her into action. With a startled cry, she sprang at a group of women.

She snatched a tortoise shell comb from a huge black woman’s hand just as she was about to try it in her kinky hair. She dragged a pink kimono from beneath a tall, slim woman’s arm and, diving all but headforemost, gathered in a whole armful of garments that an astonished little lady had been hugging tight.

By this time the battle turned. She found herself at the center of a concerted attack. The black woman banged at her with a picture frame, the tall, thin one

jabbed her with sharp elbows and the little lady made a grab at her hair.

“Ladies! Ladies!” came in a protesting man’s voice. “Why must you fight in my store?”

“Fight? Who wants to fight!” the tall woman screamed. “Here we are peaceful folks looking over the goods in your store, and here comes this one!” She pointed an accusing finger at Grace. “She comes in grabbing and snatching, that’s what she does!”

“Store! Goods!” Grace’s head was in a whirl. How could they call this a store? It was a place where people robbed strangers,—stole their trunks and rifled them. Surely there could be no mistaking that. Were not the trunks open there before her, a half dozen or more of them? And was not her own modest steamer trunk among them? Had she not caught them going through her trunk? Were not the articles in her arms, the tortoise shell comb, the kimono and those other garments her very own? Goods? Store? What could it all mean? Her head was dizzy.

“A store,” she whispered to herself, “my uncle’s store in Chicago. He gave me this address. He must be in the business of stealing trunks and selling their contents!” She felt, of a sudden, all hollow inside, and dropping like an empty sack, half sat upon a partially emptied trunk.

“Miss! Why do you do this?” The bearded man who now spoke was almost apologetic in his approach. “Why do you do this in my store? Many years I, Nicholas Fischer, have sold goods here and never before have I seen such as this!”

“Nich—Nicholas Fischer!” The girl’s eyes widened. “Then *you* are Nicholas Fischer. And *this* is your store? STORE!” she fairly screamed.

She wanted to rise and flee, but she was half stuck in the trunk and her wobbly legs would not lift her out, so she said shakily:

“I did it be—because that’s my trunk. I—I am Grace Krowl, your niece who came from Camden Center, Kansas, to help you keep your store. But I won’t, I won’t stay a moment. I’ll never, never, never help a thief!”

“You?” The bearded man’s face was a study. Surprise, mortification registered

themselves on his face. “Grace Krowl, my niece,” he murmured. “Her trunk! It is her trunk! A thief it is she says I am—I, Nicholas Fischer, who never stole a penny! Tell me, what is all this?” He stared from face to face as if expecting an answer. But no answer came.

And then a slow smile overspread his face. “Now I begin to understand,” he murmured. “It is all a mistake, a terrible mistake!

“Ladies,” he said, turning pleading eyes on the group of customers, “will you please put back into that little trunk everything you have taken out? And if any have paid for a thing, I will repay. It is my niece’s trunk. It is one terrible mistake.” He began rocking backwards and forwards like one in great pain.

“A thief, she said,” he murmured. “But who would not have thought it?” His eyes took in the half-empty trunks all about him, then he murmured again, “Who would not have thought it?”

Four hours later, just after darkness had fallen, this same girl, Grace Krowl, found herself walking the most unusual street in America, Maxwell Street in Chicago. She found it interesting, amusing, sometimes a little startling, and always unspeakably sad, this place where a strange sort of bedlam reigns.

Here, as she passed along, fat Jewish women held up flimsy silk stockings to her view, screaming, “Buy, Miss, buy now! The price goes up! Cheap! Cheap!” Here a man seized her rudely by the shoulder, turned her half around and all but shoved her into a narrow shop, where gaudy dresses were displayed. This made her angry. She wanted to fight.

“I fight?” She laughed softly to herself. “I, who have always lived in Camden Center! A sort of madness comes over one in such a place as this, I guess.” Recalling her fight earlier in the day, her cheeks crimsoned, and she hurried on.

“What a jumble!” she exclaimed aloud as she turned her attention once more to Maxwell Street. “Shoes, scissors, radios, geese, cabbages, rags and more rags, rusty hardware, musical instruments. Where does it all come from, and who will buy it?”

She paused to look at a crate of cute white puppies with pink noses. They, too, were for sale. Then, of a sudden, her face clouded.

“Can I do it?” she muttered. “Can I? I—I must! But other people’s things? So often the little treasures they prized! How can I?”

That she might remove her thoughts from a painful subject, she forced her eyes to take in her present surroundings. Then, with a little cry, she sprang forward. “Books! ‘Everything in books.’” She read the sign aloud. She disappeared through a dingy door into a room which was brightly lighted. The lights and the face that greeted her changed all. The madly fantastic world was, for the moment, quite shut out. She was at home with many books and with a girl whose face shone, she told herself, “like the sun.”

“A book?” this sales girl smiled. “Something entertaining? A novel, perhaps. Oh no, I don’t think you’d like ‘Portrait of a Man with Red Hair.’ It’s really rather terrible. One of the chief characters is a mad man who loves torturing people.” The girl shuddered.

“But this now—” She took up a well-thumbed volume. “‘A Lantern in Her Hand.’ It is truly lovely—the story of brave and simple people. I’m afraid we’re neither very brave nor very simple these days. Do you feel that we are?”

“She really is able to think clearly,” Grace whispered to herself. “I am sure I am going to like her.”

“I’ll take one, that one,” she said putting out her hand for the book. And then, because she was alone in a great city, because she was bursting to confide in someone, she said, “He buys trunks, trunks full of other people’s things. He takes the things out and sells them, other people’s things. They packed them away with such care, and now—now he takes them out, throws them about and sells them!”

“Who does?” The girl’s eyes opened wide.

“My uncle, Nicholas Fischer.”

“Oh, Nicholas Fischer.” The girl’s voice dropped. “But he is the kindest man! Comes here with books. He sells them to Mr. Morrow who owns this store—secondhand books. Perhaps they come from the trunks. And Mr. Morrow says he helps poor people, your uncle does, and he doesn’t let anyone know who it is.”

“But he buys trunks, other people’s trunks, and sells them!” Grace insisted.

“Yes, buys them at auction, I guess. Several people on this street do that. Express auctions, railway auctions, storage house auctions and all that. And you are to help him open them up!” she exclaimed quite suddenly. “You are to explore them? How I envy you!”

“Envy?” Grace stared in unbelief.

“But why not? Think of the things you may find. Diamonds perhaps; stocks and bonds; rare old coins and rarer old books; ancient silver plate. Just think of the things people pack away in their trunks! Letters; diaries; quaint old pictures. It—why it’s like a trip around the world!”

“But it—it seems so unfair,” Grace wavered.

“You’re not the one that’s being unfair,” the bright-eyed one reasoned. “Those people can’t have their things in those trunks. Perhaps they are dead. In some cases they lost their trunks because they were too poor to pay storage or express charges. You can’t well help that. So why think about it?”

Grace Krowl *was* to think about it many times and in the end to do something about it. That something was to draw her into a great deal of trouble. For the moment she left the little secondhand bookshop soothed, comforted, and filled with a desire to call again.

“No doubt you think Maxwell Street a terrible place,” the smiling girl said as she walked with her to the door, “and that your uncle’s store is the worst on the street. But I could tell you—” A shadow fell across her face. “I could tell you things about grand stores on a very grand street in this city of ours. Per—perhaps I will sometime.”

Grace was startled as she looked into her face. It had suddenly become gray and old.

“How strange,” she murmured as, dodging a pushcart laden with geese, she hurried away toward Nicholas Fischer’s place on Maxwell Street. “How strange. And how—how sort of terrible. And yet—”

The words of a great man came to her. “No situation in life is ever so bad but that it might be worse.”

* * * * * * * *

“What,” you may be asking by this time, “have the adventures of a girl from Kansas to do with Johnny Thompson and his friends?” The answer is: “A great

deal.” In the first place, Drew Lane, having discovered this little lady while traveling in a bus, was not the sort to desert her in her plight. In the second place, an invisible finger of light moving across the sky was destined to join the fates of Johnny Thompson and Grace Krowl.

However, for the time, we will return to Johnny and his friends.

CHAPTER VII
THE UNHOLY FIVE

During the course of their conversation about the open fire in Drew Lane's shack, Captain Burns took from his inside pocket a small package which proved to be five photographs pasted securely upon a strip of stout cloth in such a manner that they might be folded together in the form of a small book. "Ever see any of these?" he said to Johnny after spreading them out upon his knee.

For a moment Johnny studied the pictures thoughtfully. Then he gave a sudden start. "That," he exclaimed, pointing a trembling finger at the third in the row, "is the man who sat beside me in the auction—who got me to bid in that package!"

"Are you sure?" The Captain's tone was tense.

"Can't be a doubt about it. See that scar like a cross? Couldn't well miss that, could I? He's the one all right. And, though I could never prove it, I'd swear he was the one who struck me from the dark.

"And, by all that's good!" Johnny sprang to his feet. "I'll get that man! See if I don't! No man can strike me from the shadows and get away with it!"

"Well, I guess that makes your friend Johnny here one of us. That right, Drew?" the Captain rumbled.

Drew Lane nodded his head.

"Sit down, son," said the Captain. "I'll tell you what those pictures mean. Drew here and Tom Howe carry those pictures with them always. So does Joyce, though I don't know quite where—in her stocking perhaps."

Joyce smiled.

“We joke at times,” the Captain went on, “but this affair is no joke. Those men are our assignment. They are to be our assignment until every man of them is behind bars or in his grave. You may join us if you will.”

“I will.” Johnny’s voice was low.

The Captain extended his hand as a solemn pledge.

“You have a right to know,” he went on, “just what men you are after, and what they have done.

“They are hardened criminals, every one, public enemies of the worst sort. A little more than a month ago they sealed their fate—they killed a policeman, the finest copper that ever walked a beat.”

For a time the Captain stared at the fire. “My boy,” he said at last, in a different voice, “I’m going to take you with me somewhere, sometime. The finest little family you ever saw!” he rumbled low as if talking to himself.

Then, with a sudden start, he repeated, “They killed a policeman. Of course a policeman’s no better than any other man. But with us there’s an unwritten law that no officer shall go unavenged.

“That wasn’t all they did, this unholy five. They went to a banker’s home at midnight and terrorized his family until morning. Man’s wife was in ill health. But of course—” The Captain’s voice rumbled with scorn and hate. “Of course you couldn’t expect these robbers to take note of a little thing like that! What do they care for women and children?

“When morning came they took the man to his bank. They compelled him to open the vault. They took the bank’s securities, more than two hundred thousand dollars worth. Then, of course, they went away.

“By some oversight, the bank’s insurance had been allowed to lapse. Because of this heavy loss the bank was forced to close its doors. It was a working man’s bank. Thousands of common folks lost their savings. These five men—no doubt they had a fine time with the currency they took!

“But the bonds—” His voice rose again. “The bonds are hot. We’ve kept them hot. They dare not sell them. And we’ll get them back yet, see if we don’t!

“And those are the men we’re after!” he added a moment later. “Are you still with us?”

“More than ever!” Johnny’s voice was husky.

Once again the Captain offered his hand. “You’re a lad after my own heart,” he rumbled. “I’ve two places I want to show you, and I’m sure you’ll like them both.”

CHAPTER VIII
DOWN A BEAM OF LIGHT

Grace Krowl, the girl from Kansas, found plenty of things to occupy her thoughts as she sank into a chair in one of the two small rooms allotted to her on the upper floor of her uncle's store in Chicago.

"A store in Chicago." She laughed low. Her uncle's store in Chicago. What dreams had she not dreamed of this store? Chicago was a grand city. His store must be a grand place. She had of late pictured it as a six-story building; pure fancy, for he had never written about its size or importance. In fact, he had not written at all until she had written first and asked for a position as clerk in his store. He had been married to her mother's sister. The sister was dead.

When Grace had needed work badly she had written, and he had replied briefly: "I can give you work at fifteen dollars per week and board."

So here she was. And her uncle's store was little more than a hole in the wall. No counters, no glass cases. Things piled in heaps, and all secondhand; glass dishes here, bed covers there, dresses, sheets, towels, everything. And in the corner, like so many skeletons, a great pile of bruised, battered and empty trunks.

"He buys trunks, other people's trunks." She shuddered afresh.

Then the words of her new-found friend of the bookstore came to her. "Diamonds, stocks and bonds." These were dreams. "But rare old books, wonderful bits of Irish lace, why not?" Perhaps, after all, she could drive away the ache that came in her throat at the thought that someone who truly loved these things had lost them because they were poor.

She thought of her own trunk and laughed aloud. What a sight that must have been—she snatching at her prized possessions and those other women poking

her and banging her on the head!

Of course it had all been a mistake. She had come to Chicago by bus and had sent on her trunk by express. The van that went for her trunk had also picked up a half dozen others which her uncle had bought at auction. The trunks had become mixed. The lock had been pried off her own and the contents were being sold when she arrived. Everything had been retrieved except a pearl-backed brush she prized and a hideous vase she abhorred.

“That did not turn out so badly,” she assured herself. “Perhaps everything will come along quite as well.” And yet, as she took a handful of silver coins and one paper dollar from her purse and added them up, her face was very sober. She was a long way from home, and there could be no retreat.

The place she was to call home was above the store. Too tired and preoccupied to notice at first, she received a shock when she at last became conscious of her surroundings. The room in which she sat was a tiny parlor, all her own. Off from that was a bedroom. Everything—furniture, rugs, decorations,—was in exquisite taste and perfect harmony.

“Contrast!” she exclaimed. “Who could ask for greater contrast? Rags below, and this above!” She stared in speechless surprise.

One thing astonished her. Opposite the window in the parlor was an oval, concave mirror, like an old-fashioned light reflector. It was some two feet across.

“I wonder why it is here,” she murmured. She was to wonder more as the days passed.

When she had prepared herself for the night’s rest, she snapped out the light, then stood for a brief time at the open window looking out into the night. She was on the second floor of her uncle’s small building. Before her were the low, flat roofs of some one-story shacks. Looking far beyond these, she saw squares of light against the night sky. These she knew were lighted windows of distant skyscrapers. There were thousands of these windows.

“What can they all do at night?” she asked herself. “Struggling to make money, to get on, to keep their families housed and fed,” the answer came to her. Then, strangely enough, her mind carried her back over the trail that had brought her to this city. It had been an interesting adventure, that long bus ride. Six of the

passengers, including herself, had ridden hundreds of miles together. They had become like a little community.

“It was as if these were pioneer days,” she told herself now. “As if we were journeying in covered wagons in a strange new land.” One of these long distance passengers, as you will know, had been a young man. In his golf knickers and soft, gray cap, he had seemed a college boy. But he was not. “Out of college and at work,” was the way he had expressed it.

“What work do you do?” she had asked.

He had hesitated before replying. Then his answer had been vague. “Oh, I just look after people.”

“Look after people?”

“Lots of people. All sorts.” A queer smile had played about the corners of his mouth.

She had not pressed the question further. But now, standing there looking out into his city at night, she whispered, “His name was Drew Lane. Wonder if I’ll ever see him again? I hope so. He seemed a nice boy, and I should love to know how he looks after ‘lots of people—all sorts.’”

She looked again at the many lighted windows. Suddenly those who toiled there seemed very near to her. She found a strange comfort in this.

“I, too, must do my best,” she told herself. “God help me to be wise and strong, helpful to others and kind to all!” she prayed as she gave herself over to sleep.

She was wakened at dawn by a whisper. At first, so closely did dream life blend with the life of day, it seemed natural that she should be listening to this whisper. When she had come into full consciousness she sprang out of bed with a start.

“Good morning!” The words came in slowly, a distinct whisper. “We hope you are happy this morning. Cheerio! That’s the word!”

“When you have dressed,” the whisper continued, “won’t you just step out into the little parlor and take a seat by the table? It will be good to have a look at your shining face.”

“Someone in my little parlor! I don’t like it. And that whisper!”

She dressed hurriedly, then stepped through the door. What sort of person had she expected to see? Probably she could not have told. What she did see was *an empty room*.

Greatly astonished, hardly knowing why she obeyed the whispered orders, she took a seat by the table. Instantly the whisper began once more:

“Ah! There you are! I am talking to you over a beam of light. I am a mile away. I have interesting things to tell you. You are going to aid me.”

For a brief space of time the whisper ended. The girl’s mind was in a whirl. “Talking down a beam of light!” she thought. “What nonsense! Going to aid that whisperer?” Here surely was some strange mystery.

CHAPTER IX
CUT ADRIFT

For some time Grace Krowl remained at her small table awaiting some further message from the mysterious whisperer. No further message came. Had this whisper told the truth? Was he a mile away? She could not believe it.

On descending to the floor below, she found her strange uncle prepared to leave his odd store.

“Today I go to an auction,” he said to her with a smile. “Today there is nothing to unpack. Not many people will come. They come only when there are trunks. Tomorrow there will be trunks, perhaps many trunks.”

“Trunks,” Grace thought with an involuntary shudder.

“Today,” her uncle went on, “Margot will tend store.” He nodded toward an aged woman bending over a pile of soiled garments. “Today you are free. You may make yourself at home in your new place.”

All that day in her little parlor, Grace had one ear open for the Whisperer. She heard nothing. He spoke, apparently, only at dawn. The day was, for her, quite uneventful.

The same could not be said for our young friend Johnny. Late that day, with a narrow bandage still about his head, he returned to the “House of Magic.” And, almost at once, adventure struck him squarely between the eyes.

“You are just in time!” Felix, the inventor’s son, greeted him. “I have not tried that new thing. We will begin at dusk, in an hour or two in a captive balloon,—”

“A captive balloon!” Johnny felt a thrill course up his spine.

“On the Fair grounds,” Felix added. “There is one over there. The grounds are deserted. I have permission to use the balloon. I have had it inflated. No one will bother us there.”

It is better sometimes to do things where there are crowds. Felix was to learn this. There is safety in numbers.

At the gate of the deserted Fair grounds Felix presented his pass. They were admitted.

“Sent the equipment over in a small truck,” he explained to Johnny. “Rather heavy.”

“What equipment?” The words were on Johnny’s tongue. He did not say them. Just in time he recollected that he was to look, listen, help all he could and not ask questions. “I’ll be told all I need to know in good time,” he assured himself. Had he but known it, that night he was to need wisdom not written in any book.

The streets they were passing through now were strange. The falling darkness gave to everything an air of mystery. Here some great man-made dragon opened its mouth as if to swallow them, there a tattered sign fluttered and cracked in the wind. “The great Century of Progress!” Johnny whispered. “Here thousands swarmed along the Midway. Now all is still. Now—

“What was that?” He stopped dead in his tracks. Had he caught the sound of scurrying feet? Yes, he was sure of it. And there, well defined against a wall, were the shadows of two half crouching figures. One was tall, the other short. Johnny felt a chill run up his spine.

Felix apparently had seen nothing, heard nothing. He had gone plodding stolidly on into the gathering darkness; was at this moment all but lost from sight.

With a little cry of consternation, Johnny sprang after him.

By the time he caught up to him they were at the spot where the balloon was kept.

“We just release this clutch when we are ready to go up,” Felix explained, “then up we go. There is a time arrangement that will set the electrically operated drum, winding us back down again in two hours. We only go up about three

hundred feet. Cable holds us. Quite safe tonight, no wind to speak of."

Johnny thought this a rather strange arrangement. "No guard here?" he asked.

"No need. No one's allowed in the grounds unless they have a pass. Climb in. All set."

Johnny did climb in, and up they went.

Johnny had been in the air many times. For all that, he experienced a strange sense of insecurity as they rose a hundred, two hundred, three hundred feet into the murky air of night. "Pooh!" he exclaimed in a low breath. "It is nothing!"

That he might throw off this feeling of dread, he busied himself with other thoughts. His gaze swept the city where lights were gleaming. "Where," he thought, "are Drew and Tom? Hunting pickpockets perhaps. And where is Captain Burns? I'm going to like him, I'm sure. He is so solid and real; but jovial for all that. He said he'd take me places. What places? I wonder. Dangerous places? He said—"

His thoughts were broken in upon by Felix's voice:

"Here we are at the top. Now for the test."

The young inventor flashed on a powerful searchlight. "All I have to do is to connect this through a switch, aim my light at a window in our house, take up this microphone and say, 'Hello father!' He hears me and no one else in the world can. He—

"What!" he exclaimed in consternation. "The current is off. Someone cut the light cable!"

"More than that!" Johnny's tone was sober. He was looking over the side of the balloon basket in which they rode. "The cable that holds us has been cut! We're drifting!"

"You're right!" Consternation sounded in the older boy's voice. "We're going out into the night, over black waters. And there is no ballast!"

"They got us, those two!" Johnny muttered.

“What two?” Felix demanded.

“I saw them on the grounds, a tall one and a short one—anyway I saw their shadows. Should have told you.”

“Oh!” Felix groaned. “Wonder what we’ve done to them. But they haven’t got us—not yet!” There was courage and high resolve in Felix Van Loon’s tone. “We’ll beat them yet. You’ll see!”

Would they? Johnny silently wondered.

Strangely enough, at that moment thoughts not related at all to this adventure passed through his mind. He was once more in that place of mystery, the professor’s house, in the hallway seeing eyes in the wall, shuddering at sight of his own skeleton. “How could all that have happened?” he asked himself.

CHAPTER X
A RUNAWAY CAPTURED

Johnny had known a thrill or two, but none quite like drifting through the night in a balloon that was not meant for drifting.

“Not an ounce of ballast!” Felix groaned. “And the night so dark we may plunge without a moment’s notice into those cold, black waters. And then—oh well, what’s the good of thinking about that?”

There truly was no use at all of thinking about it. If worse came to worst and they were able to tell the moment of great danger, they might throw his instruments and the searchlight over to lighten the balloon.

“All this equipment,” Felix moaned, “cost plenty of money!”

In spite of their predicament, Johnny found himself wondering about that equipment and what they had been about to do.

For a time Johnny was silent. Then of a sudden he exclaimed, “Felix, we are drifting northeast! That means we’ll be over the lake for hours. If the wind rises, if a strong gust drags us down, or if the gas bag leaks and we are plunged into the lake we are lost! A three hundred foot cable hangs beneath this balloon. It is weighting us down. Suppose we could cut it away?”

“It’s an idea!” Felix was all alert. “But it hangs from below. How’ll you reach it?”

“Here’s a rope. I’ll go over the side. You hang on to the rope.”

“That,” said Felix slowly, “will be taking a long chance.”

“Whole thing’s a chance.” Johnny was tying a loop in the rope. “Now I’ll put a

foot in this loop, hold to the rope with one hand and work with the other. Flashlight will tell me all I need to know. Can hold the light in my teeth."

"You should be in a circus." Felix laughed. For all that, he made the other end of the rope fast, then prepared to lower his companion.

As he climbed up and over, Johnny felt his heart miss a beat. It was strange, this crawling out into space. All was dark below. Was the water a hundred or a thousand feet down? He could not tell. The majestic Lindbergh light swept the sky, but its rays did not touch them.

"If only it did," he murmured, "someone would see us."

Strangely enough, at this very moment the professor's golden-haired daughter, Beth, was making strenuous efforts to bring that very thing to pass, to get one of those eyes of the night, a powerful searchlight, focussed upon the runaway balloon.

Her father, sensing that something had gone wrong with the balloon, had hurried her away to the spot from which the balloon had risen. Arrived there after a wild taxi ride, she had discovered on the instant what had happened.

"Some—someone cut the cable with an electric torch!" In vain her eyes searched the sky for the balloon. She was about to hurry away when a hand gripped her arm.

"Where would you go?"

"Why! I—"

Taking one look at the man, she sent forth an involuntary scream. She had seen that man before. He carried a knife in his sleeve. She was terribly afraid.

Her scream had electrifying results. A huge bulk of a youth with tangled red hair emerged from somewhere.

"Here you!" he growled, "Let her go!"

Releasing the girl, the small dark man sprang at her protector.

“Look out!” the girl screamed. “He—he has a knife!”

Her warning was not needed. The little man’s knife went coursing through the air. Next instant the little man followed it into the dark. The big fellow’s fists had done all this.

“Now, sister,” the young giant turned to Beth, “where was it you wanted to go?”

“The—the Skidmore Building.”

“The Skidmore? O.K.”

Fairly picking her up, he rushed her to the taxi that was waiting for her, then climbed in beside her. “Skidmore Building. Make it snappy!”

Once in the taxi and speeding away, Beth was able to collect her thoughts. There was, at the top of the tall Skidmore Building, a searchlight. This was not always in operation, but was held in readiness for any emergency either on the water or in the air. If only she could get that light searching the air for the runaway balloon something, she felt sure, could be done about it.

The taxi came to a sudden jarring halt.

“Here you are!”

“Here.” She dropped a half dollar in the taxi driver’s hand. At the same instant something was pressed into the palm of her left hand. She looked up. Her powerful young protector was gone. In her hand was a card.

A moment later as she shot toward the stars in an elevator she looked at that card and smiled.

“Gunderson Shotts, 22 Diversey Way” it read. And in the lower right hand corner, “Everybody’s Business.”

She smiled in spite of herself as she murmured, “Gunderson Shotts, Everybody’s Business. What a strange calling!”

* * * * * * * *

At that same moment Johnny was going over the side into the dark. It was strange, this adventure. “Must be careful,” he told himself. And indeed he must. Dark waters awaited him. A drop from that height would probably kill or at least maim him.

“No chance,” he murmured.

The bright lights of the city called to him from afar. He had seen much of that bright and terrible city; had meant to see much more. “Must see it all,” he told himself.

“But now I must forget it,” he resolved.

And surely he must, for now he was beneath the basket. The tiny finger of light from his electric torch shot about here and there.

Steadying its motion, directing it toward the end of the cable, he began studying the problem at hand.

And then—something happened. Did his hand slip? Did the noose about his foot give away? He will never know. Nor will he forget that instant when his flashlight, slipping from his chattering teeth, shot downward and he, by the merest chance, escaped following it.

How it happened he will never be able to tell. This much he knew: he hung there in all that blackness supporting his weight by one desperately gripping hand.

Somewhere below was the noose that should offer him footing. Somewhere far, far below were black waters waiting. And through his mind there flashed a thousand pictures of the bright and beautiful world he might, in ten seconds’ time, leave behind.

All this in the space of a split second, then groping madly, he found the rope with his other hand. After that began the heart-breaking task of groping in the dark with his foot for the dangling rope loop, while the muscles in his arms became burning bands of fire.

“I must win!” he whispered. “I must!”

“Johnny! Johnny Thompson!” came from above. “What has happened?”

“Don’t know. I—I’m dangling. Dra—draw me up if you can.”

Came a sudden tug on the rope that all but tore the rope from his grip. “No! No! Wait!”

Once again he sought that noose with his toe.

* * * * * * * *

As for Beth, she had gone shooting up in that express elevator in the Skidmore Building.

Like a rubber ball she bounded from the car, then raced for a cubby-hole in a corner where two men were standing.

“The balloon!” she exclaimed. “The captive balloon! It’s loose, drifting! You must find it with your light!”

“What’s that?” one man demanded sharply. “Impossible! There’s no gale. That cable couldn’t break!”

“It’s loose! Drifting!” the girl insisted. “They cut the cable, someone cut it. My brother and another boy are in the balloon. You must save them.”

One man glanced at the other. “All right, we better try it, Ben!”

At that a long finger of white light began feeling its way through the blackness that is sky above Lake Michigan on a cloudy night.

Johnny, unable to find the loop in the rope, feeling his strength unequal to a climb hand over hand, felt the muscles of his arms weaken until all seemed lost.

And then, as if some miracle had been done, night turned into day. The powerful light had reached him only for a second, but that was enough. His keen eye had caught the loop in the rope. It was by his knee. A sudden fling and his knee was resting in that loop.

“All—all right now!” he called. “Try to pull me up.”

And at that the gleam of that powerful searchlight returned to rest on the spot of

air in which the runaway balloon hung.

“I’ll step over and call the sausage balloon, Ben,” one of the men in the great steel tower said to the other as Beth, at sight of the balloon still drifting high, began breathing more easily. “They’ll have to go to the rescue.”

One more fierce struggle and Johnny tumbled over the side into the balloon’s basket.

“It—it’s put on with steel rings,” he panted.

“It—what is?” Felix stared.

“The cable. What did you think?” Johnny laughed in spite of himself. “That’s what I went over to see about.”

“Yes,” Felix grinned. “But now they’ve found us. All the honest people in that great city will want to save us. Isn’t it wonderful when you think of it?” he marveled. “So many good people in the world! So many willing to give a fellow a lift when he’s in trouble. If only we could all pull together all the time, what a world this would be!”

After that, each occupied with his own thoughts, they drifted on into the night.

A half hour later a dark bulk came stealing toward them. This was a small dirigible balloon owned by an advertising firm. Soon they were alongside. Instruments were taken aboard, the runaway balloon deflated, then they went gliding back toward the city of a million lights.

“Should have had this old sausage in the beginning,” Felix grumbled. “Will next time perhaps.”

Johnny wondered if he would be invited to participate in that next endeavor and, if so, what he would learn.

In due time they were back on good solid earth. But the day, for Johnny, was not yet over.

CHAPTER XI
A ROOM OF STRANGE MAGIC

“Say!” Felix exclaimed as they boarded a car bound for home. “Wonder how it happened that searchlight fellow was looking for us.”

“Somebody told him,” Johnny suggested.

“Yes, and I know who!” The young inventor’s face fairly shone. “It was Beth; couldn’t have been anyone else. Fellow without a sister is just square out of luck, that’s all. The way she gets me out of things! Say, man! It’s great!”

A half hour later, over cups of steaming chocolate produced, as before, by the mysterious “Eye,” Beth told her story.

“Gunderson Shotts,” Felix murmured, examining the card Beth handed him. “‘Everybody’s Business.’ Suppose that means he tends to everybody’s business?”

“Got quite a job on his hands,” Johnny laughed.

“He’s big enough to take a huge load of it on his shoulders.” Beth was staring into space.

“Have to look him up and thank him,” Felix drawled. Already the events of the day were fading from his memory. He was dreaming of some strange new contraption that might startle the world.

“You’ll stay with us tonight.” Roused from his revery, he turned to Johnny.

“Why I—”

“Sure, sure you will. Show you the room right away. It’s on the third floor; a

little strange, you may find it, but comfortable, extra fine, I'd say." Felix favored him with a smile.

The room they entered a few moments later was strange in two particulars. It was extremely tall. Johnny thought it must be fully twenty feet to the ceiling. "Queer way to build a room," was his mental comment. Like other rooms in the house, it was illuminated to the deepest corners; yet there were no lamps anywhere. "Odd place, this," he thought. Yet Felix had warned him. He had been given ample opportunity to say, "I don't like the looks of it." Now he shrugged his shoulders and asked no questions; that was Johnny's way.

"Light begins to fade in twenty minutes," was Felix's only comment as he left the room.

"Light begins to fade," Johnny grinned when the door had been closed. "Sure is a queer way to put it."

Twenty minutes later he began to realize that the strange boy had spoken the exact truth. The light did begin to fade. At first the change was almost imperceptible, a mere deepening of shadows in remote corners. Then, little by little, the pictures that hung low on those tall walls began to fade. The windows too, short, low windows, too short, Johnny thought, for so tall a room, began letting in light about the shades, a very little light, but light all the same.

Breaking the spell that had settled upon his drowsy senses, Johnny sprang to his feet, threw off his clothes, dragged on his sleeping garments, then crept beneath the covers of a most comfortable bed.

"Light is fading," he murmured. He recalled the lights on the stage of the opera house. They had not blinked on and off. They faded like the coming of darkness on the broad prairies. "Sort of nice, I think," he murmured sleepily. "More natural. Like—like—"

Well, after all, what did it matter what it was like. He had fallen asleep.

How long we have slept we are seldom able to tell. At times an hour seems a whole night, at others four hours is but a dozen ticks of the clock. Johnny slept. He awoke. And at once his senses were conscious of some change going on in his room. He was seized with a foreboding of impending catastrophe.

At first he was at a complete loss to know what this change was. There was the room. The low windows still admitted streaks of light. The chairs, his bed, the very low chest of drawers were in their accustomed places.

“And yet—” He ran a hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision. And then like a flash it came to him. That exceedingly tall room was not so tall now—or was it?

“Impossible! How absurd!” He sat up, determined to waken himself from a bad dream.

But the thing was no dream. The ceiling *was* lower, fully five feet lower. And—horror of horrors!—it was still moving downward, lower, lower, still lower.

There was not the slightest sound, yet the boy seemed to feel the breath of moving air on his face.

Too astonished and frightened to move, he sat there while that ceiling marched down over the pattern of a quite futuristic wall-paper.

When at last questions formed themselves in his fear-frozen brain they were, “How far will it come? Will the posts of my bed arrest it? If the bed crashes under the weight, what then?”

While he was revolving these questions in his mind and wondering in a vague sort of way what chance he had of escaping from one of those third story windows, he noted with a start that the ceiling had ceased moving. It was as if its desire to hide great stretches of wall paper had, for the time at least, been satisfied.

The ceiling having settled nine feet or more, Johnny found himself in quite a normal bed chamber. Windows were the proper height, pictures correctly hung and furniture matching it all very well.

He settled back on his bed. It had been a long day. He would just lie there and keep a wary eye on that playful ceiling.

CHAPTER XII
THE WHISPERER RETURNS

On the following morning at dawn the whisper returned to Grace Krowl's little parlor on Maxwell Street. She had just wakened and lay on her comfortable bed staring at the faint tracings of beautiful forms on her unusual walls, when she heard it.

"A pleasant day to you! Here I am again, talking to you down a beam of light."

Springing to her feet, she threw on a dressing gown and dashed into her parlor. She would trap the intruder. But she did not. As before, the room was empty.

She took a seat by her table. "Ah! There you are!" There was a glad note in the whisper. "How beautiful is youth!" She flushed.

"I have no message of importance for you today," the whisper went on steadily. "But tomorrow—who knows?

"One request: do not disturb any object in your room. To do so may destroy the charm. And, in the end, you would regret it.

"Let me assure you I am an honorable person. I am for the law—not against it. My motives are good. You may trust me. And you may believe me when I tell you I am more than a mile away."

The girl started. There it was again. "More than a mile away. How could anyone be seen through a mile of space—much less send a whisper over that great distance?

"A radio," she thought. A careful search revealed no sign of a radio. Only one object in her room was strange, the two foot reflector against the wall.

“Dawn is passing,” came once again in a whisper. “Like the fairies, I must be on my way. Cheerio, and a good day to you!” The room went suddenly silent. It was silence such as Grace Krowl had seldom experienced.

Strangely enough, at the “House of Magic” in quite another section of the city, Johnny Thompson heard that same whisper. What was stranger still, the words were not the same. From this it might surely be learned that this was, at least, not a radio broadcast.

He had fallen asleep staring at that magic ceiling that had a way of falling silently. He awoke at dawn, still staring at that ceiling. To his vast surprise, he found it now fully twenty feet above his head. “Was that way when I went to bed,” he assured himself. “Must have dreamed it—must—”

He broke short off to listen with all his ears. In a clear, distinct whisper had come a greeting:

“Good morning, Johnny Thompson!”

“Good—good morning,” he faltered. He was conscious of a feeling that he was not heard. In this he was right.

“We are glad you are back in the city, Johnny. You will tell your friend Drew Lane that we will soon have a definite message for him—one that has to do with his present mission. We will whisper it to you some day at dawn. That is your room. You must keep it. No harm will befall you there. And now, may your day be a busy and profitable one.” The whisper ended.

We might say that, though Johnny failed to notice it at that time, there was on the far side of his room a circular mirror or reflector, such as we have seen in Grace Krowl’s room, and that his window was open toward the east.

“A good day to you.” Grace Krowl, the girl from Kansas, recalled these words, whispered to her “down a beam of light” many times during the trying hours of that day.

“Whispers,” she repeated to herself, “whispers at dawn. What does it mean? And this whisperer? Is it a man or a woman? Could one tell by the quality of tone?”

The Whisperer had given her little intimation of his purpose. She had been

assured that the purpose was honorable and kind. She had been requested to leave her room just as it was. This request had caused her to look at the strange oval reflector on the wall.

At times she thought of telling her uncle all about it. “But no,” she decided in the end, “this shall be my own small secret. What harm can come from a whisper? The Whisperer said that he would return. Well then, let him!” With that, for the time, she set the matter aside.

After a hasty breakfast served by her uncle’s aged housekeeper, she went down into the “store.” “Look!” Her uncle pointed to a number of trunks standing on end just inside the door. “Yesterday was express auction day. It comes always on Tuesday. I have bought these trunks. What is there in them? How should I know? Probably wrags.” Nicholas Fischer was very German in his speech.

“But you will be surprised.” His faded eyes brightened. “We have very swell customers on Wednesday. They come from the north side and from out by the University. They are curious. They want to see what they can buy cheap. And they buy, right from the trunks. You shall see.

“You will be very helpful,” he went on. “You are young. They will like a bright face. You shall wait on them. You will know them by their fine clothes, fur coats, all that. And I—” He looked over his cheap garments. “I shall wait on the poor ones, the ones who buy a few towels or some very poor dishes.

“Yes, you wait on the fine ladies. Only—” he held up a finger, “always I make the price.”

An artist looking in upon this bewhiskered, shabbily dressed keeper of a second-hand store and his niece all pink and fresh in her spotless smock, would have found contrast to suit his taste.

“See!” Nicholas Fischer spoke again, “I will break open the locks and lift the lids, but you must not unpack the trunks. Leave that to the fine ladies. They will tell you they are ‘exploring.’”

“But supposing they find something truly valuable—a—a diamond or something!” Grace protested.

“If they find a diamond, then I drop dead. What will it matter?” Nicholas Fischer

laughed hoarsely.

“But you keep watch.” His shrewd eyes gleamed. “If you find a diamond, then you and I will buy us a Christmas present.”

“Good!” It was the girl’s turn to laugh. “Christmas will soon be here. I’ll find the diamond, you’ll see, and a few stocks and bonds for good measure.”

“Yes. Stocks and bonds.” Seizing a hammer and chisel, Nicholas Fischer pried off the lock of a large, round-topped trunk. “The round-topped ones,” he commented, “they come from the country. Sometimes there are very fine wool blankets in these. Then we make a few dollars.”

While her uncle was prying away at the locks, the girl had an opportunity to study the trunks that, standing as they did, huddled in a group and tipped this way and that, reminded her of a picture she had seen of six very tipsy men awaiting the police wagon.

“Trunks,” she told herself, “are like people. They have character. There is a big wardrobe—a trifle shabby to be sure, but still standing on its dignity. And there are three canvas covered ones, huddled together. Never been anybody in particular and never will be. There’s that one with bright orange stripes running around it, like a delicate lady. There’s that good solid citizen, oak ribs and stout metal edges. And there—”

Having moved a little, she had caught sight of a tiny brown trunk that appeared to hide behind the “solid citizen.”

“Horsehair trunk,” she whispered to herself. “Old as the hills. What must it contain?”

And then her uncle, chisel in hand, approached.

“Please!” Her cry was one almost of pain. “Are there not enough others? This little one must not have much in it. Let me look at it—alone tonight.”

Nicholas Fischer, looking into her pleading eyes, shook his head. “I am afraid you will wreck my business. You are too soft.” Nevertheless, he spared the little trunk.

Dropping his chisel in the corner, he threw a ragged blanket over it as he muttered, “Tomorrow will be time enough. But mind you, it must be tomorrow.”

The “ladies” came, just as her uncle had promised they would. They came dressed in furs—mink, marten and Hudson seal—for it was a bleak, blustery day. They picked their way daintily between piles of used bedding and soiled dresses, to pause at last before the open trunks.

As they looked into the slim trunk with orange stripes about it, Grace was reminded of a picture she had seen of three vultures sitting on a rock peering into the distance.

“Snoopers! How I hate them! Yet, I must serve them.” Next moment she was wondering whether or not she was being quite fair to them. They had come where things were sold and had a right to inspect the wares.

“But everything in that trunk belonged to a person who treasured it,” she told herself. “Why must such rude hands unpack it, after it was packed with such care? Why must each one carry away the one treasure she most desires, while the rightful owner goes empty-handed?” To this question she could find no answer save one haunting verse she remembered from a very old book: “The destruction of the poor is their poverty.”

She summoned a friendly smile and assisted the “ladies” in emptying this trunk which had belonged to a young lady. When, however, Grace came to a drawer of photographs, letters and personal papers, she dumped them all into a card-board box and shoved them under the ragged quilt where the little horsehair trunk seemed to peek at her through the holes.

The “ladies” turned from the next three trunks in disgust. Two men’s, and one family trunk, they offered little more than dirty rags.

“Why must people be so filthy,” a fat “lady” in a mink coat complained. “If they must lose their things you’d think they might at least wash them before packing.”

The wardrobe trunk offered gaudy finery that did not interest the “ladies” overmuch. But the big square trunk Grace had named the “substantial citizen”—this one it was that brought a fresh ache to the girl’s heart.

It turned out to be a household trunk filled with bedding, linen and all sorts of fancy articles done by hand. Everything was scrupulously clean. And the bits of hand embroidery, the touches of lace, the glints of color all done with the finest thread, seemed to say, “I belong to a home. We all belong together. We rested beneath the lamp, above the fireplace in a room some people called home.”

She tried to picture that home. There was a man, a woman, and their children, a brother and a sister. The man read. The woman’s fingers were busy with thread and needle. The children played with the cat before the fire.

Her eyes filled with tears as she thought, “All this is being destroyed. All that is best in our good, brave land, a home, has become a wreck.”

But the “ladies”! How they babbled and screamed. “Oh Clara! Look! Isn’t this a scream? Only look at this piece! Isn’t it exquisite?” “Mary, just take a peek at this buffet runner. Two yards long! And all done by hand! It’s a treasure. I’ll offer the old man a half dollar for it. He’ll take it. What does he know?”

Grace listened and set her lips tight. Life, she could see, was going to be hard, but she would certainly see it through.

She experienced a sense of contentment as she recalled the little horsehair trunk. Tonight she would spirit that away up to her room and there she would find adventure looking inside it. There would be letters, she told herself, and photographs—and—and perhaps some real treasure.

At that moment her eyes caught a second box of keepsakes. These too she shoved away under the ragged quilt.

“Tonight in my parlor,” she told herself. She was rapidly coming to know that each trunk told the story of the owner. In her room she would read that story.

Her parlor. Her brow wrinkled. What a mysterious room! So perfect, and in such a place. “And there’s the concave mirror, and the whisper at dawn.” She shuddered in spite of herself.

Then she came out of her revery with a snap. The fat lady in the mink coat was approaching her uncle. She would offer half a dollar for the buffet runner. Gliding swiftly past, Grace whispered in her uncle’s ear:

“The price is three dollars.”

The “lady” gave her a suspicious glance. But the price *was* three dollars. And in the end, three dollars the lady paid.

“Is that all the trunks?” The fat lady turned a petulant, spoiled face toward the girl. “Are there no other trunks?” She snatched at the ragged blanket, but Grace was too quick for her, her foot was on its edge.

“There are no other trunks to be opened today.”

“Oh—ah!” The “lady” sighed. “This has been such fun!”

Fun? Grace turned away. And in turning she found herself presenting a tearful face to none other than Drew Lane her friend of the bus, who had entered unnoticed.

“Well,” he smiled, pretending not to see her tears. “How’s the big store in Chicago?”

“Great! Great!” She managed a smile.

“How—how are all the people you look af—after?” she asked a bit unsteadily.

“Oh, they’re all right.” He laughed a low laugh. “In fact—” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper—“I’ve got some of them locked up. Quite a number. You see, I’m a city detective. This is part of my territory. I’ll be seeing you often, I hope.”

She started and stared. That whisper! When one spoke out loud his voice could be recognized. She knew this. But a whisper? Could one truly recognize a whisper when he heard it the second time? It seemed incredible. And yet, Drew Lane’s whisper was so like the one she had heard at dawn.

“Impossible! A mere fancy!” She tried to free herself from this apparently unreasonable suspicion.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Drew Lane bantered.

“No! No! Not for a dollar,” was her quick reply.

“All right,” he laughed. “Anyway, I’ll be seeing you. Got to hurry on down the street.” He was gone, leaving the girl’s head in a whirl.

“Whispers at dawn?” she murmured as she made her way toward the horsehair trunk.

“What about these?” She held the box of keepsakes from the big trunk up for her uncle’s inspection.

“What?” He stared.

“These? Letters? Pictures?”

He made a wry face. “Baby books, maybe. Who would buy these? Throw them in the alley. Black children live in the next street. They carry them off.”

“But look! Here is the croix de guerre. Some brave fellow fought to win that,” she protested.

“Yes! But did he keep it? No! Let some black boy wear it.”

“Then I may keep them? All these?”

“If you wish.”

She rewarded him with a smile. After the evening meal she would read the stories recorded here and she would explore the little horsehair trunk.

CHAPTER XIII
SO LONG AS GOD GIVES US BREATH

That same morning as soon as he could gulp down his coffee, Johnny hastened over to the shack. He was full of talk about the whisperer and his message.

“What do you make of a thing like that?” he demanded of Captain Burns. “It seemed to come right out of the sky!”

“And why not?” The Captain smiled. “We are living in a strange world these days.

“One thing’s important,” he said as he sat up in his chair, “you must not leave this ‘House of Magic’ as you call it; at least not for long. I have a feeling that this whisperer must be on our side, the side of law and justice, and that he may be some sort of undercover man who can give us just the information we need.

“You see, Johnny—” He leaned forward in his chair. “That gang, the five public enemies, with Iggy the Snake at their head, is back in the city. They are sure, sooner or later, to sell some of these bonds they took from the bank. They are of small denominations and are negotiable. We have their serial numbers. The moment one of these bonds falls into the hands of an honest man, we will be hot on their trail. ‘Where did you get it?’ we will say to the honest man. He will tell us. We will go to the man who sold the bond and repeat, ‘Where did you get it?’ He may turn out to be honest and innocent too. But in the end we’ll reach a crooked bond dealer who knew those bonds were ‘hot’ when he bought them. If he doesn’t lead us to Iggy the Snake we’ll send him up for ten years. The charge will be receiving stolen goods.

“Oh, I tell you, Johnny!” he exclaimed, striking the arm of his chair, “we’ll get ’em, Johnny! In the end we’ll get ’em, you’ll see.

“But today, Johnny—” His voice took on a mellow tone. “While you and I are free, I’d like to take you to one of those places I spoke of the last time I saw you.”

“All—all right.” Johnny wondered what sort of place that would be.

In the Captain’s long, powerful gray car they drove across the city and into the suburbs.

At last they stopped before a home that was neither large nor showy—a bungalow with its broad side to the street, it stood in the midst of a clump of trees. Nature had planted the trees. Someone, admiring nature’s work, had built his home there.

Once inside that house, the good Captain heaved a sigh of content. A large open fire gave the tiny living room a feeling of luxurious grandeur. And yet there was about it an air of tidy comfort. The furniture was plain. Hard-bottomed rockers had been softened by handmade cushions, all in bright colors. A touch of lace and embroidery here and there on table and chairs told of fingers never still.

A short, energetic little lady with flushed cheeks hastened from the kitchen at the back to greet them.

“Well, how do you do, Captain Burns? How good it is to see you!”

“It’s good to be here,” the Captain rumbled. “And this, Mrs. LeClare, is my good friend Johnny Thompson.

“And here,” the Captain chuckled, “here’s Alice. Ah, Johnny, there’s a girl you could love!”

Johnny flushed. The girl who extended her hand laughed a merry laugh. “The Captain must have his jokes.”

The hand Johnny grasped was a chubby, capable little hand; the eyes he looked into were frank and clear. The girl’s hair was black. There was a slight natural wave in it. Her eyebrows were black and thick. She was short like her mother. Like her too, she gave forth an air of boundless energy.

“Alice LeClare,” Johnny said, half to himself. “A pretty name.”

“We are French,” Alice explained, “Canadian French.”

“If you looked over the list of Mounties that have come and gone up in the bleak northland of Canada, you’d find many a LeClare,” the Captain explained. “They’re that sort.”

Johnny saw a shadow pass over Mrs. LeClare’s face. Alice looked quickly away.

“You’ll have to excuse us,” Mrs. LeClare explained after a moment of silence. “We’re in the midst of things. Make yourselves comfortable by the fire.”

Just what sort of things the ladies were in the midst of, Johnny could guess well enough. The kitchen was not too far away—one great advantage of a small house—and from it came savory odors, meat roasting, pumpkin pies baking, apple sauce simmering.

“They can cook,” said the Captain, dropping into a chair with the air of a contented dog. “These Canadian French can cook. And what workers they are, these people!

“The boys will be here soon,” he went on. “Madame LeClare’s boys. They’re out selling their magazines. Fine boys—poor old Jack’s boys.” His voice dropped.

“Who is Jack?” Johnny asked.

“What? Didn’t I tell you?” The Captain sat up. “But of course I didn’t.

“They’re not Jack’s boys any more,” he rumbled after a moment. “Poor old Jack is dead. Finest, squarest cop that ever walked a beat. Real name was Jacques—French you know. We called him Jack.

“Wish you could have known him, Johnny. You’d have loved him.” He stared at the fire.

“Fine, big, strapping fellow,” he went on after a while. “Six feet two, black hair and bushy eyebrows, like Alice, you know.

“Women used to try to flirt with him. Stop their car, they would,—rich women in big cars, diamonds on their fingers. New-rich, young, fool women. No good—you know the kind? Well, maybe not. You will though. May God hasten the time

when that sort get back to the dirty gutter where they belong!

“But Jack—” The Captain laughed scornfully. “No danger! Jack sent them along fast enough. Jack had eyes for one and only one—his Marie.” He nodded toward the kitchen. “He lived for her, Jack did, and for Alice and the boys—fine boys, Gluck and Lucian—” His voice trailed off.

“But what—what happened to Jack?”

Not seeming to hear, the Captain went on: “Straightest cop I ever knew—too straight you might say. When you walk a beat you look after things—naturally, that’s part of your job. You try store doors to see if they’re locked, watch for prowlers, all that. And if some good citizen drinks a bit too much and the night air gets the best of him, you escort him safely home—part of your job.

“Grateful people, will hand a cop a dollar now and then. Why not? But do you think Jack would take it? Never a cent. No end polite the way he thanked them, but he took no money but what came to him on pay day. That was Jack. Said he was afraid it would lead him to accept ‘dirty money’—you know, hush money—from real wrongdoers. And, man! How Jack hated dirty money!

“Polite, honest to a fault, kind, always looking out after the unfortunate—and brave, absolutely fearless!—‘Mountie’ blood in his veins, way back. That was Jack.” Again his voice trailed away.

From the kitchen came the faintest snatch of some French song. The delicious aroma of coffee was added to that of meat, pie and sauce. From somewhere in the back came the scuffle and scrape of boyish feet.

“All this was Jack’s,” the Captain rumbled, spreading his arms wide as if to embrace the whole world. “And then—” from his pocket he drew a narrow packet. This he unfolded, then spread it down the length of his knee. It was the photographs of public enemies.

“These five—” his eyes shone with deep, abiding hate. “These five had been out riding in a costly car they had borrowed without leave. They had just kidnapped a banker and compelled him to open a safe. I told you that before. They’d got a lot of money and bonds. They were speeding west and tried to pass a stop-light. They skidded into another car. No real damage done. But that was Jack’s corner. He wanted to know—his business to know—why they’d crashed the light.

“All he said was, ‘What the—’ Then, without an instant’s warning, they let him have it from the back seat—six shots.

“And then they sped on. Jack, the squarest cop that ever breathed, was dead.

“Johnny—” The Captain’s voice was deep. “Don’t ever for a moment think crime is romantic. It is not. It is dirty, rotten, selfish, beastly!

“You might think to see one of these young crooks, dressed like ‘Boul Mich’ on parade, standing before the judge, that he was just a young adventurer. He’s not. He’s a dirty dog. He’s never worked; never will. He sticks a gun in a working man’s ribs and takes his money. Spends it for flashy clothes, furs and diamonds for his Moll—booze maybe, and gambling. And does he stop to ask, ‘was this a rich or a poor man’s money?’ You better know he don’t. What does it matter to him whose it was? It is his now. He took it.

“And they shot him!” His voice dropped to such a solemn pitch that Johnny was reminded of some words spoken in a church. “They shot him,” the Captain repeated slowly, “one of these five crooks, maybe Iggy the Snake shot poor old Jack. And by the Eternal!” He stood up, raising his hands high. “So long as God gives us breath, we’ll hunt those men until the last one of them is dead or in jail for life. For life!” His hands dropped to his side and he sank into his chair.

Then again Johnny was conscious of the low humming song, the aroma of fine food prepared by skillful hands and loving hearts—the distant scuffle of boyish feet.

“So long as God gives us breath,” he murmured low. It was like a sacred vow taken by some knight of King Arthur’s court.

CHAPTER XIV
A HUMAN SPIDER

It was a wonderful dinner they enjoyed in Madame LeClare's snug little home. And not the least of the joys for the Captain on that occasion—Johnny was sure of this—were the smiling eyes of the kindly hostess. As for Johnny, he had more than one smile from another pair of dark eyes.

Dinner over, they sat about the fire while Lucian, a slender boy of twelve, entertained them with quaint French melodies played upon an ancient violin that had been his grandfather's.

"You are to be a musician," Johnny said to Lucian.

"But what will you be?" He turned to Gluck, a sturdy boy of ten with flashing eyes.

"Tell him, Gluck." There was pride in the mother's tone.

"I am going to be an officer of the law, like my father." Gluck squared his shoulders.

"That's the boy!" his mother applauded.

"There's a woman for you!" the Captain murmured. His eyes glistened. "Gave her husband for our country's good. Now she offers her son. This country needs more mothers such as this."

It was mid-afternoon when they bade Madame LeClare and her fine family a hearty farewell.

"I wanted you to know them," the Captain rumbled as once more they entered the great city. "You are to be one of us. You may have an opportunity to be of

great service. Danger and death may threaten you. It will help you to understand the war we are waging, and why we must win."

"Thank you," said Johnny humbly. "I am sure it will."

"This is a tough neighborhood," the Captain said a moment later as they rolled down a narrow street. "'Hell's Half Acre,' I guess you might call it.

"I wonder what those young hoodlums are looking at." He slowed down his car to a crawl. At the corner of a five story apartment building a dozen or more of flashily dressed youths stood staring upward. From time to time one or the other of them might have been heard shouting something.

Stopping his car, the Captain stepped out. Johnny followed.

To their astonishment, they saw clinging to the bricks of the corner, and near to the very top of the building, a huge youth with a thick crop of hair. He was tossing his mane, laughing and roaring like a gorilla, which he resembled slightly.

"Come down from there!" the Captain thundered.

"Come and get me," the youth roared back.

"Come down!" The Captain threw open his coat, revealing his star.

"Oh! All right, I'll come." The young giant's face sobered. The crowd of flashily dressed youths vanished. At the same time a square of paper came fluttering to the pavement. Apparently it had fallen from the climber's pocket.

Johnny picked it up and read:

"Gunderson Shotts,
22 Diversey Way.
Everybody's Business."

"Why that," he said with a start, "must be the young savage with a stout heart who helped us out of a jam last night. Don't be too hard on him, Captain." Hastily he outlined the night's adventure with the runaway balloon, and the part this youth had played.

“I’ll not be too hard on him,” the Captain promised. “In fact I think this may be the changing point in his career. Stranger things have happened.

“What’s your name?” he demanded as the young giant reached the pavement.

“Gunderson Shotts, that’s my name.” The youth grinned broadly. “But they call me Spider. I can climb, climb just anything at all.”

“Spider,” Johnny thought, “it’s a name that will stick. Looks like a giant spider, long arms, long legs, hairy head, big eyes. Spider.” He chuckled.

“Don’t you know,” the Captain demanded of the one who called himself Spider, “that you’re likely to break your neck?” He examined the lay of the bricks that had given the boy only an overlapping half inch at intervals of a foot, on which to cling and climb. “And if you fell, you’d like as not kill someone else in that fall.”

“They dared me, these—” He looked about in surprise. “Why! Where are they?”

“They’ve blown,” the Captain replied dryly. “Hawks go flapping away fast enough when a hunter comes round a corner. They’re a bad lot, and this is no place for a lad like you. Hop into the car.”

“You—you’re not going to take me to the station!” Spider’s cheeks paled.

“No,” the Captain laughed, “not the station. Just to a shack we have for a hangout. We eat there sometimes. Like to eat?”

“Do I? Try me!” The young giant grinned at his captors broadly.

“We will.”

“Have much luck minding everybody’s business?” the Captain asked as they paused for a red light.

“Not much,” the big boy chuckled, “but what’s a fellow to do? No one would let me work for him, so I went to work for everybody.”

“Did yourself a good turn once anyway,” said the Captain.

“How’s that?”

The Captain reminded him of his adventure with Beth Van Loon.

“That,” the big boy chuckled, “was funny.”

“It might not have been. That fellow might have put his knife through your heart.”

“But he didn’t.” The big boy laughed hoarsely.

They stopped at a delicatessen. Here Captain Burns purchased half a baked ham, piping hot, a huge loaf of rye bread and a gallon pot of coffee.

Arrived at the shack, he spread this crude but wholesome meal out upon the table. He and Johnny drank coffee but ate little. When they had finished, save for the dishes, the board was clear.

“Spider,” the Captain said, slapping the big boy on the back, “you’re a fighter, an eater, and a climber. That’s all it takes to make a first class cop. Stick with me and I’ll make you one.”

Spider stuck. And that, as you will see, is why certain things came out as they did in the unwinding of events that were to follow.

* * * * * * * *

It was with a guilty feeling that Grace Krowl that evening began delving into the personal letters and papers taken from the thin trunk with orange stripes.

“It is as if someone were looking over my shoulder,” she told herself, “saying, ‘See here! Those are my letters! What right have you to read them?’

“And yet,” she philosophized, “if I am to help them in any way I must know something about these people.”

So she kept on reading. There were three bundles of letters and a diary. The more she read, the more deeply disgusted she became.

“I did not dream there could be such a person as that girl is!” she exclaimed,

throwing the letters back into the box and sliding it into a corner out of her sight. “That girl deserves nothing. False to her friends who try to help her, a flirt and a cheat. How—how terrible!”

For some time she sat and stared into space. “I suppose,” she murmured dejectedly, “that very few of them are worthy of any aid. And yet, there *must* be some.”

She took up the box from the big family trunk. In this she read a beautiful sad story of a father, mother and two little girls. Their pictures were all there. So too were the girls’ baby books and the father’s sharp-shooter’s badge.

The letters told the story of a brave but futile fight against poverty that had advanced upon them like a storm in the night.

“They lost their home,” she whispered. “Next they lost their furniture, all those things that had become dear to them. And now, here, last of all, is their trunk. The wreck of the grandest thing God’s eyes ever rested upon—a home.

“But at least—” She clenched her hands fiercely. “At least they shall have these trophies back. I shall write to the mother and offer them to her without charge.

“Why not in every deserving case?” she exclaimed, springing to her feet and hopping about the room. Here was a big idea. This should be a beginning. Perhaps in time she could arrange to hold the entire contents of a trunk until the real owner could redeem it.

She fancied her uncle frowning upon this. “But let him frown!” she exclaimed belligerently.

The thought was a comforting one. With it, after a trying day, she soon fell fast asleep.

She was awakened, as on the previous day, by a whisper at dawn. There was no “Good morning,” no “Cheerio!” this time. Words came short and quick.

“I have just a moment.” Thus the whisper began. “There is a girl,” it went on. “Her name is Nida McFay. She works in the bookstore around the corner on Peoria Street.”

Grace started. “Why! That’s the girl I know!” She spoke aloud, then ended abruptly.

“Ah! I see you know her! Fine!” The whisper rose. “No, I didn’t hear you. Had to read your lips. For the moment I am deaf. I am a mile away but I have eyes that see you and lips that speak to you down a beam of light. You cannot see me.”

“But perhaps I *have* seen you.” The thought popped unbidden into the girl’s mind.

“Listen carefully!” The whisperer’s tone was insistent. “You are to become very well acquainted with this girl, Nida; so well that she will tell you her story. And let me assure you—she has a story to tell.

“You must invite her to your room, seat her by your table, then induce her to tell the story.”

“But that would be spying!” the girl burst out.

“Nothing dishonorable. Remember, I promise this. You like to help people. This is your chance. You may help many. Good morning.”

The whisper was gone, leaving the girl in a daze.

“I must think,” she told herself. “Think clearly.”

Then of a sudden her eyes fell upon the little horsehair trunk. “I forgot to open it! And uncle said I should have it only for a day. Just for a day!” She was filled with consternation.

“He will have to give me one more day,” she decided at last. “He just must! I can’t turn it over to—to vandals.”

For one full moment after that she stood in sober thought. Nida McFay. So that was the girl’s name. She was to win her confidence. Get her story. Would she do it? Something told her that she would. But why? Because the whisper requested. Who was the whisperer? At that she shook herself free from these thoughts and went off to breakfast.

CHAPTER XV
A LIVING PICTURE

Johnny Thompson had always supposed he loved mysteries. But in the “House of Magic,” the old professor’s house, they came so thick and fast, and apparently without reason, that at times he felt dizzy in his head and ready enough to run away from it all.

On the day following the visit to Madame LeClare’s house, he was given a strange commission. It was Felix who said to him, “You will do us a great favor if you will sit and watch a certain picture on the wall.”

“Watch a picture?” Johnny exclaimed. “Is it worth a million dollars? And do you expect it to be stolen?”

“It is worth,” Felix said without breaking into a smile, “very little. I even doubt if you could sell it at all.

“And yet,” he added, “if you watch it long enough, something may come of it after all!”

Something did come of it, you may be sure. But to Johnny, ever keen for action, this at first seemed a dull occupation.

The picture was in his own room, the tall room that during his first night had shown an inclination to become a short one.

“Nothing could be more stupid!” he told himself after a half hour of watching. “Picture isn’t even halfway interesting.”

This was true. Though quite evidently an oil painting, this canvas within a narrow gilt frame was very dark. An old Dutch master, one would say; a suggestion of some cabin in the foreground, clumps of trees behind. There might

have been a sunset in the beginning. If there were, time had taken care of the sunset. It had put out the sun.

“Just to sit in this chair and look at that picture!” he grumbled to himself. “Nothing could be worse!”

His eyes strayed to the far side of the room where the strange round reflector rested.

“Whispers,” he murmured. “Those whispers that wakened me at dawn. Wonder if they come from that thing? I feel sure they do. Person can tell what direction sound comes from. But who whispers? How? Why? That’s what I’m going to find out.” That the whisperer would speak again, that he would at last deliver some important message, perhaps many important messages, he did not doubt.

But now— It was with great reluctance that he dragged his eyes from this mysterious instrument to fix them once more upon the dull and quite commonplace Dutch master.

When at last he accomplished the feat, he fairly bounced from his chair. The Dutch master was gone! In its stead was a square of glass. Out from that square, well down toward the left-hand corner, shone a yellow spot of light.

“Like a moon in the midst of a black sky,” he told himself. “What—”

The spot of light began revolving. It broke itself up into a hundred yellow moons. It became a golden circle, a hundred golden circles. Then, to Johnny’s utter astonishment, a face, a living face appeared in that frame.

It was a wavering sort of face. Had Johnny been superstitious he might have said it was a ghost, for now the lips and eyes were distinct, and now they were irregular and all but lost.

Then with a sharp cry Johnny sprang to his feet.

“Where is he?” he cried. “I must find him!”

He had recognized that face. It was the man who sat beside him at the auction, who had all but forced him to bid in that package containing the bronze lamp, who had later more than likely struck him over the head in that dark alley.

“Iggy the Snake!” He fairly shouted the name aloud.

That this was the living image of Iggy he could not doubt. He was blinking his eyes. He was talking to someone; that is, his lips moved, though no sound reached Johnny.

That this was no mere moving picture Johnny knew well enough. That Iggy was not in the next room, looking in at him, he knew quite as well. Iggy could never have held the expression of quiet unconcern registered on his face had he known that any honest person, let alone Johnny, was looking upon him.

“It’s magic!” Johnny exclaimed. At the same instant he knew this was not true.

“Where is he?” he exclaimed once again.

He leaped for the door. It was locked. It was a massive door. He could not hope to break it down, even should he desire to do so.

He raced to the window and threw up the sash. It was a quiet, sunshiny day. There were people passing in the street. To attract their attention would be an easy matter. But did he wish to do this? Had he a right to do so?

“You will promise to betray none of our secrets?” the professor had said. He had promised. The outer air cooled his heated brow. Slowly he turned about, retraced his steps, then sank down in his chair. He would watch. That, after all, was what he had been told to do. Perhaps in the end he would learn a great deal, just watching.

The hour that followed will stand out in Johnny’s mind as a vivid memory as long as Johnny draws a breath. He was looking, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, upon the living image of the one man he most feared and hated, Iggy the Snake. He was watching his every gesture, every movement of his lips and eyes; yet he could not touch him nor speak to him. He could not say to the policeman on the corner, “Officer, this man is a thief and a murderer! Arrest him!” He did not know even where the man was. He might, for all he knew, be in the next room or a mile away. He could only watch.

Watch he did, and that which he saw was well worth his hour of waiting.

But to wait, powerless to act, to sit there biting his lips, clenching his fists,

watching that smiling, grimacing image, that was terrible.

For a long time there was only that face. Smiling, talking, bobbing his head, Iggy was beyond doubt telling a very interesting story. Once as he threw back his head his fist came swinging into view.

“As if he were showing how he struck me!” Johnny sprang from his chair. Then, reluctantly, he settled back.

Well that he did, for a moment later the man in that distorted living picture partially disappeared and a cardboard box came into view.

“That’s it,” Johnny muttered, “that’s the box I bought, the very one!” There could be no doubt about that. He could even distinguish the yellow express label.

But this was not all, not nearly all. The package disappeared. Iggy’s head bent low. Presently he held the metal lamp to view. He was laughing, was Iggy.

It was strange, sitting there looking on. That laugh was so real, so uproarious, Johnny felt that he should hear it.

“It’s as if I were deaf,” he told himself.

But wait! There was still more. Once again “the Snake” bent his head. When his hands came up this time they were filled with bundles of paper. At first, with their edges toward him, Johnny could make nothing of this. But now Iggy’s hand turned about, and Johnny saw.

His mouth flew open in astonishment. Those papers were bonds. There were hundreds of them.

“The stolen bonds!” he muttered. “The bonds that broke a bank and made paupers of thousands!” He could not believe his eyes. The bonds had been in that package! It had been his, his! He had bought it. Had he looked closely, he would have found those bonds. And now—

A sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach caused him to double over. He saw it all now, clear as day. Those were “hot” bonds. Someone had taken them away, perhaps to New York. They had been frightened, had concealed them in that package and shipped them back. The person at the other end, more afraid than

his confederate, had refused to accept the shipment. The package was to be sold at auction. Afraid to bid it in, Iggy had induced Johnny to buy it. When Johnny tried to take the package to his lodging, Iggy and his men had fallen upon him, robbed him of the package, and hit him on the head in the bargain.

“That,” Johnny hissed, “is Chapter One. There will be other chapters to this little romance of the underworld.”

Again his eyes were upon that square of glass. Iggy had, beyond doubt, replaced the treasure. He was smiling and going through the motions of drinking. A moment more and he was gone. The glass went black. The spot of yellow light reappeared. And then, to Johnny’s vast amazement, he found himself looking once more at the uninteresting Dutch master.

“Never mind.” He sprang from his chair. “Felix will return. He will know where Iggy was when he put on this little show. I’ll get Drew Lane and Tom Howe. We’ll crash the door, and then perhaps—”

He did not finish. Instead he sprang for the door. He was prepared now, if such a thing were possible, to break it down. He put his hand to the knob. It turned. The door opened. *It was not locked.*

He was a long time finding Felix; a much longer time finding Drew Lane and Tom Howe, who were out on a hot scent. It was dark when he at last led them to the street that faces the lake where the gaunt towers of the deserted Fair grounds hung dark against the sky.

CHAPTER XVI
A STRANGE TREASURE

In the meantime, the girl from Kansas who had found a home on Maxwell Street had made a rather wonderful discovery and found herself well on the road to adventure.

At the moment Johnny and the two young detectives arrived at the street of the "House of Magic," far away on Maxwell Street Grace Krowl was staring into the friendly eyes of a white-haired book seller and saying, "Do—do you think it is val—valuable?"

"Valuable!" Frank Morrow, the genial, white-haired proprietor of the little book shop on Peoria, just off Maxwell Street, stared at her over his glasses. "Valuable! My child, if that signature is genuine it is priceless." For the second time he held a ponderous volume, an ancient Bible with hand-tooled leather cover, to the light and read aloud:

"'As a token of gratitude for a great service done to our nation and to the crown.

Her Majesty, the Queen,

Elizabeth.'"

"If that signature is genuine," he repeated, "and I have little doubt of it, this book is worth thousands of dollars."

"Thing is," Grace sighed, "to find the rightful owner."

"Rightful owner!" Frank Morrow stared at her. Nida McFay, his assistant, joined in the stare. "Rightful owner!" Morrow repeated. "*You* are the rightful owner. Your uncle bought that horsehair trunk at auction for three dollars. You purchased it from him for double that amount. This Bible was in the trunk. It is

yours. The law will uphold you."

"Yes. But is the law always right? Is there not a law higher than man's law?" Grace's tone was deeply serious.

"That," said Frank Morrow, rather bluntly, "is for you to decide."

"Decide," she thought, "all I've done since I came to Chicago has been to decide, de—"

She broke off to stare at the door of the book shop. It had been quietly opened. A tall man stood there. He was well-dressed, far too well for Maxwell Street. He was neither young nor old. His features were regular. He seemed quite a gentleman. Then the girl got a look into his eyes. She shuddered. They were hard as steel.

Next instant she was staring at Nida McFay. Her face had gone ashy white. She was grasping the table as if about to fall.

When she was able to look again at the door, Grace found it closed. The man had vanished.

"It—it's as if I had not seen him," she told herself. One look at Nida, who was very white, told her that for the time at least it was better that the man should remain unseen.

"Whatever you do," Frank Morrow was saying—he had not seen the stranger —"you should guard this Bible with great care. Beyond doubt, it was given by Queen Elizabeth as a token of great esteem to some Protestant bishop. Someone doubtless inherited this Bible containing the Queen's signature and brought it to America. Where has it been since? Who knows? Enough that it is here and that many a collector of rare books would, even in these times, pay a king's ransom to possess it. So guard it with care!"

"The Bi—Bible. Oh, yes." The girl put her hands upon it.

That Bible had come from the little horsehair trunk she had saved from her uncle's purchase at an express auction.

She had taken the trunk to her room, but in her excitement over other matters

had failed to open it at her first opportunity.

After looking at it a long time next day, without prying off the lock and peeking inside, she had decided that she must, if possible, have it for her very own. So she asked her uncle to sell her the trunk.

“What!” he exclaimed, “you have opened that little trunk? You have found a diamond, or maybe some stocks and bonds? Now you want to buy it for a little.” His small, hard eyes gleamed.

“No.” She had held her ground. “I have not opened it. You may go and see that it is still locked. But I—I like the trunk and I—I’m sure I should have loved its owner. That—that’s why I want to buy it.”

“All right.” He had smiled broadly. “But I must have a profit. Six dollars. You may have it for that. I will take it from your pay.

“But, my child—” He had laid a hand gently on her arm. “You must not do these things. They make you soft. And soft you must not be in this business.”

Nevertheless, she had remained “soft.” She had purchased the trunk “with contents, if any.” She had picked the lock with a hairpin and had spent three happy, tearful hours poring over its contents. The person who lost the trunk was named Emily Anne Sheldon. She had two sisters. Their pictures were all there.

“The sweetest little old ladies one may ever hope to see,” Grace had assured herself. “What a shame that this trunk should have been lost!”

There were bundles of letters tied with faded ribbons. The letters were like a beautiful song, sung at sunset. “If only the whole world were like these three dear old ladies,” she had sighed.

The blankets in that trunk were of finest wool, and very old. Perhaps they had been hand-woven. She could not tell. There was a blue and white bedspread that was hand-woven, she was sure of that. “And it’s worth several times what I paid for the trunk,” she told herself. “But I won’t sell it. I’ll get in touch with Emily Anne and send it all back for a Christmas present.”

In the very bottom of the trunk she had found the ancient family Bible. For a long time she had left it there. Then she had decided to show it to Frank Morrow

and his assistant, Nida McFay, and here she was. And Frank Morrow was telling her it was worth many hundreds of dollars!

“Wr—wrap it up.” She all but shuddered at thought of the wealth she was about to bear away under her arm. “Wrap it up and I’ll take it home.”

Now wondering at Nida’s sudden fear at sight of the stranger, and now puzzling over the problem of the apparently priceless book, Grace left the store to walk slowly down Maxwell Street.

At once her mind was filled with a hundred thoughts. “This,” she whispered, “is my crowded hour.” And indeed, since that strange day when she had walked into her uncle’s unusual store and had begun a fight for her few possessions, every hour had seemed crowded.

There was the mysterious “Whisperer” and his strange visits at dawn. How did his whisper come to her? She had tried in every way to trap him, but with no success. Did he indeed talk to her “down a beam of light” from the window of a skyscraper a mile away? And could he see that far too? It seemed preposterous. And yet—

Drew Lane had visited the store three times. Always he wore the jaunty clothes of a college boy. But once she had gripped his arm and found it hard as steel. He was a man, no mistaking that, and a city detective of the highest type. Was he the Whisperer? It seemed absurd to suspect him. “We all whisper alike,” she had told herself.

So, quite unconscious of her surroundings, she walked on, thinking hard. She had covered two blocks when of a sudden she felt a hand on her arm and heard in a low, chilling tone:

“Just a moment, please.”

Next instant she found herself looking into the face of the man who, a half hour before, had so frightened Nida McFay.

Never in all her life had she wanted so much to scream. The precious Bible was still under her arm. Those cold eyes were fixed upon her.

Ten seconds of thought assured her that she was in no immediate danger. The

shops were still open. She was surrounded by friends. In her brief stay on the street she had made many friends. Max Schmalgemeire, the baker, stood in his door; so too did Mamma Lebed, who sold geese. Peter Rapport was turning his hot dogs. Even Madam Jakolev, the gypsy fortune-teller, whom she strongly suspected of carrying a dagger up her sleeve, was a welcome sight at that moment.

“I merely wanted to ask you a question.” The man was polite enough. “Do you know,” his words were distinct and cold, “this girl Nida McFay is a police character?”

“Po—Police?” Grace stared.

“Practically that. Frank Morrow’s is the only place she could sell books in this city. He is stubborn, foolhardy. Just thought I’d warn you. I am J. Templeton Semp, a detective.”

He tipped his hat and was gone, leaving Grace with a sinking sensation at the pit of her stomach.

“A police character!” she whispered. “How could she be?”

She was to hear more of Nida next morning, for the “Whisperer” was to be with her once more at dawn.

CHAPTER XVII
“THE EYE”

As we have said, it was dark when Johnny Thompson finally returned to the “Street of Mystery,” as he had come to call it. Felix’s answer to his excited questioning at an earlier hour had been strange. Yes, he knew where the men were that Johnny had seen in that animated picture—at least, he knew where they had been when Johnny looked at them; they were in the house down the street where he and Johnny had planted wires and instruments. Had Johnny really seen the men?

“Seen them!” Johnny fairly raved. “I recognized one of them as surely as if he had been my brother!”

“That’s fine!” Felix smiled blandly. “That proves the thing will work.”

“But these men!” Johnny exploded. “We must get them!”

“Oh, must we?” Felix showed surprise.

“Sure we must. They are robbers, murderers. They have bonds in their possession that broke a bank.”

“Oh!” Felix stared. “Well—that’s not in our field. We are inventors, not detectives.”

“I will get Drew Lane, Tom Howe and Captain Burns.” Johnny was poised to rush away.

“As you like. Here’s the key.” Felix extended his hand. “Be sure to lock the door. We are responsible for that.”

“Lock the door,” Johnny grumbled to himself as he hurried away “Queerest

fellow I ever saw, that Felix. Smart, though. Shouldn't wonder if his inventions would do a lot of good. Think of being able to look right in upon a pack of thieves and you half a block or half a mile away!

"Lock the door!" he repeated. "May be so riddled with bullets before we get through that it won't even shut."

In this last he was wrong. When the little band, Johnny, Drew, Tom and the hulking Spider, reached the place, they found it dark. There was no answer to the bell, nor to repeated rapping. When they unlocked the door and, flashlights in left hands, guns in right, made the rounds of the place, they found it deserted and still. The rooms were rented furnished. The furniture was there, but not a garment, not a scrap of paper, not a single article that told of occupation.

"They are gone for good," was Drew's pronouncement.

"And yet I saw them this very afternoon," Johnny said soberly. "Saw the bonds, too. To think I once had them and I lost them so easily!"

"We all make mistakes," Drew consoled. "We're getting hotter and hotter on their trail. We'll get them, you'll see, and that very soon."

They left the place in silence, locking the door behind them.

They made their way to the "House of Magic," where Felix joined them.

"Find anyone?" he asked.

"Gone!" was Johnny's reply.

"I was afraid they might be. But that thing worked—that's the best of it. A little more work on it and we'll be ready to turn it over to those who can make the best use of it."

"By the way, Johnny," Drew Lane put in, "you should have a phone in your room. You may have something to report any time."

Johnny had not told Felix of the Whisperer's message. Felix had many secrets, why not he?

“I’ll put a phone in at once,” Felix assured him.

“Well, goodnight, then.” Drew Lane and his companions disappeared into the dark, leaving Johnny and Felix standing on the steps of the “House of Magic.”

“Easy to put a phone in,” Felix said. “House is full of wires.”

“And of eyes,” Johnny added.

“Yes—‘House of a Thousand Eyes,’” Felix chuckled. “Want to know about ’em?”

“Do I!”

“Well, watch.” Felix rang the bell. The door opened itself. “An eye did that,” he said quietly. “An electric eye. Step inside.”

Johnny did so. As on that other occasion, the narrow space was filled with a strange light; then he saw skeletons, his own and Felix’s, wavering before him.

“Eye does that,” Felix explained again. “The electric eye and X-ray. Eye turns on the current that starts the X-ray going. Quite a convenience. If your would-be visitors carry hard things like guns or knives, you see them and need not admit them unless you want to.

“We are seeing ourselves now,” he chuckled, “as we have never been, but as we shall be. Come inside.” The skeletons vanished. The next door opened.

“In five minutes the ‘eye’ will have made us a cup of cocoa.” Felix sat down.

“It’s really very simple,” he went on after a moment. “The electric eye, or photo-electric cell, is a vacuum tube treated chemically on the inside. A peep hole admits light. When light strikes the chemicals it starts a small electric discharge. This electric discharge, when stepped up, will start any piece of mechanism you may wish it to.

“It works as well when I cut off the light as when I turn it on. So, when I pass before a light in the wall that plays on one electric eye, it causes the door to open. Another closes the door, and so forth.

“Just now an ‘eye’ turned on the current under a pan of milk. When the milk is hot and rises in the pan, a second eye slides the pan aside and adds the cocoa and sugar. So we have steaming cocoa with no trouble at all.

“Impractical?” He threw back his head and laughed. “Yes, but it’s lots of fun.

“But the eye is revolutionizing the world, for all that!” he added, handing Johnny his cocoa. “I told you we fixed up a rig for sorting a carload of beans a day. That is done by thousands of electric eyes. Pineapples are sorted the same way. In school rooms an eye watches the light. When it gets too dark the eye throws on the lighting switch. The eye umpires bowling matches and would umpire a baseball game, call a ball a ball, a strike a strike, and never be wrong. And that certainly would be something!

“Guess that’s enough for tonight. I’ll get that phone.” He hurried away.

It was not enough, not half enough for Johnny. He wanted to ask if the eye had helped him see what he had seen that afternoon, if the eye could have anything to do with the whispers at dawn. He wanted to ask a hundred questions. But Felix was gone.

When Johnny mounted to his room, he found the telephone in its place on a stand by his bed, but Felix was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XVIII
THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

As a rule, Johnny was a heavy sleeper. All the strange doings of the past few days must have gotten on his nerves, for next morning, more than an hour before dawn, he found himself lying in bed wide awake, thinking.

The ceiling of his room, he noticed, had dropped again during the night. This neither surprised nor disturbed him. In fact, in this strange house had the attraction of gravity been reversed and had he found his bed resting on the ceiling instead of the floor, he would not have been greatly surprised.

He was, however, curious about many things. This room that had a way of growing small, with its strange light where there were no lamps, intrigued him.

The matter of the locked door of the previous day had been solved. Felix had been experimenting with a new type of time lock and had forgotten to throw the electrical switch that controlled it.

“But that living picture on the wall!” Johnny thought to himself. “How is one to explain that?

“And the whisper? Where does that come from? It can’t be a broadcast, and he can’t be close at hand.” Drew had told him the evening before that Grace Krowl had said she had heard the Whisperer in her room more than a mile away.

“The message was not the same,” he told himself. “Not nearly the same. She did not get my message. I did not get hers. He is a very particular person, this Whisperer.”

His thoughts went back to that day he bought the express package that had come so near causing his death.

“And I had those bonds!” he groaned aloud. How was this affair to end? Would Drew Lane and his band come up with these outlaws? Would there be a battle? Would he, Johnny Thompson, be in at the finish? He devoutly hoped so. He thought again of Madame LeClare and her fine children who had lost a father. He saw the dark, smiling eyes of Alice. “As long as God gives us breath!” he repeated. It was a pledge and a prayer.

His thoughts had returned to the mysterious Whisperer when he was given a sudden start by the loud jangle of a bell.

He sprang out of bed. The bell appeared to be in the room. “Like an alarm clock,” he told himself. “But there is no clock.”

He looked at the reflector on the wall. The moonlight was falling upon it—or was that some other form of light? He could not tell. The sound seemed to come from there.

He began pacing the room. The bell still jangled. But of a sudden he halted in amazement. As he crossed before the reflector the sound had ceased for the space of a second, then began again. He tried it again and got the same result.

“That’s strange!” he told himself.

Just then the jangling ceased and in its stead came the familiar voice of the Whisperer:

“Johnny! Johnny Thompson! Are you there? Are you awake?”

“The Whisperer?” Johnny breathed.

“Johnny,” the message went on, “I have an important message for your friends. Phone them at once. The men they want are at 1046 Blair Street. They are in a small, yellow sedan. They are in a garage, having their car repaired. Hurry!”

Johnny did hurry. He called the shack and had Drew on the wire at once.

“Yes,” Drew said, “Tom is here with me, and so are the Captain and Spider. Thanks for the tip, Johnny. We are on our way at once.”

“Well, that’s that!” Johnny sighed. He knew, though he regretted it tremendously,

that he could not hope to join them in this adventure.

“Stay here and wait for any further message,” he told himself. “Wonder if Drew and the rest will really come up to Iggy and his gang? If they do, man! oh, man!” He could just hear the guns popping.

There was, however, no such luck, at least for the moment. As the happy, fighting four, Drew and his band, neared the garage at 1046 Blair Street, they saw a low, yellow sedan pop out of the garage door and go speeding north.

“That’s sure to be them. After them! Give her the gas!” the Captain shouted.

Drew sent the Captain’s powerful car speeding after.

The yellow car shot straight north for a mile. Then it whirled round a corner on two wheels.

When Drew and his band rounded that corner there was no car in sight—only a huge, lumbering moving-van two blocks to the east.

“Street ends two blocks west,” the Captain snapped. “Must have gone east. Drive slow and watch the north and south streets.”

This they did. They were still going slow as they passed the van. Spider, who had been sitting in the back seat with Tom Howe, was startled a moment later to find that Tom was no longer with him. He was not in the car. He was gone.

* * * * * * * *

In the meantime, Johnny Thompson was in the midst of a strange discovery. Ten minutes after the first message had been delivered, the bell began its jangle once more.

“Hello!” Johnny exclaimed. “Big Ben again!”

Springing to his feet, he began walking back and forth before the round reflector. As on the other occasion, the bell ceased jangling as he passed.

A series of rapid experiments with a hat held in his hand showed him he could shut off the bell by holding the hat in certain positions. These positions, he

found, must be higher and higher as he receded from the reflector toward the window.

“One thing I know,” he assured himself. “That sound is produced by some force outside my window. And the person who produces it must be very high up.

“In fact—” He caught his breath as he looked out of the window and away to the east. “There is but one place it could come from. That is the top of the six hundred foot tower of the Sky Ride on those deserted Century of Progress grounds. The Whisperer—”

He broke off short to listen with all his ears. The ringing of that bell ceased, the whispered message was beginning.

* * * * * * * *

What had happened to the slender young detective, Tom Howe? Something rather strange, I assure you.

Having slipped from the slowly moving police car, he had mounted the running board of the vast lumbering van. From this point he slid to a position beside the driver. As he did this he prodded the driver in the ribs with an automatic and whispered, “You will drive as I say and where I say, or you are a dead man!”

The driver never took his eye from the road. He drove straight on.

* * * * * * * *

The message Johnny Thompson received after the second ringing of the bell was but a repetition of the first, so his mind was soon put to rest. He was left with plenty to wonder about, for all that.

But dawn was now breaking. Like departing fairies, the Whisperer had other business that must be attended to. He was heard next in Grace Krowl’s little parlor on Maxwell Street.

“Christmas Eve will be here in three more days,” he was saying. “On Christmas Eve everyone is in a mellow mood. That is the time for confiding secrets. On that evening, my friend Grace, you are to invite Nida McFay to your room, seat her beside your table and induce her to tell her story. I shall be looking in upon

you from my high tower a mile away."

"High tower, a mile away!" she thought. "How can one see that far? And the shade is always half drawn. It is impossible!" And yet, the Whisperer had more than once convinced her that he did see her face.

"But Christmas Eve!" she exclaimed indignantly. "How can one ask another to bare her life's secrets at such a time?"

It was a sober-faced Grace Krowl who seated herself before the table for a few moments of quiet thought. In the days just past she had tried out her plan of writing to people whose stories she had found in lost trunks. She had offered to return all their little treasures without cost. The results had been disappointing and disheartening. Their attitude she had found difficult to understand. In their letters they seemed to say, "You have all the things in my trunk. You have a right to none of them." She had returned the pictures and letters from six trunks. She had paid the express charges out of her own meager funds. Not one of them all had made an effort to repay these charges.

"Not one returned to thank me." She stared at the wall. "Can it be that uncle is right? That I am merely letting myself get 'soft'?"

She thought of the priceless Bible tucked away at the bottom of the little horsehair trunk. Is it strange that a half-formed hope should enter her mind, the hope that no one would appear to claim that treasure, and that she might have it for her very own?

"A fortune! Thousands of dollars!" she whispered. "And yet—"

* * * * * * * *

When Tom Howe mounted to the seat of that lumbering van he took one look through a narrow slit of a window behind the driver. The inside of the van at that time was completely dark.

After riding with the driver for fully two miles and directing his course all this time, Tom cast another sidewise look through that window. His lips parted in an unuttered exclamation. The back of the van was now open, the gate was down, and back two blocks, just turning the corner, was a low, yellow sedan.

His face was a mask as he turned his attention once more to the street that lay ahead. Two blocks before them a red crossing light gleamed. As the van paused for this light, he sprang from the seat and was away like a shot.

“Well! What became of you?” the Captain roared as a half hour later he entered the shack.

“You lost their trail?” Tom grinned.

“I’ll say we did!”

“So did I,” Tom said quietly. “In the end I did. But I stayed with them longer than you did.”

“You stayed?” Drew exploded.

“Sure I did. You remember that van on the street? They were in there, car and all! Pulled a swift one on us. Driver lowered the back gate and they drove up and in. Then he lifted the gate.

“I had ’em trapped like rats, I thought. I’d have made the driver take that van right into our squad-car garage. And then, would there have been fun!”

“But what happened?” Drew was staring now.

“Near as I can find out, the driver released the gate with some foot control. Iggy and his gang took the hint and backed right out while we were going. I saw them shoot round a corner. The trap was sprung, no rat in it—so I came home.

“How about a cup of coffee?” He moved toward the stove in the corner.

“Well that,” Drew said slowly, “is something!”

“There’ll be another day,” the Captain grumbled.

CHAPTER XIX
A WHISPER FROM AFAR

Late that afternoon Captain Burns' car came to a stop before the "House of Magic."

"Hop in," he said to Johnny when the boy appeared. "Want to take you somewhere. Been working on clues all day. Tired. Need rest. Need good company. Come along."

Johnny, who had spent a quiet day with Felix, being led further into the magic of the electric eye, but being told nothing at all about the mysteries that most intrigued him, was ready enough to go.

"Queer boy, that Felix," he said to the Captain as the car sped on through the city. "Didn't really tell me a thing I wanted to know.

"Oh, yes," he corrected himself, "he did say that the light about the place was made by neon tubes set in the walls and that the light entered the room through a million pin-pricks in the canvas covering of the walls; also that this light came in slowly because it was filtered through bulbs very like radio tubes."

"Interesting, but not so terribly important," the Captain rumbled.

"Same with that business of my room getting tall and short," Johnny went on. "Seems his father thinks there's a lot of waste space in modern homes. Bed chambers stand empty all day, living-rooms all night, and there is never enough air space in either. So he's experimenting on floors built like elevators. You flatten out the bedroom furniture and raise the floor; that gives you a tall living-room during the day. By lowering the same floor at night you get a tall bedroom."

"In any case," the Captain laughed, "you're not likely to bump your head."

“Seems,” Johnny concluded, “I had a room intended in the beginning for a sort of parlor. They needed the space above, so they let down the floor. Not a bad arrangement, only they ought to have let a fellow know. These inventors’ heads are so full of things, they forget.”

They were now well out of the city, speeding along a country road.

Thirty miles from the heart of the city they swung through a gateway and came to a stop before a small, low-roofed cottage.

It was now dark. The place seemed cold and deserted.

“You’ll not find any ceilings falling on you here,” Captain Burns chuckled. “This was my boyhood home.”

“Your boyhood home!” Johnny surveyed the narrow yard surrounded by ancient maples. He looked at the insignificant dwelling towered over by a giant cottonwood tree.

“And you rose from this,” he said in an awed whisper.

“No, Johnny,” the Captain replied quickly. “I didn’t rise. No one ever rises above his boyhood home. It is the grandest place on earth. Come on in.”

The place they entered was the kitchen. It had a low ceiling. In a corner stood a small wood-burning kitchen range with a top that was warped and cracked.

“That’s the very stove,” the Captain said proudly, touching a match to shavings and watching yellow flames spread. “I cut wood for it more than thirty years ago.

“I was away from this place a long, long time, Johnny. When I got some money I bought it for a sort of retreat. When I am poor again it shall be the last of my treasured possessions to go—my boyhood home!” he ended reverently.

“When I think—” There was a rumble in the Captain’s throat as he began to speak after some moments of silence. “When I think of the good, simple, happy times we had here, I wonder—” He did not finish, but sat smiling and looking at the glowing hearth of the little, old, cracked kitchen stove.

“I was raised in this one small room,” he began once more. “Oh, yes, we slept upstairs. No fire up there, not a spark. Cold!” He chuckled. “Twenty below sometimes.

“But this room, it was home to us. Home.” He said it softly. “I can see it now. The table there and the yellow glow of a kerosene lamp. Father dozing by the fire. Brother Tom reading. He was a scholar, Tom was. Made a fine man, he would, if—” Once more he did not finish.

“Father was a pious man,” he rumbled on after a time. “Wonder how many sons of truly pious men make their mark in the world? Many of them, I believe.

“We always had prayers on our knees before we went upstairs. Father’s prayer was always much the same. One sentence I remember well: ‘We thank Thee, our Father, that it is well with us as it is.’ It wasn’t very well with us all the time. But we had peace. The doors were never locked. Precious little to steal, and no one to steal it.

“Peace!” he mused. “Sometimes I wonder whether this eternal struggle is worth the cost. When I got older and went out with my father to help with the work, when we came rattling home in the dark in our old lumber wagon, we had peace. No one wanted to kill us. But now—”

Once again he did not finish. There was no need. Full well Johnny knew that there were those who wished this faithful officer beneath the sod.

“But when the city gets you—” The Captain’s tone had changed. “When it gets you, there’s no turning back. The noise, the rush, the excitement of life that flows on and on like a torrent—it *gets* you, and you never, never turn back.

“Remember the story of poor old Lot?”

“Yes, I remember.” Johnny knew that great old book.

“I’ve always felt sorry for Lot.” The Captain chuckled. “Country chap come to the city to live. Got his wife turned to salt, he did. Lost about all he had. But he couldn’t help it. City got him. Sodom got him. Chicago’s got you and me, Johnny. And Chicago won’t let us go until they bring us out to some spot like the one we passed a mile from here, and put us away where the hemlocks sing and sigh over the marble that is white in the moonlight.

“So we’ll fight on, Johnny.” He prodded the fire. “We won’t accomplish much. No one ever does. But we’ll do our bit—do it like men.

“But, Johnny—” He rose and stretched himself. “It helps to come out here now and then where I have known so much peace. Just to sit by this old, cracked stove, to listen to the whisper of the wind, the song of the tree toads and the whoo-whooting of some owl, and dream I am a boy again, just a boy. Ah, son, that’s good.

“We’ll go back to the city in a little while,” he went on after a time. “Get a good bed somewhere in town.

“And that reminds me, Johnny. I want you out here on Christmas Eve. We’ll make up a party and stay all night. Hang up our stockings just as we boys used to do. We’ll bring out Drew and Tom, Joyce Mills, Mrs. LeClare and Alice; yes, and Spider—only we’ll have a whole turkey for Spider,” he chuckled. “We—we’ll have a grand time Christmas Eve and all day Christmas. And such a dinner! I’ve bought a turkey, twenty-five pounds, Johnny.

“Come in here.” He took up a kerosene lamp and led the way into a second small room.

“This was our parlor. Only lit the fire on Sundays. Such Sundays as those were! Happy days, Johnny! Happy days!”

“But what’s this?” Johnny asked suddenly. “Surely this does not belong to those days.”

“No.” There was a queer look on the Captain’s face. “Fellow I know, man I would trust with my life, asked permission to put that in here.” They were looking at a two-foot wide reflector such as was to be found in Johnny’s room in the “House of Magic.”

“He said,” the Captain went on, “that if the time came when I was badly needed in the city, a message would come to me through that thing. How? I can’t say. Up until now it hasn’t uttered a squawk. It—”

Suddenly Johnny held up a hand. There was no need. The Captain was listening with all his ears, for, into that room there on the lonely prairie, had stolen a whisper.

“Captain Burns!” The words were very distinct. “I wish to inform you that a packet of stolen bonds you are seeking have been sold to Joseph Gregg of 3200 South Kemp Street. Gregg is an honest man. But back of him—” The whisper faded.

“That,” exclaimed the Captain, “is all I need to know!”

Racing for his coat and hat, he led the way to his car. A moment more and they were speeding back to the city.

“Johnny,” said the Captain, “do you believe that whisper came all the way from the city?”

“I am sure of it.”

“A broadcast?”

“No, not a broadcast. I feel sure no one in the world, save us, heard it.”

“Wonderful, if true—a revolutionary idea!” the Captain exclaimed.

“I think,” said Johnny, “that I could name the very spot from which that message came—the top of the Sky Ride tower.” He told the Captain of his discovery regarding the whisper he had heard that morning.

“We’ll have to look into that,” was the Captain’s only comment.

That very night Johnny attempted to “look into that,” with such results as you shall see.

CHAPTER XX
THE SKY SLIDER

Having secured Spider as his special bodyguard and obtained permission to enter the deserted grounds of the Century of Progress, Johnny set out on his mission of discovery. He was determined to learn what he could about the mysterious Whisperer.

It was a dark night. Clouds hid the moon. One of those cold, gusty nights it was, when fine siftings of snow creep and tremble about your feet, when sharp gusts of wind shooting out from unexpected angles blow fine particles of ice upon your cheek, and you say with a start, “Some devil of the north has been let loose to blow his breath upon me.”

“Boo!” Spider shuddered. “How cold it is!”

“Yes, and ghostly!” Johnny added. They were on the old Fair grounds. “When you think what this place has been, so full of light and sunshine, so hilarious with the screams and shouts of jolly revelers, every corner seems to hide a ghost.”

“Yes.” Spider quickened his pace. “There’s the place where they had all those freaks—tall, skinny men, short, crooked ones, two headed, one legged—all sorts of funny and distorted humans. Gee! Johnny, what a joy to have two legs and two arms, eyes, ears and all that!”

“Yes, and what poor use some of us make of them!” Johnny grumbled.

“Look.” Spider was full of recollections. “There’s where they kept that huge snake. Suppose he’s in there now, all coiled up, torpid for his winter’s sleep?” The thought caused him to veer sharply to the left.

“Ghosts, all right,” Johnny said quietly. “Ghosts of those who stood in these

places hour by hour, patiently doing their duty, roasting hot dogs, guarding jewels, changing money, selling tickets. Ghosts too of performers on this hilarious Midway."

"And ghosts of those who came to see," Spider chuckled genially.

"But look!" Johnny's voice rose. He gripped Spider's arm. "Do I see a light up there, or don't I?"

"Up where?"

"Tower of the Sky Ride."

A gaunt skeleton of steel, the towers of the Sky Ride where, in the days of wild joy at the Century of Progress three million thrill seekers had shot upward to go gliding and bumping across the sky! And, yes, there at the very top of the left-hand tower a pale yellow light shone.

"The Whisperer!" Johnny's voice was husky with emotion. "We've found him."

"But that place—" There was doubt in Spider's tone. "That place has been locked for months. Electric current is probably turned off. How'd he get up there? Six hundred feet and more!" There was awe in his tone. He was a climber, was Spider—none better, so he had supposed. Had he come upon the tracks of one more skillful than he?

"I could do it," he muttered beneath his breath. "I could climb that tower. Six hundred feet. Bah! What's the diff? Two hundred, three hundred, or six, it's all the same.

"But that man?" He turned to Johnny. "He can't just pucker up his lips and whisper a mile, can he? Takes machines, instruments, whatever you may call it, don't it?"

"Yes, I'm sure it does," Johnny agreed. "I don't know a lot about it myself. It's all like magic to me. But it must take a lot of mechanisms and a strong electric current.

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, as they walked slowly forward, "the Sky Ride's in somebody's care. Bound to be. The managers of next year's Fair are

going to operate it. And if someone had some sort of a pull he could get permission to turn on the current and set an elevator running. He could get up and down that way. And what a place he'd have for whispering! Whisper all over the world, I'd say. I'd like to have a picture of that man—if it *is* a man."

"If it is?" Spider laughed. "You don't think he's an ape, or something?"

"Might be a woman," said Johnny seriously.

"Yeah, a woman! Fine chance!" Spider scoffed.

"Tell you what!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'll take that dare!"

"What dare?" Johnny stopped short in his tracks.

"I'll get you his picture, and if it's a lady, I'll take two pictures."

"You mean you'll climb that tower? Six hundred feet! You—you've not been drinking, Spider?"

"Drinking, Johnny?" There was a deep note of reproach in Spider's voice. "Whatever else I am, Johnny, I'm not a fool. Only a fool drinks. And a fellow who climbs is a double fool if he drinks. Drink, Johnny, makes you feel as if you could fly. And that's a fatal feeling when you're up in the air.

"No, Johnny, I'm sober. You want to know what that man looks like, what he's doing up there. So do I. The elevator may be working. Who knows? If not—up I go."

"All right," Johnny agreed reluctantly. Full well he knew how futile it is to argue with a person of Spider's nature. "You'll know when you've had enough, won't you? You'll give it up if it's sort of getting the best of you?"

The Spider's reply was a guttural mutter.

"All the same, you promise!" Johnny insisted.

"Have it your way," Spider mumbled. "But just you watch this flashlight. I'll fasten it to my belt, behind. It will be shining straight down. Guess you'll be able to see it all the way up. It's pretty bright. When you see it up there at the top

you'll know I'm there.

"And—when you see a white flash you'll know I've got the picture. Always carry a flash-bulb and a little camera, I do. Get some great pictures in all sorts of places."

"Yes," Johnny grumbled, "and some time you'll get your head blown off in the bargain!"

"Oh, yeah?" Spider laughed a crackly sort of laugh.

The elevator to the Sky Ride tower might or might not have been working. The two boys had no way to tell. The door to the place was locked and bolted, apparently from within.

"Just as well pleased," Spider chuckled. "Always have wanted to climb that thing since I saw the first two sections sticking up out of the snow in 1933—so here goes!" He was away up the steel frame, like a monkey.

It was with a feeling akin to awe that Johnny saw that small, wavering spot of yellow light mount up, up, up toward the spot where some bright star lay hidden behind a cloud.

"He'll never climb so high," he muttered. "I shouldn't have let him try. And yet —" There was a mystery to be solved, and mysteries at times are to be solved only by deeds of daring. So he watched the light at Spider's back mount and mount until it was but a tiny speck of yellow light that, winking and blinking, rose ever higher and higher.

As for Spider, he was not disturbed. A climber from the age of six, he had within him supreme self-confidence. What is distance anyway? If you fall at fifty feet you will die. Can six hundred be worse? Thus he reasoned and, mounting higher and higher, thought only of his goal. He would have a look into that room of mystery. He'd surprise someone at his work and, be he man, woman or devil—flash! There would be a picture.

He was right in part—at least, the flash was not lacking; for, having at last scaled the height, he stood upon a steel cross-beam to draw his chin above a steel window frame. And there he hung, drinking in with his eyes the scene that lay before him.

The right-hand corner of a broad, glass-enclosed space had been roughly partitioned off into a small room. At the center of this narrow space, bending over some curious instrument, was a tall, thin man.

That he was not conscious of prying eyes was at once apparent, for, after a moment, partially straightening up, he switched on a powerful lamp, thus sending a sharp pencil of illumination through the clouds that hung over the city.

This accomplished, he turned half about.

Spider dropped low, he might be seen.

When next he dared bring his eyes above the edge of the window frame he found the man facing a peculiar square of metal attached to a low pedestal.

“A microphone! He’s talking into it. The Whisperer!” Spider breathed.

Then with the force of a blow it came to him that here was his chance.

“The picture,” he muttered low.

Twisting an arm about a steel beam, with no thought of the dizzy depths below, with fingers that trembled ever so slightly, he adjusted an electric light bulb, half filled with a sort of tinfoil, to his flashlight. Then adjusting his small camera, he shifted his position, held camera and flashlight high, then pressed a button.

The result was most astonishing. A bright flash was to be expected. The tinfoil filled bulb was such as newspaper photographers use for taking flashlight pictures. Yes, that first bright flash was to be expected. The second, following closely upon the first and accompanied by a sharp report, had not been anticipated. A bullet burned Spider’s ear. With a cry of consternation, he released his grip, dropped a short way toward the black depths below, struck a steel beam, threw out his hands, clutched something cold and substantial, then hung there between heaven and earth.

The first indication that all had not gone well came to Johnny when some object falling from the sky crashed upon a square of wind-blown pavement not twenty feet from where he stood.

Springing forward, he cast the light of his electric torch upon some black

fragments scattered over the spot where the thing had struck.

“The—the camera!” he whispered. “Spider’s camera. There’ll be no picture. But Spider. What of him?”

The wind that whistled about the foot of the Sky Ride tower brought him no answer.

He had been watching the top of that tower for a full five minutes when some object, gliding along a cluster of four cables closely set together and running at a broad angle from the top of the tower to the ground, suddenly caught his attention.

“Can that be a man?” he asked himself, staring with all his eyes as the thing moved downward.

“If it’s a man, is it Spider or the Whisperer?” he asked himself a moment later.

Determined to know, he went racing away toward the end of the cable, some three blocks away.

He arrived just in time to see the slider drop to earth. It was Spider.

“Quite a sky-slider, I am!” he chuckled.

“Well done!” exclaimed Johnny. “Did you see him?”

“Not very clearly. He’s a man, all right. And he’s a tiger. Nearly got me. Never again!”

Spider led the way off the grounds.

And so for the time the mystery of the Whisperer remained unsolved. Only this was known with a fair degree of certainty: his place of retreat was one high tower of the Sky Ride.

CHAPTER XXI
CHRISTMAS EVE

The dawn of the day before Christmas arrived and with it, in Grace Krowl's tiny parlor, came the hoarse whisper of the mysterious one:

"Tonight," it insisted, "you will not fail me. It is for the good of all. You owe us more than you know. It is we who beautified your living quarters. Your coming disturbed our plans. But if you do this thing for us you shall be forgiven."

"Plans." It was her turn to whisper. "What plans?" She wanted to know.

A half hour later, when she descended to the street she found Drew Lane standing by the store door.

"Saw a small leather bag through the window," he explained. "Think I'd like it."

With some irrelevance Grace said quickly:

"Drew Lane, how could anyone see you a mile away?"

"Powerful telescope, perhaps." He gave her a strange look.

"But in your room, with the shade half drawn?"

"No, not possible. Television, possibly that." His voice dropped to a near whisper. "They do strange things with that, I'm told.

"What is it?" He looked her squarely in the eye. "That Whisperer again?"

"Yes."

"And does he claim to see you as well as talk to you?"

“He does see me. I’m sure of it.”

“That’s strange!” Drew Lane did not appear to be shamming.

“Can it be,” she asked herself, “that this young man is not the Whisperer, and that he knows nothing about it?”

As for Drew, he stood there considering the advisability of inviting this girl to the Captain’s Christmas party. He left without having arrived at a definite decision. Some hours later he was to be devoutly thankful that he had not given the invitation.

Christmas Eve came. By nine o’clock the tracks of two large automobiles might have been seen winding through the freshly fallen snow before the Captain’s boyhood home, and from there away to the shed serving as a garage at the right of the house.

From the windows there stole a mellow light. Caught and flung high, curls of blue wood smoke rose from the chimneys.

The guests were seated in the tiny parlor of their beloved Captain’s old home. There were two young detectives, Drew Lane and Tom Howe, with their youthful understudies, Johnny Thompson and Spider. Madame LeClare was there too with Alice, her daughter, and Joyce Mills. Quite a jolly party they were on this Christmas Eve. Only one thought marred their pleasure—the Captain was not with them.

“It’s tough,” he had said to them at the last moment. “Something big just broke. I’ve got to get on the trail while it’s hot. But you folks go right along out. Hang your stockings up behind the old stove like good little children, and maybe you’ll catch me filling them when you get up in the morning. And if you don’t—may that Christmas turkey be tender!”

Those had been his words. Now, as Johnny sat dreaming beside the cracked stove that, despite its age, sent forth a cheering glow, he imagined the Captain skulking down some dark alley in quest of those who would disturb the tranquillity of Christmas Eve.

“Almost wish I were with him,” he thought. “And yet—”

There was a sharp wind blowing. The snow was drifting. Outside, close to the road, a windmill stood on its tall, steel tower. From time to time the wind, giving this mill a twist, caused it to send forth a sharp, grating scream that seemed a human cry of pain.

“Boo!” Johnny whispered. “There’s something spooky about a lonely country place at night.”

A moment more and his thoughts were back with the Captain. “The wind,” he thought, “will be whistling about the corners of skyscrapers tonight. The snow will go scooting and whirling away and away just as it does among the crags of the Rockies. Cities are like that. Wonder where the Captain is now?”

Then again he seemed to hear the Captain’s rumbling voice as in this very room he told of his boyhood days.

“That is the very stove—” He spoke aloud now. Pretty Alice LeClare turned her shining black eyes upon him. “It’s the very stove that burned here many years ago when the Captain was a boy. He found it in the barn loft.

“And these chairs,” he went on, “are the very chairs on which he hung his stockings so long ago. He found them in the attic, bottoms gone, some broken. He had them restored. Seems—” His voice went husky. “Seems almost a sacred place.”

“It *is* sacred,” Alice whispered back. “The boyhood home of a good man, the things he loved, are *always* sacred.”

Johnny could have loved the little French Canadian for that speech.

“And what a privilege,” Alice murmured low, “just for one night to live as he lived, so simple, so plain, so true. To hang up our stockings, feeling that they will be filled, not by lavish hands, but by loving ones, with the simple things that only real love can find.”

“But listen!” Johnny touched her arm. “How that windmill screams! It seems a —a sort of warning. Perhaps our night will not be so serene after all. Per—”

He broke short off. From the wall where the broad reflector stood facing the open window there had come a sound.

“Like a whisper,” Johnny thought. Whisper or not, it made no sense. So again the room fell into silence. Only the crackle of the fire, the racing tick-tock, tick-tock of the little clock on the mantel told that this little gray house was still the habitation of man.

* * * * * * * *

That night, over a cup of tea in Grace Krowl’s parlor, with the Whisperer looking on “from his tower a mile away” Nida McFay told her story. It was a strange story filled with smiles and tears.

For three glorious years she had worked in the book department of one of America’s most beautiful stores. Surrounded by books, with congenial fellow workers and cultured customers, she had learned what it meant to truly live.

“And then—” The little book seller looked away. “Then a man, a very little, wistful old man who lived in my rooming house, brought me some books from his library; anyway, he said they were from his library. He asked me to sell them for him at a second-hand store.

“They were valuable books. I—I sold them.”

She paused to sit for a time staring into her tea cup. It was as if she sensed the fact that someone was looking in upon them from afar, and that she dreaded to go on.

From the reflector in the corner came a strange sound. “Like someone stifling a cough,” Grace thought with a shudder.

“The books—they had been stolen from our store,” Nida went on after a time. “A detective was put on my trail. The little old man disappeared. A—a house detective, with eyes like steel blades, accused me of stealing the books!”

“I think I know him,” Grace broke in. “He looked into Frank Morrow’s shop one night.”

“Yes—yes, that was the man! He calls himself J. Templeton Semp.” Nida’s eyes were wild for an instant.

“He made me sign a paper,” she went on. “I learned later it was a confession.

They discharged me. I went to other places and asked for work, many places. Everywhere the answer was the same:

"'You worked at K——'s. We cannot employ you.'

"You see—" Her voice broke. "I had been put on the black list. I—I wouldn't do that to anyone!

"Well," she sighed at last, "that's all. Good old Frank Morrow took me in spite of the list. And here I am." She forced a smile.

Five minutes later Nida was gone. Grace sat staring at the curious reflector on the wall. "That," she whispered, "is Nida's story. And all the time she was talking someone was looking, listening. I am sure of that. I wonder how? Television? I wonder what that really is?"

Finding herself enshrouded in a cloud of gloom, she drew on her coat and, taking up a basket filled with small boxes, she went out on Maxwell Street.

Moving along from door to door, she made brief Christmas Eve calls on the simple, kindly people she had learned to love. The small boxes contained homemade candy. She left one at every door.

She found Mamma Lebed busy decorating a tiny tree for her two dark-haired little ones. "It's not much we can give them," she beamed. "But the dear ones, how they will dance and prattle when morning comes!" She brushed a tear from her broad cheek.

"Merry Christmas!" Grace whispered.

"Same to you!" Mamma Lebed gripped her hand hard.

Grossmuter Schmalgemeire was filling stockings. There was no fireplace in her tiny home back of the shop, but a straight-backed chair did as well.

"He said a mouse would come in through the hole in the toe, Hans did," she laughed. "But I told him an orange would fill it up. And so it shall. I found one in the street that is not too bad."

And so Grace found them, these friends, on every hand. Poor, but making much

of the little they had, and all filled to overflowing with the spirit of Christmas.

When she returned to her rooms, her cheeks were glowing. “Tonight,” she whispered, “I am like the moon, filled with light. The light of happiness. It is reflected happiness, but happiness all the same.”

And then, into her mind there flashed questions that had grown old, but were ever new: “Who is the Whisperer? Where is he? Why does he want Nida’s story?”

CHAPTER XXII
THE WARNING

In the meantime tremendous things were doing in the little house where Captain Burns had spent his childhood.

For a time, it is true, the silence in that little gray home out where the snow lay white and glistening on field and road continued.

Madame LeClare sat by the narrow drop-leaf table knitting. Joyce Mills, with a big black cat on her lap, seemed more than half asleep. Dark-haired Alice had curled herself up on two cushions beside the fire. The others sat in dreamy silence. It did not seem a time for small talk, this Christmas Eve. Were their thoughts busy with other Christmas Eves? Who can say? Were they thinking of the future, of the approaching New Year and what it would bring to them? Did they think at times of the five public enemies still at large and free to follow their evil ways? Perhaps, at times, all these. At any rate, they were silent.

Into that silence there crept a whisper. The effect was electric! Madame dropped her knitting. Joyce started so violently that the cat bounced from her lap. With an involuntary motion Drew Lane reached for his gun. “Lanan—” the whisper began, “Lanan Road, attention! Those in Captain Burns’ old home, attention!” The whisper was like a call “To Arms!”

“You are in grave danger. Grave danger! The report is just that. I can tell you no more. Be on your guard!”

The whisper ceased. The clock ticked on. From without came the hoarse scream of the rusty windmill. The black cat, walking across the floor, settled himself beside Alice among the cushions.

As if directed by a common impulse, Drew and Tom removed their automatics,

examined them with care, then dropped them with a little chug back into their places.

“Peace on earth, good will toward men!” Drew quoted dryly. “In such a world as ours there can be no peace.”

“Grave danger,” Johnny thought to himself. He was looking through the window to the white silence outside. “Danger? It does not seems possible! Captain Burns has kept this place a secret. We came here in a very round-about way. Surely no one followed us.

“And yet—” A thought struck him squarely between the eyes. “And yet, the Whisperer, alone in his tower among the stars—he knows!

“The Whisperer—who can he be?” He said the words aloud.

Alice, who sat almost at his feet, shook her head. She did not know. No one did, at least almost no one.

Was he a friend of the law, or its enemy? A friend, Johnny would have said. And yet, as he recalled how Spider had barely escaped death when he attempted to take a picture of that mysterious man of the tower, he could not be sure. Spider had not repeated his hair-raising experiment.

Curiously enough, it did not occur to one of them that they might slip out quietly, pile into their cars and go speeding back to the city. They had come here with a plan. They were to hang up their stockings, each of them, as if he were once more a small child. They were to stay all night, the ladies sleeping upstairs, the men and boys in two tiny downstairs bedrooms. There was to be joy in the morning and feasting at noonday; a twenty-five pound turkey awaited Madame’s skill at stuffing and baking. Who should interfere with these glorious plans? No one, surely!

* * * * * * * *

In the meantime, Grace Krowl in her parlor in the distant city had received a strange visitor.

Hardly had she returned from her little journey dispensing Christmas cheer, when there came a knock at her door.

“Who can that be?”

Springing up, she threw open the door, and there before her, smiling like some fairy, was a tiny little lady all dressed in furs.

“I received your letter.” She stepped inside. “I came to see about the little trunk.”

“But you—you’re not Emily Anne!” Grace stared with all her eyes.

“Oh, dear, no!” The little lady’s laugh was like the jingle of a silver bell. “I am her niece, Miss Baxter. Aunt Emily is dead, I am sorry to say—has been for two years.”

“Oh!” There was a note of genuine sadness in Grace’s voice. “Ex—excuse me!” she apologized. “But I came almost to know her by the lovely things in her trunk.”

“I am sure you did.” The little lady beamed. “She was a choice soul, Aunt Emily Anne!

“But tell me—” She dropped into a chair. “Your letter interested me *so* much. Won’t you tell me how you came into possession of this trunk, and how you came to write that wonderful letter?”

“Wonderful letter?” the girl thought. “At last one has returned to give thanks. How gorgeous!”

She did tell Miss Baxter all she wished to know about the trunk and the letters.

“But this Bible?” The little lady’s eyes gleamed. “You say it is worth several thousands of dollars?”

“I am sure of it.” Grace nodded her head. “I’ve had the signature verified. It is genuine.”

“Then,” said Miss Baxter, “let us form a society, you and I—a ‘Society for the Return of Lost and Strayed Trunks.’ How does that sound? There is a ‘Society for the Return of Lost and Strayed Cats.’ Trunks are more important than cats, much more!”

“But you are the only one who returned to thank me. Besides,” said Grace, “I don’t quite understand.”

“Oh! The plans,” the little lady smiled, “we must work them out little by little. We shall sell the Bible. I will add to that fund. This will give us working capital. You shall be the secretary, and do a great deal of the work.”

“Nothing could be more wonderful,” Grace murmured, too overcome for speech.

“And now!” Miss Baxter sprang to her feet. “This is Christmas Eve, and I must be on my way. I’ll see you again soon!”

With a wave of her hand, as if she might be a feminine Santa Claus, she was gone, leaving the astonished Grace to stare after her.

“Life,” she thought, “is strange, so very strange, so much mystery!” She closed the door, but did not stir from her place. She was thinking, and they were long, long thoughts.

These thoughts were broken in upon by a second knock on the door. No light tap of a sparrow’s wing, this knock, but one like the thump of a policeman demanding admittance in the name of the law. Her hand trembled as she gripped the knob.

CHAPTER XXIII
A PROMISE THAT IS A THREAT

The silence in that little gray home out there on the snow-blown prairies lasted for ten long moments. To those who waited time seemed to creep at a snail's pace. Drew Lane, shifting uneasily in his chair, was about to suggest something —he will never know what—when, sudden as before, all thoughts were drawn to the mysterious talking reflector against the wall.

The instant a voice broke the silence in that corner, Drew Lane leaped to his feet. Tom Howe, crouching like a cat, remained motionless in his chair. There was something menacing, sinister, altogether terrible about that voice. The words, more spoken than whispered, caused Johnny's blood to freeze in his veins.

"Listen, you Hell hounds!" Those were the words. "Listen! You whisper, do you? Well, so do we! You narrow-cast, and you think we can't listen. Well, we can!

"Listen!" The voice became more terrible. "You have been on our trail long enough! Public enemies! Bah!"

As if choked with words, the voice ceased for a second. Everyone in the room had turned into a statue. Only the cat was unconscious of it all. He purred loudly in his place among the cushions. And the windmill, poor thing of rusty steel, it uttered one more unearthly scream.

"Listen!" The voice was hoarse with hate. "We got you, see? Got all of you. You'll never leave that place, see? Not one of you all! Christmas Eve. It's a laugh!" There came a hoarse chuckle that was terrible to hear. "Hang up your stockings! Get 'em up quick! We're coming to fill 'em, and we'll fill 'em right with machine gun slugs! That's how they'll be filled!

“Good-night, everyone!” The speaker’s voice dropped to a mocking imitation of a radio announcer. “Good-night. And a Merry Christmas to all!”

For a full moment the silence in that little parlor, that through the years had witnessed so much of joy and sorrow, was profound.

“It’s a joke,” Spider said hoarsely at last.

“It’s no joke!” Drew Lane’s lips were white. “I know that voice.

“I only wish,” he said slowly, “that you ladies were out of it. Those fellows have machine guns. If they cut loose, they’ll riddle this place.”

“I’m a detective’s daughter.” Joyce Mills stood up square shouldered and slim.

“And I a slain policeman’s widow.” Madame LeClare stood up at her side.

“And I his child.” Alice was not smiling as she joined the two. There was a glint of fire in her dark eyes.

“Is—is that Iggy the Snake?” Madame LeClare asked.

“Beyond doubt it is.” Drew’s eyes were gleaming. “He and his gang, the men who killed Jack LeClare, the men we swore to get. And with God’s help we’ll get them yet!” He set his teeth hard.

“You ladies can shoot?” he said in a changed voice.

“As well as any man!” Madame held up her head proudly.

“That’s good! Let’s see.” Drew moved to the cupboard by the stairs. “The Captain showed me a new sort of gas bomb. Yes, here it is. Puts ’em out completely for a full half hour. Be swell if we could use it.”

“But they’ll be a respectful distance away,” Tom Howe objected. “How can we?”

“That’s right. Have to trust our automatics, I guess. Here!” Drew handed one of his guns to Johnny.

“And you.” Tom passed a thing of blue metal to Madame LeClare as if it were a

bouquet of roses. She accepted it with a bow.

“There’s no phone—no way of spreading an alarm.” Drew spoke calmly. “No one passes this way at night. They’ve got till morning. Johnny, has the place a cellar?”

“Only a hole for vegetables—no windows.”

“No use to us. They’d burn the house. Smother us like rats. We’ll have to stand our ground, every one at a window. This is the way our forefathers fought savages.” His voice had grown husky.

“These are more savage than they!” Madame LeClare added.

“We might make a dash for it. Try getting away in the cars,” Tom Howe suggested.

“They may be all set to mow us down as we come out,” Drew objected. “We’ve not been watching, you know. But we’d better be, right now!” His tone changed. “We’ll set a watch at the windows. There’s one on every side. We’ll watch in pairs. Misery loves company. You and you there; you and you—” He pointed them to their places rapidly.

Johnny found himself settled upon a cushion behind the low window in the small southwest room. At his side, so close he fancied he felt her heart beat, was Alice LeClare. He thanked Drew for that. If the watch were to be long, here was pleasant company. Then, too, he had learned by the glint in her dark eyes that, if worse came to worst, if he were wounded, out of the combat, this splendid girl would fight over him as bravely and savagely as any Indian fighter’s wife had fought over her fallen man.

It was strange, the silence of the place, once they were all settled and the lights out. The fire in the cracked old stove shone red. The little clock that had ticked the good Captain’s boyhood quite away, as if it would end the suspense and bring the dawn at once, raced more furiously than before. The girl at Johnny’s side breathed steadily, evenly, as if this were but the night before Christmas and she waiting for Santa Claus in the dark.

“What a girl!” Johnny thought.

His eyes strayed through the open door at his back. Through it he caught the square of light from the north window. A semi-circle of shadow above its sill he knew to be Spider's head. Spider was watching there alone. His post was an important one. That window looked out upon a small barn and the towering cottonwood tree. The tree was fully six feet through. The Captain had told of swinging from its branches as a child.

"It's strange," Johnny whispered to the girl, "sitting here in this quiet little gray house where men and women have lived their lives away without a breath to disturb their calm, waiting for an attack. It—why, it's like the silence that must have hung over the fields of poppies in France during the Great War."

"Do you think they'll truly come?" Alice whispered back. "Or was it just a scare? They may be in Chicago, you know. The Whisperer is."

"They are not a mile away. They will come. Drew believes they'll come, and Drew seldom makes a mistake."

"Promise me—" She pressed his arm. "If I go to—to—to the Last Round-Up and you—you are spared, you'll look after the boys and—and help Gluck to be a good brave cop when he grows up." There was a little tremor in her voice.

"I promise!" Johnny whispered huskily.

A moment later Johnny's eyes swept the wide white field before him, then the narrow road that lay beyond. For a space of seconds his eyes remained fixed upon a dark spot on that road. "Does it move?" he asked himself. In the end he decided that it did not.

Breathing more easily, he turned to look through the door at his back, into the room beyond. He started and stared. Something was missing. The dark semi-circle that had been Spider's head was gone.

"That's queer!" he muttered low. To Alice he whispered: "Keep a sharp watch. I'll be back." Next instant he was gliding noiselessly across the floor.

Ten seconds and he was staring at a vacant spot where the other boy had been. "Spider!" He all but said the name aloud. "Spider! He is gone!"

Instinctively his hand sought the latch to the door close beside that north

window. It gave to his hand. “It—it’s not locked,” he whispered. “But it *was* locked. I locked it myself.” Spider was gone, sure enough, not alone from his post, but out of the building.

At once his head was in a whirl. What was he to make of it? Was Spider yellow, after all? Had he decided to make a break all by himself? With his uncanny power of climbing, of getting through places unobserved, he would almost surely escape. “And yet—” he whispered, “is that like Spider?” He could not feel that it was. He recalled times when the boy had appeared utterly fearless, absolutely loyal.

“And yet, he was only a boy from the city streets. Supposing—” Doubt assailed him. Supposing Spider had only pretended to be loyal. Supposing that during all this time he had been in league with Iggy the Snake and his gang? Supposing it had been he who had tipped off the gang to their plans for a Christmas party!

“Yes, and suppose it wasn’t!” he whispered almost fiercely.

One fact stood out clearly. Spider’s post was vacant. It must be filled at once.

After locking the door, he slid over to Drew’s side.

“Spider’s gone,” he said.

“Gone? Where?” Drew did not raise his voice.

“Who knows? His place is empty.”

“You take it,” was Drew’s instant command. “Take Alice with you. I’ll move over where you were.

“Gone!” he murmured as Johnny glided away into the darkness. “Spider’s gone!”

CHAPTER XXIV
A STRANGE VICTORY

Apparently it is true that, under certain circumstances at least, one can recognize a person by his whisper. Certain it is that Grace Krowl, upon opening her door for a second time that night and upon hearing the whispered message, “Merry Christmas, Grace Krowl,” said without a moment’s hesitation:

“*You are the Whisperer.*”

“I am.” The slim, gray-haired man before her smiled. “May I come in?”

She stepped aside. He entered and took a seat.

“It was generous of you to trust me,” he said. “You will not regret it.

“You see—” His eyes strayed about the place. “I fitted these rooms up for myself. Then, for reasons you shall know of later, I was obliged to leave them. When I learned of your presence here, I decided to trust you, and to use you. I—You have Nida’s story?”

Grace nodded.

“She is the daughter of a very old friend.” The little, gray-haired man leaned forward. “Will you tell me the story?”

Grace told the story as best she could.

“It is as I thought.” The Whisperer sprang to his feet. “That man, J. Templeton Semp, is a rascal. He tried to hide his evil deeds by persecuting others. I must go!” He seized his hat.

“But who—who are you?” Grace cried.

“I—” He smiled. “I am Newton Mills.” Then he was gone.

What a commotion that declaration would have caused among the watchers in the little gray house on the prairies! Newton Mills, Joyce Mills’ father, boon companion of Drew Lane, Tom Howe and Johnny Thompson—Newton Mills come to life and he, of all men, the Whisperer! But no word of this could reach them now.

* * * * * * * *

It was cold over there by the north window of the little gray house. Before he and Alice established themselves there, Johnny gathered up his heavy coat and wrapped it about the girl. He was very close to her now, this brave and beautiful child of a slain policeman. They were facing death together, these two. And death drew them closer.

Bleak night was outside, and out there somewhere in hiding, creeping up behind that barn or the grove where the Captain had played as a boy, or perhaps behind the great cottonwood just before them, death was coming nearer. Johnny was seized with an involuntary shudder.

“What is it, my friend Johnny?” The little Canadian’s shoulder touched his.

“Nothing. Only thinking.” He laughed a low, uncertain laugh.

“Do you know,” he said a moment later in a voice that was all but a whisper, “that old barn behind the cottonwood was standing when the Captain was a boy? On rainy days they played in the hay, climbed high and pushed one another down, made swings of the hay ropes and leaped into the mow from twenty feet in air. They played hide and seek, boys and girls together. Sounds sort of peaceful and joyous, doesn’t it? Not—not like this.”

“You make it seem so real. Perhaps, after all, this is only a dream. Or, or only a trick to frighten us. Christmas morning will come as it came in those good days. Stockings all in a row.” Her voice was dreamy. “Presents, and a fire laughing up the chimney. All that and—

“Johnny!” She broke off suddenly to grip his arm. “What was that? A shot?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Johnny’s right hand gripped his automatic. Surely there had come a sharp crack. It sounded strange in the night.

“Board nails snapping in the frost perhaps.” He relaxed a little.

“Look, Johnny!” She gripped his arm till it hurt. “Look! Some dark object tumbling about under that huge tree. It—I think it looks like a man!”

Johnny was on his feet. “Drew! Drew Lane! Come here quick!” He all but shouted the words.

Before the call died on his lips, Drew was at his side. By that time not one dark object, but three were to be seen tumbling about on the snow beneath the giant cottonwood. Their antics were grotesque in the extreme—like men sewed into canvas sacks.

“Something’s happening,” Johnny hazarded.

“Or it’s a decoy to call us out,” Drew replied dryly.

What was to be done? Surely here was a quandary. One of the figures had stiffened and lay quite still like a corpse.

“May be faked,” Drew said grimly. “But a fellow has to see.” One hand on the door, the other gripping his automatic, he was prepared for a dash, when Johnny pulled him back.

“No! No! Let me go! You are older. If anything goes wrong, you’ll be needed here. You must remember the women.”

“All—all right.” Drew backed away reluctantly. Then, standing up at full height, ready for instant action, he prepared to protect Johnny as best he might.

Johnny was out of the door and away like a shot. Not so fast, however, but that a dark, muffled figure followed him.

Reaching the first prostrate form, he uttered a low exclamation. It was a man. Apparently quite unconscious, he lay there, his face half buried in the snow. There was a curious odor about the place. Johnny felt a faint dizziness in his head.

He stepped to the next figure. To his surprise and horror he saw it was Spider. He too lay motionless.

“Gas!” a voice said in his ear. “Can’t you see they’ve been gassed?”

He wheeled about to find himself staring in the face of the little French Canadian girl, Alice.

“You!” he murmured.

“Come out of it!” She dragged him away. “There is still some of that gas in the air.”

Johnny had got a little more of that gas than he thought. He did not lose consciousness, but he did have only a hazy notion of that which went on about him. It will always remain so—how the other members of the party came swarming out, how they found four members of the “Massacre Parade” prostrate on the snow, and Spider beside them on the ground with a broken arm—all this will always be a dream to Johnny. So too will be the story of how Drew and Tom went after the missing Iggy, who was not one of the four under the tree, and how they found him waiting in a high-powered car, and, having been fired upon, how they mowed him down with the very machine gun that had been loaded for the purpose of massacring women, men and girls alike.

The effect of the gas did not last more than twenty minutes. The words used by the four would-be savage massacre men when they found handcuffs on their wrists and clothes-line rope bound round their legs, were scarcely in keeping with the spirit of Christmas. It will not seem strange that no one cared.

As for Spider, he had some explaining to do. When a doctor had set his broken arm and he had fully recovered from his share of the gas, he told a strange story.

He had caught a glimpse of someone dodging behind the old barn. Putting the whole thing together, he had decided that the men with machine guns would take their stand behind the giant cottonwood. Its thick base would offer perfect protection from bullets.

“I thought,” he went on, “if only I can beat them to the tree and climb it, with that gas bomb on my back, I’ll be in a position to put them all to sleep at once. There wasn’t a minute to lose, so, without saying anything, I made a dash for it.”

“But it’s twenty feet to the first branch!” Johnny protested. “How’d you make it?”

“The bark of that old tree,” said Spider with a smile, “is like the edge of inch-thick boards sticking out. Nothing easier than getting a grip and going up.”

“For you,” Johnny agreed. “But you were found on the ground,” he objected.

“Things didn’t go just right.” Spider indulged in a wry smile. “I got up the tree all right. They did their part, came and got under. Then I saw something I hadn’t counted on—saw the tops of heads, yours and Alice’s by that window.

“Ten seconds more, and they’d have riddled you with bullets. Guess I got excited; must have moved. Anyway, one of ’em spotted me and fired.

“Bullet hit my arm. Lost my balance, and down I came, gas bomb and all. The bomb burst all right. And, well, you know the rest.”

“Alice!” Johnny was looking into the little Canadian’s eyes. He was thinking, “What if that machine gun had stuttered just once!”

When he realized that in the face of death Alice had followed him into the night, he wanted awfully to cry, then to seize the little Canadian and kiss her on both cheeks. Being a modest youth, he merely flushed and did neither the one nor the other, which was just as well, since Alice could understand blushes quite as readily as tears and other things.

CHAPTER XXV
THE WHISPERER TALKS

Routing out a farmer a half mile north of the Captain's old home, Drew Lane got the local sheriff on the wire and told him what had been done. An hour later the four prisoners were behind bars in the county jail, and Iggy the Snake, who had put an end to a half-score of useful men, was in the morgue.

The clock was striking midnight when Drew got Captain Burns on the wire.

"What luck?" he asked the Captain with a voice hard to control.

"Some luck, Drew," the Captain answered. "Tell you about it later. Thought I had something more. It went up like old St. Nick's reindeers, straight into thin air!"

"Drive out early in the morning." There was suppressed animation in Drew's tone. "We got some Christmas presents for you."

"Not what we been after?"

"The same."

"No—N-o-o!" The Captain fairly stuttered.

"All five. One tried, condemned and executed; four behind the bars.

"Turkey weighs twenty-five pounds." He changed his tone hastily. "It'll be stuffed with oysters and other things. You'll be out?"

"Before you're up," the Captain rumbled. "Merry Christmas!" He hung up.

"It *is* Christmas at that," Drew murmured after consulting his watch.

It was late when the stockings were filled that night. Is it any wonder that presents were sadly mixed, that Johnny received a powder-puff and Alice a bright and shiny toy pistol? But what did it matter?

The sun was high when the young people piled out of their bunks in the cold little bedrooms. Already the savory odors of a feast, of a turkey roasting, cranberries stewing, mince pie baking, was in the air. What did presents matter? A feast, and joyous and more peaceful times were just ahead.

The Captain did not keep his promise. He arrived at ten o'clock instead of at dawn.

"Had to wait for this young lady," he explained, helping Grace Krowl out of his car. "Wanted her to have a look at one of your friends," he chuckled. "No time to talk of crooks, but that man J. Templeton Semp, the dutiful house detective, is none other than Dapper Dan Drew in other circles, and Dapper Dan, as you know, is one of the men you have in jail.

"It often happens," he added when the surprise had subsided, "that men who are so very good at enforcing little unimportant regulations, such as the J. Templeton Semp Black List, are very bad in other ways.

"But wait!" the Captain exclaimed. "I have still another guest." He gave Joyce Mills a strange look, then he roared:

"Old Man, come out!"

Out stepped Newton Mills. Like a flash, his daughter was in his arms.

"And might I add," said Grace Krowl, "that he is also the mysterious Whisperer of the air!"

"That," said the Captain, "calls for a lot of explaining. Suppose we retire to the parlor?"

"There's really nothing very mysterious about that whisper business," said Newton Mills when they were all gathered about the fire. "I became interested in something they call narrow-casting. It's one of the uses of the electric eye. You really talk down a beam of light."

“Talk down a beam of light!” someone exclaimed.

“Surely.” He smiled. “It’s really very simple. You talk into a microphone. An instrument takes up the sound impulses of your voice and changes them to light impulses. These impulses may be sent down a beam of light a mile, ten, twenty, thirty miles. How far? No one knows.

“A very special reflector catches those light impulses. A mechanism containing an electric eye changes those light impulses back into sound impulses. And then you hear my voice thirty miles away.

“The wonderful part is, Captain—” He leaned forward eagerly. “Only a person with the proper mechanism in the line of that ray of light can hear them! Think of being able to sit in my high tower and send secret messages to a score of my fellow detectives, and never a crook listening in! I tell you it is going to be a great thing for crime hunters in the future!”

“Do you know,” Johnny asked, “that you in your high tower came near being the end of this young giant?” He nodded toward Spider.

Newton Mills stared in surprise. Then he said, dryly, “A caller should send in his card.”

“But how was it you could see me as well as speak to me?” Grace Krowl asked.

“Television.” Newton Mills smiled afresh. “I’d had a set installed in that room. It’s a rather crude set. But you can see a person well enough to recognize him even now.”

“And that must have been why I could see Iggy the Snake and the stolen bonds back there in the ‘House of Magic,’” Johnny put in.

“Probably was,” Newton Mills agreed.

“Speaking of those bonds,” said Captain Burns, “last night I recovered all but a few of them. Great luck! Fine Christmas present for that closed bank!”

“And for the depositors,” Drew Lane added.

“And now,” said Madame LeClare, appearing in the doorway, “soup’s on!”

“On with the feast!” cried the Captain.

A moment later they were all seated about a broad table that groaned under its weight of good things to eat.

Bowing their heads, they sang their grace before meat.

“Peace on earth, good will toward men!” the Captain rumbled.

“If only the men of this earth had good will toward one another, we could throw away our sticks and guns and come to a peaceful spot like this to live all our days.”

It was a very merry time they had in the Captain’s boyhood home that Christmas day and a joyous journey they made back to the city. And why not? Had they not been sentenced to death by their enemies and the enemies of all honest men, and had they not escaped and triumphed?

Next day Johnny returned to the “House of Magic.” He found, however, that much of its charm had gone with the solving of its many mysteries.

“Yes. It was television that made it possible for you to see your friend Iggy and the stolen bonds,” Felix admitted freely enough. “It is very imperfect at present. The time will come, however, when you will be able to look in upon wrongdoers from some spot miles away, and perhaps,” he added with a chuckle, “we will be able to look right through walls of cement, stone or steel. Who dares say we won’t?

“I suppose,” he went on a moment later, “you’d like to know what we were about in that balloon when the long one and the short one, who beyond doubt were Iggy and one of his pals, cut us loose in that balloon. We were about to talk down a beam of light. Shortly after that I made the acquaintance of Newton Mills. He told me he had been working on that. We arranged to complete the experiment from the Sky Ride tower. He swore me to secrecy—so you see I couldn’t well take you in on it.”

“Well,” yawned Johnny, “looks as if it were going to be a trifle dull around here for a time.”

“Might be and might not,” the inventor’s son grinned. “Father is working on

some marvelous things. Don’t go far from here without leaving your address. We may need you.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” Johnny agreed.

Unfortunately the peace and good will the brave Captain spoke of over the Christmas feast in his old home does not yet exist. The world is still at war with itself. Because of this we are likely to have more to tell our young adventurers in the near future. If this proves true, you will find it recorded in a book called *Wings of Mystery*.

Transcriber's Note

- Copyright notice provided as in the original printed text—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Obvious typographical errors were corrected without comment.
- Variant spellings and dialect were left unchanged.

*** START: FULL LICENSE ***
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg-tm License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or

PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to

anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or

distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or

corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to

this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the

Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

For additional contact information:
Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any

statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.