PANTHER EYE

Roy J. Snell

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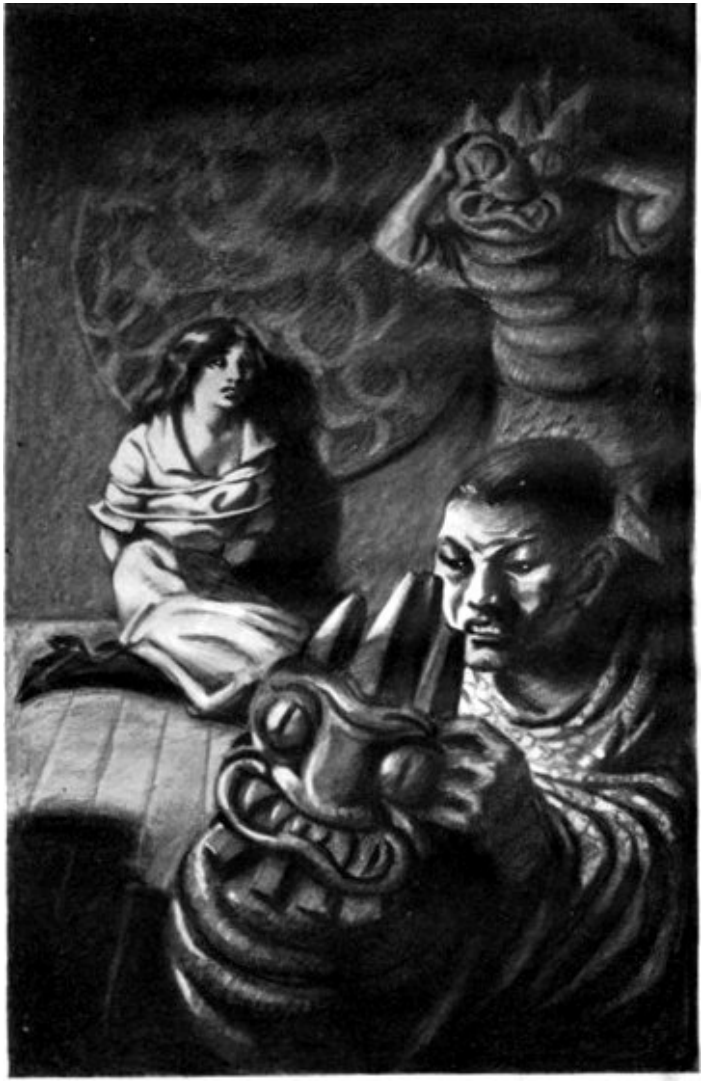
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Mystery Stories for Boys

Panther Eye



“She’s tied. There’s terror in her eyes....”

Mystery Stories for Boys

Panther Eye

By
ROY J. SNELL



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Panther Eye

CONTENTS

CHAPTER
I A Mysterious Death
II "Fifteen Men on the Dead Man's Chest"

III A Fight in the Night
IV Chukche Treachery
V The Big Cat
VI In the Grip of Terror
VII The Mystery of Mine No. 1
VIII Three Men Disappear
IX Startling Perils
X Playing a Lone Hand
XI Dangling in Mid Air
XII The Russian Dagger
XIII Cio-Cio-San
XIV Nearing the City of Gold
XV Trapped
XVI The City Of Gold
XVII Kidnapped
XVIII Under Machine-Gun Fire
XIX Johnny Goes Into Action
XX Some Mysteries Uncovered

PANTHER EYE

CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH

“He is dead!”

Johnny Thompson felt the grip of the speaker's hand on his arm and started involuntarily. How could this strange fellow know that Frank Langlois was dead—if he was dead? And was he? They were surrounded by inky blackness. It was the thick darkness of a subterranean cavern, a mine. This was a gold mine. Three minutes ago their electric torch had flickered out and they had been unable to make it flash again.

"C'mon," said the other man, "Pant," as the laborers called him, "we don't need that thing."

To his utter astonishment, Johnny had felt himself urged forward by this Pant with the easy, steady, forward march of one who is certain of every step. Twice they had turned to avoid mine-props. They had gone back into the mine perhaps a hundred feet. Now, with not a spark of light shining out of the gloom, they had paused and his companion had uttered those three words:

"He is dead."

Was the man they had come to seek really dead? If he was, who had killed him? How did Pant know he was dead? Surely in that Egyptian midnight no man could see.

As Johnny threw an involuntary glance to the spot where Pant's face should be, he gasped. Had he caught a yellow glow from one eye of the man? He could not be sure about it, for at that instant the electric torch flashed on again as suddenly as it had gone out.

Johnny's eyes followed the yellow circle of light. Then with a low exclamation he sprang forward. There, not ten feet before them, lay the form of Frank Langlois. To all appearances he was dead. Again through Johnny's mind there flashed the

telegraphic questions:

“Who killed him? How did Pant know?”

Thrusting the torch into Johnny’s hand, his companion leaped forward and, with a cat-like motion, dropped down beside the prostrate form. Tearing away at jacket and shirt, he bared the breast and placed his ear close down upon the cold flesh.

“Dead all right,” he sighed at last. “Wonder what killed him?”

He still crouched there, as a cat crouches beside its kill. As if he searched for the answer to his last question, his eyes roved about the floor.

This moment of silence gave Johnny time to study Pant, to recall what he really knew about him.

He was a strange chap, this Pant. He never bunked with the other laborers of the outfit, but had a private little pup-tent affair that he had made of long-haired deer skin and canvas. In this he slept. He was slight of build but wiry. Possessed of a peculiar supple strength and agility, he easily surpassed other men of greater weight in everything he undertook, both of labor and sport. One queer thing about him was that he always wore a pair of glasses with smoked lenses of such large proportions that they hid his eyes completely; he was never without them. One more thing, he always wore the Eskimo cut of garments; in cold weather, deer skin; in warm weather and at work, blue drill; but always that middy-styled cloak with the hood attached. And the hood was never off his head, at least not in waking hours. He had dressed that way even in Seattle, where Johnny had signed him up to join his outfit on this perilously uncertain search for gold in the Seven Mines which were supposed to exist in Arctic Siberia,

at the mouth of the Anadir River across from Alaska.

And yet, with all this strange dress, the man was not an Eskimo. Johnny knew that from the looks of him and from his talk. Indeed, in a burst of frankness, the man had once told him that when very young he had been picked up in New York by some orphan asylum and sent west to be raised by a rancher; that he had soon run away from his foster home and had, since that time, lived by his wits, sometimes in western cities, sometimes in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains. He had made three trips to foreign countries and yet, as nearly as he himself could calculate, he was not now more than nineteen, a mere boy, but certainly a most mysterious one.

Johnny's mind took up the problems of the new enterprise upon which he was entering. How would this tragedy affect his work and, most of all, the minds of his men?

Johnny, as you will remember from reading "Triple Spies," the first book of his thrilling adventures, had been in this vast, silent, and mysterious land of snow before. He had traveled over three thousand miles of it and had experienced many a strange adventure. Not least of these was the rediscovery of the Seven Mines of Siberia. These mines had first been discovered by an American prospector who, having crossed Bering Strait one summer with natives in their skin boats, had explored the Arctic Siberian rivers. He believed that there was an abundance of the precious yellow metal on the Kamchatkan Peninsula, just as there was in its twin peninsula, Alaska. In this he had not been disappointed. But when it came to mining this gold, many problems arose. Chief among these was the fact that the land belonged to the Russian Czar, from whom a

concession must be secured.

He had, at last, sold his secret to the Big Five of Chicago, five of the world's richest men. These men had secured the needed concession and had shipped large quantities of mining machinery and coal to the mouth of the river when the Czar's government suddenly went to smash. Everything was dropped for the time being and there matters stood when Johnny had come upon the mines. Some of them were well opened up for operation, but the machinery lay rusting in the sheds.

When he had made his way back to Chicago, about six months previous to the opening of our story, he had had serious matters to attend to, matters which were vital to the very foundations of his Government. After these had been settled and the Big Five, having learned that Hanada, Johnny's Japanese friend and school mate, who had made the entire Siberian journey with him and had previously worked in the Seven Mines, had been killed by a mysterious shot, fired from the depths of Chicago River, they turned to Johnny, as the one who could best aid them in solving the knotty problem of working the Seven Mines.

Johnny, with his long experience as a soldier in eastern Russia, was able to tell them frankly that there would be practically no chance of obtaining a concession of any value from the uncertain government that existed in that region.

They had called in their lawyers, who advised that they proceed to work the mines on the old concession, given them by the Czar. "The concession," they explained, "does not expire until January, 1925. That being the case, it still holds good, even though the government has changed

hands, just as a lease to bore for oil on a certain farm would hold good even though the farm changed hands."

"Yes," the rich representatives of the Big Five had smiled, "but there is a royalty of 25 per cent which was to have been paid to the Czar. Now it should go to the people. But how? To whom should this now be paid?"

At this juncture, Johnny had one of his occasional inspirations.

"Leave that to me," he had exclaimed. "Make me foreman of the enterprise and every ounce and penny's worth of that royalty will go to relieve the sufferings of those freezing, starving, and naked refugees I saw pouring into Vladivostok from the interior by tens of thousands. You appoint one person and send that person over to assist the Red Cross in distributing the benefits and I will get the gold down to them, never fear."

"Good!" one of the rich men had exclaimed.

"And, just to show you we're with you, we'll make it 35 per cent."

Now, Johnny remembered all of that. He remembered too how he had picked his miners, and his crew for the big gasoline schooner which was to bring them to the scene of their labors, and his two air men who were to man their emergency transportation—an airplane. He remembered with what high hopes he had landed on those bleak shores and had taken up the task of making his men comfortable for the long winter. Only yesterday the housing work had been completed, and to-day, while the other laborers were going over the rusted machinery, he had sent his best man, Langlois, into

the most promising looking mine to discover the conditions there. The man had not returned. After four hours of waiting, he had called to Pant, and together they had entered the mine. They had found that death had already broken through their guard.

“Let him lie as he is,” Johnny said to his companion. “We will bring in the doctor and two other men. This is a land without law. There will be no coroner’s inquest. That is all the more reason why we must be careful to avoid all appearance of foul play. When men are ‘on their own’ everything must be done in the open.”

Before turning toward the mouth of the mine, he cast one sweeping glance about the place. Beyond the body there was a pool of water. It was evident that a warm spring must enter the place near this shallow pool, for the walls on all sides were white with frost. In the middle of this pool, driven into the earth was a pick. It was rusty and its handle was slimy with dampness. Close to the end of the handle were the marks of a man’s fingers where his firm grip had ground off particles of the black rot. It seemed evident that the pick had lain on the floor of the mine, that Langlois had taken it up and driven it into the earth which had been softened by the water. Then death must have come, for he lay not three feet from the handle of the pick.

“Dead,” Johnny whispered to himself as he turned away, “but how?”

Half way to the entrance, Johnny paused, put his hand on his companion’s arm, then stood in the attitude of listening. He seemed to feel rather than hear an almost undetectable shudder that set the air about them and the rock beneath their feet to vibrating.

“What is it?” whispered Johnny.

“I don’t know,” said his companion, and there was a noticeable tremor in his voice.

They were destined to feel that earth-tremble many times before they solved the mystery of the mine.

CHAPTER II

“FIFTEEN MEN ON THE DEAD MAN’S CHEST”

The two men who, with the young doctor, accompanied Johnny and Pant back to the mine were old friends of other days, David Tower and Jarvis, one-time skipper and engineer of the submarine in that remarkable race beneath the ice and through the air told about in our second book, “Lost in the Air.” Like all worthy seamen, they had found that money “burned holes in their pockets,” and before six months had passed their share of the prize money had dwindled to such a meager sum that the fitting out of a private expedition to go north in search of the fabled City of Gold, the gleam of whose domes they had glimpsed, was not to be thought of. When, therefore, they had discovered that men were being signed for a trip to Arctic Russia with the well-known feather-weight champion boxer, Johnny Thompson, at its head, they hastened to put

their names on the “dotted line.” And here they were, two of Johnny’s most valued men.

Both worked hard at the labor entrusted to them. But ever and again, as he straightened up to ease his cramped back, Jarvis would whisper to Dave:

“It’s all right this ’ere Seven Mines, but, man, think how rich we’ll be when we git to that City of Gold. I ’ates to think how rich we’ll be. We’ll buy reindeer or dogs from the bloody, bloomin’ ’eathen and we’ll trim our sails for the nor’west when this hexpedition’s blowed up and gone.”

Dave had always smiled and hoped.

But now, there lay before them a sad task. One of their comrades, a fine young college fellow with all of life before him, had been “bumped off.” It was their duty to determine, if possible, who was responsible for this tragedy, and, if occasion seemed to warrant, to avenge it.

With bowed heads, they stood beside the quiet form while the young doctor went about his examination.

For fully ten minutes the mine was silent as a grave. Only the faint drip, drip, drip of water from the warm spring and the almost inaudible tremble-mumble of the throbbing earth disturbed the deathlike stillness.

At last the doctor straightened up with a sigh.

“Not a scratch on his body,” he announced, “not a sign of anything.”

“Heart disease?” suggested Johnny.

“Impossible. I was particularly careful to see that every man of the expedition had a good strong heart. Low temperatures are hard on bad hearts. Langlois

was exceptionally well equipped in this matter. Indeed, he told me that he had climbed Mount Evans in Colorado last summer, fourteen thousand and two hundred feet, without a murmur from his heart. Couldn't be that."

"Poison?" suggested Johnny.

"Not a sign of that either. Of course, to be sure of that, one must make a post-mortem examination. Let's get him out of this damp, black hole."

They were soon moving out of the dark and forbidding interior of the mine toward the welcome sunlight that flooded the entrance.

As they approached this entrance, the unreliable flashlight flickered out for a second, and, in that second, Johnny experienced a distinct shock. Again, it seemed to him that he caught the gleam of a round, yellow ball of light, such as one sees when looking toward a cat in the dark. When the light flashed on, Pant had moved, but Johnny concluded that he might easily have been standing where the ball of light had shown.

As he prepared to leave the mine, Johnny paused for a moment, trying to sense once more that strange earth shudder. It seemed to him that it was less distinct here than it had been further back in the mine. But of this he could not be sure. It might easily be that the slight sounds and the sensations of light and air here dulled his sensibilities, making it harder for him to catch the shudder.

The post-mortem revealed no signs of poison. They buried Langlois the next day in the grave that had been picked and blasted out of the solidly frozen earth of the hillside looking over the ice-blocked sea.

It was a solemn but picturesque scene that struck Johnny's eye as he neared the grave. Before him stood his comrades with bowed and uncovered heads. In the distance stretched the unmeasured expanse of the ice-whitened sea. Beyond, on the other side, lay the equally unmeasured expanse of snow-whitened land. Far in the distance stretched the endless chain of mountains, which to-day seemed to smoke with the snow blown a quarter mile above their summits. In the foreground, not a hundred yards away, was a group of perhaps fifty people. These were Chukches, natives, very like the Eskimos of Alaska. They had come to witness from afar the strange scene of the "alongmeet's" (white man's) burial.

The scene filled Johnny with a strange sense of awe. Yet, as he came nearer to the grave, he frowned. He had thought that all his men stood with uncovered heads. One did not. The man who had been the first to discover the dead man, Pant, stood with his fur hood tied tightly over his ears.

Johnny was about to rebuke him, but the word died on his lips. "Pshaw!" he whispered to himself, "there's trouble enough without starting a quarrel beside an open grave."

Jarvis, who was the oldest man of the group and had been brought up in the Church of England, read a Psalm and a prayer, then with husky voice repeated:

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust."

The hollow thump of frozen earth on the rude box coffin told that the ceremony was over.

One by one the men moved away, leaving only two behind to fill the grave.

Johnny strode off up the hill alone. He felt a great need to think. There was to be no more work that day. He would not be missed.

As he made his way slowly up the hill, his dark form stood out against the white background. Short, but square-shouldered and muscular, he fairly radiated his years of clean, vigorous living.

And Johnny Thompson was all that one might imagine him to be. A quiet, unobtrusive fellow, he seldom spoke except when he had something worth saying. Since childhood he had always been a leader among his fellows. Johnny was a good example to others, but no prude. He had played a fast quarter on the football team, and had won for himself early renown and many medals as a light weight, champion boxer. He never sought a quarrel, but, if occasion demanded it, Johnny went into action with a vim and rush that few men of twice his weight could withstand.

Now, however, his thoughts were far from pugilistic. He was thinking of the immediate past and the future. Every man in his crew was aware of the fact that 35 per cent of the output of these mines went to the homeless starving ones of the most hopelessly wrecked nation on the face of the earth. And though for the most part they were rough men, they had all worked with the cheerful persistence which only an unselfish motive can inspire. Langlois had not been the least among these. Now he was gone. Who would be next?

Every man in the crew knew the dangers they were facing. To the south were the anti-Bolshevik Russians, who, not understanding Johnny's claims and his motives, might, at any time, launch an expedition against them. To the southwest were the

radical Bolsheviki, who, obtaining knowledge of these rich deposits of gold, might start a land force across country to secure this much needed medium of exchange. Then there were the Chukches. Wild, superstitious tribes of spirit-worshipping people, they might come down from the north in thousands to wipe out this first white settlement established on their shores.

Johnny's men had known of all these perils and yet they had freely and gladly joined the expedition. His heart swelled with joy and pride at thought of the trust they had put in him.

Yet here was a new and unknown peril. The death of Langlois could not be fairly laid at the door of either Chukches or Russians. Could it be charged to some treacherous member of their own group? Johnny hated to think so, yet, how had it happened? Then, too, there was that strange earth-tremble; what caused that?

Already his men were growing superstitious in this silent, frozen land. He had heard them saying openly that they would not work in the mine where Langlois died. Ah, well, there were six other mines, some of them probably as rich. They could be worked. But was this peril to follow them into these? Was his whole expedition to be thwarted in the carrying out of its high purposes? Were the needy in great barren Russia to continue to freeze and starve? He hoped not.

As he rose to go, he saw a small dark object scurry over the snow. At first he thought it a raven. But at last, with a little circle, it appeared to flop over and to lie still, a dark spot on the snow.

Johnny approached it cautiously. As he came close,

his lips parted in an exclamation:

“A phonographic record!”

He looked quickly up the hill, then to the right and left. Not a person was in sight.

“Apparently from the sky,” he murmured.

But at that instant he caught himself. They had a phonograph in their outfit. This was doubtless one of their records. But how did it come out here?

As he picked it up and examined it closely, he knew at once that it was not one of their own, for it was a different size and had neither number nor label on it.

“Ho, well,” he sighed, “probably thrown away by some native. Take it down and try it out anyway. Might be a good one.”

At that, he began making his way down the hill.

He was nearly late to mess. Already the men were assembled around the long table and were helping themselves to “goldfish” and hot biscuits.

“Boys,” Johnny smiled, “I’ve been downtown and brought home a new record for the phonograph. We’ll hear it in the clubroom after mess.”

“What’s the name of it?” inquired Dave Tower, all interest at once, as, indeed, they all were.

“Don’t know,” said Johnny, “but I bet it’s a good one.”

Mess over, they adjourned to the “clubroom,” a large room, roughly but comfortably furnished with homemade easy chairs, benches and tables, and supplied with all the reading matter in camp.

Many pairs of curious eyes turned to the phonograph in the corner as Johnny, after winding the machine,

carefully placed the disk in position, adjusted the needle, and with a loud “A-hem!” started the machine in motion.

There followed the usual rattle and thump as the needle cleared its way to the record.

Every man sat bolt upright, ears and eyes strained, when from the woody throat came the notes of a clear voice:

“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest,
Yo—ho—ho, and a bottle of rum.
Fifteen men and the dark and damp,
My men ’tis better to shun.”

Again the machine appeared to clear its throat.

A smile played over the faces of the men. But again the voice sang:

“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest,
Yo—ho—ho, and a bottle of rum.
Fifteen men and the dark and damp,
My men ’tis better to shun.”

Again came a rattle. A puzzled expression passed over Johnny’s face. The same song was repeated over and over till the record was finished.

A hoarse laugh came from one corner. It died half finished. No one joined in the laugh. There was something uncanny about this record which had drifted in from nowhere with its song of pirate days and of death. Especially did it appear so, coming at such a time as this.

“Well, what do you make of it?” Johnny smiled queerly.

“It’s a spirit message!” exclaimed Jarvis, “I read as

’ow Sir Oliver Lodge ’as got messages from ’is departed ones through the medium of a slate. ’Oo’s to say spirits can’t talk on them wax records as well. It’s a message, a warnin’ to us in this ’ere day of death.”

Smiles followed but no laughing. In a land such as this, every man’s opinion is respected.

“More likely some whaler made a few private records of his own singing and gave this one to the natives,” suggested Dave Tower. “They’d take it for something to eat, but, when they tried boiling it and had no success, they’d throw it away. That’s probably what’s happened and here we have the record.”

“Anyway,” said the doctor, “if he’s a sailor, you’ll have to admit he had a very fine voice.”

There the matter was dropped. But Johnny took it up again before he slept. He could not help feeling that this was sent as a warning not from the spirit world, but from some living person. Who that person might be, he had no sort of notion. And the message gave no clue. He repeated it slowly to himself.

“What could you make out of that?” he mumbled.

Then he turned over in his deer-skin bag and went to sleep.

CHAPTER III

A FIGHT IN THE NIGHT

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest,
Yo—ho—ho, and a bottle of rum.
Fifteen men and the dark and damp,
My men 'tis better to shun."

For the fiftieth time Johnny heard those words ground out by the record that had rolled down the hill to meet him. Fifty times he had searched in vain for its meaning. For that it was not chance that had sent it rolling to his feet, but purpose, the mysterious purpose of an unknown some one, he was certain.

If the man had something to say to him, why did he not say it? Why veil his meaning in an apparently senseless song? It was getting on his nerves.

He sprang to his feet and began pacing the floor. For the first time since the record came into his hands, he had an idea. Somewhere, he had read part of that song, perhaps all. But where? He could not think.

He came to a stand beside Dave Tower, who was reading.

"Dave," he exclaimed, "part of that song, or all of it, is printed in a book. What book is it?"

"Your memory's poor," grinned Dave, "'Treasure Island,' of course—only the first two lines, though. It's the song the old one-legged pirate used to sing."

"Sure," smiled Johnny.

Turning, he left the room.

In a moment he had his parka down over his head and was out in the open air. He wanted to think.

The yellow light of the moon was cut here and there

by dark purple shadows of the night. Not a breath stirred. He walked slowly up the hill, watching the golden streamers of the northern lights streaking across the sky. It was a perfect night. And yet, it was to be marred all too soon.

"Fifteen men and the dark and damp,
My men 'tis better to shun."

Johnny repeated the last two lines of the song. So these were the words the mysterious singer had improvised to sing with those which were well known by every live American boy. What could he mean? Why had he sung them?

Suddenly it all seemed clear to him; the man was being watched and dared not do a thing openly. He wished to send them a warning. This was his only way. And the warning was doubtless to tell them to stay away from the death trap where Frank Langlois had perished.

"Well," Johnny exclaimed, as if addressing the person who had sent the message, "if that's all there is to it, we've already complied with your wish."

He turned and looked back down the hill. A few hundred yards away a hole yawned in the hard crusted snow. Twenty yards from this was a cone of black earth twice the height of a man. This was their pile of pay dirt. For five days now, they had been working on the second mine of the seven. The pay dirt they had struck was not as rich as they hoped to find, but it would repay the labor of sluicing. It was growing richer each hour. They hoped in time to uncover the mother-lode. This would pay for panning and yield a rich reward.

It was placer mining. Beside the mine entrance stood

a steam thawer, a coal-heated boiler such as is used for driving a sawmill or grist-mill engine. From this a wire-wound hose extended into the interior of the mine. The mine was fifteen feet underground, but even here the earth was frozen solid. Attached to the hose was a sharp pointed iron pipe. This pipe was perforated in hundreds of places. When it was driven into the earth and the steam turned on, it thawed the flinty soil and rendered it pliable to the pick and shovel.

“Yes,” Johnny heaved a sigh of satisfaction, “yes, sometime, perhaps in two or three months, we will send by reliable reindeer carriers our first gift of gold to the orphans of Russia.”

He made his way up the hill to the point where he had found the phonographic record, for he was curious to know the lay of the land above that point. He wanted to know where this strange person had been hiding when he set the disk rolling.

“It’s strange, mighty strange,” he whispered, as he looked up at the cliffs which towered skyward some three hundred yards above the spot where he stood.

Then suddenly he stopped short. Had he seen a dark shadow flit from one little ridge to another? The surface of the hill was very uneven. He could not tell.

At first he was inclined to turn back. But he had started for the rocky cliff and he was not given to turning back. He went on.

As he moved forward, his thoughts were again of that strange fellow who had made the record on the disk.

“Couldn’t be a native” he murmured. “No native has a voice like that. If it’s a strange white man, why

doesn't he join us? Perhaps—" He stopped short in his tracks. "Perhaps it's one of our own number. Perhaps it's Pant. He's queer enough to do or be anything."

His mind hung on that last word—anything. Yes, he might not be a man at all. Might be a girl. Why always that hood drawn tight? Why the goggles? And, being a girl, she might be more than an adventuress. Possibly she was a radical, a Russian spy, who had joined his crew to thwart his purposes. Who could tell?

"Humph!" he shook himself free from these reflections. "Lot of chance of all that being true. There's witchery in this moonlight. And yet, stranger things have happened. Whatever you say, Pant's a devil. Who else could see in the dark?"

He was standing almost directly beneath the rocky cliff. Suddenly with the quickness of thought, a small brown figure sprang at him. Then another and another.

Right at his face sprang the first one. Not one nor two of these could be too quick for Johnny. Like a shot his right arm curved out. With a screaming shudder the man leaped in air and went crashing down the hill. The second, seized by his fragile squirrel-skin parka, tore himself away. The third landed upon Johnny's back. Like an infuriated bucking bronco, Johnny went over on his back, crushing the wind out of the fellow on the hard packed snow. But the second man, dressed now in a garment of crimson hue, which he had worn under his parka, was upon Johnny's chest. His arm was entwined in Johnny's left in a jujutsu hold. His hand flashed to the white boy's chin. With such a hold even a small man could do much. The man pinioned

beneath, having regained his breath, added his strength to the other in holding his adversary flat to the snow. Johnny dug his left elbow into this one's face, while his right arm turned beneath the arm of the man on his chest and reached a position of half-nelson behind the man's head. He was now in a position to break this assailant's neck. Bones snapped as he applied the terrific muscles of his right arm and the brown man's muscles relaxed. Johnny's head and arms were free. With the speed of a wild-cat, he sprang to his feet, faced about, then, with a bounding leap, cleared the remaining assailant and went tobogganing down the hill. He had seen five others of the brown villains approaching. He had had enough for this night—more than enough.

The snow was hard packed; the descent for many yards was steep, and Johnny gained a momentum in his downward plunge that threatened disaster. Now he careened over a low ridge to shoot downward over a succession of rolling terraces. Now he slid along the trough of a bank of snow. One thought was comforting; he was escaping from those strange brown men. Shots had rung out. Bullets whizzed past him, one fairly burning his cheek. It was with a distinct sense of relief that he at last bumped over a sheer drop of six feet to a gentler incline where he was quite out of their sight.

By digging in his heels, he brought himself to a stop. Hardly had he done this than he sprang up and raced back up the hill to the last rocky ridge over which he had glided. From the top of this he might be able to see the men without himself being seen.

As he thrust his toe into a crack and braced his elbows, he peered up the snowy slope to the cliffs above. All was bathed in a glorious moonlight, but

not a creature stirred. He watched for fully five minutes with no result. When about to drop to the snow again, he thought he detected a movement to the left of where he had been looking. Fixing his eyes on that point, he watched. Yes, there it was; something was passing out from behind a rock. A gasp escaped his lips.

What appeared to be a gigantic golden coated cat had moved stealthily out upon the snow, and was gliding toward the upper cliffs.

“Whew!” Johnny wiped the cold perspiration from his brow. Still he stared.

The creature moved in a leisurely manner up the hill until it disappeared around the cliffs.

Johnny looked to the right and down the hill. The light of the clubroom was still burning. He beat a hasty retreat.

It was a surprised and startled group that looked him over as he appeared at the door, ragged, bruised and bloody. Eagerly they crowded about to hear his story.

When he had washed the blood from his face and drawn on clean shirt and trousers, he took a place by the open fire and told them—told them as only Johnny could.

“Well, what do you make of it?” He threw back his head and laughed a frank, boyish laugh, as he finished. “Some wild and woolly adventure, eh? Who were those little men? And what does it all mean?”

“Means the natives are getting superstitious about our effect on the spirits of their dead whales and are planning to treat us rough,” suggested Dave.

“Natives!” exploded Jarvis, “Them ain’t any natural ’eathen. Them’s ’eathen frum further down the sea. I ’ates to think what a ’ard lot they is. Dave and me’s seen a ’eap further north than this. ’E’s got spies everywhere, this ’eathen ’as.”

“Struck me a little that way too,” smiled Johnny. “That fellow I tore the clothes off was wearing silk undergarments. Show me the Chukche who wears any at all, let alone silk.”

“Sure!” exclaimed Jarvis.

“But if they’re around here, why don’t we see them?” objected one of the miners.

“The big cat’s ’ere. Johnny saw ’im,” scoffed Jarvis. “You ’aven’t seen ’im, ’ave you? All that’s about ain’t seen. Not by a ’ouse full.”

“What about the big cat?” exclaimed Johnny. “I thought I was seeing things.”

“E’s a Roosian tiger,” stated Jarvis. “I’ve seen the likes of ’im fur north of here.”

“To-morrow,” said Johnny, “we’ll take a day off for hunting. Big, yellow cats and little yellow men are not good neighbors unless they’ve agreed in advance to behave. Move we turn in. All in favor, go to bed.”

A moment later the clubroom was deserted.

CHAPTER IV

CHUKCHE TREACHERY

The proposed hunt for “big yellow cats and little yellow men” did not come off, at least not at the time appointed. Morning found the tundra, the hills, everything, blotted out by a blinding, whirling blizzard. It was such a storm as one experiences only in the Arctic. The snow, fine and hard as granulated sugar, was piled high against the cabin. The door was blocked. Exit could be had only through a window.

Dave Tower, in attempting to make his way to the storeroom to secure a fresh supply of canned milk and evaporated eggs, found himself hopelessly lost in the blinding snow clouds. Possessed of singular presence of mind, he settled himself in the lee of a snow bank and waited. In time, a pencil of yellow light came jabbing its way through the leaden darkness. His companions had formed themselves in a circle and, with flash lights blinking here and there, sought and found him. After that, they remained within doors until the storm had spent its fury.

It was a strange world they looked upon when, after three days, they ventured out once more. The snow was piled in ridges. Ten, fifteen, twenty feet high, these ridges extended down the hillsides and along the tundra. Through one of these, they tunneled to Mine No. 2, making an enclosed path to the mine from the cabin.

“From now on, let her blow,” laughed Johnny when the tunnel was finished; “our work will go on just the same.”

When the men were all back at work, Johnny

thought once more of the big yellow cat and the little yellow men. The storm had wiped out every trace of his struggle with the men and every track of the cat. But the native village? Might he not discover some trace of his assailants there? He resolved to visit the village. Since his men were all employed, he would go alone.

An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips as he rounded the point from which the rows of dome-like igloos could be seen. Where there had been nineteen or twenty homes, there were now sixty or seventy. What could this mean? Could it be that the men who had attacked him but a few days before were among these new arrivals? At first, he was tempted to turn back. But then there came the reflection that Nepossok, the old chief who made this his permanent home, was friendly to him. There would be little chance of treachery in the broad light of day.

He hurried on and walked down the snow-packed streets of a northern nomad village.

Reaching the old chief's tent, he threw back the flaps and entered. He was soon seated on the sleeping platform of the large igloo, with the chief sitting solemnly before him and his half naked children romping in one corner.

"Many Chukche," said Johnny.

"Il-a-hoite-Chukche. Too many! Too many," grumbled the old man.

Johnny waited for him to go on.

Twisting the string of his muckluck (skin boot), the old man continued: "What you think? Want'a dance and sing all a times these Chukche. No want'a hunt. No want'a fish. Quick come no cow-cow (no food).

Quick starve. What you think?"

"Perhaps they think they can live off the white man," suggested Johnny.

The old man shot him a sharp glance.

"Eh—eh," he grunted.

"But they can't," said Johnny firmly. "You tell 'em no can do. White man, plenty grub now. Many white men. Many months all a time work, no come open water. No come grub. Long time, no grub. See! You speak Chukche, this."

"Eh—eh," the old man grunted again. Then as a worried expression came over his face, "What you think? Twenty igloo mine. That one chief mine. Many igloos not mine. No can say mine. T'other chief say do. Then do. Not do, say mine. See? What you think?"

From the old chief's rather long speech, Johnny gathered that Nepossok was chief over only twenty of the families of the village; that the others were under another chief; that he could tell them to hunt and fish, to be prepared for a food scarcity later, but that they would do as they pleased about it.

Johnny left the igloo with a worried expression on his face. If these natives had moved to this village close beside them with the notion that they would be able to trade for or beg the food which he had stored in his warehouse, they were doomed to disappointment. And having been disappointed, doubtless they would become dangerous.

This last conclusion was verified as he went the rounds of the village peering into every igloo. There were rifles in each one of them, good ones too—high power hunting rifles for big game—lever action,

automatic. In every igloo he found men stretched out asleep, and this on a splendid day for hunting. They were but waiting for the night, which they would spend in wild singing, tom-tom drumming and naked dances.

Johnny did not find the people he had come to seek. In none of the igloos did he see a single person resembling, in the least degree, the little yellow men who had attacked him on the hill.

All this but confirmed his own opinion and that of Jarvis, that somewhere in these hills there was hiding away a company of Orientals, spies of their government, perhaps. But where could they be?

Johnny was not surprised, two days later, when, on coming out of his storeroom, he found a dark-faced and ugly Chukche looking in.

“Plenty cow-cow,” the man grimaced.

“Ti-ma-na” (enough), said Johnny.

“Wanchee sack flour mine.”

“No,” said Johnny, closing and locking the door.

The man departed with a sour look on his face. He returned within an hour. With him was a boy. Between them they carried the most perfectly preserved mastodon tusk Johnny had ever seen.

“Flour?” the man said, pointing to the tusk.

Johnny could not resist the temptation to barter for the tusk. He yielded. The man carried his flour away in triumph.

After that, not a day passed but a half score or more of the natives came sneaking about the cabin, the storeroom, and the mine, begging for food.

As the days wore on, as famine came poking his skeleton form into the igloos of the improvident natives, the condition became truly serious.

Johnny dispatched a messenger inland to discover if it would be possible to obtain deer meat from the Reindeer Chukches living there. When he found that a few deer might be obtained, he began trading sparingly with the coast natives. They had little to trade, and the little he could spare would only postpone the disaster that seemed hanging over the camp like a cloud. The natives would not hunt or fish and each day found them growing more insolent and threatening.

This to the eager young miner was a great trial. Mining operations were going on splendidly. Mine No. 2 yielded a richer pay dirt each day. Indications were that in a very few days they would be mining the mother-lode from that digging and would be storing away pure gold in moose hide sacks, some to be sent to the men whose wealth had made the expedition possible and some to the orphans of Vladivostok.

It was at this time that the native with the dark and frowning visage came with the announcement that he had located some immense tusks of extinct monsters, a short distance inland. He begged Johnny to go with him to look at them and assured him that if they pleased him, they should be brought to the coast for barter.

“All right, come sun to-morrow, I go,” said Johnny.

“I better go along,” said Pant, when the native had left.

“Go if you want to,” said Johnny.

Next morning, just at dawn, the three men started on their quest for the ancient ivory.

The way led first up the frozen river bed, then over low-lying hills to a stretch of tundra. At the distant border of the tundra towered high cliffs, flanked by snow-blown mountains. Toward these they journeyed, tramping along in silence.

As they neared the cliffs, Johnny fancied that he saw some dark creatures moving among the rocks. The distance was too great for him to know whether they were human beings or animals.

It was with a creeping sense of danger and a feeling of thankfulness for Pant's companionship, that, after arriving at the cliffs, he found himself being led into a dark cave in a hill of limestone rock.

"U bogak ivory" (look, here is ivory). The native whispered the words as if afraid the extinct monsters would waken from the dead and demand their tusks.

He had lighted a single tallow candle which gave forth a sickly, flickering light.

The place seemed fairly spooky. Only the pit-pats of their footsteps wakened dull echoes through the vaulted cavern. Johnny could not help feeling that there were more than three men in this cave. In vain he strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the walls to right and left of him.

They had gone perhaps seventy-five paces into the darkness when there came a sudden indistinguishable sound. Johnny thought it like the dropping of a small rock, followed by a half suppressed exclamation. A chill crept up his spine.

They moved on a few paces. Again came a sound. This time it was like two steps taken in the dark. At

the same instant, fingers gripped his arm. He sprang into an attitude of defense.

“Stop,” came a whisper in his ear. “Place’s full of natives.” It was Pant. “When I knock the candle to the floor, you drop flat and crawl for the door.”

For a second Johnny stared in the dark at the place where Pant’s face should be. He caught again the puzzling gleam of yellow light.

“All right,” he breathed.

Ten seconds later, as the candle executed a spiral curve toward the floor and flickered out, Johnny dropped flat and began to crawl.

CHAPTER V

THE BIG CAT

Hardly had Johnny and Pant disappeared over the hill that morning in their quest for the supposed old ivory of rare value, when things began to happen in the neighborhood of the camp. Dave Tower and Jarvis had been detailed to inspect Mine No. 3, with a view to opening it as soon as the mother-lode had been reached in No. 2. Armed with pick and shovel, they had crossed the first low ridge, which made a short cut across the bend of the river, when Jarvis suddenly whispered:

"Hist! Down! The cat!"

Dave dropped to his knees, eyes popping at the sight just before him. Not twenty yards from them was a huge tiger. With head up, tail lashing, he seemed contemplating a leap which might bring him over a third of the distance between them. Two more leaps, and then what? Dave's hair prickled at the roots; a chill ran down his spine; cold perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"If only we had a gun," he whispered.

"Keep yer eye on 'im," the Englishman whispered. "Don't flinch nor turn a 'air. 'E's a bad un."

For fully three minutes—it seemed hours to Dave—the great cat lay spread flat to the snow. Then a nervous twitch of his paws told that he was disturbed. Dave's hands grasped the pick-handle until it seemed they would crush it to splinters.

But what was this? The creature turned his head and looked to the right.

In another second they saw what the tiger saw. A clumsy, ponderous polar bear, making her way inland to some rocky cavern for a sleep, had blundered upon them.

"Ship ahoy!" breathed Jarvis. "Twelve feet long, if she's an inch, and a bob for a tail at that."

"Look!" whispered Dave. "She has her cub with her."

"And the cat sees 'er. 'Oly mackerel, wot a scrap."

When Johnny Thompson dropped on hands and knees in the cavern after the Eskimo's candle had flickered out, he felt his arm seized by the twitching fingers of Pant, and, half by his own effort, half by the insistent drag of his companion, who seemed to

be quite at home in this dungeon-like darkness, he made his way rapidly toward the door.

Complete darkness appeared to have demoralized the forces of evil that had been arrayed against them. Soft-padded footsteps could be heard here and there, but these persons seemed to be hurrying like frightened bats to a place of hiding. Twice they were stumbled upon by some one fleeing.

Johnny's mind worked rapidly.

"Pant," he breathed, "if they strike a light and hold it, we're lost!"

"Got your automatic?"

"Sure."

"Take time to get hold of it."

"Got it."

"Shoot at the first flash of light. That'll fix 'em. They're cowards. All natives are." Pant jerked out the sentences as he crawled rapidly.

They were none too soon. In another moment a match flared. Seemingly in the same instant, so quick was Johnny's movement, a blinding flash leaped from the floor and a deafening roar tore the tomb-like silence.

Johnny had fired at the ceiling, but this was quite enough. The light flared out. There was no more lighting of matches.

Creeping stealthily forward, avoiding the overturning of the smallest stone or bit of shale which might betray their position, they soon neared the entrance.

"Gotta make a run for it," breathed Pant. "Automatic ready?"

"Ready."

"Give 'em three rounds, then beat it. Make a dash to the right the instant you're outside. Ready?"

Johnny felt the hand on his arm tremble for an instant, then grip hard.

When the great, white bear and her cub came upon the scene on that snow-domed hill where Jarvis and Dave cowered before the tiger, the point of interest for the tiger was at once shifted to the fat and rollicking cub. Here was a juicy feast. And to the great cat, inexperienced as he must have been in the ways of the creatures of the very far north into which he had wandered, the cumbersome mother seemed a rather insignificant barrier to keep him from his feast. One spring, a set of those vicious yellow teeth, a dash away, with the ponderous mother following at a snail's pace—that seemed easy. He carefully estimated the short distance between them.

But if these were the sensations that registered themselves on the brain cells of this tawny creature, he had reckoned wrong.

He had made just two springs when the mother bear right about faced and, nosing her cub to a position behind her, stood at bay.

Seeing this, the tiger paused. Lashing his tail and crouching for a spring, he uttered a low growl of defiance.

The bear's answer to this was a strange sound like the hissing of a goose. She held her ground.

Then, seeing that the cat did not spring again, she wheeled about and began pushing the cub slowly before her.

“Will ’e get ’im?” whispered Jarvis.

“Don’t know,” answered Dave. “If I had a rifle, he wouldn’t. Whew! What a robe that yellow pelt would make! Just prime, too!”

Lashing his tail more furiously than before, the tiger sprang. Now he was within thirty feet of the bear, now twenty, now ten. It seemed that the next spring would bring him to his goal.

But here he paused. The mother was between him and his dinner. He circled. The bear circled clumsily. The cub was always behind her. The tiger stood still. The bear moved slowly backward, still pushing her cub. Again the tiger sprang. This time he was but eight feet distant. He growled. The bear hissed. The crisis had come.

With a sudden whirl to one side, the cat sprang with claws drawn and paws extended. It was clear that he had hoped to outflank the bear. In this he failed. A great forepaw of the bear swung over the tiger’s head, making the air sing.

She nipped at the yellow fur with her ivory teeth. Here, too, she was too late; the tiger had leaped away.

The tiger turned. There were flecks of white at the corners of his mouth. His tail whipped furiously. With a wild snarl, he threw himself at the mother bear’s throat. It was a desperate chance, but for a second it seemed that those terrible fangs would find their place; and, once they were set there, once the knife-like claws tore at the vitals of the bear, all would be over. Then he would have a feast of good young bear.

At the very instant when all this seemed

accomplished, when Jarvis breathed hoarsely, “Ah!” and Dave panted, “Oh!”, there came a sound as of a five-hundred-pound pile-driver descending upon a bale of hay.

Like a giant plaything seized by a cyclone, the tiger whirled to the right twelve feet away, then rolled limply over and over.

“Ee! She packs a wallop!” breathed Jarvis.

“Is he dead?” said Dave.

The bear moved close to the limp form of her enemy and sniffed the air.

“Looks like she got ’im,” grinned Jarvis, straightening his cramped limbs.

For the first time the mother bear seemed to realize their presence, and, apparently scenting more danger, she began again pushing her cub before her, disappearing at last over the next low hill.

“Bully for ’er!” exclaimed Jarvis.

For some time they sat there on the crusted snow unable to believe that the tiger was dead, and unwilling to trust themselves too close to his keen claws and murderous fangs. Finally, Dave rose stiffly.

“Let’s have a look,” he muttered.

“Sure ’e’s done for?”

As they bent over the stiffening form of the great yellow cat, Jarvis gave the head a turn.

“Broke!” he muttered; “’is neck is broke short off! I say she packed a wallop!”

“And the skin’s ours!” exclaimed Dave joyously. “What a beauty! We’ll skin him before he freezes.”

Suiting his action to his words, he began the task. He had worked in silence for some time when he suddenly stood up with a start.

“What’s that?” he exclaimed.

“What’s what?”

“My knife struck metal—a chain about his neck!”

“Somebody’s pet!” exclaimed Jarvis, “and a bloomin’ fine one!” He bent over to examine the chain.

“But whose?” asked Dave.

“’Ere’s the tag. Take a look.”

“Looks oriental. Some numbers and letters. I can’t read them.”

“Sure,” grinned Jarvis. “Ain’t I been tellin’ y’? It’s the bloody bloomin’ ’eathen from the islands down the sea-coast. They’re ‘angin’ about ’ere. They’ll be lettin’ out a ’ole menagerie against us some fine day—elephants, lions, mebby a hyena or two, and who knows what?”

He stood and stared at Dave; Dave stared back at him.

As Johnny Thompson prepared for the dash out of the cave, where he and Pant were to have been trapped, he realized that it was a desperate move. Pant had seen only lances and harpoons. There were doubtless rifles in the natives’ hands as well. He knew very well their intentions: they feared him as a leader and, hoping to trap him here, had planned to end his life. One by one, they would pick off his men. At last there would be a rush and the remaining few would be killed. Then the supplies would be theirs. In this land without law, they had nothing to fear but the failure of their plans. If he could escape this one

time, he would be on his guard; he would protect himself and his men.

“C’mon,” Pant cried. “Three shots; then for it.”

Three times the automatic shook the walls of the cavern. Then they were away, out in the open breaking for cover among the boulders that lined the cliff.

Now they were dodging from rock to rock; now, for a second, Johnny saw the natives swarming from the cave like bees; now, they were hidden from sight; and now, he paused for an instant to send a bullet over the head of a runner who ran too well.

Soon they had lost themselves among the hills. Only once, in the five-mile run home, did a native appear on a hilltop. He beckoned, then disappeared.

After a time, when near camp, they slowed down to a walk.

“Pretty close,” smiled Johnny, slipping his gun into his pocket.

“I say,” murmured Pant, “do you think they were the same ones that attacked you back here on the hill a few nights ago?”

“No. Their work’s too crude. These others were real chaps.”

That night, after darkness had fallen over the hills, Johnny went into Mine No. 1 with a flashlight alone. Having reached a point where Langlois had been found dead, he sat down on a frozen ledge and stared at the rust-reddened pick-handle, which seemed to point an accusing finger at him for bringing that fine fellow here to meet his death. What had killed him? This was as much a mystery as ever.

There were many mysteries about this place; there was that earth-tremble that, to-night, was more noticeable than ever; there were those strange brown people who had attacked him on this very hill; there was the tiger slain that very day and skinned by Dave and Jarvis; there was the oriental chain and tag about the beast's neck. Johnny seemed surrounded by many mysteries and great dangers. Was it his duty to call the deal off and desert the mines? Sometimes he thought it was. Ice conditions were such that it might yet be possible to get their gasoline schooner into open water and go pop-popping south to Vladivostok. But there would be those there who waited and hoped for gold to aid them in the battle against hunger, disease and death. Could they go empty-handed?

Rumors of a new peril had drifted in that day. A Reindeer Chukche, coming from a five days' journey into the interior, had told of great numbers of Russians pushing toward the coast. These could be none other than Bolsheviki who hoped to gather wealth of one kind or another by a raid on the coast. If the Chukche was telling the truth, the stay of the white men could be prolonged by only a few days at the most.

At the same time, the mining crew had reported indications that they would reach the mother-lode in No. 2 within three days.

"We'll chance it that long," Johnny said, with an air of determination, as he rose and left the mine.

He was crossing a ridge of snow, when, as once before, his eye was caught by a spinning black object.

"Another phonograph record! Another warning!" he

exclaimed. “Wonder what it will be this time?”

Johnny whistled thoughtfully to himself, as he strode forward to pick up the little black messenger.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE GRIP OF TERROR

“Oh, there’s honey in the rock, my brother,
There’s honey in the rock for you.”

Johnny was listening to the second phonographic record. In high-pitched falsetto note the singer had repeated these words over and over. That was all. If the other message had seemed void of meaning, this one appeared doubly so, for here there were no improvised lines, only these two taken from a threadbare religious song. What could it mean?

Johnny did not puzzle over this long. There were too many other important matters to attend to. Dangers confronted them. He did not fear the natives for the present. But the Bolsheviki? If they were coming this way, then here indeed was peril enough.

“Dave,” he said, after a long period of musing by the fire, “I’m going to take the team of gray wolf-hounds with a two-day supply of food and go see what all this talk about Russians means. I won’t be in danger

of being followed by natives, for I shall start long before sunrise. I'd send the boys with the airplane, but the sight of the machine would give us dead away. I can probably obtain the information we need concerning their numbers, rate of travel and so on, and not be seen at all.

"I shall leave matters in your hands. Push the mining in No. 2 to the utmost and get the richest of the mother-lode panned as speedily as possible. A hundredweight of gold would mean much. Should I fail to return, and should conditions seem to warrant the abandoning of camp, send the plane out to look for me. If they fail to locate me, take no chances. Clear the ice with the schooner as quickly as you can. I shall be all right. I came to this place from Vladivostok once by reindeer, and went north to Bering Strait the same way. I can take care of myself."

"All right," said Dave, a trifle anxiously. "I'll do just as you say. Good luck, and may you come back."

They gripped hands for a second, then parted.

In the meantime, over in the corner, with a discarded shirt thrust into the horn of the phonograph as a muffler, Pant was playing that newly-found record over and over. A puzzled frown wrinkled his forehead above the goggles.

Presently he sat up straight, and, tearing the muffler away, started the machine. His hands trembled as he sank back in his chair, limp with excitement. He allowed the record to grind its way out to the very end, then he nodded his head and murmured:

"Yes, that's it, 'money in the rock.' *Money*, plenty of it."

When Johnny started out at four o'clock the next morning, he set his dogs zig-zagging back and forth to the land side of their cabin. He was hunting the invisible trail of the Reindeer Chukche who had come from the interior the day before. When once the dog-leader had come upon the scent of it, the team bounded straight away over the tundra.

The cabin soon faded from view. First came the frozen bed of the river, then a chain of low-lying hills, then broad stretches of tundra again, with, here and there, a narrow willow-lined stream twisting in and out between snow-banks. The steady pat-pat of his "mucklucks" (skin boots) carried him far that day, but brought him no sight of the reported Russians.

After a brief sleep, he was away again. He had traveled for eight hours more, when, upon skirting the edge of a long line of willows by a river's brink, he imagined he caught sight of a skulking figure on the further bank. He could not be sure of it. He pressed on, his dogs still trailing the reindeer sled. If they had come near the Russian camp, the trail would doubtless have made a direct turn to right or left of it to escape passing too closely. The Chukches avoided these Russians as merchant ships of old avoided a pirate bark. Contact with them meant loss of their reindeer, perhaps death as well.

So, confident in his false security, Johnny pushed on. But just as he was about to emerge from the river-bed, a dozen armed ruffians of the most vicious-looking type sprang from the willows.

"Whoa!"

Resistance was useless; Johnny stopped his team. He looked back and, to his disgust, he saw that their

camp was pitched on the other side of that long row of willows. These shrubs had been caught by the frost when their leaves were yet green. The leaves had not fallen off, and, even at this time of year, formed a perfect screen, a fact for which Johnny was later to be profoundly grateful.

In vain he attempted to play up in a friendly fashion to the Bolsheviki. They looked upon him as an enemy and a hostage, for, in the first place, did they not know that American soldiers had, for many months, guarded a section of the Trans-Siberian Railroad against their armies? And, in the second place, did not Johnny drive a splendid team of gray wolf-hounds, which would be of great service to them in their march to the coast? They did not understand how he came there. They asked him all manner of foolish questions, to which he gave quite as foolish answers, and, when this was at an end, they fitted a rusty pair of “bracelets” to his feet, and, thrusting him inside a vile-smelling tent, gave him vermin-infested blankets to sleep in and sour brown bread to eat.

“Here’s a pretty mess!” he stormed silently to himself. “There’s at least a hundred of them. They must travel slowly, but even so, four days will bring them to the coast; then, unless the unforeseen happens, it’s the ocean for our outfit, or perhaps worse than death. And if anything goes wrong, it’s all my fault because I failed to consider that this bunch would have moved forward from where the Chukche saw them. I only hope the boys find out in time.”

He listened for a while with aching heart to the wail of his dogs, who had been turned into their snowy beds without their supper, and, at last, from sheer exhaustion, he fell asleep.

Two days later he was led toward a peculiar square cabinet that had been set up in the snow. Beside it was a pile of glowing embers left from a fire of willows. The ten men who marched beside him were not armed. Since they pressed about him on all sides, cutting off all chance of his escape, no weapons were needed.

They had not told him what they meant to do. What the cabinet was, what the bed of coals meant, he could not even guess. Malignant grins gave the faces of the men a look that made his blood run cold. He had seen such an expression only once before, and that in the movies when Indians grinned at the prospect of burning an enemy at the stake.

He was soon inside the cabinet with one of his guards. This cabinet was divided into two compartments, each about four feet square. As soon as he entered one of these, he was told to remove all his clothing and was then handed a large, coarse towel. At this, he heaved a sigh of relief and even chuckled a little at his fright. He was merely being given a bath—a Russian steam-bath. He had heard of such baths, and was now thoroughly in favor of them.

“A bath is a bath,” he whispered to himself as he twisted the towel about his hips, “and a great luxury in this country.”

He was pushed into the other compartment. It was stinging cold out here. A second guard appeared with a great metal can filled with the glowing coals from the fire Johnny had seen outside. He set this down upon a small stand, the top of which was on a level with Johnny’s waist, and backed out. A third man appeared with a bucket of water and a huge gourd. Taking a position directly in front of the door, this

guard dipped a full gourd of water and poured it on the coals. Instantly a dense cloud of steam rose to the ceiling. This much steam, Johnny figured, would give one a comfortable bath. But at that moment, with a fiendish leer on his face, the man threw on another gourdful, then another. The door slammed and a bar thudded into place.

Immediately Johnny took in the full horror of his situation. He was to be steamed alive. Already the dense, white cloud was descending. Lower and lower it came. He crouched down to avoid it. In another moment, it would engulf him. No man could live in such a place.

His mind worked like chain-lightning. This cabinet? How was it fastened down? How strongly? His fingers felt for the lower edge of it. Working them down and under, he secured a hold. Then, with all his superb strength, he heaved away. Something snapped, but still the thing held firm. He heaved again. The touch of steam on his back lent him new power. Crack! Crack! Then the uprooted cabinet swayed a second and then crashed into three of the gaping spectators.

Johnny leaped forward. A burly fellow seized his arms. Using an old college trick, Johnny fell backward, taking the man with him. Then, with his foot on the other's stomach, he sent him whirling into two other men, and, before they could recover from their astonishment, Johnny went sprinting down the side of the long row of willows, which had proved his downfall two days before.

He was headed for home. No Russian, nor Russian dog-team, could catch him. But he was clad only in a towel, and there were many miles of snow between him and his friends.

Suddenly, from the rear, there came the ki-yi of dogs.

“Hounds!” he murmured in despair. “Unhitched from the sled. They’ll catch me. I can’t escape them.” He stared wildly to right and left as he ran, but saw no way of escape.

After Johnny Thompson had left camp in search of the Bolshevik band that eventful morning, he was no more than out of sight when a slight figure crept from a snow-buried pup tent to the right of the cabin and went gliding away up the hill in the moonlight. It was Pant. Rapidly he scaled the snow-packed hillside. Arriving at last at the foot of the rocky cliff, he began a minute examination of those cliffs. Once he climbed to a dizzy height by clinging to the crags. It was a cat-like feat which very few persons could perform, but he did it with consummate ease. At another time he dropped flat on his stomach and crept into a broad crevice between the rocks. He was gone for a long time, but finally appeared grimy with dirt and empty-handed.

“‘Money in the rock,’” he murmured. “‘Money in the rock for you.’”

Then, as if discouraged with his quest, he turned and started down the hill.

He had covered half the distance when something caught his eye. A black spot, the size of a baseball, had bounced mysteriously past him.

In a twinkling, he was away in mad pursuit. Slipping, sliding, bounding over the glistening surface, turning a somersault to land on his feet and race ahead, he very soon came up with the thing where it had lodged against a protruding flat rock.

His fingers grasped it eagerly. Here was a third

message from the unknown one. Perhaps this would explain all.

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERY OF MINE No. 1

When Johnny Thompson saw that the wolf-hounds were on his trail, though he was without weapons of any kind and practically destitute of clothing, he decided to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the Russians, then to turn upon the pack and sell his life dearly, if indeed it must be sold to a murderous pack of half wolves.

As he sped forward, through his mind there ran all manner of stories told round northern camp fires. The stories had to do with these same Russian wolf-hounds. A man had once picketed his dogs near him in a blizzard and, creeping into his sleeping bag, had slept so soundly throughout the night that he did not realize the drifting snow was burying him. He had awakened to struggle against the weight of snow but could not free himself. Months later, when the spring thaw had come, his bones had been found picked clean by his wolf-hounds. A child at Nome, Alaska, playing with his father's team, was scratched by one of them. The smell of blood had set them wild. They had attacked him, and before help could arrive had

torn him in pieces. These stories flooding his memory lent added speed to his stalwart limbs.

He ran three miles, four, five miles. But at each added mile, the yelp of the hounds came more distinctly to him. Now he could hear the loud flap as they sucked in their lolling tongues.

He was becoming fatigued. Soon he must turn and stand at bay. He looked to the right and left of him. A cutbank presented a steep perpendicular surface against which he might take his stand with the knowledge that they could not attack him from the rear.

“But shucks!” he half sobbed. “What’s the use? I’ll be frozen stiff before they get courage to attack me.”

To the cutbank he ran, then, turning, waited.

With rolling tongues, the dogs came hurrying up to form themselves into a circle, seven gaunt, gray wolf-hounds grinning at one naked boy.

Then Johnny, catching the humor of the situation, not only grinned back, but laughed outright, laughed long and loud. What he said when he had finished was:

“Bowsie, you old rascal, why didn’t you tell me it was you?”

It was his own team. Having been unhitched at the time, they had recognized the stride of their master and had deserted with him. It was indeed a joyous meeting.

There was, however, no time to be wasted. The bitter cold air made Johnny’s skin crinkle like parchment. His feet, in contact with the stinging snow, were freezing.

Two of the dogs still wore their seal-skin harnesses. These Johnny tore off of them and having broken the bindings, wound them in narrow strips about his feet, tying them firmly around his ankles.

So, with his feet protected from the cold, he took up the fifteen miles of homeward race, the seven dogs ki-yi-ing at his heels.

Five miles farther on, he came upon a cache built by some Reindeer Chukche. In this he found a suit of deer skin. It was old, dirty and too small, but he crowded into it gratefully. Then with knees exposed and arms swinging bare to the elbows he prepared for a more leisurely ten miles home. He was quite confident that the lazy and stolid Russians were not following.

Johnny was well within sight of the friendly hill that sheltered his cabin from the north wind, when, with a sudden gasp, he stopped and stared. Coming apparently out of the very heart of the hill, an immense brown object extended itself along the horizon and at last floated free in air.

To understand this strange phenomenon, we must know what had been happening at camp, and what Pant had been doing since finding the mysterious black bill.

The ball was covered with black paper. This much, Pant discovered at once. The rest he left to the seclusion of his pup tent and the light of a candle.

When at last he unwrapped the paper, he found nothing more than a film, a small, moving-picture film. This had been developed, dried, then rewound on a spool. The remainder of the inner contents of the ball was nothing but blank paper with never a scratch of writing upon it. When Pant had examined

each scrap carefully, he held the film to the light. There were pictures on it. As his keen eyes studied them, his expression changed from that of puzzled interest to intense surprise, almost of horror.

For a full half hour he sat there holding them close to the light, then far away; tipping them to one angle then another, mirroring them on the retina of his eye until nothing could efface them. Then, having rerolled and rewrapped them, he hid them away among his deer skins and turning over, fell asleep.

He was awake again by sunrise, and without pausing for breakfast went directly to the entrance of Mine No. 1. Having entered without a light, he made his way to the back of the cavity. There he paused to listen. The earth shudder seemed to fairly shake the rocks loose about him. One pebble did rattle to the floor. The next instant there came the clang of rocks on metal. A light flashed. It was in Pant's hand. In the gleaming circle of light from his electric torch, a brightly polished disk of metal appeared. It was eating its way through the frozen wall of sand and rock. One second the light flashed, the next second Pant was hurrying from the mine as if his life depended upon it.

Dashing down the hill, he broke into the mess-room where the men were assembled for hot-cakes and coffee.

"Arms! arms!" he panted. "Rifles, automatics, anything. A pick, two picks. C'mon."

The men, believing that he had gone mad, stood staring in speechless astonishment.

"C'mon, can't you?" he pleaded. "It's the yellow men, the dirty little yellow men. They've got an infernal machine for cutting out the pay dirt in blocks.

They've looted Mine No. 1 while we slept. That was the earth-tremble. C'mon, can't you? Bring rifles! Anything. We'll get them yet!"

Catching a glimmer of his meaning, the men dashed to the bunkroom and clubroom, to appear a moment later armed with such weapons as they could find.

Arriving at the entrance of Mine No. 1, Pant held up a finger for silence.

"Arms ready," he whispered, "your left hand on the shoulder of the man ahead of you. I'll lead."

Without a light, he entered the mine and beckoned the men to come on. With soft and shuffling tread they followed, like a chain gang entering a dungeon. They took fifty paces, then they halted. A light flashed. Instantly every man gripped his weapon.

It was only Pant. What they saw before them caused involuntary ejaculations. A hole some eighteen inches square had been cut in the frozen wall.

For a second they listened. The silence was so complete that the ticking of a watch sounded like the beat of an alarm clock.

"They've gone," whispered Pant. "C'mon."

His light blinked out. There followed the sound of garments rubbing against the walls. The man behind Pant felt him one instant, the next he was gone. He had crawled through the hole. There was nothing to do but follow. One by one, thrusting their rifles before them, they crawled through this narrow door from the mine. To what? They could not even guess.

"'Tis fair spooky," whispered Jarvis to Dave. "'Ow does 'e know 'ow 'e should go? Can 'e see in the dark? 'Ow'd 'e come by the name Pant anyway?"

"Langlois give it to him," Dave whispered back, "the fellow that was killed here, you know. He claimed Pant could see in the dark and began calling him 'Panther Eye.' The men cut it down to 'Panther,' then to 'Pant.' That's all I know about it."

"'E's rightly named," growled Jarvis, as he fumbled his way through the hole in the dark.

"This way," came the low whisper of Pant. "As you were, hand to shoulder."

Only the soft pat-pat of their footfalls on the floor of what appeared to be a narrow runway broke the tomb-like silence of the place. Now and again, as they moved forward, Dave Tower felt his shoulder brush some unseen object. Each time he shivered and shrank back. He expected at any moment to hear the roar of rifles, to find himself engaged in deadly combat with the mysterious robbers who had looted the mine of its treasure while they worked within a stone's throw of it.

Twice they paused. A silence so deep that it was painful ensued. No sound came. They marched solemnly on. And now, they had struck a steep incline.

"Down low; down low; down low," came whispered back from man to man.

They stooped to an almost creeping posture and began to climb. The ascent was steep as a stair. Twice Dave lost his footing, and once came near sending his rifle crashing to the frozen earth. Some one behind was less fortunate. There came the clang of steel, then deathly silence.

Again they crept upward. Suddenly a ray of light cut through the gloom. In another second, they were in a

veritable flood of light. And yet, as they glanced rapidly to right and left, they saw walls of rock. Above them too was a vaulted ceiling. Only before them was light. What could it mean?

In an instant they knew. Leaping toward the opening, they expressed their surprise in unchecked exclamations.

“A balloon! A balloon!”

It was true. It seemed to them, as they looked, that the whole side of the mountain had burst open and allowed a giant dirigible balloon to float out from its depth.

What had really happened was evident. These robbers, having located the rich mine and having no concession to mine it, had discovered this natural cave and had cut a channel from it to the place of the gold deposit. They had reached the point by balloon. Having deflated it, they had stowed it away in the cave and had blocked the entrance of the cave with snow. The next blizzard had defaced every sign of their presence. Doubtless there had been a small secret entrance to the cave which none of Johnny Thompson’s men had discovered.

“They’re gone!” exclaimed Dave.

“And I ’ates to think ’ow much gold they took with ’em,” mourned Jarvis.

“Quick, the airplane!” shouted Pant, turning to the two aviators. “There’s a machine gun on it. We’ll halt them yet. I better go with you. Some of the rest of you explore the interior here. They may not have taken the gold.”

Dave Tower snapped on his flashlight, and, after taking one more look at the giant black “sausage” in

the sky, turned to assist the others in the exploration of the looted mine. He had little hope of discovering the treasure, but he did want to see how they had accomplished the task.

One more question crowded its way to the front: “How had they killed Frank Langlois?”

CHAPTER VIII

THREE MEN DISAPPEAR

It was the dirigible balloon that Johnny Thompson saw as he rounded the point of the hill in his wild flight from the Bolshevik band.

With his dogs grouped about him, he stood and gazed at it in speechless astonishment. Where had it come from? What was its mission? Whither was it going? These and many other questions sped through his mind as the balloon rose lazily in air.

Scarcely a moment had passed when a sound arrested his attention. It was the thunder of a powerful gasoline engine. He guessed that it was the motor of his own airplane. He had not long to doubt, for in a second the machine came swooping into sight. It made directly toward the clumsy sausage. Lithe and bird-like it tore away after the balloon.

Was this a friendly visit or an attack? The answer

came in a series of noisy punctuations—the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun.

This balloon then was an enemy. Dimly the truth entered Johnny's mind. He was beginning to connect the balloon with the little yellow men who had attacked him, and with the earth shudder, but how it all fitted in he could not tell. Who was the enemy?

His eyes were on the two ships of the sky. The airplane, having circled close to the cabin of the balloon, had fired a volley, whether directly at it or above or below it, he could not tell. Now the plane circled close again. But what was this? A man was climbing to the upper rigging of the plane. Now he was standing, balancing himself directly on top. Johnny recognized the slim figure of Pant. Now the plane, with engine dead, drifted toward the cabin of the balloon. They were almost even with it. There came three snorts of the engine and the plane shot beneath the cabin, then out on the other side. But Pant? Where was he? He was not on the upper surface of the plane nor climbing down on the rigging.

Johnny sat down dizzily. Cold perspiration stood out on his brow. The excitement, following hours of fatigue and near starvation, was too much for him; his head swam; his eyes blurred.

But he shook himself free from these sensations and gazed skyward. He expected to see Pant come crashing down to earth. He did not. There could be but one answer: he had leaped in midair for the underrigging of the cabin of the balloon and had caught it. What a feat! It made Johnny's head dizzy to think of it. He did not doubt for one moment that Pant would do it. But what could be his purpose? Had the balloon broken loose? Was it drifting free, a

derelict? This he could not believe, for the thing had seemed to travel in a definite direction. Besides, if this was true, why the machine-gun fire? Had they killed the only occupants? Johnny hoped not. He hated death. Whatever the men had done, he hoped they had not been killed. But why had Pant taken such chances?

Then as he looked, he saw a package drop over the side of the cabin. It fell straight downward, with tremendous velocity. But there came a sudden check. It was attached to a parachute. The parachute had opened. Its course was now marked by a little down-rush, then a pause, then a rush again.

He had been so intent on his observation of this that he did not realize that once more an object had fallen from the car. This time it was a man. He also was attached to a parachute.

As he came into Johnny's circle of vision, the boy rose and waved his arms, crying with a hoarse shout of joy:

"Pant! Pant! Good old Pant! He's safe!"

When Dave Tower and Jarvis led the little band of miners back through the cave, they found, as they had expected, that a small tunnel had been cut out of the frozen earth to form an entrance to the mine. Before entering this tunnel, they paused to look about them. Ranged about the walls, piled tier on tier, were black cubes of sand and gravel. From these came the glitter of yellow metal. These were cubes of pay dirt which would yield a rich return when the spring thaw came. Bits of cable, twisted coils of wire, a pair of rusty pliers, told that electricity had been employed as power for mining.

A smooth spot on the cave's floor showed where some form of engine had been set. That the power of the engine had been supplied by gasoline was shown by a great pile of empty one hundred gallon steel tanks which had been stolen from the company's supply in the sheds.

Dave picked up the pliers and rubbed the rust from them.

"They're Orientals all right," he mused. "Pliers got their stamp on 'em. But say! These boys sure had some ideas about mining placer gold. A man could take their machine to Alaska and make a fortune. Let's have a look."

"Sure! Sure!" came from a half score of throats.

They hurried down the narrow tunnel to find themselves in the mine. Here, as in the cave, they found cubes of pay dirt piled high on every side. At the end of it all was a low square machine with a buzz-saw-like wheel extending from it. The power wires, still attached to it, had been cut some ten feet from it.

"'E's a clever one!" said Jarvis.

"I'll say so," agreed Dave.

Before Pant leaped from the balloon, after throwing overboard the two hundredweight sack of gold which the yellow men, in their fright at the machine-gun fire, had deserted in the outer cabin, he performed one other valuable service. He threw over the heavy anchor, which was attached to a steel cable.

The anchor shot like a plummet for the ground and proceeded to hang itself securely in a corner of rock. The progress of the balloon was instantly halted. Still

filled with terror at the machine-gun fire, the yellow men took to their parachutes. On landing, they made good their escape by losing themselves in the rocky ledges which rose up from the sea shore. It was useless to pursue them there.

By the time all this had happened, Dave and Jarvis, with their men, had come out from the mine and had joined Johnny, who, still prancing about in his ridiculous costume, was rejoicing with Pant over the sudden enriching of their treasure-hoard.

“Get a windlass,” said Dave. “We’ll bring that giant bird to earth. There may be more treasure aboard her.”

In due time the balloon-cabin touched the snow and the men swarmed upon it.

They were disappointed in their hope of finding further treasure, but they did find a solitary man. He was a white man and was totally unconscious from a blow on the head.

“Dave, you and Jarvis stay here and see what you can do for the chap,” said Johnny. “All the rest of you come with me. We’ve got work ahead of us and a plenty. The Bolshevik band will be here in less than twenty-four hours. We’ll have to float our schooner, load the provisions and gold and beat it.”

He turned once more to Dave and Jarvis. “If you bring him to consciousness and can manage it, carry him to the ship. Otherwise I’ll send two men to help you when we are through loading.”

Wild hours of tireless labor followed for the the main gang. To bring the schooner from the bank to the water-channel, a quarter of a mile over the ice, was no mean task. It was at last accomplished. After that,

the loading went on rapidly.

Nothing had been seen of Dave and Jarvis when the last case of provisions had been brought aboard.

Johnny chose two of the men and went round the hill to assist in bringing the injured man to the ship. Imagine his astonishment when, on rounding the curve, he saw that the balloon was gone.

“Gone!” he murmured, dazed at the suddenness of it.

A hasty examination of the surroundings gave them no sign of the missing men.

“Must have broken loose and sailed away with them.”

At that instant he caught the gleam of a light on the western sky.

“Camp fire of the Bolsheviki. We can’t wait another moment,” he muttered. “And it wouldn’t do any good if we did. They’re gone.”

He turned and led his men back to the ship.

A half hour later the little schooner was pop-popping her way through a narrow channel to open water beyond. She carried, besides her crew and provisions, a hundredweight of gold taken in the last three days from Mine No. 2, and twice as much taken from the robber yellow men. Thirty-five per cent of this would do wonders in Vladivostok. Johnny was sitting and thinking of these things and of a wireless message he had received but a few days before, when he suddenly began wondering where Pant was.

“Say,” he exclaimed, turning to one of his men, “where’s Pant? Haven’t seen him since we put out.”

Sure enough, where was he? They searched the ship. He was not to be found. At last Johnny spied a note

pinned to his spare parka. It was written by Pant.

“Dear Johnny,” it read, “you will pardon me, I am sure, for leaving your service at this time. But you won’t need me down there and Vladivostok sounds too tame. Up here there is real adventure.

“Good-bye,
“PANT.”

Johnny looked at the man beside him and the man looked at him.

“Queer chap,” murmured Johnny. “But a real sport at that.”

“No use to try to find him.”

“Not a bit.”

“Queer chap,” Johnny murmured again, “Queer eyes.”

“That Pant was just short for Panther Eye,” said the miner. “Men gave him the name. One of them claimed he was hunting panthers once with a skillful surgeon. A panther tore his right eye out. The surgeon shot the panther and grafted an eye into Pant’s empty socket. The fellow claimed he’d seen him with those yellow goggles off. Said his pupil contracted in the light like a great cat’s eye. But you can’t believe half those men tell you.”

“No, you can’t,” said Johnny. “I guess every chap has a right to have a secret or two about himself and keep them. Pant had his and kept it. That’s about as far as we’ll ever get on that mystery. What say we go to chow?”

CHAPTER IX

STARTLING PERILS

In the harbor at Vladivostok a thirty-ton gasoline schooner threaded its way through narrow channels left by ocean liners and gunboats toward a deserted water-front where half-dismantled warships of ancient Russian design lay rotting in the sun. Straight to a rickety wharf they made their way.

Hardly had they thrown a line over a swaying post when two men sprang across the narrow space.

“Watch your step!”

It was Johnny Thompson who spoke. The man with him was the young doctor of his outfit.

As they cleared the dock and entered a side street of this metropolis of eastern Russia, they walked with a heavy tread; their step lacked the elasticity that their youthful faces would warrant. They were either very weary or very heavily burdened. No burdens were visible, though something might be concealed beneath their greatcoats. There was, indeed, a bulkiness about their forms from shoulder to waist, but in this Arctic clime, coming as they had from the north, one might easily credit this to sweaters.

As they reached the shadow of a building, Johnny stopped and fumbled in his pocket. At the same time his gaze wandered away toward the north.

“Wonder where Pant is now?” he grumbled. “I miss the little rascal, don’t you?”

“Sure do.”

“Wonder what made him drop us flat that way?”

“Can’t say. Had a reason, though. He always had a reason, and a good one. There was something he wanted to do.”

“Hope he does it quick and gets on down here. He’s been part of my bodyguard so long, I confess I don’t feel safe in a new place like this without him.”

Johnny stopped fumbling in his pocket and drew forth three yellow slips of paper.

“Here’s the messages. I wrote ’em all down. Mighty little good they’ll do us.”

He read them aloud:

“‘When can you come across?’”

(Signed)
“M.”

“‘We must produce. At once.’”

(Signed)
“M.”

“‘Am in danger. Come across.’”

(Signed)
“M.”

“What does a fellow get out of that, anyway?” he grumbled. “What does this fellow ‘M’ expect? The first one reached us after we’d been operating two months, the second a month later, and the third a month after that. What does he think this land is like? Three thousand miles! But then, I suppose the rotten Russians did it. Made threats, likely.”

“Doesn’t give any address,” commented the doctor.

“Not a scratch. We’d better go to the Red Cross headquarters, wherever that is. Let’s hunt it up.”

Again they took up their heavy, even tread and came

out from the narrow street onto a broader one, which appeared to lead to the business section of the city.

As Johnny sniffed the pungent odor of spring in the twilight air, he was forcibly reminded of the time consumed in that journey from the mines to Vladivostok. He regretted the many delays. When they occurred, he had fairly fumed at them. He realized now that "M," whoever that might be, the agent sent from Chicago to superintend the distribution of supplies for the refugee orphans, might have been compelled to leave Russia before this. That the Russians, disturbed by a thousand suspicions and fears, would not tolerate a stranger who had no apparent purpose for being in their land, he knew all too well. The agent could state the purpose of his presence in the beginning and get away with it, but when months had elapsed and nothing had been done, what dark suspicions might be directed against him?

Johnny heaved a sigh of resignation. Nothing that had happened could have been avoided. Time and again ice-floes clogging the waters of those northern seas had threatened to crush their craft, and only by long detours and many hours of tireless pulling away from the giant cakes had they found a passage. The journey could have been made by reindeer in the same length of time. As he thought of that, his heart skipped a beat. What if the little yellow men who had come so near making away with that two hundredweight of gold had succeeded in securing reindeer, and had made their way to Vladivostok? What would they not risk to regain possession of the gold that had been snatched from them?

As he thought of this, he picked his steps more cautiously along the slippery streets. He cast a glance

to the right and left of him. Then he started and plucked at his companion's sleeve.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Watch the alley to the right!"

When Pant so abruptly deserted Johnny Thompson's service, leaving only a vaguely worded note to tell of his going, he had, indeed, a plan and a purpose. So daring was this purpose that had he taken time to think it through to its end, he might never have attempted it. But Pant thought only of beginnings of enterprises, leaving the conclusions to work themselves out as best they might, effectively aided by his own audacity.

His purpose can best be stated by telling what he did.

When he left the schooner that night and crossed over the shadowy shore ice, a blizzard was rising. Already the snow-fog it raised had turned the moon into a misty ball. Through it the gleaming camp fires of the Bolshevik band told they had camped for the night not five miles from the mines.

The blizzard suited Pant's purposes well. It might keep the Russians in camp for many hours, and would most certainly make an effective job of a little piece of work which he wished to have done.

With a watchful eye he skirted the cabin they had left but a brief time before. A pale yellow light shone from one of the windows. Either the place was being looted by natives, or the yellow men had taken refuge there. The presence of a half-score of dogs scouting about the outside led him to believe that it was the natives. Where, then, were the Orientals?

Breathing a hope that they might not be found in the mines or the machine sheds, he hurried on. With a hand tight gripped on his automatic, he made his

way into Mine No. 1. All was dark, damp and silent. The very ghost of his dead comrade seemed to lurk there still. Who was it that had killed Frank Langlois, and how had it been done? Concerning these questions, he now had a very definite solution, but it would be long before he knew the whole truth.

Once inside the mine, he hastened to the square entrance that had been cut there by the strange buzz-saw-like machine of the Orientals. The wall was thin at this place. With a pick he widened the gap until the machine could be crowded through, and with great difficulty he dragged it to the entrance of the mine. Once here his task was easier, for the machine was on runners and slid readily over the hard-crusted snow. With a look this way, then that, he plunged into the rising storm. Pushing the machine before him, he presently reached the mouth of Mine No. 3 in which three days of steam-thawing had brought the miners to a low-grade pay dirt. The cavity was cut forty feet into the side of the bank which lay over the old bed of the river.

Having dragged the machine into the farthest corner, he returned to the entrance and at once dodged into the machine sheds. To these sheds he made five trips. On a small dog-sled he brought first a little gasoline engine and electric generator, next eight square batteries, then some supplies of food, a tank of gasoline, and some skin garments from the storeroom. His last journey found the first gray streaks of dawn breaking through the storm. He must hasten.

With a long knife he began cutting square cakes of snow and fitting them into the entrance of the mine. Soon, save for a narrow gap well hidden beneath a ledge of rock, the space was effectively blocked.

He stretched himself, then yawned sleepily.

“It’s a poor game that two can’t play at,” he muttered. “Now, if I can get this machinery singin’, we’ll see what Mine No. 3 has saved up for us. Unless I miss my guess, from the way the rock lays, she’ll be a rich one.”

With that he crept into his sleeping-bag and was soon lost in the land of dreams.

Pant’s first act, after awaking some six hours later, was to connect four of his batteries in series, then to connect the ends of two wires to the poles of the series. The wires were attached at the other end to a socket for an electric light.

When the connections were completed he screwed in a small bulb. The filament in the lamp glowed red, but gave no light.

Two batteries were added to the series, then two more. At this, the light shone brightly, dispelling the gloom of the place and driving the shadows into the deepest recesses.

With a smile on his lips, the boy twisted a wire into a coil, connected it to the battery circuit, watched it redden, then set his coffee-pot over it.

He was soon enjoying a cup of hot coffee and pilot bread.

“Not so bad! Not even half bad!” he muttered good-naturedly to himself. “Electricity is great stuff. Now for the mining stunt!”

He listened for a moment to the howl of the blizzard outside, then began busying himself with the machinery at hand. Connecting the batteries to the gasoline generator to give it a “kick-off,” he heard

the pop of the engine with evident satisfaction. He next connected all his batteries in series and, having connected the engine, ran wires from it to the motor in the strange, mining buzz-saw. There followed a moment of suspense, then a grunt of disgust.

“Not enough voltage. Gotta get more batteries to-night. Dangerous, too. Storm’s going down. Bolsheviki coming in. Natives prowling an’ yellow men, don’t know about. Gotta do it though.”

At that he sat down on his sleeping-bag, and, with arms outstretched, like Jack London’s man of the wild, he slept the uneasy sleep of one who hunts and is hunted.

Night came at last and, with it, wakefulness and action. Cutting a hole through the snow-wall, which under the drive of the storm had grown to a surprising thickness, he crept out and slid down the hard bank, leaving no tracks behind.

The storm had abated; the moon and stars were out. As he dodged into the store sheds, he fancied that he saw a shadow flit from sight at the other end.

Working rapidly, he unearthed four fresh batteries. They were heavy affairs. A sled improvised from a plank and a bit of wire would aid him in bringing them up the hill. He had just arranged this contrivance and was about to turn toward the door, when a sudden darkening of the patch of moonlight admitted by the open door caused him to leap behind the massive shape of a smelter. He peered around the edge of it, his breath coming rapidly.

Through his mind sped the question: “Bolsheviki, natives, or yellow men?”

Upon freeing itself from the frozen claybank, the

sausage balloon, with Dave Tower, Jarvis and the unconscious stranger on board, rose rapidly.

In their wild consternation, Dave and Jarvis did not realize this until the intense cold of the upper air began to creep through the heavily-padded walls of the cabin.

At this, Jarvis dropped on his stomach and stared down through the plate-glass on the floor.

“Shiver my bones!” he ejaculated, “we’re a mile ’igh and goin’ ’igher!”

At this word Dave dashed for the door. He had it half open. A blast of air so cold that it seemed solid ice rushed its way through the opening.

Immediately Jarvis threw himself against the door.

“What’ll y’ do?” he stormed. “I ’ates to think ’ow stiff you’d freeze h’out there in the ’alf of a second.”

Dave shook with the cold and the excitement. The stranger in the corner groaned.

Jarvis sprang to the gasoline motor.

“If we can get ’er started we’ll ’ave some ’eat.”

After five minutes of fumbling about with stiffening fingers, he straightened up with a sigh.

“Can’t make ’ead nor tail of ’er. These bloomin’ ’eathen; they make such queer riggin’s.”

Dave did not answer. He had discovered a series of sealed wet batteries lined against the wall and, having dragged one of these loose from its wiring, prepared to test it out with a piece of insulated wire.

In a second there came a blinding flash.

“Charged! Charged to the gunwale!” he exulted.

“Now if we can only hook them up with the heating system of this cabin, we’re all right. Give us a hand.”

Jarvis, catching his idea, began searching for the connecting wires of the heating system, while Dave connected the batteries in series.

“’Ere they are,” he exclaimed suddenly. “Right ’ere, me lad.”

Soon a life-sustaining warmth came gently stealing over the place.

“Take hoff ’alf the batteries,” suggested Jarvis, “’alf’s a plenty. There’s no tellin’ ’ow long we’ll be sailin’ in this hark.”

This was hardly done when their attention was attracted by the stranger. He had groaned and turned over.

“Now that it’s warm enough,” suggested Dave, “we’d better try to help the poor fellow back to consciousness. If he hasn’t suffered a concussion of the brain, he’ll live yet, and perhaps he can tell us things. There are plenty of questions I’d like to ask him.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Jarvis eagerly. “’Oo killed Frank Langlois.”

They went to work over the man. Having removed his outer garments, they unbuttoned his shirt and began chafing his hands, arms and chest, till they were rewarded by a sigh of returning consciousness.

“Where am I?” the man whispered, as he opened his eyes.

“You’re all right,” answered Dave quickly. “Drink this and go back to sleep.”

He held a cup of steaming malted milk to the man’s

lips. He drank it slowly. Then, turning an inquiring look on Dave, he murmured, “American?”

In another second he was lost in a sleeping stupor.

Dave twisted himself about and gazed down at the panorama of purple shadows that flitted along beneath them.

“Patient doing well,” he murmured at last. “Going due north by west. Forty miles an hour, I’d say. Beautiful prospects for all of us, Mr. Jarvis. Going right on into a land that does not belong to anybody and where nobody lives. Upon which hundred thousand square miles would you prefer to land?”

Jarvis did not answer. He was dreaming day dreams of other adventures he had had in that strange no man’s land.

Finally he shook himself and mumbled:

“No ’opes. No ’opes.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say it was as bad as that,” smiled Dave. “Let’s have a cup of tea.”

“Yes, let’s,” murmured Jarvis.

CHAPTER X

PLAYING A LONE HAND

Hardly had Johnny Thompson in Vladivostok uttered his warning to the doctor than a figure leaped out at him from a dark doorway. Not having expected an attack from this direction, Johnny was caught unprepared. A knife flashed. He felt a heavy impact on his chest. A loud snap followed by a scream from his assailant. There came the wild patter of fleeing footsteps, then the little drama ended.

“Hurt?” inquired the doctor, a deep concern expressed in his tone.

“Nope,” Johnny smiled. “But I’m afraid the rascal’s ripped a hole in one of my moose-hide sacks. The gold is leaking out.”

“Hang the gold!” ejaculated the doctor. “Let it go. It’s done its part—saved your life. An armor of gold! I’d say that’s some class!”

“That’s all right,” said Johnny, still keeping an eye out for other assailants. “But sentiment won’t buy biscuits and honey for starving children. Gold will. Give us a hand at stopping the leak.”

“Go easy,” admonished the doctor, “you’ll give the whole thing away.”

They worked cautiously, revealing nothing to a possible prying eye. When the task was completed,

Johnny stooped to pick up the hilt of the broken blade. He turned it over and over in his hand, regarding it curiously.

“Oriental, all right,” he murmured. “I wonder if those little rascals could have beaten us here.”

“Come on,” exclaimed the doctor impatiently, “this is no place for wondering. I’m for a safe place inside somewhere.”

A few turns brought them to Red Cross headquarters, and to one of the big surprises of Johnny’s rather adventurous life. He had hardly crossed the threshold when his lips framed the word:

“Mazie!”

Could he believe his eyes? Yes, there she was, the girl chum of his boyhood days, the girl who had played tennis and baseball with him, who had hiked miles upon miles with him, who swam the sweeping Ohio river with him. The girl who, in Chicago, having tried to locate him, had come near to losing her life in a submarine.

“Mazie! Mazie!” he whispered. Then, “How did you come here?”

“By boat, of course,” smiled Mazie. “How’d you think?” She took both his hands in hers.

“But, Mazie, this is a man’s place. It’s dangerous. Besides, what—”

“What’s my business? Well, you see, I’m your agent. I’m going to spend all that splendid gold you’ve been digging to help the orphans. I’m ‘M.’ It was I who did all that frantic wireless stuff. Did you get it?”

“I did,” smiled Johnny, “and if I’d known it was you I would have come on by wireless.”

“But now,” he said, after a moment’s reflection, “as Jerry the Rat would say, ‘Wot’s de lay?’”

Mazie sighed. “Honest, Johnny, have you the gold? Because if you haven’t, it’s ‘Home, James,’ for me. These Russians are the most suspicious people! They’ve threatened to put me aboard ship twenty times because I wasn’t making good. I wasn’t feeding anybody, as I have said I would. And, oh, Johnny!” she gripped his arm, “the last three days I’ve been so frightened! Every time I ventured out, day or night, I have seen little yellow men dogging my footsteps; not Japanese military police, but just little yellow men.”

“Hm,” grunted Johnny, “I fancy Doc and I met one of them just now. He seemed to know us, too. Here’s his dagger.”

“Broken?” exclaimed Mazie. “How?”

Johnny stepped to the door of the small parlor and closed it.

“Gold,” he whispered, “an armor of gold.”

From beneath his coat he drew a sack of gold.

“Yes, Mazie, we’ve got the gold—plenty of it. Again I ask you, ‘Wot’s de lay?’”

Mazie clasped her hands in glad surprise. For fully three minutes she acted the part of a happy child dancing around a Christmas tree, with Johnny doing the part of Christmas tree and delighted parent all in one.

At last, she came down to earth.

“What we need is food and shelter for the poor little wretches. Oh, Johnny, I can’t tell you—”

“Don’t need to,” interrupted Johnny, “I soldiered in

this God-forgotten hole for nine months. Tell me what we can do first and fastest."

"Well, there's a great empty hotel down in the street St. Jacobs. It has a wonderful dining-room, big enough for a thousand women and children. We can rent it for gold."

"For gold," said Johnny, setting a sack of gold on the table.

"Then we can get rice and sweet potatoes from China by ship, for gold."

"For gold," again echoed Johnny, banging three heavy sacks on the table.

"Oh, aren't you the Midas!" exclaimed Mazie, clapping her hands.

"But, Johnny," she said presently, "there's one more thing. It's hard, and I'm afraid a bit dangerous. Rice and sweet potatoes are not enough for starving people."

"I'll say not."

"They need soup. Many would die without it. Soup means meat. We must have it. The nearest cattle are a hundred miles away. The Mongols have them. They are the border traders between China and Russia, you know. They have cattle—hundreds of them. They can be bought for gold."

"For gold," smiled Johnny, patting his chest which still bulged suspiciously. "I'll be off for the cattle in the morning. I'll leave Doc here to do what he can, and to look after you."

"Good!" exclaimed Mazie, clapping her hands again. "The Red Cross will supply you a band of trustworthy Russians to help drive the cattle here.

The Mongols won't dare bring them."

"All right," said Johnny. "And now, what about the supposed hospitality of the Red Cross? I'm hungry. So is Doc."

"Right this way," and Mazie hurried through the door.

Half an hour later the two were enjoying such a meal as they had not eaten for months; not because of its bountifulness, nor richness, but because it was prepared by a woman.

"To-morrow," said Johnny, as he murmured good-night, "I am to venture into one more unknown land."

"Yes, and may your patron saint protect you as he has done in the past," said Mazie.

"My patron saint is a miss," smiled Johnny, "and her name is Mazie. Good-night."

Realizing that he was trapped, the instant that forms blocked the door of the machine sheds at the Seven Mines, Pant tackled the problem of escape. If these were natives or yellow men, they would treat him rough. If they were Bolsheviki, he could hope for no better fate. His only hope lay in escape. The place had no other door and no open windows. He must gain his freedom by strategy. Evidently, he must play the cat-and-mouse act about the piles of supplies and machinery.

As he dodged back to a position behind a large ore crusher, he managed to catch sight of the two men.

"Bolsheviki!" he gasped inaudibly. "What giants!"

Full-bearded giants they were, reminding him of nothing so much as of Bluebeard in the fairy books,

or the Black Brothers in “The Lost River.”

Seeming to scent him, as a dog scents a rat, they moved cautiously down the narrow passage between piles. As yet, they had not caught sight of him. Hope rose. Perhaps they would pass by him. Then he could make a dash for it. Yet, this was not entirely satisfactory. They would follow him, would see where he had gone, if he escaped to the mine. Then all his plans would go glimmering.

Instantly there flashed through his mind a bolder and, if it worked, a better plan. Moving close to the crusher, he put his hand to the great hopper that rested on and towered above it. This was made of iron and was fully eight feet wide and quite as deep. His keen eye measured the aperture at the bottom. No giant, such as these were, could crowd through that hole. And the hopper was heavy. Applying all his strength to it, he felt it give ever so slightly. It was not bolted down; it was merely balanced there. He would be able to topple it over. And, once over, it would be a difficult affair to handle, especially from beneath.

As he waited, his heart thumped so loudly that it seemed the Russians must hear and charge down upon him.

They came on cautiously, peering this way then that. He caught the gleam of a knife, the dull-black shine of an automatic. It was a man hunt, sure enough—and he was the man. Now they were five paces from him, now three, now two. His breath came in little inaudible gasps. His muscles knotted and unknotted.

And now the moment had come. The men were even with the crusher, on the opposite side from him. Gathering all his strength, he heaved away at the

hopper. There followed a grinding sound, a shout of warning, then a dull thud. The enemy were trapped.

Pant spun round the crusher like a top. Seizing the wire he had arranged for his improvised sled, he rushed toward the door, dragging the batteries after him.

A glance backward came near convulsing him with laughter. One of the Russians had succeeded in thrusting his head through the narrow opening at the top of the inverted hopper. Here he stuck. To the boy, he resembled a backwoodsman encircled by a barber's huge apron.

But there was little time for mirth; business was at hand. New problems confronted him. Were other Bolsheviki near the shed? If so, then all was lost.

Poking his head out of the door, he peered about carefully. There was not a person in sight. The wind had risen.

"Good!" he muttered, "it will hide my tracks!"

He was soon speeding across the snow. In another five minutes he was peering like a woodchuck from his hole in the snowbank. His batteries were already inside. If he had not been observed, he had only to block his entrance and leave the wind to plaster it over with drifting snow.

As he looked his brow wrinkled. Then he dodged back, drawing the snow-cake door after him. The two Russians had emerged from the shed.

For hours on end the balloon, with Dave Tower, Jarvis and the stranger on board, now hundreds of miles from the mines, swept over the barren whiteness of unexplored lands. The sun went down

and the moon shone in all its glory. The fleeting panorama below turned to triangles great and small —triangles of pale yellow and midnight blue. Now and again the earth seemed to rise up toward them. By this Dave and Jarvis knew that they were drifting over snow-capped hills. When it receded, they knew they were over the tundra. Sometimes they caught the silver flash and gleam of a river the ice of which had been kept clear of snow by the incessant sweep of the wind.

As Dave crouched by the plate-glass window staring down at that wonderful and terrible spectacle of an unknown land, he asked himself the question: “Was this land ever viewed by mortal man?”

The answer could be only a surmise. Perhaps some struggling band of political exiles, fighting their way through summer’s tundra swamps and over winter’s blizzard-swept hills, had passed this way, or lingered to die here. Who could tell? Surely nothing was known of the mineral wealth, the fish, the game, the timber of this unexplored inland empire. What a field to dream of!

His mind was drawn from its revels by a groan from the stranger. He was awake and conscious. Propping himself half up on an elbow, he stared about him.

“Where am I?” He sank back, an expression of amazement and fear written on his face.

“Who are you?” asked Dave.

“I—why—I,” the man’s consciousness appeared to waver for a second. “Why, I’m Professor Todd from Tri-State University.”

“What were you doing with the Orientals?”

“Orientals?” The man looked puzzled. “Orientals?

Oh, you mean the natives; the Chukches. Why, I was studying them. Getting their language, taking pictures, getting phonographic records, and—"

Suddenly the man's face went white.

"Where—where are we?" he stammered through tight-set lips. The balloon, caught in a pocket of thin air, had caused the car to lurch.

"Taking a little trip," said Dave reassuringly. "You're all right. We'll land after a bit."

"Land? So we are on a ship? I've been sick? We're going home. It is well. Life with the Chukches was rotten, positively rotten—positive—"

His voice trailing off into nothingness. He was asleep again.

Dave stared at him. Here was a new mystery. Was this man lying? Had he been in collusion with the Orientals, and was he trying to hide that fact; or had the rap on his head caused a lapse of memory, which blotted out all recollections of the affair in the case and mine?

"Look, Dave!" exclaimed Jarvis suddenly, "as I live it's the City of Gold!"

In the east the sun was just peeping over the horizon. But Jarvis was not looking in that direction. He was looking west. There, catching the sun's first golden glow, some object had cast it back, creating a veritable conflagration of red and gold.

Dave, remembering to have viewed such a sight in other days, and in what must have been something of the same location, stared in silence for a full minute before he spoke:

"If it is," he said slowly, "there's only one salvation

for us. We've got to get down out of the clouds. The last time I saw that riot of color it was on the shore of the ocean, or very near it, and to drift over the Arctic Ocean in this crazy craft is to invite death."

He sprang for the door which led to the narrow plank-way about the cabin and to the rigging where the valve-cord must hang suspended.

CHAPTER XI

DANGLING IN MID AIR

Before dawn, the morning after his interview with Mazie, Johnny was away for the camp of the Mongols. There was a moist freshness in the air which told of approaching spring, yet winter lingered.

It was a fair-sized cavalcade that accompanied him; eight burly Russians on horseback and six in a sled drawn by two stout horses. For himself he had secured a single horse and a rude sort of cutter. He was not alone in the cutter. Beside him sat a small brown person. This person was an Oriental. There could be no mistake about that. Mazie had told him only that here was his interpreter through whom all his dealings with the Mongols would be done.

He wondered much about the interpreter. He had

met with some fine characters among the brown people. There had been Hanada, his school friend, and Cio-Cio-San, that wonder-girl who had traveled with him. He had met with some bad ones too, and that not so long ago. His experiences at the mines had made him, perhaps, unduly suspicious.

He did not like it at all when he found, after a long day of travel and two hours of supper and pitching camp, with half the journey yet to go, that this little yellow person proposed to share his skin tent for the night. At first he was inclined to object. Yet, when he remembered the feeling that existed between these people and the Russians, he realized at once that he could scarcely avoid having the interpreter for a tent-mate.

Nothing was said as the two, with a candle flickering and flaring between them, prepared to slip into their sleeping-bags for the night.

When, at last, the candle was snuffed out, Johnny found that he could not sleep. The cold air of the long journey had pried his eyes wide open; they would not go shut. He could think only of perils from small yellow people. He was, indeed, in a position to invite treachery, since he carried on his person many pounds of gold. He, himself, did not know its exact value; certainly it was thousands of dollars. He had taken that which the doctor had carried, and had left the doctor to do what he could for the sufferers, and to assist Mazie in her preparations of the great kitchens and dining-room where thousands were to be fed.

For a long time, he thought of treachery, of dark perils, reaching a bloody hand out of the dark. But presently a new and soothing sensation came to him. He dreamed of other days. He was once more on the

long journey north, the one he had taken the year previous. Cio-Cio-San was sleeping near him. They were on a great white expanse, alone. There was no peril; all was peace.

So great was the illusion that he scratched a match and gazed at the sleeping face near him.

He gave a little start at the revelation it brought. Certainly, there was a striking resemblance here to the face of Cio-Cio-San. Yet, he told himself, it could not be. This person was a man. And, besides, Cio-Cio-San was now rich. She was in her own country living in luxury and comfort, a lady bountiful among her own people.

He told himself all this, and yet so much of the illusion remained that he fell asleep and slept soundly until the rattle of harness and the shout of horsemen told him that morning was upon them and they must be off.

He looked for his companion. He was gone. When Johnny had dressed, he found the interpreter busily assisting with the morning repast.

“Just like Cio-Cio-San,” he muttered to himself, as he dipped his hands into icy water for a morning splash.

After his escape from the two Bolsheviki in the machine shed, Pant sat by the entrance to his mine in breathless expectancy. The two Russians certainly had not seen him enter the mine, but others might have done so, and, more than that, there was grave danger that they would track him to his place of hiding.

He was not surprised when his alert ear caught a sound from without, close at hand. He only crowded a little further back into the corner, that the light

from the broken-in entrance, providing it was discovered and crushed, should not fall upon him.

His heart thumped loudly. His hand gripped his automatic. He expected immediate action from without. His hopes of reaching the mother-lode of this mine vanished. He thought now only of escape.

But action was delayed. Now and then there came sounds as of footsteps and now a scratching noise reached his ear. The crust of the snow was hard. Perhaps they were attempting to tear it away with some crude implement, a stick or board.

As he listened, he heard the whine of a dog. So this was it? One of their hounds had tracked him down. They were probably afraid of him and would wait for him to come out.

“In that case,” he whispered to himself, “they will wait a long, long time.”

He did not desert his post. To be caught in the far end of the mine meant almost certain torture and death.

As he listened, he heard the dog’s whine again and again, and it was always accompanied by the scratching sound. What could that mean? A hound which has found the lair of its prey does not whine. He bays his message, telling out to all the world that he has cornered his prey.

The more the boy thought of it, the more certain he became that this was not one of the Russian hounds. But if not, then what dog was it? Perhaps one of Johnny Thompson’s which had escaped. If it were, he would be a friend.

Of one thing Pant became more and more positive: there were no men with the dog. From this

conclusion he came to a decision on a definite course of action. If the dog was alone, whether friend or foe, he would eventually attract attention and that would bring disaster. The logical thing to do would be to pull out the snow-cake door and admit the beast. If he were one of the Russians wolf-hounds—Pant drew a short-bladed knife from his belt; an enemy's dog would be silenced with that.

With trembling fingers he gripped the white door and drew it quickly away. The next instant a furry monster leaped toward him.

It was a tense moment. In the flash of a second, he could not determine the character of the dog. His knife gleamed in his hand. To delay was dangerous. The beast might, in a twinkle, be at his throat.

He did not strike. With a supple motion he sprang to one side as the dog shot past him. By the time he had turned back toward the entrance, Pant recognized him as a white man's dog.

"Well, howdy, old sport," he exclaimed, as the dog leaped upon him, ready to pull him to pieces out of pure joy.

"Down, down, sir!"

The dog dropped at his feet. In another minute the snow-door was in its place again.

"Well, old chap," said Pant, peering at the dog through his goggles. "You came to share fortunes with me, did you? The little yellow men had a tiger; I've got a dog. That's better. A tiger'd leave you; a dog never. Besides, old top, you'll tell me when there's danger lurking 'round, won't you? But tell me one thing now: did anyone see you come in here?"

The dog beat the damp floor with his tail.

"Well, if they did, it's going to be mighty tough for you and me, that's all I've got to say about it."

Upon opening the door to the cabin of the balloon, after catching the gleam of the supposed domes of the City of Gold, Dave Tower found, to his great relief, that they had dropped to a considerably lower level than that reached by them many hours before. He was able to stand exposure to this outer air.

He began at once to search for cords which would allow gas to escape from the balloon.

"Should be a valve-cord and a rip-cord somewhere," he muttered to himself, "but you can never tell what these Orientals are going to do about such things."

As he gazed away toward the north, he was sure he caught sight of dark purple patches between the white.

"Might just be shadows and might be pools of salt water between the ice-floes. If we land on the ocean, good night!"

Hurriedly he searched the rigging for dangling cords. He found none. If there had been any, they had been thrown up and tangled above by the tossing of the balloon.

Dave stared dizzily upward to where the giant sausage drifted silently on. It was a sheer fifty feet. To reach this there was but one means, a slender ladder of rope. Could he do it? Could he climb to the balloon and slit it before they reached the ocean?

It was their only chance. If the City of Gold was not a complete illusion; if human beings lived there at all, they might hope for food and shelter. There were chemicals in the cabin for re-inflating the balloon. A

fair wind, or the discovery of the method of operating that Oriental engine, might insure them a safe voyage home. But once they were out over the ocean—his heart went sick at the thought of it.

Gripping the rounds of the ladder, he began to climb. It was a perilous task. Now with a sinking sensation he felt the ladder apparently drop from beneath him. The balloon had struck a pocket of air. And now he felt himself lifted straight up a fleeting hundred feet.

Holding his breath, he waited. Then, when the motion was stable, he began to climb again. He had covered two-thirds of the distance, was staring up at the bulk that now seemed almost upon his very head, when, with a little cry, he felt his foot crash through a rotten strand. It was a second of dreadful suspense. Madly he grasped the rope sides of the ladder. His left hand slipped, but his right held firm. There, for a fraction of time that seemed an eternity, supported by only one hand, he hung out over thousands of feet of airy space.

His left hand groped for the ropes which eluded his grasp. He gripped and missed, gripped and missed. Then he caught it and held on. He was holding firmly now with both hands. But how his arms ached! With his feet he began kicking for the ladder, which, swinging and bagging in the wind, seemed as elusive as a cobweb. At last, when strength was leaving him, he doubled up his knees and struck out with both feet. They fell upon something and stuck there. They had found a round of the ladder. Hugging the ropes, he panted for breath, then slowly worked himself to a more natural position.

“Huh!” he breathed at last. “Huh! Gee! That makes a fellow dizzy!”

He had climbed ten steps further when a cry of joy escaped his lips:

“The valve-cord!”

It was true. By his side dangled a small rope which reached to the balloon.

Gripping this he gave it a quick pull and was rewarded at once by the hiss of escaping gas.

“Good!” he muttered to himself, as he prepared for his downward climb. “Trust an Oriental to make things hard. Suppose they thought if they had it any closer to the car the children might raise the dickens by playing with it.”

He swung there relaxed. They were dropping. He could tell that plainly enough. Now he could distinguish little lines of hills, now catch the course of a river, now detect the rows of brown willows that lined its banks.

He looked for the gleam of the City of Gold. There was none. The sun had evidently climbed too high for that.

His eyes roamed to the north. Then his lips uttered a cry:

“The ocean! We can’t escape it!”

CHAPTER XII

THE RUSSIAN DAGGER

Johnny Thompson, with his interpreter by his side, found himself in the camp of the Mongols. It was a vast tented city, a moving city of traders. Down its snow-trod streets drifted yellow people of all descriptions. Men, women and children moved past him. Some were young, some very old. All appeared crafty and capable of treachery.

“It was against these people that the Chinese built their great wall,” said Johnny thoughtfully. “I don’t wonder.”

“When do we see his highness, the great high chief who deals in cattle?”

His interpreter smiled. “I have just come from there. We may go to see him now.”

Johnny twisted one shoulder as if adjusting a heavy burden, then turned to follow the interpreter.

He did not like the looks of things; he longed to be safely back in Vladivostok with Mazie. There were times like this when he wished he had not taken it upon himself to play the fairy godfather to Russia’s starving hosts. But since he had undertaken the task, however difficult it might prove, he must carry on.

He soon found himself sitting cross-legged on a floor so deeply imbedded in soft, yielding skins that he sank half out of sight beneath them. Before him, also reposing in this sea of softness, was a Mongol of unusual size, whose face was long and solemn. He puffed incessantly at a long-stemmed Russian pipe.

Forming the third corner of the triangle, was the little interpreter.

The two members of the yellow race conversed in low tones for some time. At last the interpreter turned to Johnny:

“I have told him that you want to buy cattle, much cattle. He say, how much you want to pay? How you want to pay? How much you want to buy?”

“You tell him that I saw six of his cattle out here just now. They are very poor. But we will take them—maybe. Ask him how much?”

“He say, have you got gold?”

“You say,” grinned Johnny, “that we have got gold. We don’t need a button-hook to button up our purse, but we’ve got gold. We pay gold. How much?”

The interpreter puckered up his brow and conveyed the message. The Mongol mumbled an answer.

“He say, how much you want pay?”

“Tell him for six cattle I pay one pound gold. All same.”

He drew from his pocket a small leather sack, and unlacing the strings held it open before the Mongol.

The crafty eyes of the trader half closed at sight of the glistening treasure. His greedy fingers ran through it again and again. Then he grunted.

“He say,” droned the interpreter, “how much cattle you want to buy?”

“Maybe three hundred,” stated Johnny casually.

The interpreter started, but delivered the message.

The Mongol, upon receiving this word, sprang from the furs like a jack from his box and hot words rushed rapidly from his lips.

When he had finished, the interpreter explained that he said Johnny was jesting with him. It was impossible that anyone would buy three hundred head of cattle with gold in the starving land of Russia.

The Mongol sank back to his place among the furs, and the bickering was continued. For two hours it waged, ending finally by the promise of the Mongol that, in the morning, the cattle should be at hand; that they would be better than those Johnny had seen; and that Johnny's "beggarly" price of one pound of gold for six cattle would be accepted.

Once the bargaining was over, the Mongol was transformed in a second's time into the most charming of hosts. Johnny and his interpreter must dine with him. Yes, indeed! They must sleep in his tent that night. They should talk long and of many things. It was not often that he had the honor of playing host to such a rich and clever guest. Indeed, it was not. But they should not converse so long together that Johnny and his most excellent interpreter should be robbed of their night's repose.

Several hours later, Johnny was buried to the point of smothering beneath rugs of fur that would bring the price of a king's ransom. His mind was still in a whirl. Perhaps it was the tea, perhaps the excitement of big business, and again, it may have been a premonition of things to happen. Whatever it may have been, he could not sleep.

His racing mind whispered to him of treachery out of the night. It had been a wonderful evening. They had been treated to a feast such as he had seldom dreamed of. Surely these Mongols could concoct from beef, rice, sweet potatoes and spices the most wonderful of viands. And, as for tea, he had never

tasted real tea before. The aroma of it still haunted his nostrils.

And the Mongol had told him many things. He had traveled far, had this trader; he had seen much. He spoke of Russia, of China, Japan and India. He told of matters that made Johnny's blood run cold, of deeds done in that border-land between great countries, each seething with revolution and bloodshed. Not that he, the Mongolian, had done these things, but he had seen them accomplished. And he had traded for the spoils, the spoils of rich Russians driven from their own land and seeking refuge in another. He was a trader. It was his business. He must have profit. What should one do? If he did not take the riches, another would. But as for committing these deeds himself, Confucius forbid it; he had scowled to show his disapproval.

At the same time, as Johnny thought it all through, and felt the hard lumps about him that were sacks of gold, he found it very difficult to fall asleep.

His interpreter, lying not an arm's length away, breathed with the steady ease of one in deep slumber. The Mongol had drawn a curtain of ermine skins between them and his own bed. Could it be that this interpreter had made his way into the good graces of Mazie only to turn murderer and robber at the proper time? Johnny had only Mazie's word that the person could be trusted, and Mazie was but a girl, not accustomed to the deep-seated treachery in the oriental mind.

He had traveled far that day; he had talked long and dined well; he was a healthy human being; and sleep came at last.

How long he had slept, he did not know when he

was awakened by an indescribable sensation. Had he heard something, felt something? He could not tell. He breathed on, the steady deep breath of a sleeper, and did not stir, but he opened an eye a mere crack. A shadow stretched across him. It was made by a person who stood between him and an oriental lamp which flickered dimly in the corner. His eye sought the place where the interpreter lay. The skins were too deep there and he could not tell whether he was there or not.

The shadow shifted. The person was moving into view. He could see him now. He was short and brown of face.

“The interpreter!” These words formed themselves on his lips, but were not spoken.

The next second he knew it was not the interpreter, for there came a stir at his side as the interpreter sat up.

So there were two of them. Treachery! Well, he should not die alone. His hand gripped the cold steel of his automatic. He tilted it ever so slightly. Fired from where it lay, it would send a bullet crashing through the crouching interpreter’s chest. He was about to pull the trigger when something arrested his attention.

A blade gleamed in the hand of the interpreter. Even in this darkness, he recognized the weapon as one he had taken from a would-be murderer, a Russian Chukche. He had given it to a very good friend, a Japanese lady—Cio-Cio-San!

A cold chill ran down his spine. Had he come near killing a friend? Was this one crouching in the act of defending him against an enemy? Cold perspiration stood out upon his brow. He made a tremendous

effort to continue breathing evenly. He could only take a desperate chance and await the turn of events.

Hardly had Dave Tower discovered the imminent peril of drifting out over the ice-packed sea, than a ray of hope came to him. Scattered along the mainland of this vast continent there was, here and there, an island. Should they be so fortunate as to drift upon one of these, they might be saved.

Hurriedly climbing down from his perilous perch, he hastened to inform Jarvis of their position.

“Blind my eyes!” exclaimed Jarvis. “Wot don’t ’appen to us ain’t worth ‘appenin’.”

Then Dave told him of his hope that there might be an island ahead.

“I ’opes so,” said Jarvis, as he seized a glass and rushed outside to scan the broken surface of the sea.

In the meantime, the balloon was sinking rapidly. It was only a matter of time until the cabin would bump upon an ice-pile. Then it was doubtful if even the quickest action could save their lives.

They brought the stranger, who was now able to sit up and stare about him, to the outer deck. He gazed down at the swaying, flying landscape and was badly frightened when he discovered that they were in midair, but Dave reassured him, while Jarvis brought sleeping-bags and boxes of food to a position by the rail.

“If the worst ’appens, we’ll at least h’eat and sleep on the floe until it ’eaps up an’ buries us,” he grumbled.

“Land ahead!” exclaimed Dave suddenly, throwing down his glasses and rushing inside the cabin. He was out again in a moment, bearing on his shoulder

a coil of steel cable, and dragging a heavy land anchor after him.

“We may be able to save the old boat yet,” he yelled excitedly. “Jarvis, bring out the rope ladder.”

Jarvis hastened inside and reappeared almost immediately with the ladder.

“It’s an island,” said Dave, “and, as far as I can judge, we’re only two or three hundred feet from its surface when we get above it. We’ll throw over the anchor and if it catches somewhere, we’ll go down the ladder. In time the balloon will lose gas enough to bring her to earth.”

“You ’ave a good ’ead, me lad,” approved Jarvis. “’Ere’s ‘opin’ it ’appens that way!”

It did happen that way, and, in due course of time, the three men found themselves on the brow of a low plateau which seemed as deserted as the pyramids of Egypt, and quite as barren of life.

“One thing’s sure,” said Dave. “We’ve got to get the gas back into that old cloth tank and catch a fair wind, or get that engine to working, if we don’t wish to starve.”

“Aye,” said Jarvis.

“There’s a strange pile of rocks up on the ledge there. I’m going for a look at it,” said Dave.

He returned in a few moments, mingled excitement and amusement on his face.

“Jarvis,” he smiled happily, “we’re not so badly off, after all. Here we are right back in old United States of America!”

“United States?” Jarvis stared.

“Says so in this message I found in a brass can. Says —”

Dave broke off suddenly. Something on the crest to the right of them had caught his attention. Grasping his automatic, Dave went skulking away in the shadow of the hill.

Jarvis, too, had seen it and awaited the outcome of this venture with eager expectancy.

CHAPTER XIII

CIO-CIO-SAN

Hardly had Johnny Thompson’s finger lessened its pressure on the trigger of his automatic, than the interpreter sprang straight at the figure that cast the shadow.

A scream rent the air.

With a spring, Johnny was on his feet, just in time to see one of the figures drop. In the dim light he could not tell which one. He stood there motionless. It had all happened so quickly that he was stunned into inactivity.

In that brief moment bedlam broke loose. The Mongol chief sprang from behind his curtain. Other Mongols, deserting all night games of chance, came

swarming in on all sides. Their jargon was unintelligible. Johnny could not tell them what had happened, even had he rightly known.

The fallen man was dragged out upon the snow, where his blood made a rapidly spreading dark circle on the crystal whiteness. He was dead beyond a doubt.

Slowly the group settled in a dense ring about some one who was talking rapidly. Evidently the survivor of the tragedy was explaining. Was it the interpreter or the other? Johnny could not crowd close enough to tell.

He flashed his electric torch upon the fallen body. The sight of the hilt protruding from the chest, over the heart, gave Johnny a start. His interpreter had won. It was his knife that had made the fatal thrust. The dead man was undoubtedly Oriental and not a member of the Mongolian tribe.

That knife! Johnny started. How had this person come into possession of that blade which he had given to Cio-Cio-San? That Cio-Cio-San would not give it away, he was certain. What then had happened? Had it been stolen from her, or was this strange interpreter, who had doubtless just now saved his life, Cio-Cio-San herself? It seemed unbelievable, yet his mind clung to the theory. He would soon know.

Slowly the crowd dispersed. The killing of an Oriental in such a camp as this was merely an incident in the life of the tribe, a thing soon to be forgotten. Two servants of the chief bore the body away. Once more Johnny found himself sitting in the triangle with his interpreter and the Mongol. In his hands he held two knives; one he had drawn from

the heart of the dead man and had cleansed in the snow; the other was the one dropped by the murderer. This last one evidently had been meant for him.

The Mongol was profuse in his apologies, while he lauded to the sky the bravery of the little interpreter. The slain man, he explained, was no member of his company. He was one of three who had camped on the outer edge of the village that very night. Doubtless they had followed Johnny with the purpose of murdering and robbing him. He had sent at once for the other two men, but they had fled. He hoped now that his guests might sleep in peace.

After delivering this message, he bowed himself back through the curtains. Johnny and the interpreter were left alone. It was a dramatic moment. The interpreter's fingers twitched nervously. Once the brown eyes fell upon the knives Johnny held, but instantly they flashed away. Johnny had drawn a freshly lighted fish-oil lamp to his side.

"Friend," said he in a low tone, "you have done me a great service this night. Will you do me but one more?"

"Gladly, most gracious one."

The small head bent low.

"Allow me." Johnny took one of the brown hands, and began rolling up the loose sleeve of the brown-skin parka. The brown face blanched a trifle. He uncovered a sleeve of pink silk, and beneath that a slender brown arm. On the arm, a finger's length beneath the elbow, was a triangular scar.

Johnny sighed, then carefully rolling down the sleeve, dropped the hand.

“It is enough,” he smiled, “you are my old and very dear friend, Cio-Cio-San. You have to-night added greatly to the debt of gratitude which I owe you and can never repay. But why did you come? And why, most of all, are you in disguise? Why are you in Russia at all? Why not in your beloved Japan?”

Cio-Cio-San sighed as if relieved at feeling the mask removed.

“I came to Russia to find a very dear relative who had lived with my family in the interior of Russia before this revolution came upon us. I met Mazie; your so good friend. She pressed me into her service. Who could refuse? I was glad to be of help.

“Then, because there was no Japanese man who could speak for you to the Mongols, she asked me to go. And, because it is unsafe for a woman to go on such a journey, undisguised, I dressed as a man. So, there you have it all. I am glad you know, you are a man of great honor. You will not tell others. You will protect me from them.” There was no question in her voice.

Johnny put out his hand in silence. Her small brown one rested in his for a moment.

Then in drowsy silence they sat by the sputtering lamp until the tinkle of bell, the clatter of harness, the shout of drivers, and the distant lowing of cattle, told them it was another day.

That day’s business was quickly brought to a close. Before the sun was high in the heavens, Johnny found himself once more tucked beside his interpreter in the cutter, slowly following his Russians, who drove a splendid herd of cattle over the snow-clad fields and hard-packed roads toward Vladivostok. Johnny owned that herd. Soon it would

be supplying nourishment to the hungry little ones.

The return journey was crowded with recollections of other days, of those days when he and Cio-Cio-San had followed the glistening trail to the far Northland. But, as the spires of the cathedral in the city loomed up to greet him, Johnny's mind was filled with many wonderings and not a few misgivings. He was coming to the city of eastern Russia which more than any other had seen revolt and counter-revolt, pillage and sudden death. In that city now, starvation and disease stalked unmolested. In that city, the wary Japanese military police maintained order while many a rampant radical lurked in a corner to slay any who did not believe in his gospel of unlimited freedom and license. Into that city Johnny must go. Every man in it craved gold and food, and Johnny had both. He would use it for the good of the sufferers, if he was given time. But those who rob and kill, do not wait. He was troubled about Mazie. He had trusted gold to her care. Had he acted unwisely; subjected her to needless perils?

He thought of the Oriental who had attempted to take his life back there in the Mongol's camp. There had been a strong resemblance between this man and the band of men who had attempted to rob Mine No. 1. Had they secured reindeer and made their way to Vladivostok? If so, they would dog his trail, using every foul means to regain possession of the gold. And Mazie? If they had entered the city, had they discovered that part of the gold was in her hands? He shivered at the thought of it.

At last, leaving the cattle in a great yard, surrounded by a stone fence, some five miles from the outskirts, he drove hurriedly into Vladivostok.

CHAPTER XIV

NEARING THE CITY OF GOLD

The creature for which Dave had gone on a double-quick hunt, after the balloon had landed on the desert island, was a reindeer. He had probably crossed over on a solid floe from the mainland. It was his last crossing. Soon Dave came back dragging two hundred pounds of fresh meat behind him.

“No more ‘gold fish’ in cans,” he exulted. “No more evaporated milk and pickled egg. We eat, Jarvis, we eat!”

“That’s fine,” smiled Jarvis, “but what’s all the words you been spillin’ about this bein’ America?”

“Oh!” laughed Dave. “That was something of a joke, though this island really does belong to old U.S.A. Captain DeLong, an American, whose ship was crushed in the ice near this island, was its first discoverer. He claimed it in the name of his country and christened it Bennett Island. It says that in the message he left in his cairn. But that don’t feed us. I’m starved. There’s driftwood on the beach. C’mon.”

Soon they were roasting strips of delicious venison over a crackling fire. Supper over, they lay down with faces to the fire and talked over prospects for the future. The stranger was with them, but had little to say. He seemed puzzled at the unusual circumstances of the journey and was constantly asking when they would return to the native village at the mouth of the river.

“Evidently,” said Dave, after a long and fruitless attempt to draw from him any account of his life

with the Orientals in the mine, “the rap he received on his head blotted out all memory of those days. If we can’t get that particular stretch of memory in working order, we may never know how Frank Langlois was killed, nor who it was that sent us strange messages on phonographic records and moving-picture films. I’m hoping his memory’ll come back. A sudden shock may bring it round at any time.”

Their conference regarding the future resulted in a determination to wait for a change of wind which would insure them a safe trip to the mainland. In the meantime, Dave would prepare the chemicals for immediate inflation of the balloon and Jarvis would study over the Japanese puzzle of a gasoline engine which would not respond to his touch.

Jarvis’ work netted nothing. Three days later an onshore wind arose, and the balloon, wafted upward on its gentle crest, brought the explorers back to the mainland.

“Land! Land! And the City of Gold!” exclaimed Jarvis, as the evening clouds lifted and gave them a momentary view of that strange golden gleam which for so long had haunted their dreams.

Once before, many months ago, the two of them had neared the spot on an ocean craft, but duty to marooned comrades had called them back. Now they had only themselves to think of, and the City of Gold, if city it be, would offer to them a haven of refuge.

What wonder that their hearts beat wildly as they caught its gleam and realized that in a very few moments they would be landing within a quarter of a mile of that mysterious city, which, according to the

natives whom they had met long ago, did really exist as a place of many people and much gold.

“Pull the cord! Pull the cord!” shouted Jarvis excitedly. “We’re nearin’ shore.”

He had spoken the truth. As Dave gripped the cord attached to the gas valve on the balloon and in his imagination heard the hiss of escaping gas and felt the drop of the balloon, his thoughts sobered. After all, what did they know about these strange people? What sort of treatment would they receive from them? If they landed they might, in less than an hour, be dead. Might it not be better to allow the balloon to rise and to attempt a journey back to some Russian town? But instantly he realized that this gale which was coming would carry them to the heart of Bolsheviki Russia. What chance would they have there?

“Pull the cord! Pull the cord!” insisted Jarvis.

Mechanically, Dave’s hand came down. The hiss of air was followed by the sagging drop of the car. The die had been cast.

For an hour, after admitting the white man’s dog to his secret mine, Pant sat listening for any sound that might tell of his discovery. After this, heaving a sigh of relief, he turned at once to the work that lay before him. He realized that whatever he did must be done soon.

Dragging the newly acquired batteries back to where the others were lined up along the wall, he attached one of them to the circuit, then threw in the switch which should set the buzz-saw mining machine into operation. An angry spit and flare was his only reward.

Nothing daunted, he cut in another battery, then another. As he touched the switch after attaching the third battery, a loud whirring sound rewarded him.

“Eureka! I have found it!” he cried, leaping high in air. “Now we win!”

The dog barked loudly at this singular demonstration, but since the vault-like mine was sound proof, it mattered little how noisy was his rejoicing.

The cutting machine was instantly set in operation. The sing of the wheel against the frozen earth was deafening. The earth-tremble, started by the machinery, could not fail to make itself felt outside the mine. But when he realized that only the yellow men knew the cause of such a tremble and that they were many miles from that spot, making their way south with dog team or reindeer, Pant had little fear. He would find his way to the mother-lode, would melt snow from the inside of the bank by the mine’s entrance, would wash out the gold; then, if only he could evade the Russians and the Chukches, he would begin the southward journey.

Hour by hour, the stacks of dark brown cubes of frozen pay dirt grew at the sides of the mine. Hour by hour, the yellow glistened more brightly in the cubes. Yet he did not come to the mother-lode. He slept but little, taking short snatches now and then. Sometimes he fell asleep at his task. One thing began to worry him; the gasoline was running short. With no gasoline to run his motor, there could be no electric current, no power.

Now and again he fancied that men were prowling about the snow-blocked entrance. He knew these were only fancies. Sleepless days and nights were

telling on his nerves. When would the rich pay come?

At last, while half asleep, he worked on the upper tiers of cubes, there came a jarring rattle which brought him up standing. The wheel had struck solid rock. This meant that there was a ledge, a former miniature fall in the river bed. At the foot of this fall, there would be a pocket, and in that pocket, much gold. The gasoline? There was yet enough. To-morrow he would clean up the mother-lode. Then he would be away.

He stumbled, as in a dream, to his blankets, and, wrapping them about him, fell into a stupor that was sleep and more.

As the balloon, in which Dave Tower and Jarvis rode, drifted toward the shore of the mainland, Dave, shading his eyes, watched the yellow gleam of the City of Gold darken to a purplish black, then back to a dull gray.

“Man, it’s gone. I ’ates to look,” groaned Jarvis. “It’s gone, the City of Gold.”

Dave had been expecting something like this to happen. “Probably the surface of some gigantic rock, polished by wind and rain, reflecting the rays of the sun,” was his mental comment. He did not have the heart to express his thoughts to Jarvis.

They drifted on. Suddenly Dave dived into the cabin and returned with a pair of powerful binoculars. He turned these on the spot where the shining City of Gold had been.

What he saw brought an exclamation to his lips. It died there unuttered. “After all,” he thought to himself, “it may be nothing, just nothing at all.”

What he had seen was still brownish gray in color, but instead of the flat even surface of a rock broken here and there by irregular fissures, he had seen innumerable squares, placed as regularly as the roofs of a house. “Nature does not build that way. Man must have had a hand in it. Here’s hoping.” Such were his mental comments as he saw land rise up to meet them. Were they nearing an inhabited land?

He did not have long to wait for the answer. As the balloon drifted in over the land, figures ran across the snow, in evident pursuit of the drifting “sausage.”

Jarvis, who had taken the glass, let out a roar. “It’s ’uman’s, me lad, ’uman bein’s it is, and if it’s no one but the bloody, bloomin’ ’eathen, I’ll be glad to see ’em.”

He was right. As the anchor, catching in a claybank, jerked the balloon to a sudden halt, they could see the people racing toward the point where the car was sure to land.

Dave’s mind was in a whirl. First his right hand gripped his automatic, next it hung limp at his side. What manner of people were they, anyway? If that broad flat surface of little squares meant the roof of a building, then these certainly were not natives, Chukches or Eskimos. Those always lived in houses of deer skin or snow. And, if it was a house, what an immense thing it must be. A hundred feet long, perhaps two hundred, and half as wide.

There was little time for speculation. The balloon carriage dropped rapidly. Their daft professor hung to the rail, babbling incoherent things about returning to the mouth of the Anadir. Jarvis was silent. Evidently there was but one thing to do; to trust themselves to the tender mercies of these

people.

As the cabin bumped the snowy tundra, Dave sprang over the rail, followed by Jarvis, who assisted the still feeble professor.

They found themselves at once in the midst of a curious-eyed group of people. These, with their long beards and droll clothing and droll manners, made Dave feel as if he were another Rip Van Winkle entering a land of dreams.

In the crowd there were some twenty men, slowly straggling in. There was a woman of middle age, and beside her a girl of about sixteen years, evidently her daughter. Dave's eyes approved of the girl, and though she was a stranger to his tongue, she did not fail to find an immediate means of letting him know that she looked upon him with much favor.

All these people were dressed in skins, fawn skins for the most part, though there were occasional garments of leather. The garments were not cut at all after the manner of Chukches or Eskimos. The girl wore a skirt and a loose middy-like jacket of white buckskin, the skin of which had been split thin. The garments suited her wonderfully well.

Dave had concluded, before one of them spoke, that they were Russians. When the oldest man of the group attempted to address him, he knew his guess to be correct, though he understood not one word of what was being said.

"But what," he asked himself, "are these people doing here so far within the Arctic Circle, and how do they live?"

Having made it evident that he did not understand their language, he awaited further attempts at

conversation. Other languages were tried with no success, until a man of thirty years or past suddenly said:

“Do you speak English?”

Dave could have wept on his shoulders for pure joy. What he did do was to extend his hand with a hearty, “Put her there, old chap, that’s just what I do!”

“You must be hungry,” said the new-found friend.

“We could eat,” admitted Dave.

“Come this way.”

Having made sure that the balloon was in a safe position, Dave and Jarvis, assisting the professor, followed their host round a point of rock and up to a row of cabins on the southern side of the hill. Having entered one of these, they were invited to sit down while the professor was helped to a room in the rear and tucked into bed.

“Now, gentlemen,” said the stranger, “we can offer you only venison and fresh sweet potatoes for your main course. You will perhaps not mind that. But in the matter of salads, we can give you a little choice. Will you have head lettuce or sliced cucumbers?” He smiled genially.

Dave looked at Jarvis; Jarvis stared at Dave. Was this man jesting? Head lettuce and cucumbers in mid-winter, inside the Arctic Circle? What a rank impossibility! Yet the man did not smile.

“Mine’s ’ead lettuce an’ a little whale blubber,” laughed Jarvis.

“And yours?” smiled the host, turning to Dave.

“S-s-same,” stammered Dave,

"'E's a jolly sport," sighed Jarvis, as the man went out. "Next 'e'll offer strawberries for dessert."

Imagine their utter astonishment when the man returned presently with a wooden tray heavily laden with food, and on it, not only two heaping wooden bowls of head lettuce, but two smaller bowls of luscious red strawberries, and beside each of these, a little wooden pitcher of rich cream.

"Sorry we have to offer our food in such plain dishes," smiled the host. "We have experimented with pottery but have had no success as yet." He bowed himself out of the room.

"Dave, old pal," said Jarvis, "don't move, don't speak to me. Don't wake me up. I'm 'aving such a beautiful dream."

CHAPTER XV

TRAPPED

The day following his locating of the mother-lode, Pant worked feverishly. Hardly four hours had passed when he found himself digging away the heart of the snowbank that blocked the entrance to his cave and melting it that he might wash the pans of rich gold that were now being thawed from the cavity beneath the one-time river falls.

“Going to be a rich haul,” he whispered to his dog, “richer than Mine No. 2, not so rich as No. 1, but rich enough all right. And if we can make our getaway, Oh, boy!”

Only one thing troubled him as he worked. Not having been outside at the time the blizzard was piling snow about the entrance to the cave, he could not tell the exact depth of the snowbank; could not be sure that he was not removing too much of the snow and leaving too thin a crust above.

This did not worry him greatly, however. The hard-packed snow would not crumble in easily. So he cut away at it until there was a hollow space at the mine’s entrance twenty feet long and half as wide.

Meanwhile, he was panning the pay dirt and putting it away in carefully sewed, split walrus-skin sacks. At times, he paused to rub his hands together like Midas, as he stowed away another sack on the top of a small sled which was hidden in a corner. On this sled were a sleeping-bag and a little food. When their work was completed and the gold all loaded on, he and the dog would harness themselves to this sled and steal out into the night. If they were successful in evading the Bolsheviki, the natives, and the little yellow men, they would hurry on to the south where there was a reindeer station. There he would barter his watch and other valuables for two sled deer. He would hate parting with the dog, but he could not take him with the reindeer.

The mine had been fairly stripped of its wealth and the sled loaded down with gold, when, as he drank his coffee, munched his hard biscuit, and thought things through, he was startled by a growl from the dog. The next instant there came the dull thud of falling snow-crust, followed by the jarring thump of

a heavy body. A startled expression uttered in Russian brought Pant to his feet with his hand on his automatic.

Realizing that one of the Russians had blundered upon the snow above the entrance, that it had caved in with him, and that the only chance of safety was in "getting" that Russian before he made his escape, he dashed down the mine. An unfortunate step threw him to the floor. This lost him the race. On reaching the spot, he found the Russian had vanished.

"Well, old pal," he said, addressing the dog, "that means we gotta get out, and mighty quick, too. That fellow's not coming back alone. Bolsheviki'll be swarming up here like bees in less time than it takes to tell it."

He stood silent for a moment. Then he sprang into action.

"I've got an idea!"

Seizing the long knife from a shelving rock at the side of the entrance, he began cutting cubes of snow from the bank. Working along the edge of the rocky cliff, where the bank was thickest, he soon had a side tunnel well started. He worked with feverish haste. It was only a matter of moments until the whole Bolshevik band would be upon him. To come out into the open was to invite death. To hide away in the side cavity in the snow with his gold, to wait until they had all entered the mine, then to burrow his way out and make his escape, seemed his only hope.

When he had tunneled into the bank ten or twelve feet and hurriedly arranged some blocks for closing the opening, he raced to the back of the mine for his sled. He had just made a grab for the draw-strap,

when there came a sound from the entrance.

He was trapped. They had come. His heart skipped a few beats. How many there were, he could not tell, but more than enough. He must act and act quickly, and, even so, all seemed lost. On one thing he was determined; he would not abandon the gold save as a last resort.

The dog, exercising an almost human sagacity, uttered not a single growl, but hung close to his master's side.

Exerting all his strength, the boy threw the heavily laden sled upon his back; then, in a crouching posture, he began making his way toward the entrance. There was no light, yet he made his way without a second's hesitation, round little piles of frozen earth and over heaps of stone and gravel. Not a rock was loosed, not a sound made by his soft, padded footsteps, as he moved swiftly along the passage.

Now he was a quarter way to the entrance, now half. No definite plan of action had entered his mind. He knew only that, in some way, he must make good his escape.

Suddenly a light flared. A match had been struck. A bearded face flickered behind it in the shadows, then another and another. There followed a steadier gleam of light.

"A candle!" the boy whispered in despair.

He shrank back into the deeper shadows. The procession of grizzled giants moved forward with caution. Soon they were twenty feet from him and then only ten. It seemed inevitable that he should be seen.

The moment for action had arrived. In his right hand was a heavy lump of frozen pay dirt. With a sure twist of the wrist he sent this crashing into the candle. Amid the curses of the men, the candle snuffed out. The next instant, there came a thundering crash. Pant had overturned a whole tier of pay dirt cubes.

In the midst of the confusion that followed, he made his escape. Scorning his snow-den, in which he was to have hidden, he scrambled out of the main entrance and, with the sled shooting on before him down the steep incline, headed straight toward the ice-blocked ocean.

It was but a matter of moments until he found himself effectually lost in the labyrinth of ice piles and up-ended cakes on that endless expanse of ice that lined the shore.

Breathing more easily, he sat down upon his sled, and, after digging into his scant food supply, opened a can of frozen beans. These he shared with his dog. Having eaten, he took up his tireless march to Vladivostok.

These things had been happening to him while his former companion, Johnny Thompson, was threading his way through the ice floes to Vladivostok. While Johnny was completing his journey and making his trading trip to the wandering city of Mongols, Pant was hurrying southward. This passage was uneventful. It so happened that, the very day on which Johnny Thompson was about to re-enter this Russian city of many dangers and mysteries after his visit to the Mongols, Pant, coming from an opposite direction, was also entering.

It will not, I am sure, seem strange that Johnny at

this very time found himself longing for this companion and his protection. And, of course, since Johnny was known to have gone to Vladivostok, it will not seem strange that Pant was wondering if he would be able to locate him there.

You will observe that the “clan is gathering.” The little band for a time so widely and strangely separated are moving toward a common center, Vladivostok. Pant and Johnny are at the city gates. But Dave and Jarvis, far in the north, are only hoping. If they can get the balloon afloat and can manage the engine, Vladivostok is to be the air-port of their dreams.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CITY OF GOLD

The head lettuce, strawberries, and the cream which Dave Tower and Jarvis saw before them on the wooden tray in the cabin of the mysterious Russian were part of no dream, but a glorious reality. Their palates testified to that fact in prompt order.

“But where’d they come from?” inquired Dave, smacking his lips.

“Don’t ask,” grumbled Jarvis. “It’s enough they’re ’ere.”

Dave did ask and he did receive a reply. They had hardly finished their meal, when the friendly stranger was at hand, ready to show them the village.

The cabins they had seen were ordinary affairs, built of driftwood. But as they rounded a corner of rock, they were confronted by a very different scene. Beyond them stretched the broad, low roof of what appeared to be a vast greenhouse. And indeed that was exactly what it was. That another such greenhouse did not exist anywhere in the world, they were soon to learn.

“The Golden City,” murmured Jarvis.

“But the glass?” exclaimed Dave. “Where did you get it?”

“Not a square inch of glass in it,” smiled their host. “Come inside.”

Soon they breathed the peculiar, tropical dampness that fills every greenhouse. All about them were green things growing. To the right of them, prodigious potato plants thrived in beds of rich earth; to the left were beds of radishes, head lettuce and onions. Over their heads, suspended in cleverly woven baskets of leather, huge cucumbers swung aloft, their vines casting a greenish light over all. Far down the narrow aisle, numerous varieties of plants and small fruits were growing. Close beside them ran a wall of stone, which, strangely enough, gave off a mellow heat. Along the wall to the right ran a stone trough, and, in this, a murmuring stream of water went glittering by.

“Tell us the answer to this fable,” whispered Dave. “We are all ears, oh Wise One!”

“There’s not much story to tell,” said the host. “A political exile in northern Russia, having been farmed out as a slave to a trader, was carried with his master, against their wishes, on the angry waters of the great Lena River to the shores of the Arctic Sea. They struggled along the seashore until they came to this place, and here, for a time, they tarried.

“The exile was learned in many sciences. He perceived at once the vast possibilities of this place as a hostage for escaped exiles. A warm spring, flowing winter and summer, sprang from the rocky hillside; a ten-foot vein of coal cropped out from that same hill. Limestone rock promised material for plaster; an extraordinary deposit of rock rich in mica promised windows. Put your hand on the window beside you.”

“Mica,” murmured Dave, as he took his hand away.

“Mica,” repeated his host. “All our windows are double and made of mica.”

“Well, after facing many dangers, this exile and his master made their way back to the land in which the Czar and his nobles have condemned many honest and good people to live as slaves because of their beliefs. He went back to dream and to tell of his dreams to his friends. At first these doubted, but one by one they too began to dream. From that they took to planning and preparing. All manner of seeds were gathered and hoarded. Clothing and food were saved. One night, twenty-eight of them disappeared. They have never returned; they are here. This is the work of their hands. We live, as you see, with all the material needs supplied. We have a reindeer herd which supplies us clothing, milk and meat. This greenhouse gives us the rest.”

“You are Communists?” said Dave.

“We were Communists in theory, back in old Russia. Here we are Communists in practice.”

“Why do you not go back to old Russia now?”

“What? Leave this for exile?” The man’s face showed his astonishment.

It was Dave’s turn to be surprised. Could it be that this man and his companions did not know that, for more than two years, the Communists had been in power over the greater part of old Russia?

“Don’t you know,” he said slowly, “that the Czar is dead, that his government has been overthrown, that the Communists hold sway in your land and all exiles have been called home?”

“What?” The man sank weakly to a seat, covering his face with his hands.

“Why!” exclaimed Dave in astonishment. “Why don’t you leap and shout for joy? Your Communist theory has been put into practice.”

“And Russia? She must be in ruins!” He groaned miserably.

“Not quite that bad,” smiled Dave, “though God knows it has been bad enough.”

“Communism!” exclaimed the man springing up. “Communism will never do. It drives men to dry-rot. Here we have had Communism at its very best, a group of friends, each doing the best for the whole group at all times, but we have not been happy. We have been of all men the most miserable. Each one of us would give a year of this for one week spent in honest competition for a livelihood with other men.

“Competition! Competition! I cannot tell how it is,

but I know it to be a truth now; honest competition is not only the life of trade, it is the life of man and without it man will die of inactivity which comes when interest dies.

“But my country, my poor Russia, my brave Russia! She will yet see her error and build up a government like your own, a free government of the people, a government not without its faults, but ever striving toward perfection. She must do it!”

He sank back exhausted by this impassioned utterance. For some time he did not move nor speak. At last he roused himself.

“And now, my friend,” he said, “you in your great balloon will take us somewhere, I am sure.”

“If we can get our engine started,” said Dave.

“We will help you.”

At that moment Jarvis, who had wandered down the aisle, came storming back.

“’Oo’s the two ’eathen that just went out the door?” he demanded.

“Just some natives that came here and wished to stay,” smiled the Russian. “When they came, they had been pretty badly torn up by a polar bear. We nursed them back to life and they have been so grateful for it that they have never left.”

“Good reason!” stormed Jarvis. “Gold! Gold! The City of Gold.”

“We have a little gold here,” smiled the Russian, “but precious little good it’s ever been to us.”

“Now mind y’. I’m a tellin’ y’,” stormed Jarvis, striking his fists together, “them’s no natural ’eathen. Them’s two spies from far down the coast. A polar

bear me eye! An ice anchor it was that cut 'alf a ear off'n the little one. Them's the lads that Dave and me 'ad the tussle with on the submarine more'n a year ago. I tell you they're no natural 'eathen an' I 'ates to think what'll 'appen to 'em if I meets up with 'em again."

Dave sprang to the door through which the men had just passed. They were not to be seen. The incident was disturbing. There could be little doubt but that Jarvis had identified the men as the same pair that had locked them in a prison made of walrus tusks the year before, and had fought with them later on the submarine. Now if they had recognized Jarvis, what might they not do? He continued to think of this while the Russian showed them through the most wonderful greenhouse in all the world.

"You see," said their host, "we built this against the side of the cliff, at the point where the soft coal mine cropped out. We cut away enough of the coal to make room for a great stone furnace. From this furnace we ran heat tunnels of stone through the entire greenhouse. The work is all very simple. Coal is mined and loaded on trucks of wood, run on wooden tracks. From there it is shoveled into the furnace. We ran stone troughs through the greenhouse connecting them to the warm spring. This furnishes water for use in our homes, and for irrigating the rich soil we have brought from the tundra. At the same time, it keeps the air here sufficiently moist."

"What a garden of Eden!" exclaimed Dave. "And you would leave all its safety and comfort to take a chance in the great disturbed world? Why will you be so foolish?"

The man turned a look of compassion upon him.

“You will never know why, because you have never known what it is to live without the push and pull of many human beings striving for mastery all about you. In a well-populated land, this would all be very wonderful. Here it is nothing. Nothing!”

As he spoke, the man bent over and opened a small box made of heavy driftwood.

Having peered into its depth for a second, he uttered a sharp cry:

“The gold! It is gone!”

“Was there much?” asked Dave.

“Around a hundredweight. Who could have taken it? Yesterday we would have given it away for a song. To-day, with hopes of deliverance at hand, it is indispensable. Who could the robbers be?”

“The ’eathen, the unnatural, bloody, bloomin’ ’eathen,” exclaimed Jarvis. “Find them and you find the gold.”

The “unnatural ’eathen” were not to be found. Had the earth opened up and swallowed them, they could not have more completely vanished from the region of the City of Gold.

When a search far and wide had been made for them, with no results, attention was turned to the problem of a journey to other lands, for, even robbed of their gold as they were, these former exiles were eager to escape and to try their hand at making a living in more populated lands.

Three days were spent in futile attempts to start that oriental engine. When this was given up, it was decided that they should inflate the balloon, await a favorable wind and try their fortunes at drifting back

to the land whence they came.

Not one of them but knew the perils of such an undertaking. Should the wind shift, they might be carried out over the sea. On the other hand, they might be forced to make a landing in the heart of the vast, barren lands, and in that case, they must surely starve. The balloon cabin would carry them all, but there would be little room left for provisions.

Not one of them hesitated. Boldest of them all was the beautiful girl who stuck close to Dave's side, watching his every move with big admiring eyes, and, at spare times, learning to speak bits of his language.

The balloon was at last inflated. Provisions were loaded. The wind was beginning to shift. They would be off in a few hours. All were expectant. A tense nervousness gripped them, a sensation composed half of hope and half of despair. They were eating the evening meal in the common mess hall by the cliff when a sound utterly strange to the Russian's ears smote the silent air. It was a thundering pop-pop-pop.

Dave turned white. Jarvis sprang to his feet with a wild howl on his lips.

"The 'eathen! The bloody, bloomin' 'eathen. It's the engine."

He was right. It was the engine. It was thundering out its wild song of power and speed, and its voice was growing more distant.

As they crowded from the mess cabin, they saw the balloon hanging in midair. Watching they saw it move slowly southward. On the bridge by the cabin stood two small figures.

“The ’eathen! The bloody, bloomin’ ’eathen!” cried Jarvis.

“We might have known,” groaned Dave. “They’re oriental and so is the engine.”

CHAPTER XVII

KIDNAPPED

On entering the city, after leaving his cattle in safe keeping at the farmyard, Johnny Thompson went directly to Red Cross headquarters to inquire for Mazie.

“Mazie!” exclaimed the matron in amazement, “we thought she went with you. We have not seen her since you left.”

Johnny sank weakly into a chair. His head whirled. Mazie gone for five days! What must be her fate? In this city of opposing factions, with its dens of radicals, thieves and murderers, and, above all, the gang of “yellow men” from the north, what chance could there be of ever seeing her? Yet he would! At least he would give his life in a search for her!

Hurriedly sketching to the nurse his plans for the refuge for homeless ones and informing her of the whereabouts of the cattle and the remaining gold, he dashed from the room. Armed with his automatic, he

went at once to the heart of the most treachery-ridden city in the world. Where was he to search for her? He had not the remotest notion. Suddenly, thinking of the telegrams she meant to send to Hong Kong ordering rice and sweet potatoes and of the visit she had meant to make to the owner of the unoccupied hotel, he decided to attempt to trace her steps at these places.

At the telephone station, the agent, referring to his reports, established the fact that she had sent the telegrams. At the office of the owner of the hotel she was unknown. No American woman had been to him to rent the hotel. That much then was settled; somewhere between the telegraph office and the hotel owner's place of business she had been spirited away.

Johnny began tracing out the course she would probably have taken. A narrow side street offered a short cut. Being familiar with the city and in a hurry, she would take that. Half way down this street, Johnny came upon a familiar door. It was that of Wo Cheng, the Chinese costumer. He had had dealings with Wo Cheng during his sojourn in this city as a soldier. Here was a man he could trust. He paused by the door and gave the accustomed signal of those other days.

In answer to his rap, the door opened a crack.

"Oo-we! Johnny!" grunted the Chinaman, opening the door, then closed it quickly as Johnny entered.

"You come buy?" he rubbed his hands together.

"No come buy?"

"Wanchee cum-show?"

"No wanchee cum show. No wanchee money."

“Oo-we!” grunted the Chinaman again.

Johnny’s eyes were restlessly roving over the array of garments that hung on either side of a narrow aisle. Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation and sprang to a corner and examined a woman’s dress.

“Wo Cheng,” he demanded almost fiercely, “where you come buy this?”

“Oo-we!” squealed the Chinaman. “Can’t tell mine, not savvy mine.”

“You woncha savvy!” Johnny hissed between tight set teeth.

“Mebby can do,” murmured the Chinaman hurriedly. “No see. Mebby now see. See Jap man, this one, velly small Jap man. This one think mine.”

“Good,” said Johnny. “Now perhaps you can tell me what kind of a dress he took away?”

“Mebby can do.” The man, fumbling among his garments, came upon a plain, Russian, peasant type of dress.

“Take look, see,” he murmured. “One, two, three, allesame.”

“All right, you no speak see mine, savvy.”

“No speak,” murmured Wo Cheng.

“Good-bye,” said Johnny bolting out of the door.

“Mazie’s dress,” he mumbled to himself. “They have transformed her into a Russian peasant girl for their safety, but where have they taken her?”

As he rounded the corner, an old familiar sound smote his ear. The rat-tat-tat of a machine gun. It was accompanied almost at once by another and yet another.

"An uprising and a battle!" he muttered savagely. "Worse and worse. What chance has a fellow got? Do well enough if I escape the firing squad."

The two oriental spies in the balloon they had stolen from Dave Tower and Jarvis were not as fortunate as in the first instance they seemed to be. There was practically no wind. The engine was slow in getting the bulky sausage under way.

Suddenly as the watchers, with despair written on their faces, gazed skyward, they saw something slip from the cabin deck and drop like a plummet. A silvery thread appeared to follow it.

"The anchor and the cable!" exclaimed Dave. "It's got away from them. If it catches—C'mon."

He was away like a rocket. Uneven surface, slippery hills of snow meant nothing to him. He was racing for freedom from threatening years of exile.

Jarvis, followed by the Russians, came on more slowly. As they mounted a low hill they saw the cabin of the balloon give a sudden lunge.

"She's caught!" panted Jarvis. "'Ere's 'opin' she 'olds."

In another second, a groan of despair escaped his lips. It was true that the anchor had caught in a frozen bank of earth and was holding fast, but the men were bending over the rail working with the upper end of the steel cable. If they could loosen it or file it, causing it to snap, no human power could bring them back. And if they got away with the balloon—.

But after despair, came hope. There sounded the pop of an automatic. Six shots came in quick succession.

“Dave’s a wonder with an automatic!” exclaimed Jarvis.

The men worked on. Would they accomplish their task? Every person in the little group of watchers held his breath.

Crack-crack-crack. The automatic spoke again. Doubtless Dave had moved to a position more directly under the cabin.

“’E’s got ’em! ’E’s got ’em!” exulted Jarvis, throwing his cap in air.

One of the Orientals was seen to waver, then to fall backward. The other instantly dropped from sight.

“The windlass,” commanded Jarvis. “Some of you bring it up. We’ll pull ’em down alright, alright! We’ll get the bloody, bloomin’ ’eathen yet.”

A wooden windlass, made for bringing the balloon to earth in case of storm, was brought forward, while Dave and Jarvis watched for any indication of further activity on the part of the robbers.

Once the windlass was fastened to the bank by means of ice anchors, the task of bringing down the balloon was a matter of moments.

Two cowering wretches were found in one corner of the cabin.

“I’m for ’aving an end to ’em at once and immediately,” stormed Jarvis.

“No! No!” smiled Dave. “They’re just the boys we want. They are going to tell us why the engine won’t go for us.”

“And if they do?”

“If they do, we’ll leave them the greenhouse, coal

mine, heating plant and all in exchange for that bit of information."

Jarvis seemed quite content with any arrangement which promised to put a few thousand miles between him and the "bloody, bloomin' 'eathen."

After the wound of the one who had been winged by Dave's automatic had been dressed, Dave locked himself in the cabin with the yellow men.

It took him three hours to secure the desired information, but in the end it came.

The wounded Oriental showed him a secret eccentric bearing through which the crank shaft operated. When this bearing was properly adjusted the engine worked perfectly, when it was out of adjustment, it would not work at all.

When Dave had operated the engine for an hour, he sent the prisoners back to the greenhouse, where they were released. The gold they had stolen was found hidden away in a locker of the balloon cabin.

In another hour, the balloon, with all on board, gently urged on by the wind, ably assisted by the now perfect engine, was making good time toward Vladivostok.

As Johnny Thompson hesitated at the head of the street, listening to the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, uncertain which way to turn, he heard the distant thunder of an engine in midair. Gazing away to the north, he saw a dirigible balloon circling in search of a likely lighting place.

"I wonder which faction that bird belongs to?" he murmured.

If he had but known the truth, a little ray of hope

would have pierced the gloom of his leaden sky, for this balloon was none other than the one he had seen carry his good friends, Dave and Jarvis, away from the mines, some weeks before. They had made the journey in safety. Twice they had been obliged to land to escape the fury of a storm. Wild reindeer had made up for the scantiness of their food supply. Now they were about to alight and enter the city of many mysteries.

Pant had already entered. The clan was gathering, gathering for stirring events, for the development of new mysteries and the solving of old ones. Soon, all unknown to one another, Dave and Jarvis, Pant, Johnny Thompson, Cio-Cio-San, and Mazie would be in the same city—a city seething in the tumult of revolt.

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER MACHINE-GUN FIRE

By the time Johnny had left the den of Wo Cheng, night had come down upon the city. It was by the light of a golden moon that he saw the balloon hanging in the sky. The balloon, however, interested him little. He was thinking only of Mazie. He had decided to make his way to a corner of the city occupied by Japanese people of doubtful character.

To do this he must leave the street he was in and, after turning to his right, go straight ahead for ten blocks.

He was not long in discovering that the carrying out of his plans would put him in the greatest danger. The cross-street was jammed with Russians who fled from the raking fire of machine guns set somewhere at the head of that street. Johnny could still hear their rat-tat and the sing of bullets. Men, women and children ran through the street. An aged peasant woman, her face streaming with blood, toppled toward him, then fell. He sprang to assist her, but two of her own people came to her aid.

“What’s the rumpus?” He hazarded the question in English.

“Nobody knows,” said a clean-faced young Russian. “It’s the Japs shooting. Can’t tell why. Probably just nervous. Nothing was done against them, though St. Christopher knows it’s plenty we’d like to do. They want this peninsula, and if keeping us fighting among ourselves will give it to them, they’ll win it.”

“I’ve seen their spies two thousand miles from the last sign of civilization.”

“They are everywhere, like fleas.”

“I’ve got to get at some of them. Think they kidnapped a friend of mine,” said Johnny. “But how can I get past this?”

“I know a closed private alley. Want to try that?”

“I’ll try anything.”

“Come.”

The man led the way half the distance back to Wo Cheng’s door, then suddenly opened a door in a wall.

“See. Through there.”

He closed the door behind Johnny. Johnny looked about. Straight on before him lay a path, to the right of which was a garden. At the end of the path was another door.

“Must open on another street,” he muttered to himself. “Touchy sort of business this prowling through a strange city at night with a big row on foot. Can’t be helped though.”

He reached the door only to find it locked. The wall was not high. A gnarled pear tree offered him a lift to the top. He had soon scaled it, and was looking up and down the narrow street that ran on the other side.

“Not a soul in sight,” he whispered.

He listened for a second. The rattle of machine-gun fire had ceased. Now and again there came the crack of a rifle or automatic.

Johnny slipped off the wall. His feet had hardly touched ground when a shot rang out and a bullet sang past him. Dodging into the deep-set doorway, he whipped out his automatic and waited. Footsteps were approaching.

“Jig’s up,” he muttered. “Worse luck for it!”

His hands fumbled at the door. In a second there came a dull thud on the other side of it. He had pushed his automatic through a latch-string opening.

“No use getting caught armed,” was his mental comment.

In another moment the Japanese military police were upon him. In vain he told them that he was an American, in vain presented his papers. They had

seen him climb over the wall; that was enough. Many Russian radicals spoke English very well, and, as for papers, they could be forged. Besides, were there not many American radicals, soldiers of fortune, here assisting in the attempt to overthrow their rule. He should go to prison at once, and "To-morrow!" There was something so sinister about the way they said that "to-morrow" that it sent the cold chills racing down his spine.

Down one narrow street, then another and another they went until, eventually, they came to a frowning stone-wall with an iron-grating set deep in an arched ante-room. Through this doorway he was thrust and the lock clanged behind him.

He was not alone. He had hardly taken a step before he stumbled upon a prone form. Many men and some women were sprawled about on the stone floor.

"Amerikaner," came in a shrill whisper. "Lie down here."

Johnny obeyed.

"Got you, did they," said the voice with a Russian accent.

"Yes, and for what?" said Johnny.

"In this land we do not ask for what. It is enough that we are got."

"What's to-morrow?" asked Johnny suddenly.

"To-morrow we will be shot."

"That's cheerful," said Johnny. "What time?"

"Before dawn."

"That's rotten soon," said Johnny. "I don't think I'll stay to see it."

“I guess you will,” said the stranger.

There seemed nothing more to be said, so the two new-found friends lay there in silence. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Johnny’s were mostly of Mazie and of the thousands of starving children they had hoped to aid.

“It’s sure rotten luck,” he ejaculated at last.

Just at that moment the great iron gate was heard to creak on its hinges. Other wretches were being pitched inside to await their doom.

The door was so deeply set in the wall that nothing could be seen of the newly arrived prisoners.

As Johnny lay wondering what they were like, he heard a shrill whisper:

“Johnny! Johnny Thompson!”

“Here!” he whispered back.

There were sounds of a person crawling toward him, the curse of a Russian who had been disturbed in what was probably his last sleep; then Johnny’s lips uttered a low exclamation. He had caught the dull gleam of a golden ball of fire.

“Pant,” he murmured.

“It’s me, Johnny.” The boy’s hand touched him.

Johnny was dumfounded. “How’d they get you?”

“Beaned one of them cops, I did. Saw ’em glom onto you. Wanted t’ horn in with you.”

“Guess you horned in once too often,” said Johnny huskily. “This is a death-watch we’re keeping, and it’s for ourselves.”

“We better blow the coop then.”

“If we can.”

“We can.” Pant’s tone was decided and convincing.

For some time after that the two boys spoke of their experiences since last they met.

“You see, I got it cached out yonder three hills and a hike outside this burg. She’ll tip the beam at a century weight and a half, maybe more. All pure gold, you bet. And it’s all for the little Russian kids, every bit. I ain’t held back a copper.”

Johnny, knowing that Pant was speaking of the gold he had taken from Mine No. 3 and had sledded nearly three thousand miles to Vladivostok at risk of his life, could only grip his hand and swallow hard.

“Gee!” said Pant, when Johnny had finished his story. “We’ll have to find that Mazie of yours, and quick. But we’ve got to get out of here first.”

He was ready with his plans after a moment’s thought. Prisoners were being brought in every ten or fifteen minutes. There were no lights in the prison and the military police carried none. The place was pitch dark. He did not say that he could see well enough, but, from past experiences, Johnny knew that he could. They would creep close to the iron gate and, when it was opened to admit others, they would crawl out on hands and knees.

“And if luck’s bad, then this,” said Pant, slipping a small dagger into Johnny’s hand.

“You got one, too?”

“Sure.”

“All right.”

They crept close to the gate and waited. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes of dreadful silence went by with

never an approaching footstep. Johnny's heart beat painfully. What if the last poor victim had been brought to await his doom? Dawn would be breaking, and then the firing squad. Cold perspiration beaded his forehead.

But hold! there came again the shuffle of feet. A lone prisoner was being brought in.

"Now!" came in a faint whisper. A steady hand gripped his arm. He felt himself led forward. A foot scraped his knee. It was the incoming prisoner. He uttered no sound.

They were now on the outside of the gate. Flattening themselves against the wall, not daring to breathe, they waited.

Turning, the police clicked their heels and marched away. Outside, before the open anteway, marched a solitary guard. Once they were past him, they were safe.

Fortune favored them. The man hazarded a moment off duty to step into a door for a cup of coffee. In that moment, they were away.

"Easy," said Pant. "Should have brought your friend, the Roosian."

"He wouldn't come," said Johnny sorrowfully. "Said it wasn't any use."

"All we got to do's keep hid till mornin'."

They escaped from the alley through a gate into a garden, and there, in a shed against the side of a brick building, they waited for the morning.

As they lay there half awake, there came to Johnny's ears the words of a ridiculous popular song of other days:

"Oh, Johnny! Oh, Johnny! How you come on,
Oh, Johnny! Oh, Johnny! How you come on!"

"Sounds like Mazie," whispered Johnny, starting to his feet. "It *is* Mazie. They've got her hid up there!"

Pant pulled him back to earth. "If it's Mazie, they've got men watchin'. No good to spill the beans. Tomorrow night we'll make up a bunch an' git 'em."

Realizing the wisdom of these words, Johnny quieted his mad desire to rush the place at once, and sat down.

Just as the first red streaks striped the sky, there came a loud volley of shots.

Johnny plugged his ears and shivered. Perhaps they were executing the prisoners. Who could tell?

CHAPTER XIX

JOHNNY GOES INTO ACTION

The first precaution taken by Johnny and Pant, after leaving the shed in the back garden, was to hasten to the water-front where their friends, the rough and ready mining gang, were still living in a cabin near the gasoline schooner. Selecting eight of these, Johnny detailed them to work in two shifts of four each, to lurk about the building where Mazie was

being confined. They were instructed to guard every exit to the place, and, if an attempt was made by the kidnappers to change base, to put up a fight and, if possible, release Mazie.

Johnny realized that time was precious, that not one moment must be lost in going to the rescue of his girl-pal, but in this land of many soldiers and little law it was necessary to move with caution. When darkness came, with his gang of miners and a few other hardy fellows, he could rush the place and bring Mazie away without being caught in the hopelessly entangled net of Russian law.

Pant appeared to have lost all interest in the case. He went prowling along the water-front, peering into every junk-shop he came to. What he finally pounced upon and carried away, after tossing the shopkeeper a coin, amused Johnny greatly. It was a bamboo pole, like a fishing-pole only much larger. He estimated it to be at least five inches across the base.

“Now what in time does he want of that?” Johnny asked himself.

Arrived at the Red Cross station, Pant disappeared with his pole inside an old shed that flanked the Red Cross building. Johnny saw little more of him that day. Pant went out after lunch to return with a cheap looking-glass and a glass cutter. There was an amused grin lurking about his lips as Johnny stared at him, but he said nothing; only returned to his shed and his mysterious labors.

As darkness fell, the clan gathered. The miners in full force and variously armed with rifles, automatics, knives and pick-axes came in from the water-front. Pant came out from his hiding. He carried on his back a bulky sack which did not appear to weigh him

down greatly. It gave forth a hollow rattle as he walked.

“Sounds like skulls,” said one miner with a superstitious shudder.

The little band received a welcome shock as they rounded the corner of the street by the cathedral. They chanced to be beneath a flickering street-lamp when some one shouted:

“Hello there, ’ere’s the gang!”

It was Jarvis and Dave Tower. Having alighted from the balloon and procured for their exiled friends comfortable quarters in a place of refuge, they had gone out in search of Johnny Thompson, and here they had found him.

“What’s up?” demanded Dave.

Johnny told him the situation in as few words as possible, ending, “You want in on it?”

“Yer jolly right,” exclaimed Jarvis, “and ’ere’s ’ate to the bloomin’ ’eathen!”

So, strengthened by two good men, the party moved cautiously forward until they were only one block from their destination.

“Split up into two sections,” commanded Johnny in a whisper. “One party under Dave go up street beyond the place, the other under Jarvis stay down street. Pant and I will drop back into the garden and try to establish connection with the prisoner. We’ll get the general lay of things and report. If a shot is fired, that will be a signal to rush the place.”

They were away. Creeping stealthily forward, they entered the gate to the garden. Then, skulking along the wall, they made their way toward the shed where

they had spent part of the previous night. Twice the hollow things in Pant's sack rattled ominously.

"Keep that thing quiet, can't you?" snapped Johnny. "What y' got it for, anyway?"

"Show you in a minute," whispered Pant.

So they crept on toward the goal. No lights shone from these back windows. The place was dark as a tomb. Somewhere in the distance a clock slowly chimed the hour. A shiver ran over Johnny's body. Things would happen soon.

"All I ask is five minutes; five minutes, that's all," whispered Pant, as he lowered his sack cautiously to the ground and unlaced its top.

Dimly through the darkness Johnny could see him draw several long objects from the bag. When the bag was empty, he began setting these objects end to end. Evidently they were fitted with sockets, for, once they were joined together, they stuck in place. He soon had them all together. Johnny surmised that this was the reconstructed bamboo pole with all obstructing joints taken out; but what Pant meant to do with it, he could not even guess. He watched with impatient curiosity.

"A speaking tube," he whispered at last. "It's a good idea."

"Mebby; but that ain't it," breathed Pant.

"Well, whatever it is, be quick about it. Somebody out front may spill the beans any time. If the military police rush the boys, the game's up."

Pant paid no attention. His movements were as steady and cautious as a cat stalking a robin.

"Now, I guess we're about ready," he murmured. "Be

prepared for a dash. There's stairs to the right. I may start something." His words were short and quick. Evidently his heart was giving him trouble.

"All right," Johnny stood on tip-toes in his agitation.

Suddenly Pant reared his tube in air. Then, to Johnny's utter astonishment, he dropped on one knee and peered into an opening at one side of it.

"A periscope!" whispered Johnny. "But what can you see in the dark?"

For a moment Pant did not answer. His breath came in little gasps.

"She's there," he whispered. "She's tied. There's terror in her eyes. There's something crawling on the floor. Can't make it out. We gotta get up there quick."

All at once a shot rang out. It came from the window. The tinkle of broken glass sliding down the bamboo tube told that the periscope was a wreck.

"Periscope's done for. They saw," whispered Pant. "Now for it. Up the stairs. They gave our signal. Boys will rush the place from the front. C'mon!"

They were off like a flash. Up the stairs they bounded. A door obstructed their way. Johnny's shoulder did for that.

Crashing into the room they found a candle flaring. Two persons were struggling to free themselves from imitation dragon costumes. It had been these who frightened Mazie.

"Snap dragon!" exclaimed Johnny, seizing one of the beasts by the tail, and sending him crashing through the panels of a door.

"Snap dragon!" He sent the other through the

window to the ground below.

“I’ll teach you!” He glared about him for an instant. Then his eyes fell on Mazie. Without attempting to free her, he gathered her into his arms and fairly hurled her through the door where he and Pant had entered. Then he took his stand in front of it.

He was not a moment too soon, for now the place was swarming with little yellow men. In the light of the candle, their faces seemed hideously distorted with hate. At once Johnny went into action. His right took a man under the chin. No sound came from him save a dull thud. A second went jibbering over the window-sill. A third crashed against the plaster wall. Pant, too, was busy. Everywhere at once, his wicked little dagger gleamed. But, suddenly, two of the strongest sprang at him, bearing him to the floor.

Leaping at these, Johnny gripped them by their collars and sent them crashing together. His breath was coming in hoarse gasps. He could stand little more of this. Where were the boys?

As if in answer, there came the crash of arms on a door and Jarvis burst into the room. He was followed by the whole gang.

“Ow-ee! Ow-ee!” squealed the yellow men. “The white devils!”

In another moment the room was cleared of fighters. Only three of the enemy remained. They were well past moving.

“Pitch ’em after ’em,” roared Johnny. “Tell the cowards to carry away their wounded.”

The wounded men were sent sliding down the stairs.

“Now then, git out. Scatter. I never saw any of you

before. See!”

There was a roar of understanding from the men. Then they “faded.”

Leaping to the back stairway, Johnny picked Mazie up in his arms and carried her down to the garden. Here he cut the bands that held her hands and feet.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes.”

“C’mon then. Gotta beat it.”

They were away like a shot.

A half-hour later they were joking over a cup of chocolate and a plate of sweet biscuits in the Red Cross canteen. Mazie was still dressed as a Russian peasant girl.

“I say, Mazie!” exclaimed Johnny. “You make a jolly fine-looking peasant!”

“Thanks!” said Mazie. “But if that’s the way they treat peasant girls, I prefer to be an American.”

“What did they do to you?”

“Nothing, only tried to frighten me into telling where the gold was. It’s not so much what they did as what they would have done.” She shivered.

“Did they get any of the gold?”

“Not an ounce. It’s all stowed away here at the Red Cross.”

“Good! Then we’ll have our haven of refuge yet.”

“If we live.”

“And we will.”

They lapsed into a long silence, each thinking many

thoughts.

CHAPTER XX

SOME MYSTERIES UNCOVERED

The days that followed were busy ones for Johnny Thompson and Mazie. The tumult in the city had died away. There was a chance for work. Feed must be bought for the cattle from Mongolia; the hotel was to be rented. Through the good services of the Red Cross, the most needy of the refugees were to be assembled, and, when the ship from China arrived, the work of unloading was to be directed.

Several busy days had passed before Johnny had time to think of looking up his gang. At this moment he was seated at the head of a seemingly endless table on each side of which was an array of pinch-faced but happy children.

When he started out to find the men the first one he came upon was Dave Tower. Dave began telling him of the strange case of the professor who had been with the Orientals at the mines, and had drifted north with them in the balloon.

“His mind seems all right now and he is well as any man could be, but he either cannot or will not tell us a thing of his life with the Orientals up there at the mines,” said Dave. “There are some things we would all like to know. Strange case, I’d call it.”

“Yes, but there have been stranger. Say!” Johnny

slapped him on the shoulder. “You bring him around to headquarters to-night. I’ve got an idea.”

“Righto. We’ll be there. So long till then.”

When Dave arrived with the professor, he found that the stage had been set for a moving-picture show. He was glad of that; it had been months since he had seen one. He was hardly prepared, however, for the type of show it was to be.

The room was darkened. Beside him, sat the professor. There came the peculiar snap-snap of the carbons as the power came on. The next instant a dazzling light fell upon the screen, and out into that light there moved a half-score of little yellow men. Some were working industriously at a machine which cut cubes of earth from the bank before them. Others were carrying the cubes away and piling them.

Professor Todd moved uneasily. He put his hands to his eyes, as if to shut out the scene. Then unexpectedly he cried out, as if in pain:

“My head! My head! He struck me.”

“Who struck you?”

Dave looked about. There was no one near them.

“The yellow man; he struck me,” cried the professor. Then he covered his face with his hands and his body swayed back and forth with suppressed emotion.

Johnny moved silently toward them.

“It’s coming back to him. When he regains control of himself, he will know everything. It was the flash of light and the familiar scene that did it. Of course, you know that is the film he sent out to us when he was a prisoner in the mine.”

What Johnny said was quite true. When the man was again in the cool out-of-doors, he was able to give a full account of his life with the Orientals. They had made him prisoner because they feared to have him at large. Other white men might appear, as indeed they had, and he might reveal their plans. He had known in a vague sort of way that some mysterious deathtrap had been set in Mine No. 1, and when, through a crack in the wall to his prison, he saw the white men arrive, he determined to attempt to warn them. This he did by singing songs to the Orientals and, at the same time, making phonographic records to be sent rolling down the hill later.

"But you don't actually know how Frank Langlois was killed?" There was disappointment in Dave's tone.

"No, I do not," said the professor.

"Oh, as to that," said Johnny. "Didn't Pant tell you?"

"Pant? I haven't seen Pant since the fight to save Mazie."

"Isn't he with the bunch?"

"No—nor hasn't been. Jarvis says his goggles were smashed in the fight. Says he saw him without them. No one's seen him since."

"You don't think they got him?"

"Not Pant. He can't be got, not by a mere band of Orientals. But what's this he told you about Langlois?"

"Oh! He stayed up there, you know. He went into Mine No. 1 and prowled round a bit. Found where the yellow bunch had run a high-tension insulated wire through a crevice in the rock to the head of that

pool into which Langlois drove his pick. They ran a second wire to the base of the pool and connected the two to a heavy battery circuit. They had discovered that the pool rested upon a chalk rock which was good insulation. There was, therefore, no ground to it. But the damp spot on which Langlois was standing when he swung the pick was grounded. The minute he struck the pool the whole current passed through his body."

"Electrocuted!"

"Yes."

"Well, that's settled," said Dave, after a moment's reflection. "Now what about Pant? Where is he?"

"Let's go ask the gang."

In a little cabin close to the water-front, they found the gang. They were all there but Pant.

"Where's Pant?" asked Johnny.

"On his way to America," said one of the men. "Saw him on the steamer not a half hour ago. He told me to tell you he'd left the gold for you up at the Red Cross."

"Have his goggles on?"

"Nope."

"And his eyes?" The men, leaning forward eagerly, listened for the answer to this question.

"Steamer was pullin' out; I was too far away to see 'em."

"Oh!" The men sank back in disgust.

"As for that," said Jarvis, "I seen 'im plain enough the night of the scrap. 'E'd 'ad 'is goggles smashed to bits. I saw 'is eyes plain as I see yours."

The men leaned forward again.

“An’,” Jarvis went on, “an’ ’ope I may die for it, if ’e ain’t got one panther eye. I saw the pupil of it shut up in the light just like a cat’s.”

“You’ll die for it, or say you’re wrong, anyway, about the panther part,” smiled Johnny.

“D’ y’ mean to say I lied?” demanded Jarvis hotly.

“Not exactly that. You saw what you expected to see, that’s all. As far as the panther part is concerned, you’re dead wrong.”

All eyes were now turned on Johnny.

“You see,” he smiled, “the pupil of a panther’s eye does not contract to a line in the light as a house cat’s does. It contracts to a smaller circle, just as yours and mine do. Go consult your encyclopedia. Ask any hunter of big game, or keeper of a zoo, and he’ll tell you that I’m right.”

The laugh was plainly on Jarvis, and he got it from everyone.

“All the same,” he maintained stoutly, “that don’t prove that Pant ain’t got a cat’s eye, an’ you all know ’e ’as or ’e’s a devil. ’E can see in the dark.”

There was no disputing this point, and there the argument dropped.

Two months later, having got the haven of refuge well established and turned over to the management of the Red Cross, Johnny and Mazie were on a Pacific liner bound for America. Johnny might return at some future time to the Seven Mines, but for the present he had had quite enough of Russia.

The gang were all on board. With Dave went two persons—the beautiful young exiled Russian girl and

her mother.

As the steamer lost the last glimpse of land, Johnny drew from his pocket a wireless message he had received that morning. It read:

“Come over. Get in on something good. Secret Service and a three-ring circus, Pant.”

“Secret Service and a three-ring circus,” repeated Johnny. “Sounds pretty good. Worth looking up. Pant’s a queer one. Bet he’s found something different and mysterious. I’ll bet on that.”

He had. But this story must be told in our next volume.

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