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Title: The Crimson Flash

Author: Roy J. Snell

Release date: December 28, 2012 [EBook #41721]

Language: English

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRIMSON FLASH \*\*\*

E-text prepared by  
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A Mystery Story For Boys

*The*  
**Crimson Flash**

Roy J. Snell

*Mystery Stories for Boys*

**The  
Crimson Flash**

*By*  
**ROY J. SNELL**



The Reilly & Lee Co.  
Chicago

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[9]

## THE CRIMSON FLASH

### CHAPTER I JOHNNY LOSES A FIGHT

In the center of the "big top," which sheltered the mammoth three-ring circus, brass horns blared to the rhythmic beat of a huge bass drum.

Eight trained elephants, giant actors of the sawdust ring, patiently stood in line, awaiting the command to make way for the tumblers, trapeze performers, bareback riders and the queen of the circus.

The twins, Marjory and Margaret MacDonald, just past ten years of age, and attending their first circus, stood pressed against the rope not an arm's length from the foremost elephant. Suddenly the gigantic creature reached out a beseeching trunk for a possible peanut.

Sensing danger, Johnny Thompson, the one-time lightweight boxing champion, who, besides their maid, stood guard over the millionaire twins, sprang forward. Quick as he was, his movement was far too slow. Marjory jumped back; there was an almost inaudible snap. The elephant stretched his trunk to full length—then in apparent anger uttered a hollow snort.

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A broad bar of sunlight shooting over the top of the canvas wall was cut by a sudden flash. The flash described a circle, then blinked out at the feet of three waiting young women performers.

With a cry of consternation on his lips, Johnny Thompson sprang over the ropes. Bowling over an elephant trainer in his haste, he bolted toward the three girl acrobats at whose feet the miniature meteor had vanished.

Again his agile movement was far too slow. Six pairs of rough hands tried to seize him. Johnny's right shot out. With a little gurgle, an attendant in uniform staggered backward to crumple in the sawdust. A ring-master, leaping like a panther, landed on Johnny's back. Dropping abruptly, Johnny executed a somersault, shook himself free and rose only to butt his head into the stomach of a fat clown.

And then what promised to be a beautiful scrap ended miserably. A razor-back, or tent roustabout, struck Johnny on the head with a tent stake. Johnny dropped like an empty meal sack. At once four attendants dragged him beneath the tent wall into a shady corner. There, after tying his hands and feet, they waited for his return to consciousness.

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Little by little Johnny came to himself, and began to fumble at his fetters.

"Wow! What hit me?" he grumbled, as he attempted to rub his bruised head.

"You fell and struck your head on a tent pole," grinned a razor-back.

"Some scrapper, eh?" a second man commented.

"Dope or moonshine?" asked a third.

"Neither," exclaimed Johnny. "It was—darn it! No. That's none of your business. But I'll get it back if I have to follow this one-horse show from Boston to Texas."

[12]

"You won't follow nothin' just at present," scowled the razor-back, eyeing his shackles with satisfaction. "That guy you hit had to go to the show's surgeon."

"Wow!" ejaculated his companion. "And I bet this little feller doesn't weigh a hundred and ten stripped! How'd he do it?"

"Let me loose and I'll give you a free exhibition," grinned Johnny, as he settled back, resolved to take what was coming to him with a smile.

He was not a quarrelsome fellow, this Johnny Thompson. He had studied the science of boxing and wrestling because it interested him, and because he wished to be able to take care of himself in every emergency. He never struck a man unless forced to do so. The emergency of the past hour had spurred him to unusual activity. In a way he regretted it now, but on reflection decided that were the same set of conditions to confront him again, his actions would probably be the same. His one regret was that he had been unable to attain his end. His only problem now was to recover lost ground and to reach the desired goal.

Late that night, with stiffened joints and aching muscles, he made his way to the desolate spot where but a few hours before a hilarious throng had laughed at the antics of clowns and thrilled at the daring dance of the tight-rope walker.

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In his hand Johnny held a small flashlight. This he flicked about here and there for some time.

"That's it," he exclaimed at last. "This is the very spot."

Dropping on hands and knees he began clawing over the sawdust. Running it through his fingers, he gathered it in little piles here and there until presently the place resembled a miniature mountain range. He had been at this for a half hour when he straightened up with a sigh.

"Not a chance," he murmured, "not a solitary chance! One of those circus dames got it; the trapeze performer, or maybe the tight-rope walker. Which one? That's what I've got to find out."

[14]

Suddenly he leaped to his feet. A long-drawn-out whistle sounded through the darkness.

"The circus train! I've just time to jump it. I'll stow away on her. How's that? A circus stowaway!"

Johnny dashed across the open space and, just as the train began to move, caught at the iron bars of a gondola car loaded with tent equipment. Climbing aboard, he groped about until he found a soft spot among some piles of canvas, and, sinking down there, was soon fast asleep. He had had no supper, but that mattered little. He would eat a double portion of ham and eggs in the morning. It was enough that he was on his way. Where to? He did not exactly know.

When Johnny leaped over the rope in the circus tent the previous afternoon, in his rush toward the lady performers, he had dodged behind the trained elephants. This took him out of the view of the twins, Marjory and Margaret. So interested were they in the elephants that they did not miss him, and not having noted the sparkle in the sunlight which sent Johnny on his mad chase, they remained fully occupied in watching the regular events of the circus.

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The elephants had lumbered into the side tent, the tight-rope walker had danced her airy way across the arena, the brown bear had taken his daily bicycle ride, and the human statuary was on display, when Marjory suddenly turned to Margaret and said:

"Why, Johnny's gone!"

"So he is," said the other twin. "Perhaps he didn't like it. He'll be back, I'm sure."

The maid was quite accustomed to looking after the millionaire twins, so when Johnny failed to put in an appearance at the end of the performance, they passed out with the throng, the maid hailed a taxi and they were soon on their way home.

It was then that Marjory, looking down, noticed that the fine gold chain about her neck hung with two loose ends. Catching her breath, she uttered a startled whisper:

[16]

"Oo! Look! Margaret! It's gone!"

Margaret looked once, then clasped her hands in horror.

"And father said you mustn't take it!"

"But it was our first, our very first circus!"

"I know," sighed Margaret. "And wasn't it just grand! But now," she sighed, "now, you'll have

to tell father.”

“Yes, I will—right away.”

Marjory did tell. They had not been in the house a minute before she told of their loss.

“Where’s Johnny Thompson?” their father asked.

“We—we don’t know.”

“Don’t know?”

“We haven’t seen him for two hours.”

“Well, that settles it. I might have known when I hired an adventurer to look after my thoroughbreds and guard my children that I’d be sorry. But he was a splendid man with the horses; seemed to think of ’em as his own; and as for boxing, I never saw a fellow like him.”

[17]

“Yes, and Daddy, we liked him,” chimed in Marjory. “We liked him a lot.”

“Well,” the father said thoughtfully, “guess I ought to put a man on his trail and bring him back. Probably went off with the circus. But I won’t. He’s been a soldier, and a good one, I’m told. That excuses a lot. And then if you go dangling a few thousand dollars on a bit of gold chain, what can you expect? Better go get your supper and then run on to bed.”

That night, before they crept into their twin beds, Marjory and Margaret talked long and earnestly over something very important.

“Yes,” said Marjory at last, “we’ll find some real circus clothes somewhere. Then we’ll have Prince and Blackie saddled and bridled. Then we’ll ride off to find that old circus and bring Johnny Thompson back. We can’t get along without him; besides, he didn’t take it. I just know he didn’t.”

“And if he did, he didn’t mean to,” supplemented Margaret.

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A moment later they were both sound asleep.

As Johnny Thompson bumped along in his rail gondola, with the click-click of the wheels keeping time to the distant pant of the engine, he dreamed a madly fantastic dream. In it he felt the nerve-benumbing shudder which comes with the shock of a train wreck. He felt himself lifted high in air to fall among rolls of canvas and piles of tent poles, heard the crash of breaking timbers, the scream of grinding ironwork, and above it all the roar of frightened animals—tigers, lions, panthers, tossed, still in their cages, to be buried beneath the wreckage, or hurled free to tumble down the embankment. In this dream Johnny crawled from beneath the canvas to find himself staring into the red and gleaming eye of some great cat that was stalking him as its prey. He struggled to draw his clasp knife from his pocket, and in that mad struggle awoke.

With every nerve alert he caught the click-click of wheels, the distant pant of the engine. It had been nothing more than a dream. He was still traveling steadily forward with the circus.

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Yet, as he settled back, he gave an involuntary

shudder and, propping himself on one elbow, stared through the darkness toward the spot where, in his dream, the great cat had crouched. To his horror, he caught the red gleam of a single burning eye.

Instantly there flashed through his mind the row of great caged cats he had seen that day. Pacing the floor of their dens, pausing now and again for a leap, a growl, a snarl, they had fascinated him then. Now his blood ran cold at the thought of the creature which, having escaped from its cage, had crept along the swinging cars, leaping lightly from one to the other until the scent of a man had arrested its course. Was it the Senegal lion? Johnny doubted that. Perhaps the tawny yellow Bengal tiger, or the more magnificent one from Siberia.

All this time, while his mind had worked with the speed of a wireless, Johnny's hand was struggling to free his clasp knife.

[20]

Once more his eye sought the ball of fire. Suddenly as it had come, so suddenly it had vanished. He started in astonishment. Yet he was not to be deceived. The creature had turned its head. It was moving. Perhaps at this very moment it was crouching for a spring. A huge pile of canvas loomed above Johnny. A leap from this vantage, the tearing of claws, the sinking of fangs, and this circus train would have witnessed a tragedy.

He strained his ears for a sound, but heard none. He strove to make out a bulk in the dark, but saw nothing. Could it be a tiger or mountain lion, jaguar or spotted leopard? Or was it the black leopard from Asia? A fresh chill ran down Johnny's spine at thought of this creature. Other great cats had paced their cages, growled, snarled; the black leopard, smaller than any, but muscular, sharp clawed, keen fanged, with glowering eyes, had lurked in the corner of his cage and gloomed at those who passed. It was this animal that Johnny feared the most.

If he but had a light! At once he thought of his small electric torch. Grasping it in his left hand, he leveled it at the spot where the burning eye had been, and gripping the clasp knife in his right, threw on the button.

[21]

As the shaft of light flashed across the canvas, he stared for a second, then his hand trembled with surprise and excitement.

"Panther Eye, as I live!" he exclaimed. "You old rascal! What are you doing here?"

The former companion, for it was not a great cat, but a man, and none other than Panther Eye, fellow free-lance in many a previous adventure, stared at him through large smoked glasses, a smile playing over his lips.

"Johnny Thompson, I'll be bound! Some luck to you. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for something."

"Same here, Johnny."

"And I'll stay with this circus until I find it," said Johnny.

"Same here, Johnny. Shake on it."

Pant crawled over the swaying car and extended a hand. Johnny shook it solemnly.

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"Slept any?" asked Pant.

"A little."

"Better sleep some more, hadn't we?"

"I'm willing."

"It's a go."

Pant crept back to his hole in the canvas; Johnny sank back into his. He was not to sleep at once, however. His mind was working on many problems. Not the least of these was the question of Panther Eye's presence on the circus train. This strange fellow, who appeared to be endowed with a capacity for seeing in the dark, was always delving in dark corners, searching out hidden mysteries. What mystery could there be about a circus? What, indeed? Was not Johnny on the trail of a puzzling mystery himself?

Having reasoned thus far he was about to fall asleep, when a single red flash lighted up the peak of the canvas pile, then faded. He thought of the red ball of fire he had taken for a cat's eye. He remembered the yellow glow he had seen when with Pant on other occasions. His mind attacked the problem weakly. He was half asleep. In another second the click-click of the car wheels was heard only in his dreams.

[23]

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## **CHAPTER II BOXING THE BUNCO- STEERER**

From time to time during the night, Johnny awoke to listen for a moment to the click-click of the wheels. Once he thought he caught again the play of that crimson flash upon the canvas. Once he remained awake long enough to do a little wondering and planning. How had Pant, his friend of other days, come aboard this circus train? What was he seeking? True, Johnny had received a letter from this strange fellow some time before, in which he spoke in mysterious terms of a three-ring circus and the Secret Service, but Johnny had taken this very much as a joke. What possible connection could there be between circus and Secret Service? Finding the problem impossible of solution, he turned his attention to his own plight. He had started upon a strange journey of which he knew not even the destination. In his pocket was a five-dollar bill and some loose change. He must stick to this circus until he had regained a certain precious bit of jewelry. How was he to do that? One of the three lady circus performers had it, he felt sure, but how was he to find out which one? Should he be so fortunate as to discover this, how was he to regain possession of it?

Hedged about as the life of the circus woman is, by those of her own kind, the task seemed

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impossible, yet somehow it must be done. It had been the utmost folly for Marjory to wear her mother's engagement ring, set with an immense solitaire, dangling on a chain, when they attended the circus, yet she had done it, and Johnny had promised to watch it. He had kept a sharp lookout, but had been caught unawares when the thief had proved to be an elephant, who doubtless had taken it for something to eat, and, having scratched his trunk upon it, had tossed it to his lady friends of the human species, to see what they thought of it.

"Rotten luck!" Johnny grumbled, as he turned over once more to fall asleep.

[26]

By a succession of sudden stops and starts, by the bumping of cars, and the grinding of brakes, Johnny realized that at last they had come to a stopping place. When the starting and stopping had continued for some time, he knew the city they were entering was a large one. Opening his eyes sleepily, he propped himself up on one elbow and tried to peer about him. It was still dark. A stone wall rose a short distance above the cars on either side. Above and beyond the wall to the left great buildings loomed. From one of these, towering far above the rest, lights gleamed here and there. The others were totally dark.

"Big one's a hotel, rest office buildings," was Johnny's mental comment. "But say, where have I seen this before?"

Lifting himself to his knees, he looked down the track in the direction they had just come. A tower pointing skyward appeared to have closed in on their wake. Turning, he looked in the opposite direction. A dull gray bulk loomed out of the dark.

"Chicago," he muttered in surprise. "Of all places! We've come all the way from that jerk-water city of Amaraza to put on a show in good old Chi. Can't be a bit of doubt of it, for yonder's the Auditorium hotel, back there's the Illinois Central depot, and ahead the Art Institute. Grant Park's our destination. The situation improves. We'll have some real excitement. Pant will be tickled pink.

[27]

"Pant! Oh, Pant!" he whispered hoarsely. "Pant!" He spoke the name aloud.

Receiving no answer, he climbed over the canvas piles to the spot where Pant had been.

"Gone," he muttered. "Didn't think he'd shake me like that!"

He dropped into gloomy reflections. What was his next move? He had counted on Pant's assistance. Now he must go it alone.

"Oh, well," he sighed at last, "I'll just hang around and let things happen. They generally do."

Before darkness came again things had happened—several things, in which the fortunes of Johnny Thompson rose and fell to rise again like bits of cork on a storm-tossed sea.

[28]

Before putting his hand on the iron rod to lower himself to the cinder strewn track, he gave

himself over to a moment of recollection. He was thinking of this strange fellow, Pant. Again he groped his way in the dark cave in Siberia, with Pant's all-seeing eye to guide him. Again he fought the Japs in Vladivostok. Again—but I will not recount all his vivid recollections here, for you have doubtless read them in the book called "Panther Eye." It is enough to say that the incidents of this story proved beyond a doubt that Pant could see in the dark, but as to how and why he was so strangely gifted, that had remained a mystery to the end; and to Johnny Thompson it was to this time as great a mystery as in the beginning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pant had left the circus train at Twenty-second Street. He had drawn his cap down to his dark goggles, and hurrying over to State Street, boarded a north-bound surface car.

[29]

A half hour later he climbed the last of six flights of stairs, and turning a key in a dusty door, let himself into a room that overlooked the river at Wells Street.

This room had been Johnny Thompson's retreat in those stirring days told of in "Triple Spies." Johnny had turned the key over to Pant before he left Russia. Pant had renewed the lease, and had, from time to time, as his strangely mysterious travels led through Chicago, climbed the stairs to sit by the window and reflect, or to throw himself upon the bed and give himself over to many hours of sleep.

At present he was not in need of sleep. Swinging the blinds back without the slightest sound, he drew a chair to the window and, dropping his chin in his cupped hands, fell into deep reflection. His inscrutable, mask-like face seemed a blank. Only twice during two hours did the muscles relax. Each time it was into a cat-like smile. Just before these moments of amusement there had appeared upon the river, far below, a broad patch of crimson light.

[30]

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning before the circus performance is like the wash of a receding tide. Dull gray fog still lingers in the air. In front of the ropes that exclude visitors a few curiosity seekers wander up and down, but it is behind these lines, on behind the kitchen, mess, and horse tents that the real denizens of the fog are to be found. Here a host of attaches of the circus, and those not definitely attached, wander about like beasts in their cages, or engage in occupations of doubtful character. Here are to be found in great numbers the colored razor-backs, mingled with the white men of that profession. Stake drivers, rope pullers, venders of peanuts and pop, mingle with the motley crowd of sharp-witted gentry who, like vultures following a victorious army, live in the wake of a prosperous circus. Later, all these would sleep, but for the moment, like owls and bats, they cling to the last bit of morning fog.

It was down this much trodden "gold coast" at the back door of the circus that Johnny Thompson found himself walking. He had taken

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his coffee and fried eggs at a restaurant that backed "Boul Mich." He was now in search of Pant, also hoping for things to turn up, which, presently, they did.

So Johnny sauntered slowly along the broad walk bordering the Lake Front park.

Here and there he paused to study the faces of men who sat munching their breakfast. Faces always interested him, and besides, he knew full well that some of the sharpest as well as the lowest criminals follow a circus.

His course was soon arrested by the hoarse half whisper of a man to the right of him. About this man—a white man—was gathered a knot of other men.

"Five, if you pick the black card. Try your luck! Try it, brother. Five dollars, if you pick the lucky card." These were the words the man whispered.

Johnny edged his way to the center of the group. In shady places at the back of great country picnics, or in secluded sheds at county fairs, he had seen this game played many a time, but to find it in a Chicago park seemed unbelievable. Yet, here it was. A broad shouldered man, with an irregular mouth and a ragged ear, evidently badly mauled in some fight, stood with a newspaper held flat before him. On the paper, face down, were three ordinary playing cards. The slim, tapering fingers of the man played over the cards, as a pianist's fingers play over the keys. Now he gathered them all up to toss them one by one, face up, on the paper.

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"See, gents; two reds and a black! Watch it! There it is! There it is! Now, there! Five dollars, if you pick the lucky card! Five to me if you lose."

He shot an inquiring glance toward Johnny. Johnny remained silent.

A short, stout man thrust a five dollar bill into the conman's hand. His trembling fingers turned a card. It was red. With an oath he struggled out of the ring.

"Can't hit it always, brother," a smirky smile overspread the conman's face.

[33]

"Well, now, I'll make it easy. There it is! Leave it there. Who will try? Who will try?"

A young man wearing a green tie passed over a ten dollar bill.

"Make it all or nothing. All or nothing," chuckled the operator.

The youth grinned. His confident finger picked the card. It was black.

"You win, brother, you win. I told you. Now, who'll win next?"

Again he shot a glance at Johnny. Again Johnny was silent.

Twice more the game was played. Each time the conman lost.

"Everybody wins this morning." The conman's fingers played with the cards, and in playing

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bent the corner of the black card ever so slightly upward. Johnny's keen eyes saw it. When the card was turned, he had picked it right. Five times in imaginary plays the conman tossed the cards down and gathered them up. Each time Johnny's eye, following the bent card, told him he was right. Six times he picked the black card correctly. Was the conman drunk? He thought not. His keen eyes studied the circle of faces. Then he laughed.

"Where do you think it is?" The conman bantered.

Johnny pointed a finger at the bent card.

"Why don't you bet?"

Johnny laughed again.

"I bate." A Swede standing near Johnny thrust out a five dollar bill.

He won.

"See?" jeered the conman. "You're no sport. You're a coward." He leered at Johnny.

Johnny's cheek turned a shade redder, but he only smiled.

Again the Swede bet and won.

Again the conman had the word "coward" on his lips. He did not say it.

Johnny was speaking. There was a cold smile on his lips.

"I can tell you one thing, stranger," Johnny squared his shoulders, "I'm not in the habit of allowing men to call me a coward. I'll tell you why I don't play your rotten game, then I'll tell you something else. That man, and that one, and that one and this Swede are your cappers. You had twenty-five dollars between you when I came. You got five from that stranger who left. When one of your cappers won, he passed the money from hand to hand until it came back to you. If they lost it's the same. A stranger has about as much chance with a bunch like you as a day-old chick has in the middle of the Atlantic. But say, stranger, you called me a coward. I'll tell you what I'll do. You've got me topped by seventy-five pounds, and you think you know how to handle your dukes. I'll box you three rounds, and if you touch my face in any round, I'll give you a five-case note, the last one I have. Not bet, see! Just give! You can't lose; you may win. What say?"

[35]

The conman's lips parted, but no sound came. The eyes of his pals and cappers were upon him.

"You wouldn't let the little runt bluff y'," suggested the young capper of the green tie.

[36]

"Oh—all, all right, brother." The conman's voice stuck in his throat. "All right. Somebody fetch the gloves."

A boxing match, or even a free-for-all, is not so uncommon on the back lines of a circus, but it never fails to draw a crowd. It was upon this inevitable crowd that Johnny counted for his backing, should the three rounds turn into a rough and tumble, with no mercy and no

quarter.

Once his gloves were on, he explained to the rapidly growing circle the terms of the match.

"There's no referee, so all of you are it," he smiled.

"Right-O. We're wid ye," a genial Irishman shouted.

"Go to it, kid," a sturdy stake driver echoed.

"Are you ready?"

Johnny moved his gloves to a position not ten inches from his body. With fists well extended, the conman leaped across the ring. The blow he aimed at Johnny's head would have felled an ox, had it landed. It did not land. Johnny had sprung to one side. The next instant he tapped the conman on his ragged ear.

[37]

This appeared to infuriate his antagonist. Perhaps it served to bring back memories of another battle in which he had been worsted. His rage did him neither service nor credit. Time and again he bounded at the elusive Johnny, to find himself fanning air. Time and again Johnny tapped that ragged ear. The conman landed not a single blow. When, after three minutes, a man called time, and the two paused to take a breath, the plaudits were all for Johnny.

As he rested, the beady eyes of the conman narrowed to slits. He was thinking, planning. He had not scored on the first bout, the second would see him a winner.

Instantly upon re-entering the ring he rushed Johnny for a clinch. Taken by surprise, the boy could not avoid it. Yet, even here, he was more than a match for his heavier opponent. Gripping hard with his left, he rained blows on the other's back, just above the kidney. That, in time, made a break welcome.

The conman's game was to clinch, then to force his opponent back to a position where he could land his right on Johnny's chin. This would win his point. More than that, it would enable him to break Johnny's neck, if he chose, and he might so decide.

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Three times he clinched. Three times he received trip-hammer blows on his back, and three times he gave way before his plucky opponent. When, at last, time was called, he fairly reeled to his corner.

There was a dangerous light in his eye as he stepped up for the third round.

"Watch him, kid. He'll do you dirt," muttered the Irishman.

"Keep your guard," echoed another.

Johnny, still smiling, moved forward. His face was well guarded. He was confident of victory.

Twice the conman feinted with his right, struck out with his left, then retired. The third time he rushed straight on. Johnny easily dodged his blows, but the next second doubled up in a knot. Groaning and panting for breath he fell to the earth.

[39]

Eagerly the conman leaped forward. His glove had barely touched Johnny's cheek when a grip of iron pulled him back.

"There's no referee. Then I'm one. An Irishman for a square scrap." It was Johnny's ardent backer.

Panting, the conman stood at bay.

In time, Johnny, having regained his breath, sat up dizzily and looked about.

"Where's the five?" demanded the conman.

Johnny held up his right glove. "I leave it to the crowd if he gets it fair."

"He fouled you wid his knee! He jammed it into yer stummick! A rotten trick as ever was played!" yelled the Irishman.

"Right-O! Sure! Sure! Kill him! Eat him alive!" came from every corner.

Johnny rose.

"We'll finish the round," he said quietly.

"Keep your money," grumbled the conman.

"No! No! No!" came from a hundred throats, for by this time a dense mob was packed about the improvised ring. Chairs, benches and barrels had been dragged up. On these men stood looking over the shoulders of those in front.

Like an enraged bull the conman stood at bay.

"All right," he laughed savagely. "We'll finish it quick."

He leaped squarely at Johnny. Johnny's whole body seemed to stiffen, then to rise. Springing full ten inches from the ground and ten inches forward, he shot out his glove. There came the thudding impact of a master-blow.

The conman rose slightly in the air, then reeled backward into the mob. The point of his chin had come in contact with Johnny's fist.

With characteristic speed, Johnny threw off the gloves, seized his coat and lost himself in the crowd.

He was not ashamed of his part in the affair, far from that. He knew he had given the crook only that which he richly deserved. He was not, however, at that moment looking for publicity, and escape was the only way to avoid it.

In eluding the crowd he was singularly successful. By dodging about the horse tent, and rounding the mess tent, he was able to make his way directly to the shore of the lake. Here he walked rapidly south until he found himself alone. Throwing himself upon the ground, for ten minutes he watched the small breakers coil and recoil upon the shore. Rising, he lifted his laughing blue eyes to the sunshine. Then, scooping up hands-full of the clear lake water, he bathed his face, his chest, his arms.

"Boy! Boy!" he breathed, as he beat his chest dry. "It's sure good to be alive!"

A moment later his face clouded. "But how about

that diamond ring? Oh, you sparkler, come to your daddy!"

With this, he repaired to the show site.

On returning to the rear of the circus tents, he was surprised to be accosted at once by a smooth-shaven, sturdy man with a clean, clear look in his eye.

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"You're the boy that's so handy with his mitts?"

Johnny had a mind to run for it, but one look into those clear eyes told him this would be folly.

"That's what they say," he smiled.

"Shake! I like you for that." The stranger extended his hand.

Johnny gripped it warmly.

"The way you handled that conman wasn't bad; not half-bad. You're a sport; a regular one! The circus boys like a good sport; the real chaps do. How'd you like a job?"

"A—a job?" Johnny stammered. "What kind?"

"Circus job."

"What kind?" Johnny repeated.

"What can you do?"

"I—I—" suddenly Johnny had an inspiration. "Why, I'm the best little groom there is in three states. I could shine up those fat bareback horses of yours till you'd take them for real plate glass."

"Could you? I believe you could, and you're going to have a chance. Millie Gonzales' three mounts have been neglected of late."

[43]

Millie Gonzales! Johnny caught his breath. He had gone fishing and caught a whale the first cast. Millie Gonzales was one of the three circus girls at whose feet the diamond ring had dropped. Perhaps she was the one who had picked it up; who held it among her possessions now. He would know.

"When can I go to work?" he asked unsteadily.

"Right now. I'll take you over to the stables. Stable boss'll give you a suit and some unionalls. You shape up the three and have 'em ready for Millie by two o'clock, in time for the grand parade."

"Of all the luck!" Johnny whispered into the ear of a sleek, broad backed gray a half hour later. "To think that I should have fallen into this at the very start! Perhaps Millie has it. Perhaps she's wearing it on one of those tapering fingers of hers at this very moment. Is she, old boy? Is she?"

[44]

The horse looked at him with eyes that said nothing.

"You won't tell," Johnny bantered. "Well, then, I'll have to find out for myself. Come on, you two o'clock!"

[45]

## CHAPTER III THE FEASTERS SEE A HAUNT

Pant did not return to the neighborhood of the circus grounds until darkness had fallen. Then it was only to go skulking along the beach, and to perch himself at last, owl-like, on a huge pile of sand which overlooked a particular stretch of the beach on which a huge fire of driftwood had been built. The fire had died down now to a great, glowing bed of coals. About the fire eight negroes were seated.

"Razor-backs from the circus," was Pant's mental comment. "Something doing!"

So filled with their own thoughts were the minds of the colored gentlemen that they had failed to note Pant's arrival. Seated there in the darkness, motionless as an owl watching for the move of a mouse, his mask-like face expressionless, his slim, tapering fingers still, Pant appeared but a part of the dull drab scenery.

"Hey, Brother Mose; time to carb de turkey-buzzard," chuckled one of the darkies.

[46]

"Brother Mose" turned half about, stretched out a fat hand and drew toward him a thin object wrapped in a newspaper.

"Sambo," he commanded, "leave me have dat cleavah!"

Sambo handed over a butcher's cleaver.

The next instant the package was unwrapped, revealing a clean, white strip of meat, which had at one time been half the broad back of a porker.

"Po'k chops!" murmured Mose.

"Um! Um! Um!" came in a chorus.

"Ya-as, sir. Now you-all jes' stir up dem coals, an' put dem sweet 'taters roastin', while I does the slicin' an' de cleavin'." Mose drew a butcher knife from his hip pocket.

From a second bulging package on the beach, two of his comrades drew shining yellow tubers, while others stirred up the coals, and raked some out to a circular hole in the sand, which had previously been lined with ashes. Having tossed the coals in, they covered them lightly with ashes, at the same time calling:

"Le's hab dem 'taters!"

[47]

All this time with no observer save the unsuspected Pant, Mose was operating skillfully on that pork loin. With a slab of drift wood as chopping block, he sliced away with the skill of a hotel butcher. In a twinkle, the chops lay neatly piled in heaps on the slab. Then, while no one was looking, he caused a liberal handful of the chops to disappear into the huge pocket at the back of his coat.

Pant's lips curved in a smile. "Holding out," he whispered.



"Dere dey is," exulted Mose, like a rooster calling his brood to a meal. "Dere dem po'k chops is, all carved an' cleaned an' ready fo' de roastin'."

"Um, um, um," chanted his companions in gurgling approval.

Whence had come these pork chops? This question did not trouble Pant. They might have been bought at a butcher shop; then again, they might have been stolen. It was enough for Pant that they were there. He was glad. Not that he hoped to "horn in" on the feast; he had eaten bountifully but an hour before. Nevertheless, he was glad to be here. This little festal occasion suited his purpose beautifully. He had hoped something like this might be going on down here. The pork chops stowed away in Mose's pocket amused him. As he thought of them his former plan changed slightly, his lips twisted in a smile.

[48]

"It's all plain enough," he thought to himself. "Moses and old Lankyshanks, his buddie, have a half hour longer to loaf than the rest of them; that gives them time for a little extra feast. The supplies belong to them all alike, but Mose and Lankyshanks get double portions if—" Here he smiled again.

The preparation for the feast went on. Each man twisted out of tangled wire a rude but serviceable broiler. They joked and laughed as they worked, their dark faces shining like ebony.

"Po'k chops, po'k chops, po'k chops! Um! Um! Um!" they chanted now and then.

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In time word was passed around the circle, and then eight right hands shot out and eight broilers hung out over the coals.

Snapping and sputtering, flaring up with a sudden burning of grease, whirled now this way, now that, the pork chops rapidly turned a delicious brown. The odor which rose in air would have made a chronic dyspeptic's mouth water.

"Po'k chops, po'k chops, po'k chops! Um! Um! Um!"

Twice Pant lifted his eyes toward the stars. Twice he brought them down again.

"Haven't got the heart to do it," he whispered to himself; "I'll take a chance and wait."

The sweet potatoes had been dug from the roasting pit; the feasters had sunk their teeth deep in juicy fat, when Pant was suddenly startled by a groan close at hand.

Without moving, he turned his head to see a colored boy sitting near him.

Recognizing the round, close-cropped bullet head as one belonging not to the circus, but to South Water Street, he leaned over and whispered:

[50]

"Lo, Snowball, what y' doin' here?"

"Same's you, I reckon." The boy showed all his teeth in a grin. "Jes' sittin' an' a-wishin', dat's all."

"Pork chops, huh?"

"Ain't it so, Mister? Ain't dem the grandes' you ain't most never smelt?"

"Sh, not so loud," cautioned Pant. "Maybe there'll be some for you yet. Sort of reserve rations."

"Think so, mebbey?"

Pant nodded.

Then together they sat in silence while the feast went on; sat till the last bone and potato skin had been thrown upon the fast dulling coals.

"Huh!" sighed Snowball. "Hain't no mo'."

He half rose to go, but Pant pulled him back to his seat. Six of the colored gentlemen were wiping their hands on greasy bandanas, and were preparing to depart.

"Reckon me and Lanky'll jes' res' here for a while," grunted Mose.

[51]

"Eh-heh," assented Lankyshanks.

The six had hardly disappeared over the hill when Lankyshanks' eyes popped wide open.

"Mergency rations," he whispered.

With a grunt of satisfaction, Mose handed three pork chops to Lankyshanks, wired his own three to his broiler, stirred up the fire, then began slowly revolving the sputtering chops over the sparkling embers.

For fully five minutes Pant and Snowball, on the sand pile, watched in silence—a silence broken only by an occasional, half audible sigh from Snowball.

The chops were done to a brown finish when Pant suddenly fixed his gaze intently upon the big dipper which hung high in the heavens.

At that precise instant, Mose, uttering a groan not unlike that of a dying man, threw his broiler high in air, rolled over backward, turned two somersaults, then stumbling to his feet, ran wildly down the beach. Having dropped his chops on the coals, Lanky followed close behind. The expression of utter terror written on their faces was something to see and marvel at.

Pant still gazed skyward. Snowball gripped his arm, and whispered tensely:

[52]

"Lawdy, Mister! Look'a dere!"

Pant removed his gaze from the heavens and looked where Snowball pointed, at the bed of dying embers.

"What was it, Snowball?" he drawled. "Why! Where are our friends?"

"Dey done lef'," whispered Snowball, still gripping his arm. "An' so 'ud you. It's a ha'nt, er a sign, er sumthin'. Blood. It was red, lak blood. All red. Dem fellers was red, an' dem po'k chops, an' dat sand, all red lak blood."

"Pork chops," said Pant slowly.

"Yes, sir, po'k chops an' everything. I done heard dat Mose say it were a sign. Dey's be a circus wreck, er sumthin'. Train wreck of dat dere circus."

"Pork chops," said Pant again thoughtfully. "Where did the pork chops go? Why! There is one broiler full on the wood pile. They must have left it there for you."

[53]

"No, sir! Dat Mose done throwed it dere. Dat's how scared he was."

"They won't be back, I guess; so you'd better just warm them up a bit and sit up to the table."

Terror still lurked in Snowball's eyes, but in his nostrils still lingered the savory smell of pork chops. The pork chops won out and he was soon feasting royally.

"Snowball," said Pant when the feast was finished, "would you like to earn a little money?"

"Would I? Jes' try me, Mister!"

"All right. I want five Liberty Bonds, the fifty-dollar kind. A lot of those circus fellows have them, and some of them will sell them, maybe cheap. Don't pay more than forty-five for any. Get them for thirty-nine, if you can. The cheap ones are the kind I want. Here's the money. Don't bet it, don't lose it, and don't let any of those crooks touch you for it. It will take you a little time to find the bonds. I'll meet you right here in two hours."

Snowball rolled his eyes. "Boss, I sho' am grateful fo' th' compliment, but I is plum scared at all dat money."

[54]

"Nobody'll hurt you or take it from you. You're honest. If you do lose it, I'll forgive you. Good-by."

Pant strode rapidly down the beach, leaving Snowball to make his way back to the circus grounds in quest of thirty-nine dollar Liberty Bonds, an article which, if he had but known it, has never existed in legitimate channels of business.

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## CHAPTER IV "PALE FACE BONDS"

After leaving Pant, Snowball divided the money he had been given for the purpose of purchasing Liberty Bonds into five little rolls. These he deposited in five different pockets about his ragged trousers and coat.

"Dere now," he muttered; "dey won't nobody snatch it all from me at oncet."

He first wandered down the back ropes, accosting here and there a colored gentleman who looked as if he might be the proud possessor of a bond.

Some laughed at this bullet-headed youngster,

who claimed to be in possession of enough money to purchase a "sho' nuff" Liberty Bond. Others, with prying eyes, leered at his pockets. These he gave a wide berth. An hour of this sort of thing netted him two bonds at forty-two dollars each.

"Huh," he grunted at last, "these here colored circus folks sho' am plum short on Liberty Bonds. Reckon I'se gwine try some white mans."

[56]

Making his way boldly out to the front of the circus, where a thin crowd filtered in and out, here and there, some few drifting into the side shows, he made straight for a man in uniform who guarded the entrance to the big tent.

"Say, Mister, you all got any Liberty Bonds to sell?"

"Liberty Bonds?" The man started and stared. "Who wants 'em?"

"Me. I do, Mister."

"Say!" The man bent low and whispered. "You see that man selling tickets in front of the big side show, by the picture of the fat lady?"

"Uh-huh."

"He's got some. Bought them this morning, cheap. Mebbe he'll sell them to you."

"Thank ye, Mister."

Snowball was away like a flash.

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"Liberty Bonds?" said the ticket hawker of the black mustache. "How many?"

"I might buy one, if it's cheap, mebbe."

"How cheap?"

"How much you all want?"

"Forty dollars."

Snowball shook his head, "Thirty-nine. That's all I'm payin' jes' now." His hand was in his right trousers pocket.

"Let's see yer money."

Snowball stepped back a discreet distance, then displayed two twenty-dollar bills.

"All right, let's have 'em."

"Let's see dat Liberty Bond."

"All right." The man dug into his inner vest pocket, produced a flat envelope from which he extracted a square of paper.

"Here it is."

Snowball inspected it closely. "Dat's all right, Mister. I git a dollar back."

The ticket seller peeled a one-dollar bill from a bulky roll and the deal was closed.

"Say, Mister," said Snowball, rolling his eyes, "I might buy another one, same price."

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"Why didn't you say so?"

Snowball grinned.

Again the deal was closed.

Snowball put his hand into his left hip pocket and repeated his declaration:

"Say, Mister, I might buy jes' one more."

For a second time the man's eyes rested on him with suspicion lurking in their depths.

"Say, boy, who you buying these for?"

"Fo' me, mysef."

"All right, Mr. First National Bank, here you are."

The deal was quickly closed and Snowball hastened away, happy in the realization that he had accomplished the task set for him.

Making his way to the beach, he found Pant sprawled out on the sand, half asleep.

"Did you get them?" the white man asked drowsily.

"Ya-as, sir. Here dey is." Snowball held out the five bonds. "An' here's de change."

Pant sat up, suddenly all alert.

"You got three for thirty-nine?"

"Ya-as, sir."

"Let's have a look."

Pant's slender fingers trembled as he spread the five squares of paper out upon the sand.

"Good!" he muttered. "You got them all right. Now look at them all. Snowball. See any difference in 'em?" He held a lighted match above the bonds.

Snowball studied them as intently as his roving eyes would allow.

"No, no, sir, I don't."

"These two. Look different, don't they?"

"No, no, sir; I can't say dat."

"You're blind," grunted Pant. "Two of them are paler than the others; ink is not so dark. See? Not quite."

"Oh, yas, ya-as, sir."

"Now those two pale face bonds were folded up with one other. Remember where you got them?" Pant's eyes flashed through his thick glasses.

"No, no, Oh, ya-as, ya-as, sir, I do. It were dat 'ere white man; sellin' tickets, he was."

"Good! Now here's a dollar. That's for you. You'll get another when you come back. You take these two pale face bonds to the ticket seller and ask him where he got them."

"Ya-as, sir."

Full of wonder at the strange doings of this odd

fellow with the black glasses, Snowball hurried back to the ticket seller.

"Say, Mister," he demanded, "whar'd y' git these pale face bonds?"

"What?" The man stared at him.

"Whar y' git 'em?" Snowball held them up for inspection.

"Let's see." The man made a grab for them.

"Nem' min'." The boy darted away.

"Who wants to know?" the man demanded gruffly.

"Me, myself."

"I can't tell exactly. I bought two from Tom Stick, the midget clown, three from Andy McQueen, the steam kettle cook, and two more from a bunco-steerer—feller with a bite taken out of his ear. I don't know which ones those are.

"Say, boy!" The expression on his face suddenly changed. "You let me have them bonds."

"No-o, sir!"

Snowball dashed away in sudden fright. With the ticket seller close on his heels, he dodged around a fat woman, nearly collided with a baby carriage, leaped the tent ropes. Like a jack rabbit, he scooted beneath the ponderous wagons on which rested the electric light plant of the circus, and, at last, dodging through the mess tent, succeeded in eluding his pursuer.

He was still breathing hard when he reached the place of rendezvous on the beach.

"What did he say?" demanded Pant.

"He said he bought some from dat midget clown, an' some from a steam kettle cook, an' some from a bunco-man wid a chewed ear. Say, Mister, do I get dat oder dollar?"

Pant held it out to him. "What you puffing about?"

"Dat ticket man chased me."

"What for?"

"Don't know, boss."

For a moment they were silent.

"Say, Boss," Snowball whispered after a time, "what you s'pose made dat ere red splotch on the groun'?"

"What red spot?" There was a suspicion of a smile lurking about the corner of Pant's mouth.

"Man! Don' you know? 'Roun' dat fiah?"

"Oh, yes; I wasn't looking just then."

"Say, Boss!" The boy was whispering again. "I ain't afraid of almost nuthin'—nuthin' but signs and ghosts. You s'pose dat were a sign?"

"It might have been."

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"An' say, Boss, what's dem colored fellers sayin' 'bout a wreck? Don' mean that ere circus train's gwine wreck? Man, that'd be some kind of a wreck! Tigers fightin' b'ars, lions eatin' elephants, snakes a-crawlin' loose, wild cats a-clawin', an monkeys screamin'! Man! Oh, man!"

For a full minute Snowball sat silent, wild-eyed and staring at the mental picture he had conjured up. Then a sudden thought struck him.

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"Say, Boss, dis am circus day ain't it? An' I got two dollars I jes' earned and ain't spent, ain't I? Boss, I'se gone right now!"

And he was.

For a long time Pant sat there in contemplative silence. Finally, with one hand he smoothed out the sand before him. On this, with his finger, he spelled out the name: BLACKIE McCREE.

Then, with a quick glance about him, as if afraid it had been seen, he erased the letters.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Johnny Thompson had been introduced to the stable boss and had been given his assignment, he lost no time in getting on a suit of unionalls and was soon at work sleeking down his three broad backed dapple grays.

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It was a long task, painstakingly done, for Johnny loved horses and these three were among the finest in the circus.

His mind, however, was not always on his brush and cloth. In the grand parade, which, in Chicago did not leave the tent, but circled about in the mammoth enclosure, while the vast crowds cheered, Millie Gonzales rode standing on these three fat chargers, that, with tossing manes and champing bits, seemed at every moment ready to break her control and go rushing down the arena. Johnny was to take the horses to the entrance of the big tent. That much he had been told. Would he there turn them over to Millie? And would she be wearing the missing ring? The answers to these questions he could only guess.

It was with a wildly beating heart that he at last led his three horses down the narrow canvas enclosure which led to the great tent. Already the procession was forming. Here a group of clowns waited in silence. Here a great gilded chariot rumbled forward, and here a trained elephant was being fitted with his rider's canopied seat.

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By this director, then that one, Johnny was guided to the spot from which his three dapple grays would start.

He had hardly reached the position than a high-pitched, melodious, but slightly scornful, voice said:

"Why! Who are you? Where's Peter?"

"Who's Peter?" asked Johnny, doffing his cap respectfully, but studying the girl's hands the meanwhile.

"Why, he's my groom."

"Begging your pardon, he's not; I am."

"You?" She stood back and surveyed him with unveiled scorn. "You? A little shrimp like you?"

Johnny was angry. Hot words rushed to his lips but remained unspoken. He was playing a big game. For the time he must repress his pride.

"I—I—" Millie stormed on, "I like a big groom, a strong one. I shall see about this."

[66]

"Oh!" smiled Johnny, "if it's strength you want, I guess you'll find me there. And for horses, I know how to groom them."

Millie cast an appraising eye over the grays. "Did you do that?"

"Yes, please."

"They're wonderful!"

Lifting a dainty foot, she waited for Johnny's palm. Once it rested securely there, she gave a little spring and would have landed neatly on the first gray's back, had not Johnny suddenly shot his arm upward. As it was, she rose straight in the air three feet above the horses to land squarely on the middle one of the three.

She landed fairly on her feet. A whip sang through the air. She had aimed a vicious blow at Johnny's cheek. There was a wild flare of anger in her eye.

Dodging out of her reach, Johnny stood trembling for fear he had foolishly wasted his grand chance.

Presently the girl's lips curved in a half disdainful smile.

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"You are an impudent fellow, and I should have some one thrash you.

"You are strong, though," she went on, "and because of that, I'll forgive you. In the future, however, remember that I am Millie Gonzales and you are my groom."

Johnny nodded gravely. The procession moved forward. Millie passed from his view.

After calmly reviewing the situation, one fact stood out in bold relief in Johnny's mind: If it were Millie Gonzales who had the ring, his task was to be a difficult one, for she was a keen, crafty, high-tempered, unscrupulous Spaniard, who would stop at nothing to gain her end.

"Well, anyway," he decided, "if she has it, she is not wearing it. It's not on her hand. Here's hoping it's one of the other two."

He moved to a position where he could watch the parade. For a full three minutes his eyes swept it from end to end. Out of it all—the troop of elephants, the brass band, the clowns, the performers, the many strange carts and chariots—one figure stood supreme: A girl who rode high on a throne, mounted upon a great chariot, escorted by six footmen, and drawn by six prancing chargers.

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"The queen of the circus!" he thought. "I wonder who she is."



Johnny had hardly spoken the words when, for a second, the girl's smiling face was turned his way. He caught his breath sharply. "She's one of the three," he gasped. "If it is she who has the ring—"

He did not finish, for just then the van of the procession entered the wing, and he slipped away behind the canvas to await Millie Gonzales and the three grays.

"Say pard," he whispered to a circus hand standing beside him, "who's this queen of the circus?"

"Don't you know?" the other asked in surprise. "That's Gwen Maysfield, the tight-rope dancer. A regular sport she is, too; can box like a man. Packs a wallop, too. I've seen her knock this fellow who boxes the bear clean over the ropes."

[69]

"Boxes the bear?"

"Sure. Don't you know the act? Feller's got a bear; rides bicycles, and all that. One of his stunts is to put on the gloves with the big silver-gray. Of course it's a frost. Bear could knock him a mile, if he wanted to."

Johnny said no more, but soon began piecing together his bits of information. Gwen was the queen of the circus. She was also one of the three at whose feet the diamond ring had dropped. She liked boxing. If only he could manage to get a few rounds with her, that might break down the social barrier that stood between them. Then he could ask her about the ring. But she was the queen, and he only a groom. How was he to manage it? She boxed with the performer who boxed the bear. Perhaps he could make the acquaintance of this bear boxer.

The time was approaching when Millie and her three grays were to go on. He hastened away to his work.

[70]

That night in the animal tent, while the exhibition was in full swing, while thousands were crowding before the long line of cages, there occurred a strange and startling incident; a cage plainly marked BLACK LEOPARD had appeared, in the uncertain light of night, entirely empty.

"Guess that's a fake," a spectator grumbled.

"What is it?" asked a child.

"Says 'Black Pussy,'" smiled the father, "but I guess there isn't any."

"Oh, Papa, I want to see the black pussy!" wailed the child, clinging to the ropes, and refusing to move along.

The father was striving to quiet the child when, of a sudden, a flash of crimson light brought out the dark corners of the cage in bold relief. It was gone in a twinkling, but in that time a raging fury of black fur, flashing claws and gleaming eyes leaped against the bars.

The child screamed, the father swore softly. There was a succession of exclamations from the crowd. A colored attendant, who chanced to be passing with a bundle of straw, dropped his

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burden to stare, open mouthed, at the cage.

When he again put his trembling fingers to the bundle of straw, it was to mutter:

"Tain't no safe place fer a 'spectable colored man to wuck. 'T'ain' safe. All dem raid flashes ever'whar. Can't fry po'k chops fer 'em. Can't wuck, can't do nuttin'."

That night, after the grand performance was concluded, after the surging crowd had passed out, after the arc lights had fluttered, blinked, and then left the place in darkness, Johnny went out for a breath of fresh air before turning into the bunk assigned to him. He was walking around the end of the big top when a sudden flash of crimson appeared against the canvas. It was a flash only, remaining not one second, but Johnny paused to listen.

In another moment there came a whispered, "Hello, Johnny," and Pant appeared.

"You work for this circus?" Johnny asked.

[72]

"No. You?"

"Yes, got a job to-day."

"What?"

"Horses."

"Good. That puts you inside. You can help me, Johnny—help me a lot, and believe me, kid, it's big—the biggest thing we ever worked on." Pant's words came quick and tense.

"What is it?"

"Can't tell you now, but you can help. Here, take these three Liberty Bonds. They're good ones. You take 'em over town and sell 'em. Here's a hundred iron men. You buy me five more bonds from these circus men, see? Any of 'em. You're inside, see? You can do it. Buy five. They've got 'em. They'll sell 'em, too."

"I call that light business, dealing in Liberty Bonds on a small margin," grumbled Johnny. "What shall I pay?"

"Thirty-nine."

"Nobody but a crazy man would sell 'em for that."

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"Mebbe not, Johnny, but they'll sell 'em. Pay more, if you have to. The game's a big one, I tell you. So long." Pant vanished into the night.

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## CHAPTER V STRANGE DOINGS IN THE NIGHT

The following day Johnny carried out Pant's wish in the matter of selling the three Liberty Bonds. When it came to picking up other bonds at Pant's excessively low price, he experienced

greater difficulty than had Snowball. Indeed, in all his time off duty he secured only one bond.

"Guess I haven't struck the right spot yet," was his mental comment. "I'll try again to-morrow."

It was just as he was about to return to his dapple grays that he received a sudden shock. He had been idly glancing over the "Daily News" when a headline caught his eye:

"Offers \$1,000 Reward for Return of Lost Gem."

Quickly he read down the column, then his face fell.

"Guess he thinks I stole it," he muttered.

[75]

It certainly looked that way, for Major MacDonald had publicly offered a reward of a thousand dollars for the return of the ring, and had made it plain that no questions would be asked.

"They won't be asked, either." Johnny set his teeth hard. "I'll let him know that he can keep his reward. I'll get that ring back, and I'll send it to him with no return address."

Even as he spoke, he started. A new thought had struck him. What if the girl who had the ring should read of the reward and return the jewelry? Where would he be then?

"He'd think I had stolen it and given it to a circus girl," Johnny groaned. "Then what would he think of me?"

But the next moment he was resolute again. "I'll get next to that boxing bear fellow right away, and I'll cultivate the acquaintance of Millie, if she cuts my face open with that whip of hers. I'll win yet! Watch my smoke!"

He hastened away, resolved upon getting better acquainted with Millie Gonzales at once.

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That night, however, offered no further opportunity for making acquaintances. Indeed, he was made more and more conscious of the fact that in the circus there existed an almost unbreakable line of caste. There were the performers and the attendants. The attendants were kept in their places. They did not mingle with the performers; they were distinctly considered beneath them.

"Oh, well," Johnny said to himself, "if that's that, why I'll have to get to be a performer, that's all."

But when he came to think it over soberly, he could imagine no means by which this end could be attained.

If he had but known it, the opportunity was to present itself in a not far distant time, and in a manner as startling as it was sudden.

In one thing that night he was extremely fortunate—he succeeded in securing a position where he could get a clear view of the performance of two very interesting persons, Gwen, the Queen, and Allegretti, the man who boxed the bear. The contrast of the two stood out in his thoughts long after the performers had moved out of the ring. Gwen was wonderful. Johnny was sure he had never seen anyone to

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equal her in all his life. Light as a feather, waving her delicate silk parasol here and there, she tripped across the invisible wire. Yet, fairy-like as she was, every move spoke of strength, of well developed and perfectly trained muscles. She wore the accustomed grease paint of the ring, but Johnny did not need to be told that beneath this there lay the glow of a healthy skin.

"She's all right," he decided. "I'll wager she's an American. Only an American girl could be like that."

Through the quarter of an hour during which Gwen was the center of attention of the vast throng, he watched her. The breathless leaps in air, the light, tripping dance from post to post, the bow, the smile—he saw it all and breathed hard as she at last danced out of the ring.

"If she has the ring, it's going to be hard to get it," he decided. "If another could be bought, and I had the money, I'd rather buy it and let her keep the old one, but there's only one in all the world, and if she has it I must get it from her. Gwen, big, wonderful American girl, I'm for you, but I'm also a hard hearted detective, and I'm on your trail."

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The antics of the swarthy foreigner who boxed the bear were as ludicrous and grotesque as Gwen's act had been exquisite.

"Clumsy lobster!" Johnny exclaimed, after watching him for five minutes. "What he doesn't know about boxing would fill an encyclopedia, and if he didn't have a good natured bear, he'd get his head knocked off. All he's good for is to dance with a bear on the street and hold out a tin cup for nickels. Nevertheless, Allegretti, old boy, I've got to scrape up an acquaintance with you someday, for that's on the road to the heart of Gwen, though how she can stand the garlic and the look of your ugly mug long enough to box a round with you is more than I can understand."

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\* \* \* \* \*

While Johnny Thompson was watching the performance, two little girls, sitting bolt upright in their beds in the big house of Major MacDonald in far-away Amaraza, were planning wild things for the future. Through the aid of their maid they had succeeded in securing for themselves suits that would do with the circus—pink tights, exceedingly short blue skirts, red slippers and green caps. All that bright afternoon they had spent in the back yard practicing on their ponies. Standing up on the back of one of them had been easy after the first few attempts, but when Marjory had tried standing with one foot on each pony she had slipped down between them and had come near to being crushed.

"We'll do that, too, some day," she had exclaimed resolutely.

And now, before they went to sleep, they were planning.

"Yes, sir," Marjory was saying, "that old circus will come back here some time; I just know it will! Maybe next week."

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"And Johnny Thompson will be with it," broke in Margaret. "I just know he will, and we'll get on our ponies when the parade is started. We'll ride right in the parade, and Johnny will see us and say, 'There are my friends, Marjory and Margaret.' Won't he be proud of us!"

"Won't he, though!" The other twin clapped her hands in high glee.

They went to sleep finally, still thinking of Johnny and the circus, but little dreaming of the remarkable and thrilling adventures in store for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

That same night, after the circus tents had been darkened, two strange things happened. The first was never made public; the second was the talk of the circus people the next morning.

Scarcely had the last straggling sight-seer wandered from the grounds, than two figures emerged from the side entrance to a small tent. They were followed at a distance by a third. Darting directly for the wall that lined the railway tracks, which at this point run some twelve feet below the surface, but open to the air, they scaled the wall, and, by the aid of a rope, let themselves down to the track.

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The third person, having followed them to the wall and noted the direction they had taken, contented himself with following along the wall. Coming presently to some stairs, he crept silently down, then having listened for a moment, possibly for the sound of footsteps, he peered down the track. For an instant a pale crimson light flashed down the track. It might easily have been mistaken for the glow of a switch lantern. Then he pushed on after the pair.

The two men left the tracks at Randolph street and, taking a zigzag course, headed for the river. Into a long, low-lying building facing the stream they went. Not five minutes later the individual who had followed them was braced against a wall, peering in through a crack in a broken window pane. What he saw within was a low-ceilinged, dimly lighted room, furnished only with a small table, four chairs and a dilapidated chest of drawers. Four men were bent over the table. The lines of their faces drawn in eagerness, they were staring at some flat object on the table. Soon one of them, with the tips of his thumb and forefinger lifted the corner of a sheet of paper. He had lifted it half off from the flat object, to which it appeared to cling, when a startling thing happened—the room was suddenly illuminated with a brilliant blood red light. This lasted only a fraction of a second. The room was then left in darkness, black as ink; for even the candle had been overturned and snuffed out. From the darkness there came the sound of overturned chairs, as the four men made good their escape. By the time they reached the open air their tracker had vanished utterly.

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He was, at that very moment, flattened against the corner of a dark wall, and was quite as unhappy over the turn of events as they were. At the very instant when he was about to discover a secret of vast importance, his foot had slipped, his face bumped against the glass, and the

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unexpected happened.

The second occurrence, the one which caused much talk among the circus people, happened a short time later. As the attendants reported it, it would seem that their attention was first attracted to the strange phenomenon by the growl of a lion, whose cage was in the corner of the tent. To their surprise, the cage, the lion, and even the straw upon which he lay had turned blood red. Hardly had they finished staring at this than the snarl of a Siberian tiger at the opposite corner had called them to note that the red light, for light it must have been, had shifted to the tiger's cage. The red glare had continued to play hide and seek with the distracted animals for fully five minutes and, during all that time, not one of the attendants could detect its source. At times it appeared to stream down from the canvas top, then to shoot from a corner, or to leap up from the floor.

One notable fact was reported: In every instance save one, the animals whose cages were illuminated with crimson light cowered in a corner in snarling fear. The single instance in which this was not true was that of the black leopard. That beast leaped, clawing and snarling, at the bars of its cage, as if it would tear the originator of the crimson flash limb from limb.

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As the report spread, the negroes of the troupe were panic stricken. They quit in numbers. The owners and managers were hard pressed to keep enough men to do the menial work about the tents, and sent the employment agent to search the city for recruits. One of these recruits chanced to be Snowball, the bullet-headed friend of the strange hanger-on, Pant.

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## CHAPTER VI JOHNNY BOXES THE BEAR

Johnny Thompson paced the beach up which the waves of Lake Michigan were rolling. There had been a storm, the aftermath of which was even now coming in. Johnny's mind was in a turmoil. He had been with the circus five days now. Two more days they would remain in Chicago. He was still groom for Millie Gonzales' three grays. Millie was as impossible as ever. Three times she had struck at him with her whip, when he had appeared to overstep his rights as her menial.

"If she has the ring, fine chance I've got unless I steal it from her," he grumbled.

Allegretti, the Italian boxer, was quite as impossible as Millie. Once Johnny had bantered him for a boxing match, but the fellow had showed all his white teeth in a snarl as he said:

"No box-a da bum."

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He had meant Johnny.

Johnny's blood had boiled, but he had made no

response. Only when he was out of hearing, he had declared, "Never mind, old boy, I'll get you yet."

But thus far he had not "got" him. The way into the good graces of Gwen, queen of the circus, seemed effectually blocked. He had not tried approaching her, for he felt that would be folly.

In spite of the sharply drawn lines of caste which prevailed in the circus, life within the tented walls when the performers were off duty was astonishingly simple. Grease paint came off at the end of the last act. About the dressing tent and the assembly yard the women stars appeared plain and simple-minded people. There was nothing of the bravado that Johnny had expected to find. The three girls who held the center of his attention, because of the ring, were wonderfully well-developed physically. Millie was slender and quick as a cat. Mitzi von Neutin, the trapeze performer, was also slender and strong. She was French; Johnny knew that from the many "Mais, oui" and her "Mais, non," with which she answered the questions of the other performers. With her abundance of yellow hair she was like a kitten, as she curled up on a rug in the corner of the tent reading a French novel.

But Gwen—Gwen was perfection itself. Not too stout, not too thin; strong, yet not masculine, she was indeed a queen. About the tent, when off duty, she wore a short blue skirt and a blue middy blouse open at the neck and tied with a dark red ribbon. Twice Johnny had seen her boxing with the Italian. Each time the blood had rushed to his temples. To think of such a queen taking her exercise with so coarse a creature filled him with inward rage.

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"Oh, well, he's of the caste," Johnny had grumbled. "No matter; so shall I be in time. I don't know just how, but I will."

Pant, too, had puzzled him greatly. He had not forgotten his friend's uncanny power of seeing in the dark. He had heard of the strange appearance and disappearance of the crimson flash in the animal tent and elsewhere, and suspected that Pant was at the bottom of it, but just what his game was, or what strange secret of the power of light Pant possessed, he could not guess.

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Johnny had at last succeeded in buying the five bonds which Pant had wanted. He had obtained two of them for \$39 each. These he had bought from a fat, red faced man who was a guard at the entrance to the big top. He was even now waiting to deliver them to Pant.

Presently that individual came shuffling by, and, motioning Johnny to follow him, continued down the beach until they had found a secluded spot in a turn of a breakwater.

"Got 'em?" Pant whispered.

"Sure."

"Good! Let's see!"

"Good! Fine!" he exclaimed, after he had glanced over the bonds. "Now can you tell me who sold you these two together?"

"I don't know his name; a fat, red faced fellow at the entrance of the big top."

"Good! That's one of them. They're the right kind, I'll wager. Let's see!"

Pant spread the bonds out on a broad plank.

"No, only one!" he mused. "Getting careful, I'd say, Johnny." He turned suddenly. "Would you risk much for an old friend?"

"I'd do a lot for you, Pant."

"Thanks!" Pant gripped his hand warmly. "Take these two bonds you got from that fat fellow and sell them to-morrow to some dealer in bonds on La Salle street. You bought them for \$39, did you not?"

"Yes."

"You should get \$45. Good little gain, eh?"

Johnny grinned. He knew Pant too well to think for a moment that he would engage in a small business of trading in bonds two or three at a time. What his real game was, he was unable to guess.

"All right, old man. See you to-morrow," he said, rising and tucking the bonds away in his inner pocket. "I'll hurry back now. I think I'm going to box the fellow who boxes the bear, though how I am to arrange it, I can't quite tell."

Johnny wandered back to the big top. It was late morning. Many of the circus people would be in the big tent going through their stunts.

His hope of finding the boxer of the bear in one of the rings was not in vain. He was, at the moment of Johnny's entrance, in the act of putting the bear through his mock heroic battle.

With an air of apparent indifference, Johnny leaned against a center tent pole and watched him. Allegretti hated being watched, Johnny knew. That was why he lingered.

The Italian stood his scrutiny for three minutes, then with an angry glare in his eye, he cried:

"Go 'way, you bum!"

Johnny's only reply was a grin.

"Go 'way! No can box-a da bear when you all time loafin' here."

The Italian was dancing with rage.

"You can't box anyway, so what's the difference?" Johnny grinned again.

"No can box?" The Italian stormed, "No can box? You wan'na see?"

"Sure, show me," Johnny grinned.

An extra pair of gloves lay near by. Allegretti kicked them toward him. "Putta dem on. 'No can box,' he says. Allegretti show dat bum!"

He squared away in such an awkward manner that Johnny found it hard to suppress a smile.

"Now where do you want me to hit you first?"



Johnny asked politely.

The answer was a volley of quick blows, which all fell upon Johnny's well managed gloves.

When the Italian paused for breath, Johnny tapped him lightly on the nose. Enraged at being so easily scored upon, the fiery foreigner fairly went wild in his efforts to reach Johnny with a blow that would send him to the surgeon. To avoid these wild swings was child's play for Johnny. Time and again the Italian left him a wide opening, but Johnny only further enraged his opponent by tapping him lightly.

This farce lasted for five minutes. Johnny was puzzled to know what to do. He knew that the impostor, who called himself a boxer, was completely within his power. By a single jab of his powerful right, he could send him to dreamland. This, however, was farthest from his thought. To needlessly injure a man was never part of Johnny's program.

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A large, low, paper-topped barrel, used in the trained dog act, stood within ten feet of them. Suddenly Johnny resolved what he would do; he would humiliate his opponent. Perhaps that would bring him to terms.

Slowly he forced Allegretti back until he was within five feet of the barrel when, with a quick right to the chest, he lifted him off the ground and landed him square in the center of the top of the tub. There followed a ripping sound, the paper burst, and Allegretti dropped from sight.

With a smile Johnny stood waiting the Italian's reappearance, when, to his utter astonishment, he was struck a sledge hammer blow in the middle of the back.

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The blow sent him sprawling. In a flash he was on his feet, and faced about to meet this new and powerful foe. Imagine his amazement when he found himself facing, not a man but a bear. With gloved forepaws, with broad mouth grinning, the bear stood ready for his share of the match.

What had happened was evident. The Italian had neglected to remove the bear's gloves. The bear had now entered the ring. Johnny had a choice of facing him or running. It was a novel experience, but he was not well acquainted with flight, so he held his ground.

The bear advanced with none of the skill of an experienced fighter. His training had been superficial. He had been taught to swing his arms in a certain way when his opponent swung his as a signal. The bear, however, was six times as heavy as Johnny. One fair smash in the face with that giant paw would send Johnny to the happy hunting grounds.

As Johnny squared back, with his guard high, the bear hesitated, a quizzical, almost human grin overspreading his face. Then, seeming to get a signal to rush in, he came plowing forward, striking straight out as he advanced. Johnny sidestepped, and, leaping off his toes, tapped him on the ear. It was a stinging blow. Bruin's ears were sensitive. That blow came near proving the undoing of Johnny, for instantly flying into a rage, the bear forgot his training.

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Dropping on all fours, he rushed at Johnny with the fierceness of his forest ancestors. Dodging this way and that, Johnny sought to get in a felling blow, but in vain.

Again the bear reared upon his hind legs. So quickly was this accomplished Johnny did not escape the grappling swing which, open handed, the bear let fly. The animal's stubby claws raked his face, leaving three livid lines of red. The matter was growing serious. Something must be done quickly. Johnny did it. Watching for an opening, he at last leaped high and forward. His arm went up in one of his short, lightning master blows. There was the sound as of a steel trap sprung. The bear whirled in a circle, then crumpled to earth.

"There's your bear," panted Johnny, wiping his face.

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"No box-a da bear," groaned the grief stricken Italian.

"I should say not," said Johnny. "He doesn't box fair. He scratches."

"You kill-a da bear. I get-a your goat."

"Oh! The bear'll be all right," grinned Johnny. "Just give him a lump of sugar and a sniff of smelling salts. He's a bit dizzy, that's all."

"But say!" he said after a moment. "You can't get my goat. I ain't got any. But I have a notion that I've got yours right now."

He had, but the Italian wasn't to know it until some hours later.

As he turned to walk away, Johnny noticed a well built, wholesome looking girl in short skirt and middy standing a short distance off. She was looking his way and smiling. It was Gwen, the queen. He wanted to go over and speak to her. He was sure she had seen all that had happened.

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"Can't afford to rush things too fast," he whispered to himself and, turning toward the bunk tent, he hastened away.

As an hour and a half remained before he must go on duty, Johnny slicked up a bit and went over to La Salle street to sell the bonds which Pant had entrusted to his care. The first two dealers he approached refused to buy; they did not purchase bonds in such small lots. The third looked Johnny over carefully, then examined the bonds. After that, he wet the tip of his right forefinger on a sponge and proceeded to count out a handful of bills. These, with some small change, he shoved beneath the lattice to Johnny.

"Fine day," he smiled, as he turned away.

"You bet," Johnny agreed, as he pocketed the money.

Out on the shore of the lake he found Pant.

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The latter stared at him for a moment in silence. He was looking at the three red lines drawn on Johnny's face by the bear.

"Say," he whispered at last, "give me those bonds!"

"I, I," Johnny stared, "I haven't got them!"

"Haven't got them? Where are they?"

"Sold 'em as you said to do."

"Sold them? When?"

"Half an hour ago."

"With that on your face?"

"Sure."

With a low whistle, Pant sank down upon the sand.

"Why, what's wrong?" demanded Johnny.

"Oh! Nothing much. One of those bonds was a counterfeit, that's all."

"Counterfeit?"

"I said it."

"And you sent me to sell it?"

"I suppose I should have told you. You'd have done it just the same. Anyway, you would have, had I told you everything. But if I had told you, that would have made you nervous and spoiled everything. I'm a marked man. I couldn't go myself. How was I to know that you'd go and get branded in that fashion?"

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"Ho, well," he continued after a moment's reflection, "it's all right, I'm sure. The bond was perfect except for one trifling detail. It was a shade lighter print than those made by Uncle Sam, and, after all, that's really nothing. Who knows but the Government printer failed to ink his rollers well some morning? I know it was a counterfeit, though."

He bent over and wrote a name in the sand, then quickly erased it.

Johnny had read it. "Who's Black McCree?" he asked promptly.

"He," Pant whispered, "is the slickest forger that ever lived, and the worst crook. We're going to get him, you and I, Johnny. And he's with the circus."

"Did—did you ever see him?" Johnny demanded.

"I can't be sure. Perhaps. But we will, Johnny, we will!"

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For a moment they sat there in silence; then Johnny arose and without a word, walked away.

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## CHAPTER VII NO BOX-A DA BEAR

There was one particular part of the show that afternoon which Johnny was anxious to see. So anxious was he, indeed, that even the danger and mystery connected with the sale of the

counterfeit Liberty Bonds were crowded from his mind. So intent was he upon seeing it, that he half neglected his duties, and received for the first time, directly upon his cheek, a sharp cut from Millie's whip. Even that failed to make him angry. Once Millie's act was over, and he had rushed the dapple grays to their stable, he dashed out of the horse tent, through the assembly grounds, under the canvas wall of the big top and found himself at last beneath the bleachers in a very good position to see what was going on in the ring to the south of the center.

He breathed a sigh of satisfaction, as he saw the swarthy Italian bear boxer, dressed in his green suit, come marching pompously down the sawdust trail toward the ring. The lumbering silver tip bear was at his heels.

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The first part of their performance, the ball rolling, the stilt walking and bicycle riding, went off very well. The expectant smile on Johnny's genial face was beginning to fade when finally boxing gloves were produced, and thrust upon the fore paws of the waiting bear.

Johnny's smile broadened. A wild look in the bear's eyes told him that something was about to happen.

It did happen, and that with lightninglike rapidity. No sooner had the bear felt the gloves upon his paws than, without waiting for signals, he let drive a tremendous right swing at the trainer's head. He missed by but a fraction of an inch.

"Zowie! What a wallop," whispered Johnny. "He hasn't forgotten. I thought he wouldn't."

Indeed, the bear had not forgotten the punishment he had received earlier in the day and, whether or not he had the intelligence to know that Allegretti was no match for him, he had at least resolved to demolish him as speedily as possible, for hardly had the Italian recovered from his surprise when a second blow aimed at his chest sent him sprawling.

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Leaping to his feet, the trainer waved his arms in frantic signals. It was of no avail. The bear had known the taste of victory. He was not to be signaled.

Straight at his trainer he rushed. The Italian uttered a shout of terror, then, closely followed by the bear, bolted from the ring.

The spectators, thinking this was a part of the play, howled and screamed as they rocked with laughter.

To the Italian it was tragedy. Had not the bear grown fat in idleness, and so impaired his running power, the affair might have ended unfortunately for Allegretti.

As it was, having pursued his trainer halfway down the length of the tent, the bear paused, rose on his haunches, tore a glove from his paw and aimed it with such force and accuracy at the trainer's back that it sent him clawing in the dust.

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With one more yell, Allegretti rose and

continued his flight. The second glove missed its mark. With mouth open, seemingly in a broad grin, the bear's gaze swept the circle of delighted spectators, then, appearing to forget all about the incident, he dropped on all fours, and allowed an attendant to lead him quietly away.

Johnny ducked for the assembly enclosure. There he found the Italian waving his arms before the manager.

"No box-a da bear! No box-a da bear!" shouted Allegretti.

"No, I'd say you didn't," smiled the manager. "But you did better than that. You put on a scream; you made 'em laugh their heads off. Do that every day and I'll double your pay!"

"What!" demanded the outraged trainer. "Do dat again! Not for five time, not for ten time my pay. He want-a keel me, dat-a bear. No box-a da bear. No more box-a dat-a bear."

No amount of argument could make Allegretti change his mind. He was scared white. Johnny and the bear had got his goat. He was through. He would never box the bear again.

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"Well," said the manager, turning to Johnny, at last, "I guess it's up to you!"

"Up to me? How?" gasped Johnny.

"You crabbed the Italian's act by boxing the bear. Now you'll have to become a professional bear boxer, and box him yourself. See?"

"No, I don't see," said Johnny stoutly. "Why, I don't even know the signals."

"Make up some of your own. Pete Treco, the tumbler, used to be a bear boxer. He can help you. We'll be out of Chicago in three days. I'll give you till then to get in form. What say?"

"I—I'll try," said Johnny.

"That's all anybody can do. And say, if you can get him to pull that stunt, chasing you, throwing the glove and all that, the double pay offer stands."

Johnny caught his breath. His opportunity had come. There had come a shake-up. In three days there would be another, and he would be "shaken up" to the position of a full-fledged performer, or he would be shaken down out of the circus altogether. Could he make it?

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Closing his fists tight, he gritted between his teeth:

"By all that's good, I will!"

Fiery and high tempered Millie lost her groom that very day.

As far as the circus people were concerned, Johnny Thompson vanished. In a small tented enclosure, eight hours out of every twenty-four were spent in strenuous attempts to teach that bear to do his bidding. It was a difficult task. More times than one he barely dodged a sudden swing of that powerful paw, which if it had landed would have increased the demand for cut

flowers and slow music.

Pant alone saw him, and that after the shadows had fallen. It was at such times that they talked long of those other days in Arctic Siberia.

"Pant," Johnny shot at his friend one night, "what are you here for?"

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"Same back to you," smiled Pant. "What are you here for? You're not a circus man. What interest can you have in learning to box a bear?"

"It's deeper than that," smiled Johnny. "It's a matter of honor. There are three girls in that circus I must get on speaking terms with. The only way to do that is to become a performer."

"Oh! It's a skirt!"

"Not exactly—only a diamond ring."

"A ring?"

"Yes, listen," and Johnny proceeded to tell his story.

"That's interesting," said Pant, "and I think I can help you. In fact, I think I am safe in promising to tell you in time which of the three girls has the ring."

"You tell me? How?"

"Leave that to me. I have ways of finding things out. It can't be done here, though; on the road, perhaps, or at a one-night stand. Wait and see."

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"And now," continued Pant, "I want you to promise to help me with my own mystery. It is a much deeper and far more important affair. You know the type of people that follow the circus?"

Johnny nodded.

"Well, mixed with these little crooks is a big one—a forger, a master counterfeiter. His work is so good, as you know yourself, that it can be passed on La Salle street, and that's going some. I have several samples of his work. I know they are counterfeits, yet there is not a defect except the slight lack of color. They are technically perfect. One would almost say they were photographs of the real thing. These bonds are being secretly passed out even here in Chicago. When we get out into the safer small cities, I have no doubt the state will be flooded with them. It's an easy game. You know how they work it: Circus employee has a bond he has been saving, money all gone, must sell at a sacrifice. Greedy rubes snatch them up. And the worst of it is, they are so perfect that only in cases where two of the same number chance to come together will they be detected. With the vast number of genuine bonds in the country, this is likely never to happen. So there you are. Why, I doubt if even the Treasury Department itself could detect them. And this Black McCree is at the bottom of it all."

"How do you know that?" Johnny bent forward eagerly.

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Pant smiled. "He has a foolish habit of scrawling his name about. He made the mistake of scribbling it on one of the bonds which later came into my hands. He's known to the police

the country over, not so much as counterfeiter, however, as a 'Red'—a dynamiter of the worst type. He has more than once left his scribbled name above a ghastly piece of work. That is all they know of him. He has never been identified. Just why he has decided to take up the life of a sane crook and enter the forging game, I can't tell unless—by George! I believe I have it! Yes, sir! It's a financial plot!"

"How's that?" Johnny asked.

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"Can't you see? Our country is deeply in debt. Every town and city is flooded with national credit slips in the form of Liberty Bonds. A nation's credit is its life. Now, if some slick fellow can fill the safety boxes of the land with bogus bonds, what is to become of the country's credit? In time government bonds cannot be sold at any price, for the would-be purchaser cannot tell whether he is buying a genuine bond or a counterfeit."

"I see," breathed Johnny.

"And yet," mused Pant, "it may not be a plot, after all. Perhaps this Black McCree thinks he has discovered a way to get rich quick, and has dropped his radical notions. They mostly drop them when they fall heir to a piece of money. But, anyway," he straightened up with a jerk, "we've got to get him."

"What's he like?" asked Johnny.

"That's what no one knows. He's never been seen. He may be large or small. He may be, for instance, a certain husky conman with a ragged ear."

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"The very chap," exclaimed Johnny. "He's a crook, all right. I caught him in a crooked deal the other day. We had a little boxing match."

"You can't be sure he's the man," smiled Pant. "Small crooks seldom do big jobs, and big crooks don't operate con games. Yet he'll bear watching. He may be doing that as a blind."

"There's another fellow, though," Pant went on, "a midget clown—Tom Stick, a queer little chap. He's the prize of the circus. Dresses like a mosquito, and drives a huge elephant around the ring. Strange part about him is, he insists on living all by himself in a little house built on wheels. Far as I know, no one has ever been allowed inside that house of his. You see the chance, don't you? He could have all kinds of an outfit in there, and no one would be the wiser. Of course, he wouldn't sell many bonds himself; he'd pass 'em out through others."

"There's a third fellow, a cook, the steam kettle cook, Andy McQueen. Don't know so much about him. What I want you to do is to get acquainted with these men and see what you can find out. You're on the inside, so you can do it. There's another fellow, he's—"

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At that juncture the conversation was ended by the appearance of a party rounding a sand pile, and Johnny hastened back to the tented grounds.

"I'm crazy to get in my first performance," he told himself. "If it's successful, it'll put me on

even ground with Gwen, the Queen. Then we'll see what we shall see. She looks mighty interesting, to say the least."

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## CHAPTER VIII THE GIRL AND THE TIGER

Late that night Johnny Thompson was reminded for the hundredth time of his position as a serf among the knights and ladies of the circus. He was just passing into the now almost deserted big top when he came face to face with Millie Gonzales. In sudden embarrassment he was about to speak to her and doff his cap when, with chin in air, she swept past him.

Setting his teeth hard, Johnny hastened on. Only when he was at a safe distance did he give vent to his feelings.

"If it wasn't for the ring, I wouldn't stand for it," he raged in a whisper, "I, I'd, well, I'd make her bite her own sharp tongue. Maybe," he reflected, "maybe some time I will."

The incident was soon forgotten, and it was not so long after that Johnny was made to realize that not all the ladies of the circus were like Millie, not even those who ranked above her.

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In a dark corner of the tent, Johnny threw himself on a pile of netting to think. Life had grown strangely complicated for him since he had joined the show. Problems great and small lay before him for solving. It was like a lesson in algebra. There was the problem of boxing the bear. His ability to solve that problem would be tested all too soon, on the day after to-morrow. In some small city he would have his try-out. Depending upon the successful solving of this problem was the other and more important one, that of the ring. Who had it? Millie, the bareback rider, Mitzi, the trapeze performer, or Gwen, the dancing queen of the tight wire? Thus far he had not the slightest clue. If one of them had it, she never had worn it while Johnny was in sight. Could it be that the one in possession of it suspected him of seeking it? That did not seem probable.

"And yet," he reflected, "stranger things have happened. She may have seen me make that foolhardy dash for it when the elephant flicked it from the chain."

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But at once his mind swept on to the third and most important problem of all—Pant's problem, the problem of the counterfeit bonds. Pant had named three men who might be responsible, the conman of the ragged ear, the midget clown, the steam kettle cook. Johnny Thompson was one of the kind of fellows who, when they recognize a great and important problem, set themselves to solving it, leaving all minor difficulties to take care of themselves. As he lay there now, he realized that Pant's problem had already become his; that for the time being, the ring might be all but forgotten. And yet he hoped that, as the more important and difficult problem was being



solved, this one of lesser importance would work itself out.

"Well, anyway," he mumbled, half rising, "my success at boxing the bear comes first, for unless I put that stunt across, I will have precious little chance to discover the whereabouts of the ring, or to help Pant run down the counterfeiter. To-morrow's my last day of training. Me for my bunk."

But just as he was about to get upon his feet he checked himself and sank back in his place. A vision had struck his eye—a vision of lithe wonder and beauty. It was dancing along a silver wire.

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It was Gwen, Queen of the circus. The great tent was totally dark, save for the corner where she practiced. She had arranged a spot light in such a manner that its brilliant rays struck squarely across the tightly drawn wire, and there in that light, which was flashed back by her brilliant costume and her tossing umbrella, she was performing all unconscious that anyone was watching her.

Johnny Thompson thought he was the only onlooker, and perhaps at first he was. If so, it was not for long. Had he but known the nature of that other spectator, he might have leaped to his feet and rushed to warn the queen of her danger. Not knowing, he sat entranced by the wonderful apparition who seemed more a being of another world, or perhaps some tropical bird, as she flitted from end to end of that silver wire. Now she rose straight in air and, seeming to soar aloft, swept down to the wire again. And now she dropped upon her hands to bend and twist in a blinding whirl, while her gleaming parasol spun above her.

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"Um," Johnny breathed; then again, "Um!"

But what was that? He thought he detected a stealthy movement to the right of him. It might have been but the swaying of a tent pole shaken by the wind, but he kept his eyes upon the spot for some time. He had concluded it was nothing, and was about to turn his attention to the girl again, when the movement came again, this time closer at hand. At the same time he heard a sound that in a place less quiet to an untrained ear would be nothing at all. To Johnny it spoke of danger—perhaps danger to himself, perhaps to the girl. He thought of the counterfeiters. Did they know he had joined Pant in the task of hunting them down, and realizing his importance as an inside man, had they decided to do away with him at once? Or was this some enemy of the beautiful dancer?

Danger, Johnny had learned, loses much of its terror when squarely faced. He now threw himself upon the sawdust and began creeping, knife in hand, toward the spot from which the sound had come.

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Ten feet he crawled, then paused to listen. In the stillness he heard the occasional creak of the wire, the spatter of the spot light. Then again he caught that gliding sound. It was retreating from him, moving closer to the girl. This time he crept twenty feet or more before he paused. Again the same sounds greeted his strained ears. Again the gliding sound. The creature, whether beast

or human, traveling faster than he, must be not more than thirty feet from the swinging, swaying girl.

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And now, like a flash, his eyes, for a moment relieved from the dancer's dazzling light, saw the creature—a gaunt tawny beast it was, a tiger stalking human prey. For a second Johnny shivered and shrank back. How had this creature escaped? This he could not know. Its purpose was all too evident. Attracted by the gleam of the fairylike figure dancing on the wire, it was thinking only of breaking her bones with its yellow fangs.

Johnny paused for half a minute, then resumed his forward movement. Poorly armed as he was, he would not allow the beast to have its way unopposed.

Yet, after covering another yard or two, he paused. The girl was ten feet in air. Did the tiger have the power to leap that high? For a tiger of the jungle this would be no feat at all, but for this one of the cage, Johnny was in doubt. And Gwen? Did she have the iron nerve to keep on dancing down the wire with a great yellow beast leaping madly for her feet?

It was a tense moment. Every muscle in his body quivered. The hand that gripped his knife almost crushed the hilt.

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The questions that surged through his brain were not long in being answered, for now, in the dim half light about her, the girl saw the beast. For one brief second her eyes were dilated with fear. The parasol, trembling, wavering, almost slipped from her grasp.

Johnny rose on one knee. "If she falls? If she falls?" he breathed silently.

But she did not fall. Seeming to summon all her nerve and strength, she held her parasol high and once more danced gracefully down the wire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours before this moment in our story, Pant had left the circus grounds, and, crossing a viaduct over the tracks, had made his way down the avenue toward the river. As he cut across the roadway and lost himself down a dark alley near the river, he might have been heard saying to himself:

"The bear, driven from his lair, returns; the rabbit circles back to his brush pile; sometimes crooks return to their rendezvous. I wonder if they will this time? Well, we shall see what we shall see."

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He was by this time nearing a long, low-lying building that flanked the river. Before a door which was reached by three downward steps, he paused. All was dark, silent, mysterious. For a moment he listened intently, then after a hasty glance up and down the deserted alley, he darted to a low, narrow window. His efforts to lift the sash were fruitless. Quickly drawing a thin-bladed knife from his pocket, he inserted the blade beneath the catch. There was a click. The next instant Pant had lifted the sash, dived through and closed the window after him.

The room was utterly dark, yet he appeared to have no difficulty in finding his way about the place. Whether he had a previous knowledge of the building, was endowed with an instinctive sense of location of things, or could see in the dark, would have been a question too difficult for a casual thinker to answer. An observer, had there been one, might have said that the room had a strange way of flashing crimson for a fraction of a second, then becoming inky black again.

After moving about for a time, Pant doubled himself up and, creeping into the broad lower part of a dilapidated cupboard, closed the door behind him.

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Ten minutes elapsed. A rat scurried over the uneven floor. Another creeping through a hole in the base of the cupboard, began rattling a loose bit of board about. Pant kicked at it. Then all was silent again.

Five minutes more passed. Three rats had ventured out upon the floor when, of a sudden, there sounded the rattle of a key in the outer door. The rats scurried away. Pant caught a quick breath, as he whispered:

"They return!"

A match was struck. A broad, fat face appeared at the door. The man's small, beady eyes peered about the place for a moment, then he whispered back over his shoulder:

"All right. C'm'on."

"Safe?"

"Sure!"

Two other men followed him. One was slim, the other broad shouldered. Pant almost let fall an exclamation, as he saw that the broad-shouldered one had a ragged ear.

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"Perhaps Johnny's right," was his mental comment.

Through a hole left by what had once been a lock on the cupboard door, he could catch every move of the mysterious three.

Gathering around the table they proceeded at once to what appeared to be the task of the night. A flat tin affair was placed on the table. A tin cup from which the handle of a brush protruded was set down close to the pan. A roll of paper was produced. It was while this was being rolled backward and then drawn across the smooth edge of the table to make it straight that Pant felt something touch his hand. Barely checking a start, he held himself rigidly motionless. In an instant he realized that it was only a hungry rat. But in a minute he knew that this was quite bad enough, for the rat began to gnaw at his finger.

In the meantime, in the room the man of the ragged ear had taken the broad brush and moved it several times over the pan. He dipped the brush each time in the cup, as if applying a liquid. The fat man held a sheet of paper as if ready to spread it out upon the pan.

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The rat persevered. He had gnawed his way

through the tough outer skin of Pant's finger, and had touched tender flesh when, with a sudden quick movement, Pant's thumb closed down. He was not quick enough. The rat, whirling about, was caught only by the tail. With a piercing, almost human scream the rat struggled for freedom.

Instantly the room went dark. In that same instant, a hand groped for the door, behind which Pant was concealed. Pant had hoped to strangle the rat without a sound. In this he had failed. Just what he was in for now, he could not even guess.

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## CHAPTER IX THE TIGER SPRINGS

In the dim half light, as Johnny crouched in the sawdust ring, knife in hand, he saw the tiger lash his tail as he prepared for a spring. He saw the girl dancing on the wire, twirling her parasol as she danced. His mind whirled. Was this all a dream? Was it but a moving picture flashed upon the screen? He shook himself. No, there were the colors in the girl's costume, the red that came and went in her cheek, and there were the wonderful colors in the coat of that giant cat. It was real, and the cat was preparing for a spring. Should he cry out? Attract the beast's attention, then stand for battle? To do so meant sudden death. No man armed with a knife could hope to defeat a tiger.

On the other hand, what if he waited? Could the tiger leap ten feet in air? If he could, what then? The girl had nerve; Johnny could see that. There was a strong chance that the tiger could not reach her. He would wait.

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Suddenly into that brilliant circle of light there shot upward a tawny, gleaming body. The tiger had leaped square at the girl. Johnny's heart stood still. There came an audible gasp from the girl. The cruel fangs of the beast flashed in the light. Up, up he rose, five feet, six, seven, eight. Now his great paws flashed at the girl's feet. An instant of suspense ended with a gasp of relief. The tiger had missed.

For a fraction of a second the girl teetered on the wire. She seemed about to lose her balance and fall, but she at once regained her composure, and, with a smile upon her lips, such as she threw to admiring spectators, she tripped again along the wire.

"Bravo!" Johnny's lips formed the word, but he did not say it.

Again the tiger crouched for a spring. The girl was gaining self-control. Estimating the position of the tiger, she tripped away from him. Angered, the tiger roared savagely, gave two short jumps, then leaped straight and high.

With a little cry, half of fear, half of defiance, the girl sprang in air. The next instant the tiger's paw touched the wire. One breathless second

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the girl appeared to hover in air, then she dropped. Her toe touched the vibrating wire. She slipped. She uttered a low moan.

Just at that moment the spot light blinked suddenly out, leaving the great tent in utter darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

For a few moments after the candle was extinguished in the mysterious room down by the river Pant remained motionless. Then, as a groping hand found the door to his hiding place, he leaped into spring-steel-like action. The cupboard door banged open. A sudden flash of red light was followed by the dull thud of a body striking the floor. A second flash produced the same result. A chair clattered to the floor. The street door swung suddenly open, then banged shut again. A fugitive figure sought cover in the shadows of a dark corner of the building.

"Are you shot?" came a gruff voice from within.

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"Thought I was, but guess I ain't."

"So did I."

"There wasn't any report."

"A red flame, and a biff that floored!"

There followed sounds of movement. A match was struck. For a moment a light flickered in the room, then three heads appeared at the door. Mounting to the third step, the leader glanced quickly up and down the street. Then, followed by his two companions, he darted away.

"Some rotten luck," grumbled Pant, for it was he who lurked in the corner.

Without a light, he again entered the room. When he came out a short time later, he was straightening out a bit of crumpled paper.

\* \* \* \* \*

For Johnny, after the spot light in the circus tent blinked out, an agony of suspense followed. The girl—had she dropped? The tiger—was he now about to spring? Without a light Johnny could do nothing. A sudden wave of remorse overcame him. He blamed himself for not entering the struggle when the light was on.

But what was this? Could it be that his straining ear caught the sing of the wire, as the girl's foot touched it in her wild dance? He listened. There could be no mistake about it. Even in the darkness she had regained her footing, was dancing down the wire.

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But the tiger could see in the dark. She could not see his leaps. And he would leap again, Johnny was sure of that.

In this he was not mistaken, for, with sinking sensation, he heard the cat leave the ground. There followed no sound. Breathlessly he waited till he felt the slight shock of the cat as he dropped. Or was it Gwen?

At this time of uncertainty a weird thing happened. Seeming to come from a spot in mid air, a streak of crimson light flashed down at an

angle toward the floor. For an instant, it turned the costume, the parasol, the face of the girl crimson; the next, it swept the crouching tiger with a flood of blood red light. With a growl of fear the beast shrank back. The light followed him. He rose and leaped away. He paused. The light was again upon him. With a wild snarl, he sprang away toward the far end of the tent.

As he lay there staring open-mouthed, Johnny heard the sputter of arc lights. In a moment the tent was ablaze with white lights. The dynamo had been started, the light turned on.

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Johnny sprang to his feet, then facing about, looked for the girl. The next instant he sprang toward the spot over which the wire was strung. He was there in time to break her fall. She had tottered from the wire.

She had not fainted, but it was in vain that she attempted to rise; her limbs would not support her.

"I, I guess I lost my nerve," she apologized, as she sank down upon the sawdust.

"If you did, you lost a lot," exclaimed Johnny in undisguised enthusiasm. "You were great!"

For the moment he forgot the caste of the circus, forgot he was only an ex-groom and she the queen of performers.

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"Just sit right here," he counseled. "I'll run and get you a glass of water; you'll be all right in a jiffy. The tiger's safe enough; keepers have got him."

By the time he returned, the world had righted itself again, and he was only a slave.

"I, I'll be running along," he stammered, "that is, if you're all right?"

"But I'm not all right," protested Gwen. "Besides, I need some one to talk to. Why should you go?"

"You know," Johnny faltered, "I'm not a performer; at least, not yet."

"Fiddle!" she puckered up her lips. "What diff does that make; you're a brave boy. You were right near that awful tiger when I saw you, and you weren't running away. I believe you were there all the time."

"I was," admitted Johnny. "I was watching you dance when he came up."

"Oh!" She gave him a queer look. "And what did you think you could do?"

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"If he had reached you, I could have put up a good scrap."

She looked at him again. "I believe you could," she smiled. "I saw you give that bear the knockout the other day. That was good, awful good! Say! You can box, can't you?"

"A little."

"Will you give me some lessons?"

Johnny's heart leaped. Would he?

"Su—sure," he stammered, "any—any time."

"All right; to-morrow morning at nine. What say?"

"That suits me."

"It's a go," she said, holding out her hand. Johnny gripped it warmly, and as he did so, he realized that there was nothing soft or flabby about that hand.

"You see," she half apologized, "I have to keep in trim for my stunts, and nothing will do it quite like boxing."

"Uh-huh!" Johnny scarcely heard her. Her hand had made him think of the diamond ring. Should he ask her about it now? It seemed what his old professor would call the psychological moment. Yet he did not want to ask her. He was already enjoying her friendship, knew he would enjoy it more and more and did not wish to risk losing it. Then he thought of Pant and his problem. Perhaps she could aid them in solving that.

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"Say," she whispered suddenly, "what was that blood red light?"

"I, I don't know," Johnny replied.

"Wasn't it spooky? Came from nowhere!"

"I don't know how it was done," said Johnny, "but someone was behind it—someone who evidently wanted to help you."

The girl glanced at him sharply.

"No," he smiled, "I didn't do it. I'm not that much of a magician. But I'm not sure but that I know the person who did it."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Will you find out and let me know?"

"If I can," said Johnny, smiling once more.

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"Oh!" she gasped again. "I owe that person a lot. The tiger would have got me for sure. I'd do a lot for him."

"Would you?" asked Johnny.

"Of course I would."

"You may have a chance some time."

"How strangely you talk!"

"That's all I can tell you now."

He arose and, assisting her to her feet, walked with her to the flap of the ladies' dressing tent; then bade her good-night.

"She's a real sport!" he told himself. "Now I've got to make good at boxing the bear, even if it is a rotten job."

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## CHAPTER X GWEN MEETS A "HAY"

## MAKER”

Johnny Thompson did not relish giving boxing lessons. Like all true artists, he was more interested in doing things than in teaching others how to do them. Especially did he dislike giving lessons to women.

Johnny had his particular ideas about the possible skill of lady boxers and his estimate was not flattering. However, he was willing to teach Gwen because he liked her, thought of her as a good sport, and hoped to profit by his acquaintance with her. He was destined to find her rather a surprise as a boxer.

Exactly at nine o'clock next morning he was on hand in the small sawdust circle at a remote corner of the "big top." Gwen was only three minutes late and Johnny put that down as being much to her credit. "Most girls would have been fifteen minutes or half an hour behind time," was his mental comment.

After a formal "Good morning," Johnny helped Gwen on with her gloves. This gave him an opportunity to look her over. Naturally her hands received his first attention. He looked for rings; found none, and then laughed at himself for believing that any person would come for a boxing lesson with rings on her fingers.

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Looking her up and down from head to toe, he found her good to the eye—even better than in her professional costume. She was all of a girl now. In her short skirt, blue middie and silk stockings and with her mass of hair drawn tightly into form beneath a strong net, she made a picture worth looking at. Johnny found himself catching his breath sharply as he drew on her gloves and laced them snugly about her wrists.

"You won't strike hard—not at first, anyway—will you?" she breathed.

"Not at all," Johnny smiled, "but you'll have to be careful about one thing; practice calls for boxing that is as near the real thing as possible. I mean that I'll seem to be going to deal you a real knock-out blow, but I'll 'pull the blow,' as they say, just before it lands, so it will be a mere tap. The thing you'll have to be a little careful about is running into those 'hay makers,' otherwise they may prove to be the real thing in spite of all I can do to avoid it."

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"I'll try," Gwen smiled back. "Are you ready?" She tapped him playfully on the nose.

"Ready!" Johnny squared away.

From the start, Gwen's boxing was a baffling mystery to the boy. She seemed to fairly dance on air. Her foot movements were marvelous. Now she was here; now there; now in another corner of the ring. Johnny had been called the fastest boy of the ring, but Gwen was faster. For some time he did not reach her even with a light tap.

But time taught him new tricks and brought back to his mind many half-forgotten old ones. He began to realize that, although her face protection was perfect, she was exposing her



chest.

"That's where her lesson begins," he told himself, and at once began tapping her over the heart with ever increasing force until she threw down her hands with a sharp, "Oh-wee!"

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"Time's up," laughed Johnny, throwing himself down upon the mat and inviting her to do the same.

"You see," he explained, when they had caught their breath, "you box the way you do your tight rope work. It's great stuff. I never saw a lady boxer your equal."

Gwen gave him a happy smile.

"But," he went on, "you've got your weak points, just as the rest of us have. You play your defense too high. That leaves your chest unguarded. If you were in a real fight your opponent would deal you a knock-out blow over the heart. You'll have to practice playing closer to the sawdust with both your hands and your feet. It's that tight rope stuff that does it. You box as if you were tiptoeing along the rope and holding up that Japanese parasol to balance you."

Gwen thanked him for his advice, then, as all good friends occasionally do, they lapsed into silence.

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"Second round," said Johnny, two minutes later as he pocketed his watch.

To Johnny this tight rope dancer seemed an amazingly alert pupil. It was no time at all before he found her guard lowered and her hands traveling so fast that only now and again was he able to score a point. To his great surprise, he found himself thoroughly enjoying the third round. Not only was he teaching her something about guarding and self-control, but she was giving him pointers in speed and foot work.

"You're great!" he breathed at the end of the third round. "You really are."

Flushed, highly excited, filled with a girlish enthusiasm, she beamed back at him. The affair was a huge success; there could be no doubt of that. Johnny saw himself safely possessed of an entirely agreeable pal, one of the very elect, of the inner circle of star performers, too. He saw himself frolicking with this wonderful pal day after day. A fine day-dream!

And just there something happened, as often is the case when one's cup of happiness is about to overflow. In the fourth round Gwen, excited by Johnny's praise, strove to out-do herself. Before she had not been half so airy nor so nimble and skillful in eluding her opponent's blows. Thus challenged, Johnny brought into play his every tactic. Maneuvers which had lain dormant in his brain leaped to the forefront. It was as if he were again in a real battle in a real ring. Like live things, his gloves flashed. He leaped to the right, then to the left, then backward. He darted suddenly forward. He ducked. He leaped high. But ever the elusive Gwen escaped him.

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At last, in one mad rush he found himself facing her. Her round chin was exposed. What an

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opportunity! He lifted himself clean off the floor; his right hand struck out and up. It would have brushed her chin—an admirably “pulled” blow—had she not at this instant leaped suddenly at him. Whether she thought she saw an opening and had herself resolved to score, or had, in the mad rush, completely lost her head, Johnny could not tell. He only knew that there came a sickening sound of impact, followed by a dull thud and Gwen lay crumpled, unconscious at his feet. His blow had found its mark. The full force of it had been expended on the girl’s chin!

Heartsick, he struggled to regain his scattered senses. The next instant he was rushing away for water. From a bucket he dipped it ice cold, and applied it to her forehead. Then with a towel he began to fan her.

All the time reflections were rushing through his troubled brain: “What a fool! Just when things were going right! All off now! Mighty funny how it happened! All my fault! Mebbe hers, too! But a girl—what a wallop to give a girl! Who’d forgive it? Boss’d fire me if he knew it. What a muss! Go back to the bear if I get a chance. Bear’s about my class. What a nut a fellow can make of himself! I—why dum it anyway—”

His dismal reflections were arrested by the opening of Gwen’s eyes. She sat up dizzily and gazed about her as if looking upon a world unknown.

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“Where am I?” she faltered. “Oh!” she moaned, and held her head.

Johnny’s thoughts touched the bottom of despair.

But the next moment she was looking at him and actually smiling. “I suppo-pose,” she said uncertainly, “that you’d call—call that a ‘hay—hay maker’?”

Johnny grinned in spite of himself. “It was,” he agreed.

“And I—I ran into your ‘hay maker.’”

“Something like that,” Johnny agreed, sitting down beside her. “I hope you feel better.”

She did not answer, but sat staring at the sawdust. They remained in just that position until Johnny’s watch had ticked off a hundred and twenty seconds. He knew it was a hundred and twenty for he counted them all.

“I suppose,” he said, when he could endure the silence no longer, “that that’s the end of it?”

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“I suppose so,” she agreed.

Again they were silent. There seemed nothing more to say.

“And I thought we would have some grand times together,” said Johnny, at last. “I might have known though—”

“Oh! But aren’t we?” There was a puzzled look on her face.

“Why! You—you said that was the end of it!”

“I suppose so for today. I’m really too shaky to

box any more to-day. But how about to-morrow?"

With a wild shout of joy, Johnny leaped to his feet.

"Then—then—," he stammered. "Why, you're a brick!"

He extended his hand and helped her to her feet.

"Why? What's so wonderful?" she smiled at him. "I ran into you and got bumped. I don't hold that against you. Why should I? Would another boy hate you for it?"

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"No. He might not, but a girl—"

"Fiddle! Girls are just like boys, if you let them be. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"You sure will!"

For a moment Johnny hesitated before taking her hand for a farewell; the question of the diamond ring had flashed through his mind. Was this the time to ask? He hesitated; then gave it up. A moment before he had felt that he had lost her. He would risk nothing more this day.

"Good-bye and good luck," he murmured, as she turned to go her way.

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## CHAPTER XI THE BLACK BEAST

"Pant," said Johnny the next evening, as they sat upon the beach in the moonlight, with the tom, tom, tom of the circus drum sounding from the distance, "there's one thing that puzzles me about this crimson flash."

"Let's hear." There was a smile lurking about the corners of Pant's mouth.

"That big yellow cat last night was scared stiff, just frozen in his tracks by the crimson flash," said Johnny. "They tell me that all the big cats act that way, except one."

"Uh!" grunted Pant. "The black panther."

"He leaps right at it, wants to eat someone up every time it's flashed on his cage. How's that?" asked Johnny.

Pant smiled, as he drank in a deep breath of cool, night air. "That, Johnny, is a rather long story, a story I've never told. But, because you've been a good pal, because, though I've doubtless seemed mighty queer at times, you've never asked a leading question, I've a strong notion to tell it to you."

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Johnny waited in silence. The tom tom of the drum ceased. By that he knew that Gwen, Queen of the circus, was just entering the ring for her part. He had intended to see that act again, but if Pant spoke—

"I think I will," mused Pant. "You see," he went on, "ever since I was a small child I have had a great interest in cats. Even before I could walk, so they tell me, I would turn up missing, and they'd find me at last creeping through the grass in the meadows, following an old tomato colored cat that was hunting for moles.

"As I grew older I came to know that a cat could see in the dark, and that he did most of his hunting at night. These things interested me. Night after night I would slip from my bed, steal out into the night and follow the cats in their nightly wanderings. I guess I learned things about cats that no one else knows; some of their secrets, I mean. I've never told them, and I'm not going to tell them to you. Knowledge is of very little use to people unless they go to the places where it can be applied, and very few are willing to go all that way.

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"When I was thrown out into the world to shift for myself I still wanted to know more about cats. Little by little I came to know that house cats were but the pygmies among cats; that there were large, fierce, dangerous cats—wild cats, mountain lions, tigers, and the like. It was just when my curiosity about these big cats was at its height that I happened to wander into a zoo. There I found tigers, panthers, leopards and mountain lions. I was wild with joy. I watched these big cats for hours. I asked so many questions of the attendant that he threatened to throw me out. When night came he did force me to go away. For a week I did nothing but haunt that zoo.

"At last it came to me suddenly one day that I could learn nothing really worth while about these wonderful cats unless I could watch them, as I had watched house cats, in their native haunts, as they rested, fed, played and wandered about or stalked their prey. I asked the keeper where their native homes were. He showed me on a map. I was astonished. They were from all over the world, India, Africa, South America, everywhere.

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"There were two cats that had caught my eye, the great tawny beast, the Bengal tiger, and the smaller black cat with the shifting eye, the black leopard.

"When I was told that both these came from the jungles of India I was overjoyed. I would go there and follow them day after day, until I knew all their secrets.

"When I told the attendant of my resolve, he laughed at me; said I'd be killed and eaten before I had been in the jungle a day.

"I took to thinking about that; then I tried to study out some way to make the great cats of the jungle afraid of me. I returned again to the zoo and studied the great animals. When the keeper was not looking I tried many things. At last I found one thing that would make them afraid—all but one, the black cat with the shifting eyes; he was not afraid. He leaped at his bars snarling, but I said to myself, 'He is only one, all other black leopards will be afraid.'"

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"Of the crimson flash?" whispered Johnny.

Pant gave him a look of warning, then glanced

away at the lake.

"I was only a boy and not very far in my teens at that, but I went to the jungles of India. I don't remember much how I went. I was a stowaway on a big steamer, then in a smaller one. I helped pole long, heavy barges up an endless river where mosses and grape vines hung thick along the banks, and where great slimy beasts rose from the water to glare at us. I caught the fever and lay for weeks in a bed of a hospital provided for Dutch missionaries.

"After I got well, I poled more boats up the river until, at last, I was in the heart of India, where there were few white men, where there were many naked natives, where it was all jungle, and where in the night I could hear the call of the wild things, my friends, the great cats. Ah, my boy! Then I was happy. I would study. I would learn secrets. I would know things that no other man knew."

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Pant paused and, rising, began to pace restlessly back and forth, and Johnny, watching, was reminded of the great Bengal tiger pacing the length of his cage.

"There was a mission station," Pant went on, still pacing to and fro; "a little mission, with a tiny hospital and a doctor. It was in a native village at the edge of a great jungle. The natives swarmed to it from many miles around. When I asked the gray haired doctor why they didn't have a large hospital, he shook his head and answered:

"No money."

"I had a little money; I gave him that, and he let me stay there with them. There were just his wife and one nurse and the servants. I did little things for them about the place the time I was not sleeping during the day. At night I went out into the jungle alone. That first night, when they saw me starting out, they called me back; told me there were great cats lurking in the jungle that would kill and eat me; begged me not to go, but I said to them:

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"I have a charmed life. Nothing can harm me. Besides, all cats are my friends.'

"You see," Pant sat down upon the sand, "you see, I didn't want to tell my secret. Never tell your secrets, Johnny, at least not all of them. You'll mean more to your friends and trouble your enemies more if you keep them. I kept mine; but I went out into the jungle alone.

"I found them, Johnny; I found the great tawny cats with the dark stripes, the tigers. They were not hard to find, for I knew the secrets of cats, and all cats are alike.

"First I found the old tiger, then his mate. They were hunting in the tall grass. Right away, when they saw me, they wanted to hunt me and take me home to their cubs. But there I had them. There was my great secret. When I showed them what I could do, they were afraid. They walked round and round me until, in the morning, the grass was all trampled round in a circle.

"The next night I found their cubs playing near the roots of a fallen tree. They were three

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months old—big as dogs. The father had broken the forelegs of a deer, and had brought it home for them to kill.

“When they saw me, the old ones wanted to get me more than ever. How they snarled! How they circled and lashed their tails! They couldn’t get me; I had them. They were afraid. Ten men on elephants, with rifles, they would have attacked with a rush, but not me. They were afraid.

“But, Johnny, they were wonderful cats. Their coats! You have seen tigers in cages. Bah! They are nothing to the great, free cats of the jungle. The yellow! You have seen the sky at sunset sometimes when it was painted with golden fire? It was like that, only grander. And the dark stripes! They were like midnight. The gleam of their teeth, the burning red of their eyes, as they prowled in the night. Ah! Johnny! I had found true happiness. I only wanted one thing to make me perfectly happy, and that was to have them play with me, as they played with their cubs; as the house cats played with me when I was in rompers. That, too, would have come, but—”

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Sighing, Pant rose and began pacing the beach again.

“A change came over me. I began to see things and to wonder. At times I thought how sick I had been down there in the little Dutch mission hospital, and how the short, fat Dutch nurses had pattered about in their wooden shoes to help make me well. Then I saw the hundreds and hundreds of poor natives who came limping into our little station, or who were carried in on bamboo stretchers. It all set me thinking. Up to that time, I had thought that nothing mattered but cats. I wanted to know all about cats. I wanted, yes, I do believe I wanted to be like a cat. Some folks believe we were all animals once before we were born as humans. An old native of the jungle told me that. If that is true, then I was once a cat.

“But I got to thinking that perhaps humans counted more than the great cats in the jungle. I didn’t want to think that, not at first, but I couldn’t shake it off. When I went into the jungle to watch the cats I saw in my mind those sick people coming, coming, coming. I didn’t like it; didn’t want to see them. There was yet the great black cat. I must find him somewhere in the jungle. I must see him.

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“One day I talked to the doctor about my thoughts, and he told me that people counted for much more than big cats. He said he needed medicine, supplies, new houses, everything, and since I could go to the jungle and come back alive, perhaps I could help him.

“‘How?’ I asked.

“It was a terrible thing he said: ‘Go into the jungle and get me tiger cubs. Traders will pay big money for them.’

“It was terrible. I could do it. There were three cubs. I could get them, but—

“‘But,’ I said to the doctor, ‘the big cats, the father and mother, must first be killed.’

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“‘Yes,’ he smiled. And that was all he said.

"I went into the jungle again that night and, as I watched the splendor of the great cats, I said, 'No, I will never do it! Never! Never!' And yet I was going to do that very thing. I was going to take a rifle with me, and lie there in that wonderful moonlight to wait for them to come back; sooner than I thought, too.

"It was that night, for the first time, that the old tiger left his mate and the three cubs while I watched them and went away to hunt by himself. Then I was glad, for I always had wished to watch him as he hunted down the blue deer, the buffalo, wild goat or wild pig. So I followed. Creeping after him through the moonlight I lost him many times, for his yellow stripes were like the moonbeams, and the dark ones like wavering shadows. But I always found him again, as he rose to leap along some path or across an open spot in the forest.

"At last I knew that we were nearing the village. 'Ah!' I said to myself, 'so that is your game. You will pick a calf or a fat young pig for your dinner. Perhaps you may not fare as well as that,' for I decided that I must use my charm to drive him from the village if he went to rob there.

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"But, before I had expected it, he began to circle. By that I knew he had scented some prey. Narrower and narrower his circle grew. Greater and greater became my curiosity, for I wondered what kind of prey he could find so near the village and yet not safe in its pen.

"Finally I climbed upon the trunk of a dead tree, and then I saw. My blood ran cold. Out of the village had wandered a child, a little girl of four or five years. She had crept from her bed while others were asleep, and there she was, the pale moonlight glistening from her body, and the tiger not four springs away. Then it was that I saw, saw clear as midday how it was; that all big cats were men's enemies, and were but to be killed.

"Yet, I could not kill. I had not as much as a knife. I could do but one thing. I had my charm. I must stand between the beast and the child.

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"Three leaps brought me in his path. Then I turned and faced him. It was a great and terrible moment. My charm; would it work? He was terribly angry. Lashing his tail, he leaped to one side. But that was no good. I had him. I was now beside the child, who was not one bit afraid.

"That time the tiger almost dared. He leaped once. Two more leaps remained. He leaped again. I could see the round, black pupils of his eyes; count his teeth; hear him breathe. Three times they relaxed. He did not dare. My charm; it worked. I had him. He did not dare.

"At last he slunk away through the tall grass. Then, because the child was not afraid, because I knew it would be the last time I should ever watch the cats and their cubs, I took the child and followed the tiger back to the lair, where all night long, beneath the moon, the tiger and his mate with their cubs beat a hard, round path about me and the little girl.

"Just before sunrise I heard the distant beat of the tom tom, the bellowing of bull buffaloes. Then it was that I knew that the natives were

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driving the herd of buffaloes to the jungle that they might frighten the tigers from their lair, and secure the remains of the child. And all the time I had the child safe in my arms."

Pant paused and looked away over the glimmering water. The tom, tom, tom of the circus drum was sounding. The indistinct noises wafted on the breeze might be the lowing buffaloes. Johnny, for the second, fancied himself in the heart of the jungle with Pant, the child, and the tigers.

"The next night," Pant's voice had grown suddenly husky, "I went to the jungle again, and that morning I brought in the pelts of the tiger and his mate. The kittens were chained to a tree. The natives brought them in later. The hospital was bigger and better after that. And I, I was a hero, a hero to them all, but not to myself."

"But the black cat, the panther?" suggested Johnny after a moment of silence.

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"Oh, yes, that was later. We have not time for it now. We move to-night. We must hurry. Already the people are leaving."

"One thing more before we go," said Johnny eagerly. "Light, Pant, does light travel in straight lines?" He was thinking of the crimson flash that had leaped apparently from mid-air in the tent the previous evening.

"I am surprised that you ask it," Pant smiled. "You have been in Alaska?"

"Yes."

"Then, at Cape Prince of Wales you must have seen the midnight sun?"

"Yes, in June."

"If the sun's rays shone straight, you must have had then as many hours of continuous darkness in December as you had of continuous daylight in June. Did you?"

"No," said Johnny. "We had three or four hours of sun every day, even in December."

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"Then," said Pant, smiling, "the sun's rays must have been bent that they might reach you. In fact, the rays of light never travel straight. So long! I'll leave you now to think that over. See you at our next stand. Hope I can tell you then who has your diamond ring."

He vanished into the night, leaving Johnny to stare after him in wonder and admiration.

"Some day," Johnny said to himself, "I'll hear the story of the black leopard."

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## CHAPTER XII

### JOHNNY WINS DOUBLE PAY

Johnny had scarcely reached the cluster of tents that loomed large in the darkness, when he was



startled by a sudden wild burst of activity. Men and boys rushed silently here and there; lanterns and searchlights flashed from place to place. For a second he stood there paralyzed. What was it, a fire or an approaching cyclone?

Then he laughed.

"We move to-night. Down go the tents."

They did go down. Before his astonished eyes they disappeared as if by magic. In all his life he had never seen anything that came near equaling the team work displayed in the dropping of the big top and the loading of the circus.

In a marvelously short time they were on their way. Johnny, because of his prospects of becoming a regular performer, had been assigned a berth in a sleeping car. Pant, being merely a hanger-on, slept as he had on many another night, beneath the stars, with only a bale of canvas for covering.

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Johnny spent a half hour in thought before the even click, click of the wheels lulled him to sleep. They were on their way, and he was glad. To-morrow he would have his try-out. To-morrow, too, he would give Gwen her second lesson in boxing. Should he ask her about the ring? To-morrow they would be in one of those small cities in which Pant had said the counterfeiters would reap their richest harvest. When would Pant find his man? Would he, Johnny, have a part in it? He must not fail to fulfill his promise to Pant; to get acquainted with the steam kettle cook and the midget clown.

The next morning Johnny kept his boxing appointment with Gwen. It was after a half hour of strenuous work, while they were resting on a mat, that she turned to him suddenly and said, in a low voice:

"A strange thing happened last night."

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"What was that?"

"I was awakened from my sleep. I had been dreaming of a fire, and I would have sworn that it was a flash of red light that awakened me."

"That's strange." Johnny's tone told nothing.

"What is stranger still, two other girls were awakened in the same manner."

"You had upper berths?"

"Yes."

"There were glass ventilator windows above you?"

"Yes."

"Probably the light from a switch tower shining in."

"It was too bright for that. It was so bright it was crimson. It was like—it was like the crimson flash that fell on the tiger that other night!"

"That *was* strange," Johnny smiled, but his smile told nothing.

He was not surprised when, as he met Pant a

half hour later, the strange fellow said to him in a matter-of-fact tone:

"It's the slim girl, the one that rides bareback, Millie, what is it they call her?"

"Millie Gonzales."

"She's the one. She's got your ring."

"I thought you might know," Johnny said quietly.

Pant shot him a quick glance. "Somebody been talking?"

"Not so you'd need be alarmed. But, say, now I know she's got it, how am I to get it from her?"

"That's up to you," retorted Pant.

"It's strange," said Johnny a little later; "last night I dreamed that the circus train was wrecked, all shot to smithereens! And the animals—they were having the time of their lives, fighting each other and eating folks up."

"If that ever happens," Pant gripped his arm hard, "if it ever does, you get that big black cat! Get the black cat! See? He's a bad one; a man-eater. Got a record. A bad one. See?"

Johnny nodded, and thought again of the story Pant was to tell him of that same black cat and the jungles of India. But there was no time for it now; the show would soon begin, and then would come the great event, his try-out.

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It came. All too soon he found himself marching down the sawdust trail. Dressed in his tightly fitting green suit, and closely followed by the bear, he felt foolish enough. He was a trifle awed by the immense throng, too. He had been in many a boxing match, but never one like this. In those other matches he had had men for opponents, and mostly men as spectators. Here it was far different.

Anxious questions forced their way into his consciousness. How was the boxing bout going? Would he be able to manage the bear, or would the animal, goaded on by the shouts of the crowd, repeat the performance of that other day, when he had run the Italian out of the tent?

Cold perspiration stood out on Johnny's forehead, yet he did not falter. Bracing himself for his ordeal, he bowed low to the audience, then turned to put the bear through his preliminary antics. All went well; still, through it all, Johnny's eyes strayed now and then to the boxing gloves. So real was his fear of the outcome of the match, that at times it seemed to him the gloves were alive and ready to leap from the floor into his face.

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Yet, when the time came, the thing seemed as simple as child's play. The bear performed his part perfectly. Johnny even risked a little extra exhibition by entering into a clinch with the bear and cleverly extricating himself. The great test came, however, when the bear, appearing to grow angry, leaped squarely at him. Three times the great beast did this, then with a sudden cry of seeming terror, Johnny darted from the ring and, closely followed by the bear, raced away before the packed throng of amazed and delighted spectators. When the bear paused,

threw his gloves and turned to leer at the audience, Johnny knew that he had not only made good, but made good *big*. He had won his double pay.

He was just rounding the outer entrance, with the applause of the crowd dying away, when a small, shrill voice squeaked up to him:

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"You did fine. You're all right."

Glancing down, Johnny had no difficulty in recognizing Tom Stick, the midget clown. He cut a comical figure as he stood there. A mere child in size, he was dressed in an African hunting suit and carried a shiny air rifle. Not far away, a gigantic elephant stood complacently stuffing hay into his mouth.

Johnny looked first at the midget, then at the elephant.

"We go on next," squeaked the little fellow, "Jo-Jo, that's the elephant, and myself. I play I'm hunting wild elephants. See? Shoot him. See? Shoot him with the air gun all around the tent. Real bullets, too! He doesn't mind. Hide's tough. We always get a laugh; Jo-Jo and I do. Want to know how we came to be friends, Jo-Jo and me?"

Johnny nodded.

"Well, you see, Jo-Jo was a French elephant. They didn't need him during the war, so they sent him over to America, and sold him here. Well, Jo-Jo knew French all right, but he didn't understand a word of English. He was supposed to be one of the smartest elephants in the world over in France, but over here he was so stupid they actually had to push him off the cars when they unloaded him. Just plumb stupid. See? Got so they wished they didn't have him at all.

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"Well, you know, I used to show in France once myself, so I knew a little French, and one day, just for fun, I said to Jo-Jo:

"'Bon jour, Jo-Jo. Comment alle vous!'"

"Well, sir, that elephant nearly wiggled his old palm leaf ears off out of pure joy. I knew right away what made it; it was hearin' someone speak in his own language, so I just went right on spielin' French to him, and he kept on gettin' happier and happier until at last I had to stop for fear he'd break a blood vessel laughin'.

"When the Boss knew about it, he gave Jo-Jo to me, and we've been mates ever since.

"We've got to be movin' up. Good-by, Mr. Bear Boxer. See you some other time."

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Johnny watched the dwarf, as he walked behind the elephant and, turning a corner, disappeared from sight.

"So that's one of the fellows Pant suspects of being the forger, Black McCree? Not the man, I'd say," he muttered. "And yet, you never can tell."

It was the next morning, while he was preparing for his daily bout with Gwen, that Johnny received a shock of surprise which he did not soon forget.

A unique plan for creating a new laugh had occurred to him. He was telling it to Gwen.

"They don't have the clown assist you in your turn, do they?" He smiled, as he laced her right glove.

"No. How could they? I never saw a clown walk the tight wire."

"Wouldn't need to; just pretend to." He stooped to pick up her left glove.

"How?"

"Well, you see, they might have two or three small balloons just large enough to lift him off the ground. They could have small ropes attached to each of these. The attendants—the—the—"

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Johnny's eyes had seen something which made him stutter. On the plump third finger of Gwen's left hand reposed *the* ring, the diamond ring, which had been the means of making him a circus performer.

"I—I'll take it off for you." He drew the ring from her finger.

"Thanks," she smiled at him. "Awfully stupid of me to wear it. There's a handkerchief in the right hand pocket of my blouse. Just wrap it in that, and put it in my pocket, please."

For one brief second Johnny hesitated. Was this the moment of moments? The ring which would clear his good name was within his grasp. Should he say, "Gwen, this belongs to a friend of mine, not to you; I must take it to her"?

For an instant he looked into Gwen's frank blue eyes, then, without a word, he drew the handkerchief from her pocket, wrapped the ring carefully up, then thrust it deep down in the pocket of her blouse.

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"As I was about to say," he continued with forced composure, "they could hold the balloons steady, while the clown tripped lightly along the wire. Perhaps he might even attempt a clog. When he was in the midst of the clog, the attendants could suddenly lose control of the balloons, letting the clown go up to the top of the tent. He could then climb to earth head first by doing a hand-over-hand on a rope fastened to a peg in the ground. Don't you think that would bring a laugh?"

Gwen's brow was wrinkled in thought for a moment.

"Yes, I think it would," she said suddenly. "I think it would be a berry! How'd you like to be the clown?"

"I wasn't in aviation in the Army," smiled Johnny.

"No, but really, would you?"

"Why! Why! Yes, I might. It might be better than boxing the bear, and since I've got to stick around, I might as well be a clown as anything."

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"Stick around?" she asked. "Why do you have to stick around?"

For an instant the words were on the tip of Johnny's tongue which would have told her the whole truth. But his lips would not frame the sentence.

"Why, I—I," he stammered; "just my nature, I guess. Always did like the circus."

Johnny was not a great success as a boxer that morning. He was thinking of the diamond ring, and wondering why he had not demanded the right to keep it, once he had it in his grasp; wondering, too, how it happened that Millie had it one day, and Gwen another. "Queer mixup," was his mental comment.

Late that night, after the show was over, when the lights were dim, Johnny wandered into the animal tent. He was just passing the cage of the black leopard when a low hiss halted him. Then he felt a grip on his arm. It was Pant.

"Sit down here in the dark, Johnny," he whispered. "I'll tell you the story of that black beast. I can tell it better with his wicked red eyes burning holes at me through the dark, just as they did once before, and him a free black cat!"

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Johnny started as he stared at the cage where, on a narrow wooden shelf, the leopard must be reposing. All he could see was a pair of red balls of fire, and it seemed to him that in all his life he had never seen anything so full of hate as was the red gleam that seemed fairly to shoot out from them.

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### **CHAPTER XIII PANT'S STORY OF THE BLACK CAT**

"Life's like this," Pant gripped Johnny's arm, as the two red balls in the back of the dark cage shifted from side to side; "life's just like this: When once you've done a thing, you want to do it again. That's why we have to watch our habits, if we want our lives to count for something. Lots of fellows don't watch them. I told you about killing the old tiger and his mate, and bringing in the cubs to the doctor, so he could sell them to the traders and buy supplies for his hospital. Well, once I had done that, I wanted to do it again. I guess there was something of my old desire to study cats in me yet, for I was overjoyed when I heard wild stories about a giant black leopard that haunted the trail far up the river. You see, the mountain streams were drying up, and the big cats were being driven out of the mountain forests to the river jungles.

"The stories they told about that big black cat made a fellow's blood run cold. He was big as a tiger. He was a fierce man-eater. His fangs were twice the size of a tiger's, and each one like a knife blade. He had been seen to seize a full grown man, and before the man's companions could fire upon him, to leap to the bough of a tree, ten feet from the ground, the man in his

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jaws, too. The others had fled in terror. They never knew what terrible fate had overtaken their companion until a few days later a second party passing that way had found his bones strewn beneath that tree.

"Of course I laughed at their stories. A black cat do a thing like that? Why, the one in the zoo back home was not three times the size of a house cat, and he, the keeper had told me, was eight years old.

"I did not believe their stories, but the natives believed them, and would not stir up the river road; and none would come down it, either; so those who were sick could not come to the hospital I had helped to make better. This made me angry.

"I will go and kill that black cat,' I said to the doctor. 'I will have his skin for a foot mat!' [175]

"He smiled in a friendly way, and bade me not be rash. The black leopard, he told me, was much more to be feared than the tiger. Unlike the tiger, he killed for the fun of killing. He climbed trees, and there on the dark trunk, seeming but a part of the tree itself, he waited for his prey. In the gloom of the forest, he dropped without a sound, and his attack was most terrible. He was truly large, too, six feet in length from tip of nose to base of tail.

"I did not believe the doctor. Had I not seen a full grown black leopard in the zoo? Was he not an insignificant fellow? And yet, I was a little afraid, for I remembered that the black cat in the zoo had not been afraid, when all the other great cats cringed in dark corners of their cages. I was a little afraid, but I would not admit it.

"Just because you have told me he is terrible,' I said, 'I will take along a strong cage. I will bring him to you alive. We will sell him to the traders, and buy more beds for our hospital.' [176]

"Then the doctor begged me not to be foolhardy. But I would not listen. With four natives to carry the cage, with a rifle in my hand, and a big knife at my belt, I went—went far up the river trail. When the natives would go no farther, I called them dirty cowards, and putting my rifle inside the cage, dragged the cage after me until I had come to a place where, in a deep forest, at the bend of the river, the black cat was said to make his stand.

"I was frightened a little, Johnny, when I saw the bleached bones of a man lying beneath a great tree where mosses and vines hung thick, but I reassured myself by saying the man had died there alone, and the jackals had picked his bones.

"That's the origin of the wild story,' I told myself. 'Like as not there is no black cat at all, and I shall go home disappointed.'

"But I didn't, Johnny, I didn't."

Johnny could feel Pant's hand grip his arm hard, as the black creature in the cage stirred and gave forth a sort of hissing yawn. [177]

"You were never in the jungle at night?" Pant's tense, vibrant whisper told more plainly than

words that he was living over again those hours in the jungle alone.

"No," breathed Johnny.

"It's wonderful, and terrible. The sun sinks from sight. Darkness comes and then out shines the moon. And the moonlight! Nowhere else is it like it is in the jungle. It creeps down among the masses of leaves, transforming swinging, swaying limbs into gigantic, twisting serpents, ready at any moment to swing down upon you. It turns every shadow-dotted tree trunk into a beast ready to leap at your throat. It's weird, fascinating, terrible. Down at the river some beast plunges into the water. You hear the splash, then the swish, swish of his strokes. He is coming to your bank, you are sure. You are afraid. Who would not be?"

"But me, I sat by my cage, with the rifle over one knee and watched. One hour, two hours, three hours I watched, until at last all the twisting branches, the spotted tree trunks were familiar to me.

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"And then, then he came; the black beast, the great black cat, he came."

Pant paused. There came a hiss from the cage, as if the black cat, too, was living those hours over again.

"I saw him, Johnny, I saw him. I caught the wicked gleam of his two red eyes." Pant gripped Johnny's arm until it hurt. "He was not thirty feet from me. Flattened against a broad tree trunk, he was glaring at me out of the dark. How he came so close without my seeing him, I cannot tell. He was a devil. Perhaps he had been there all that time. Who knows?"

"Anyway, there he was. I cast my charm upon him. And I had him, Johnny, I had him. With my rifle I could have shot him on the instant. But he had me, too. He was so wonderful. I have told you about the wonder of the tiger's coat. It is nothing to the coat of a black leopard in the jungle. You have seen him. You know how immense he is; seven feet from tip of nose to base of tail. You have seen him in his cage, but will never see him as I saw him that night, a free beast in his own wilderness, and I a stranger, an intruder.

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"But I thought I had him. I wanted to study him: to learn his secrets. I planned how I would follow him day after day, and learn all his secrets. I was mad, stark mad."

Pant paused again as if for breath. The black beast moved nearer on his shelf within the cage. The thrashing of his tail was like the dull beat of a drum.

"Just when I was thinking all this," Pant rose upon his knees in his excitement, "just when I thought I had him, he gave one piercing scream and leaped. My man, what a leap! He struck me all unprepared; struck me with fangs and claws tearing at my flesh. Yet my right hand was free. It was a tense, agonizing second. In some way I got out my knife and slashed away with it. The next instant I lost consciousness."

Pant paused again. Once more the leopard

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moved his length along the cage.

"But, Johnny, here's the strangest part of all. I cannot explain it; only know it's true. They say that sometimes, in moments of great shock, men lose their personality and become another person; that when they come back to themselves they have done things they know nothing of, yet others have seen them do. It may have been like that with me. And then, a great teacher in the heart of India once told me that there was a great spirit of the forest who looked after brave hunters, and did things for them in time of great danger which they could not do for themselves. It may have been that, too. Whatever way it may have been, it was strange; so strange that you would not believe me were I not your friend who always told you the truth.

"Listen, Johnny! When I came to myself I was weak, terribly weak from loss of blood; but the cat, the big black cat, he was raging in the cage, and the door was fastened tight."

Pant paused. The animal tent was still. Suddenly a crimson flash gleamed. For an instant it turned the black cat blood red. The next moment, with a wild snarl, the beast flattened himself against the bars of his cage.

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A keeper sprang out of the darkness.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"What's what?" drawled Pant.

"I thought I saw a flash."

"He evidently thought something of the sort," Pant replied, poking his thumb at the black cat.

"Well, you guys better move on. This ain't no place for spinnin' yarns."

"That's all right," drawled Pant, "but let me tell you, friend; if anything ever happens to this circus, a fire, a cyclone, a train wreck, or anything like that, you get that cat. Get that black cat!"

"What d'you know about him?"

"Plenty that I don't tell to strangers."

Pant lifted the wall of the tent and stepped out into the moonlight, followed by Johnny.

"You didn't finish," suggested Johnny.

"There's not much more to tell. You have to hand it to that doctor, though. When I didn't come back in the morning, he tried to organize a party to search for me. No one would go. They were scared cold by the black cat. So he came alone. He found me there, too weak to move, and he carried me all the way back and put me in a bed I'd helped him to buy.

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"The natives went for the black cat and brought him back to the village in triumph.

"When I was better a trader came to me and offered me the price of a tiger's cub for the black cat. I laughed in his face, and told him I'd take the cat to the States myself. That's what I did. I got five thousand dollars for him, and sent it all back to the doctor so he could buy beds,



and absorbent cotton, and medicine for his hospital."

"That was good of you," said Johnny.

"Who's good?" demanded Pant. "Didn't he teach me sense when I didn't know anything but cats? Didn't he carry me out of the jungle on his back when no one else dared to go in?"

For a time they were silent. Then, gripping Johnny's arm, Pant whispered: "But, Johnny, we're after worse cats than the black one. We're after human tigers. Tigers that destroy man's faith in man; that make life little worth the living. And, Johnny, we're on their trail, close on their trail. Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps the day after, you shall see—well, you shall see what you shall see."

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## CHAPTER XIV IN TOM STICK'S HOUSE

That same night, by the dull glow of a half burned out camp fire on the bank of a river, Pant told Johnny of his plans as a Secret Service man on a big case, and how they had worked out thus far.

"You remember the crimson flash in the animal tent, and how it frightened a lot of the colored boys into jumping their jobs?" he chuckled. "Well, that helped me, helped me a lot; for you see some of the boys that quit were working for this bunch of counterfeiters that has Black McCree as its head. Some of the boys that were hired were already getting pay from Uncle Sam for helping me. Some of them now are getting triple pay, once from the circus, once from me and once from the counterfeiters. See how it works?"

Pant chuckled again.

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"These boys with the three pay checks have helped me a lot, but not enough. They can't get back far enough. They know only the men who pass the bonds on to them, and those men are just helpers like themselves. They pass the goods on, but the real man is still back in the shadows; too far back for me to see him. He's the man I want; the man and his outfit; and let me tell you, Johnny, that's some outfit. There's never been anything like it before. It's a danger. Where and when they operate is more than I know. They could hardly do it in one of the tents. They might do it in one of the cars, and it might be Tom, the midget clown, doing it in his house on wheels."

"I've talked with him," said Johnny quickly. "I don't believe he's in on it."

"Don't be too sure. Take no chances. If he's especially friendly, that may mean that he is onto the fact that you're working with me and that I'm after them. A bunch like that would stab you in the back in a second."

For a few minutes there was silence, then Pant continued: "We are making some progress. We know about how much of the 'queer' they are peddling in these towns, and take my word, it's a plenty. They are planting it thick. We've got to get 'em, and get 'em quick. Have you talked with Andy McQueen, the steam kettle cook, yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Do it to-morrow. He may be important. And Johnny," Pant leaned forward with an impressive gesture, "Johnny, watch your step. You're in danger every moment. They may know you're with me; probably do, and if they do, they'll get you if they can. That's all. Goodnight."

Rising, he stretched himself like a cat, then went slouching away into the darkness.

For a long time Johnny lay there on the sand dreamily gazing into the fire. It was, indeed, a tangled web of mystery the unraveling of which he had let himself in for, and one which, as Pant had suggested, might at any moment suddenly break and let him down with an awful fall.

There was the ring. Gwen had it that morning; Millie had it two days before; perhaps Mitzi had it at this very moment. He was still surprised at himself because of his action of that morning. Well, he must have that ring. This, if for no other reason, must hold him to his surprising circus career. He wondered if Gwen were serious about the clown stunt and, if so, whether she would soon have it arranged. He thought again of Pant's problem, and wondered for the hundredth time if he should have any part in its solving.

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But the greatest mystery of all was the crimson flash. He had seen it leap down from the air and turn the tiger, loose in the big tent, blood red. He had seen it do the same thing in the animal tent. In his suggestion regarding the direction of the sun's rays in the Arctic, Pant had intimated that rays of light could be made to follow crooked paths. If this could be done, if Pant held within his fertile brain the secret of this terrible power, what a wonderful fellow he was! How it would transform modern life, modern warfare! Trenches would be utterly useless once a light might be thrown upon them from any angle. Many things that were dark, secret and hidden in every day life would be clear as the light of day. What dark corner, what secret rendezvous, would be safe from the glare of those crooked rays of gleaming light?

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Johnny pondered until his head whirled, then, rising and shaking himself, he made his way to the sleeping car in which he now bunked. The circus would soon be on its way to the next small city.

That next small city, if Johnny had but known it, was only ten miles from the home of the grandparents of the millionaire twins. They had ridden cross country for a visit to their grandparents. Along the roads they had seen glaring posters announcing the coming of the circus. They had decided at once that now was the time to join that circus. Their circus riding clothes were in the trunk, which had been sent on by express. Even as Johnny rose from beside the fire, the twins, in their beds at their grandfather's rambling, old house, were

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planning how, on the morrow, they would slip on their circus garb underneath their dresses, and ride away to discover their old friend, Johnny, and join the parade.

Morning broke bright and clear on the old fair grounds of Rokford, which was the place of the great circus' next one day stand. When Johnny had eaten breakfast, he strolled past the cooking tent and, having paused to admire the row of shining copper steam kettles, he thought of his promise to get in touch with the manager of these kettles. The cook was not in sight at that moment, so Johnny paused to study these great vats, which resembled nothing so much as giant kettle drums.

"Just a twist of the valve and the steam does the rest," he murmured to himself.

"Great, ain't they?" a voice said at his elbow.

"Sure are." Johnny turned about. It was the cook. A tall, slender man, well past middle age, with a drooping mustache, and a wrinkled smile, he studied Johnny from head to toe.

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"You're a boxer," he said, getting his smile into operation. "Saw you box a conman once. Been wonderin' ever since how such a small fellow could pack such a wallop."

"I don't mind tellin' you," said Johnny. "It's absurdly simple. Instead of just getting the force of your arm muscles into the blow, or the push of your shoulder, you leap as you strike, and that puts the whole of your body back of your mitt. That's easy, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is, after you been doin' it a few thousand times; easy as fryin' flapjacks."

"How long have you been cooking with steam kettles?" asked Johnny.

"Only five or six years. But I've been cookin' all my life. I was cook for a surveying outfit when the Union Pacific was built. Boy! Those were the days of real sport. Used to run out of fuel and everything."

A humorous twinkle lurked about the man's eyes, as he lighted his pipe and sat down on an upturned bucket.

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"I mind one time," he mused, "when we was plumb out of wood, and nothin' but grass; prairie all 'round us. Just enough fire to make coffee; not enough to fry flapjacks, and the nearest supply station thirty miles away."

"What did you do?" asked Johnny.

"Well, sir," the cook removed his pipe and spat on the ground, "I said, 'Boys, there'll be flapjacks for breakfast just the same.' I mixed 'em up as usual in a big tin bucket. I gave the bucket to one of the boys, and a hunk of bacon rind to another, and told 'em all to follow me. I struck a match and set the prairie grass on fire; then I held my fryin' pan over it until it was hot. I baked the first flapjack and tossed it out of the pan over my shoulder. Some fellow caught and ate it. I did another and another the same way, and kept that up until every fellow in the bunch was satisfied."

Johnny smiled. The cook smiled, spat on the ground, then concluded his story. "When we got through breakfast we were ten miles from camp. Prairie fire travels. So did we."

Johnny laughed; then he thought and laughed again. After a time he rose and went on his way.

"That's another fellow," he told himself, "that I'd never suspect of being a crook, but what's that about people who 'smile and smile and are a villain still'? A fellow has to watch out."

He was just thinking of this when a shrill voice piped:

"Hello, Johnny! Want to see my house?"

It was Tom Stick, the midget clown. He was offering Johnny a rare privilege; inviting him to view the inside of his house on wheels. Pant had told Johnny that such a boon had been granted to no one. Yet, because it was so rare, and because of Pant's warning, "They'll stab you in the back," he was tempted for a second to decline.

Courage and curiosity overcame his fears, and smiling he said:

"Sure! Lead the way."

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The clown's house was little more than a box on wheels, but once Johnny had crowded himself through the narrow door and seated himself, much humped up, on a miniature chair, he was surprised at the completeness of its furnishings. He could easily imagine himself in a hunter's lodge in the depths of the forest. An open fireplace, with a real wood fire burning, a roughly hewn table, benches beside the fireplace, a cluster of fox skins hanging in the corner, a bear skin on the floor, rifles hanging on one wall; all these, with the unmistakable odor of fresh pine wood, went far toward taking him back to the forests.

"You see," squeaked Tom Stick, rubbing his hands in delight at Johnny's astonishment, "I was born and brought up in the Maine woods. I loved the wild out-of-doors, and when the circus people offered me big money to join them, I told them no. But my mother needed the money, so, at last, I told them if they'd build me this house, and never disturb me in it, I'd come. You see they did. I've never had any of the other circus people in here. Didn't think they'd understand. They've always lived in a tent. They'd laugh at a fellow who wanted a home with four board walls, a ceiling, and a smell of the pine woods in it. But I knew you wouldn't. You've had a home, and you know the woods. Tell that by the color in your cheeks, and the way you swing your arms when you walk."

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For a moment the dwarf was silent, then suddenly he shot a question at his visitor.

"Johnny, what do you live for?"

"Why, why, I don't know," Johnny stammered. "Just live because it's fun to live, I suppose."

The midget wrinkled his small brow in thought.

"Not so bad," he murmured. "Not so bad. But Johnny; did you ever wonder what a little fellow

like me lives for?"

"No, I didn't," Johnny admitted.

"Well, there's a lot of things we can't do that big folks can; but there's one thing, Johnny, one thing," Tom's tone died to a whisper; "a short man can have a tall bank account. He can, can't he, Johnny?" The little fellow twisted his face into a knowing smile.

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"I guess he can," grinned Johnny, "and it's a fine thing that he can."

Johnny had stepped over and was examining an ancient squirrel rifle, which Tom explained had belonged to his grandfather, when he noticed the way the walls of the house were fastened. The walls were made of fresh pine slabs. They were wired tight to something behind them. "Iron bars," was his mental comment. "When they made this they just built it inside a wild animal cage. I wonder what would happen if a fellow were to get locked in here?"

He was speculating on this, when he heard a voice outside calling.

"Johnny, Johnny Thompson!" It was Gwen.

He answered the call and, turning to his little host, said: "Guess I better go. Some work, I suppose. Great little house, you've got. Much obliged for letting me see it."

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He backed out of the door and hurried away to join Gwen, but even as he did so, he thought of the midget clown's reference to a tall bank account, and of his house built inside a cage. What if this little fellow was a miser? What if his greed for gold had led him into counterfeiting? What if he were Black McCree? What safer place could be found for hiding a counterfeiter's den than a house built inside a cage on wheels?

All these speculations were cut short by the appearance of the smiling face of his lady boxing partner, Gwen.

"It's the clown stunt," she exclaimed excitedly. "The big chief fell for it right away. He hurried a messenger off to Chicago for the balloons. They're already here, and they've tried them out with a dummy and they worked beautifully. They want you to try it right away."

"This dummy," smiled Johnny, "he didn't fall and break his neck, did he?"

"No, of course not, Silly!"

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"Well, here's hoping I don't, but it's a powerful long distance from the top of the center tent pole down to the sawdust."

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## CHAPTER XV BURSTING BALLOONS

The big top had never been more crowded than it was the night of Johnny's first performance as

a clown. And never, in the memory of the oldest circus man, had there been a jollier throng. Never had there been an act more thoroughly appreciated than that of Gwen, the Queen, and Johnny, the fat clown.

Johnny had been dressed in inflated rubber clothing until he appeared as fat as a butcher. When, by the aid of the balloons, he rose to the tight wire, when he tripped lightly along it, and returned cakewalking, the spectators howled their approval. But when in apparent consternation, he lost his step and instead of plunging downward, leaped upward with the sudden lift of the balloons, they rose to their feet and roared their delight.

Silently, calmly, he rose toward the tent top. There was nothing calm about the feelings that surged in Johnny's breast, however. He had never been in aviation, and never would be. Going up in the air made him feel sick. Had it not been for Gwen, he would have refused to attempt this stunt.

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"Oh, well!" he sighed, "here's the top; now I can grab the rope and come down. Rope's more certain than these balloons."

Hardly had the thought passed through his brain than there came a loud report. So close it was that it hurt his ear drums. It was followed almost instantly by a second explosion.

"The balloons," Johnny groaned. "They're bursting!"

For a second his head whirled. To drop from those dizzy heights meant death. Then his mind cleared. The rope was to his right. Already he was beginning to shoot downward. Could he reach it? With one wild leap in mid-air, he thrust out a hand. He grasped the rope with his left, then lost his hold. With his right, he secured a firmer grip. At that same instant the last balloon burst. For one sickening moment, he clung there, swinging backward and forward, madly groping for the rope with his free hand. At last, he found it, and, with a sigh of relief, began sliding down the rope.

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The crowd was standing up cheering. The band was playing. Even the performers thought it part of the act.

For a minute or two after he had reached the ground, Johnny rested on a mat. As he rose to go he noticed something lying in the sawdust. Carelessly he picked it up, examined it, then gave a low whistle. It was an arrow-like affair. The shaft was of steel wire, the head of wood. The head had been discolored, part yellow and part dark brown.

"Sulphur!" he murmured. "Dipped in burning sulphur, then shot at my balloons! No wonder they exploded. Now, who played that dirty trick?"

He examined the thing carefully. "Couldn't have been shot from a bow, no groove for the bow string. Now I wonder. An air rifle, that's what it was."

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Quickly there flashed before his mind a picture of a midget clown chasing a huge elephant

around the ring. The clown was dressed in equatorial hunting garb and carried an air rifle.

"Tom Stick!" Johnny murmured. "Tom Stick and his air rifle! I wouldn't have thought he'd do it."

Slowly he walked back through the alleyway that led to the dressing room.

He had discarded his clown suit and had walked out into the open air, when a shrill young voice called his name:

"Johnny, Johnny Thompson."

Whirling about, he found himself facing the millionaire twins. They were riding astride their ponies, and were dressed as if ready for their turn in the ring.

"Wha—where'd you come from, and who let you in?" he gasped.

"We came from our grandfather's to join the circus," piped Marjory.

"Yes, and to think," Margaret fairly wailed, "we got here too late for the parade!"

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Johnny looked at them for a moment, then laughed a good natured laugh.

"Got let down, didn't you?" he smiled. "Well, so did I a minute ago, mighty sudden, too. But perhaps we can get you into a part yet, since this is positively your first and last appearance."

"Oh, no, Johnny," exclaimed Marjory, "not the last! We've come to stay as long as you do."

"Then I don't stay long," laughed Johnny. "Circus is no place for millionaire twins. You wait right here. I'll be back."

By dint of much persuading, Johnny succeeded in getting the twins a place on the program. At the end of the races came a pony race. The ponies were ridden by monkeys. It was arranged that the two little girls, on their own ponies, were to race the monkeys on their circus mounts.

It was a wilder and more genuine race than is usually pulled off in the circus, for the twins were dead in earnest about winning it, and so were the monkeys. The monkeys and their ponies had played at racing so long, however, they were not able to get seriously down to business. When the twins were riding neck and neck, three lengths ahead of their nearest rivals, they delighted the throng by leaping upon their feet and riding in this manner around the last sweeping circle and out of sight.

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"That's fine," exclaimed the manager, rubbing his hands. "Who are they, friends of yours? Can we book 'em for the rest of the season?" He was speaking to Johnny.

"Can't book them for another show," groaned Johnny. "And I'll get skinned alive for letting them in on this one. They're the daughters of Major MacDonald, the steel magnate. Ran away from their grandfather's, and they go back to-night."

The manager whistled. "Too bad to spoil

perfectly good circus girls to make society belles," he smiled. "But seein' that's who they are, I guess it can't be helped."

"Oow-wee! That was grand!" exclaimed Marjory, who now came up with her sister. "Did we make good. Can we stay?"

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"You made good, but you can't stay," smiled Johnny. "What do you suppose your grandparents are thinking of about now?"

"Oh, they won't know about it at all. We are supposed to be over here with friends who live down on Pine street. That's how they let us come at all. These friends are real old folks and don't go to circuses. When we got here, we called them up as if we were at home and told them we couldn't come; so you see it's all right. And, Johnny, if we can't stay and be circus folks, we can stay just one night, can't we, and have a real ride in a circus train?"

Johnny looked at the manager.

"Sure," grinned the good natured boss of the circus. "We'll put you in the care of Ma Kelly, the circus girls' matron, and you'll be safe as a bean in a bowl of soup."

"How far do we move?" asked Johnny, a bit anxiously.

"Only forty miles, and that leaves us less than thirty miles from their grandfather's place. They can make it back all right."

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"I'll borrow one of the rough riders' ponies, and hoof it back with them," said Johnny. "But remember," he turned to the twins, "remember, this is the last. To-morrow morning you turn your faces toward home. And by thunder! I wish I could go along to stay!"

"Why? Why can't you?" cried Marjory. "We want you to. Indeed, we do."

"I can't tell you now. Maybe some time. You stay right here. I'll send Ma Kelly around. Then I've got to go box the bear."

Johnny rushed away, and that was the last they saw of him for some time.

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## CHAPTER XVI THE WRECK OF THE CIRCUS

That night, as Johnny listened to the chant of the negroes as they went about their tasks of breaking camp and loading, he fancied that there was a weird and restless tone to it, foretelling some catastrophe brooding over all.

The night was dark, with black, rainless clouds hurrying across the sky. Johnny shivered as he walked toward his sleeping car. His hand was on the rail when someone touched his arm. It was Pant.

"Johnny," he whispered, "how'd you like to ride



with me in the gondola to-night?"

"Oh, all right," Johnny answered, a note of impatience in his voice.

"If it's going to be a bother, don't come."

"I'll come along."

"Thought you might like to be in on something big."

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"I've been in on something big twice to-day. The first came near to being my funeral, and the second will be, if I don't get those twins back to their grandfather's pretty quick."

Johnny told Pant of the day's experiences, as they made their way back to a tent car.

"Oh, you'll come out all right with the twins," said Pant. "I only hope we don't get into things that'll muss us up to-night, but we'll go careful."

"Of course," he whispered, as they settled down among the piles of canvas, "it's that Liberty bond business. I've been scouting 'round in the towns we've been in, and the way they've been spreading the 'queer' about is nothing short of a super-crime.

"I've been running up a blind trail for a long time. Thought I had something on that conman with the ragged ear and two of his pals. I followed them down to the river in Chicago twice, and the second time came near catching them; would have, too, if it hadn't been for a rat that tried to eat my hand off. I got 'em the other night—outfit and everything, and it turned out to be only a mimeograph kit for making fake telegrams, announcing results of races, baseball games, and the like. I was sore when I found it was nothing; might have been a blind, at that. But I had to start all over again, and last night when we were on the way, I made a mighty important discovery. There was a light in the rear end of one of the horse cars most of the night. That's as far as I got. It was moonlight. They might see me if I came spying around. Besides, I wanted someone else along; someone with a strong arm. Didn't want to get pitched off the train just when I had my hand on the trick. Of course, it may be just an all night crap game, but I don't think so. Anyway, we'll see. We'll let them get under way, then when we're clipping it up at a lively rate, and the moon's under, we'll have a look."

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Pant fell silent, apparently lost in his intricate problem. Johnny yawned.

A quarter of an hour later Johnny was just dropping off into a doze, when Pant gripped his arm and whispered:

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"C'mon. Let's go!"

Having climbed over two gondolas and the top of a one-time express car, they dropped cat-like from the roof of the express car to the platform of a second express car.

Here they stood silent, listening for fully two minutes. At first everything appeared dark, but presently Johnny caught a faint gleam of light that apparently came through a crack in a lower panel of the express car door.

"What'll we do if they come out at us. It's a rotten place," he whispered. Just then the car gave a lurch which almost threw him from the narrow platform.

"Duck and jump."

"Mighty risky."

"Only chance. Too many of 'em. Probably guns and everything."

"All right. Get busy."

Pant dropped on his knee and, bracing himself to avoid being thrown against the door by a sudden lurch, peered through the crack. [210]

What he saw drew forth a whispered exclamation:

"It's the real gang!"

For some time all was silent. Johnny's heart was doing time and a half. What if they were forced to stand and fight or jump? He shivered as he tried to make out the embankment through the darkness. They were racing down grade.

"We've got 'em! It's the gang!" Pant whispered again. "Look!"

He rose and stepped aside. With muscles set for action, Johnny dropped on his knees, and, shutting one eye, peered through the narrow opening.

What he saw astonished him. In a brilliantly lighted room, the width of the car, and some ten feet deep, four men were working rapidly, and apparently with great skill. What surprised him most of all was that all four men wore heavily smoked glasses, such as Pant himself wore. He saw at a glance that neither the steam kettle cook nor the midget clown was with them. He was glad the cook was not there. His feeling regarding the midget, after the events of the previous day, was not unmixed.

The things the men were doing interested him immensely. Two of them appeared to be putting little squares of paper through a wash, such as a photographer uses. A third was drying them before a motor-driven, superheated electric fan. The fourth was stamping them in a small press. Each time he stamped one, he appeared to change the type. [211]

Presently, the two who were handling the baths appeared to come to the end of their tasks. Hardly had they spoken a word to their companions than each man stepped to a corner, and, turning his back from the center of the room, stood there motionless.

"Wha—" Johnny's lips formed the word. There was not time to finish. The next instant he dropped limply back upon the platform, as if he had been shot.

"What is it, Johnny?" Pant whispered in alarm. Johnny's hands covered his face. [212]

"The flash! My eyes! They're blind!"

Pant pushed him roughly to one side.

"Let's see."

Johnny slid back to the other car platform. Still dazed by the sudden flood of light that had struck his eye, but fast recovering, he watched Pant with interest, not unmingled with awe. By the sudden spurts of light that shot through the crack, he knew that the flashes were being continued, yet Pant did not remove his eye. He still crouched there before the crack. Gazing intently within, he uttered now and then a stifled "Ah!" and "Oh!" at the marvels which he was viewing.

Finally he dropped back to a seat beside Johnny.

"Eyes all right now?" he asked.

"Sure. What was it?" queried Johnny, forgetting his aching eyes.

"Color photography."

"Color photography?"

"Sure. One of the great inventions of the age, and they are using it for making counterfeit bonds!"

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Johnny was silent.

"You see," whispered Pant, "great inventors have been experimenting with color photography for years. They got so they could do color work on negatives—that is, the photographic plate—very well. They have used these for the purpose of photographing the stages of certain diseases, and a few things like that; but when it came to getting the color on the positive—the picture itself—that could not be done. These fellows *can do it*, and are doing it. The bonds are printed in brown and black. They catch these colors perfectly, only in a little paler hue. Their paper is nearly perfect, but whatever defects it has are counteracted by this color photography which reproduces the very tints of the paper."

For some time they sat there in silence.

"Now that we know their game," whispered Pant at last, "how are we going to get them? One of the fellows is a ticket seller. He sold Snowball some bonds when we were in Chicago. I might have known he was in it. Another is a guard at the entrance of the big top."

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"Sold me some bonds once."

"That's right. The other two I don't know. Let's have another look."

Pant had just put his eyes to the crack; Johnny was standing behind him, when there ran through the train a sickening shiver. The next instant there followed a deafening crash, as car jammed upon car, and, leaping high upon one another, left the track.

It was a wreck—such a wreck as is seldom witnessed—the wreck of a circus train; a head-end collision with a bob-tailed freight running like mad.

At the moment previous to the first shock of the wreck, Gwen might have been seen sitting in her own compartment talking earnestly with the

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millionaire twins. None of the three had yet undressed for retiring. The things the twins were telling Gwen had much to do with Johnny Thompson, and appeared to interest her very much, for now and then there came an amused, and again a surprised, twinkle in her eye. At one time, a close observer might have seen her slip a ring from her finger, a ring that had been covered by the folds of her dress. The ring she crowded deep into the pocket of her blouse beneath her handkerchief.

When the wreck occurred, the car they were in, a staunch steel affair, leaped high in air, then wholly uninjured, left the track to topple over on one side and lay there quite still.

Gwen had been shaken from her seat and jammed beneath the one before her. The twins, gripping the sides, held on as if riding a fractious broncho, and were not shaken loose.

"Oh!" cried Marjory, as the car settled to rest, "Johnny Thompson and our ponies! We must find them. They may be killed."

The pair of them, sliding from their seats, had crawled through a window, and were away before Gwen could sufficiently recover her breath to call them back. She wrung her hands in real distress.

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"They'll be killed!" she cried frantically. "Half the lions and tigers in the circus must be loose!"

Then she scrambled out of the car to find Johnny Thompson. He would know what to do!

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## **CHAPTER XVII**

### **"GET THAT BLACK CAT"**

At the first shock of the wreck, Johnny Thompson and Pant were thrown with such violence against the express car door that the lock was sprung, and they were pitched head foremost among the surprised and panic-stricken counterfeiterers.

Pant was the first to regain his wits. The car, like many others, had careened to one side and lay there motionless. The instruments in the room had been tossed about. Everyone was splashed with a stinging fluid which came from the vats. The peculiar instrument which had occupied the center of the room, and was undoubtedly the color-photo camera, an instrument of priceless value, had apparently sustained little injury. Pant seized upon this and was about to dash through the door with it, when the large man with the black moustache wrenched it from his grasp, and, poising it for an instant in his right hand, hurled it at Pant's head. Leaping to one side, Pant barely escaped the blow. There was a crash, followed by the tinkle of glass and metal instruments.

The next moment the big man shot suddenly upward and fell back with a groan. Johnny's good right hand had got him under the chin.

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Two of the men leaped from the door and fled. The one remaining sprang at Pant, but was at once borne down by Johnny.

"Tear some of those wires from the wall," panted Johnny. "We'll tie them and drag them out."

The fat man, who was completely within their power, was soon tied, then carried out of the car to the embankment.

"Now for the other," puffed Johnny.

They dodged back into the car. To their astonishment, they found that the other man had escaped.

"Gone!" muttered Pant.

"Faked unconsciousness."

[219]

"And he was the prize bird of them all."

"Too bad!"

Suddenly Pant appeared to remember something.

"Johnny," he whispered in a tense whisper, "Johnny, get that black cat!"

Catching his breath, Johnny sprang from the car.

"Wait," whispered Pant. From his pocket he had drawn a tiny vial.

"That," he whispered, "may help you. It's what they call cat-lick in India. An old Hindu gave it to me after I had captured the big black cat. He said it was like catnip to the cat. When a tiger or leopard smelled it, if he could get near the spot where a drop had been spilled he forgot his savageness, and laid down to roll in it. I'm not sure. It sounds queer. Try it if you must."

"You got some?"

"Sure."

"I'll go up track; you go down."

"Right! And Johnny," Pant repeated, "get the black cat!"

[220]

Johnny had scarcely turned from the car when he almost ran into somebody.

"Gwen!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What you doing out here? Don't you know half the beasts are loose? Listen to that?"

The long drawn out roar of a lion sounded above the wail of darkies, the neighing of ponies, and the trumpeting of bull elephants.

"I know, Johnny, but Johnny, nothing half so terrible could ever have been dreamed of!"

"The wreck? I know. Some people are almost sure to have been killed."

"But the twins?"

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. They were in the car with me when the shock came. They were telling me about—all about you. They got away while I was freeing myself from the seats. Went to find you

and their ponies. Oh, Johnny, we must find them quick!"

"Yes," Johnny answered, "but watch out for the black cat, the leopard. He's a man-eater from the jungle."

[221]

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "And I saw him not a minute ago. He's loose from his cage. He was crouching in the corner of the wreck. I caught the gleam of his eyes."

"Where?"

"Back there."

Johnny started forward.

"Johnny, you won't go?"

"I must."

"You'll be killed."

"I've got to get him first." He drew an automatic from his pocket. Then he walked steadily forward, his keen eyes studying every dark corner of the wreck.

Down the train lengths lights were flashing. The keepers were searching out the cages, striving to retain those animals which had not yet escaped, and to locate those that were free. The wooden cars of an ancient design which carried the animals had been torn and crushed, piled upon one another, until the wreck at this point resembled a kindling pile. Here one heard the splintering of boards, as some beast attempted to free himself, and here the crash of torn-up planks told that some loyal elephant strove to free his mate. The whole scene was one of wild confusion. Wildest, most terrifying of all, came the occasional challenge of a great cat of the jungle, now free to do the bidding of his own wild will.

[222]

\* \* \* \* \*

Hardly had Gwen turned, after Johnny had hurried away, than she uttered a cry of dismay. Creeping toward her, his wild eyes gleaming, was a gaunt, yellow tiger. For a second she was paralyzed with fear. And in that second the cat made progress—now he was ten yards away, now eight, now five.

What should she do? To turn, to attempt to flee seemed futile. A tiger could run much faster than she. He might leap as she turned. Her heart stood still. Cold perspiration came out upon her brow.

Just when hope seemed gone a strange thing happened; a thing which had happened once before under very different circumstances; a crimson flash leaped out from the darkness and played upon the tawny coat of the tiger. Blinded, terrified, the beast shrank back, yet the light still played full upon him. Leaping and flaring like the light of a fire, it held the animal at bay until the keepers came with chains and led him away.

[223]

\* \* \* \* \*

When the twins jumped out of the car window to go in search of Johnny Thompson and their

ponies, they stumbled down the embankment to climb laboriously up again, and make their way tripping and falling around wrecked cars, from which came weird, wild sounds of animals fighting for freedom.

Suddenly from beneath Marjory's feet there sounded a queer chatter. Then something clawed at her legs. With a wild scream, she shook it from her. It was a monkey that had escaped from his broken cage. Others could be heard chattering to the right of them. Leaping forward they were startled by a great bulk that loomed unexpectedly before them in the dark.

"An elephant!" screamed Margaret.

[224]

For a minute they hesitated; the next, they leaped to one side and, having passed the elephant, continued on down the track. Always to the left of them there loomed the overturned cars. All at once, from beneath the wheels of one of these there came a piercing scream. At the same instant they caught the gleam of two red balls of fire glaring at them out of the blackness. Some fierce, wild creature was lurking there. And he moved. Stealthily he made his way toward them. Now he was away from the cars. A black spot, he glided forward, his glaring eyes seeming to grow larger and larger as he advanced.

Seized with a sudden paralysis of fear, the twins stood rooted in their tracks.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a little gasp Gwen sank upon the ground. She looked in vain for the crimson flash. It was gone. And now, for the first time she realized that she did not know the direction whence it had come.

After leaving Gwen, Johnny Thompson made his way cautiously along the uneven embankment. Now his eye caught a gleam that appeared to come from the great cat's eyes. It proved but the reflection of some polished object. Again he heard a rattle among splintered boards, only to find a colored roustabout climbing from the pile of broken lumber under which he had been buried. Johnny was just beginning to believe that he had missed both the black beast and the twins when something leaped at him out of the darkness.

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It took him but a second to realize that this was not a wild beast, but a man; the king of the counterfeiters.

Taken by surprise, he went down with the man upon his back. At the same instant he caught the gleam of a knife in the outlaw's hand. There could be not one shadow of doubt that he meant murder.

A terrible struggle followed. The man, fully fifty pounds heavier than Johnny, was at the same time agile and strong. Now the knife was poised in air, only to be dashed to the ground. Now Johnny secured a half-nelson. Now his hold was broken. And now Johnny was thrown to earth with such force as to render him half unconscious. Struggling against a terrible dizziness, he fought but feebly. The end seemed to have come.

[226]

But, at that moment, there came a shrill voice:

"I'm here, Johnny Thompson! I'm here!"

One moment the knife poised above his chest; the next a diminutive figure attached itself to the arm that held the knife and sent it whirling to one side.

"Tom Stick, the midget clown!" gasped Johnny, renewing his struggle for freedom.

Dimly in the half light, he saw what followed. Turning all his attention to this new enemy, the counterfeiter appeared to seize the dwarf by the heels and dash him with terrible force against the ground.

Then, almost instantly, a great, brown bulk lumbered in out of the blackness, and at that instant, with a gurgling cry, the counterfeiter appeared to rise in air to be sent crashing again and again against the side of the embankment.

[227]

"Jo-Jo, the French elephant, Tom Stick's friend!" cried Johnny, leaping to his feet to bend over the prostrate form of his little defender.

Two attendants came hurrying up.

"It's Tom Stick," explained Johnny. "That other fellow's dead. The big bull elephant killed him. And right it was. He deserved it. Look after Tom. I've got to find the twins and the black cat."

Once more, after recovering his automatic, which had been thrown from him in the first assault of the counterfeiter, he leaped away into the dark.

He was not a moment too soon, for as he dropped down from a pile of tumbled bales of canvas he came face to face with the twins. They were standing wild-eyed, transfixed. Not ten yards away and within leaping distance, his tail lashing, his white fangs gleaming, was the great black cat.

[228]

With uncommon coolness Johnny grasped his automatic and, taking careful aim at the spot between the creature's fiery eyes, grasped the handle tight. There came a metallic click, but no report. The gun had jammed—was utterly useless. With a cry of consternation, Johnny dropped the gun and reached for his clasp knife. Thus poorly armed, he was about to rush at the man-eater, when there came the sudden glare of red light as it played upon the great cat.

"The crimson flash! Thank God!" he murmured.

But the next instant he remembered the words of Pant, when he had told of his jungle experience: "He did not fear my charm; he leaped!"

What now would be the outcome? It was a time of terrible suspense. Johnny's breath came in little gasps. One of the twins had dropped to the ground.

There was not long to wait. Whirling, the cat leaped away to the right. Then, for the first time, Johnny saw that the crimson flash came directly from a dark bulk, a clump of bushes close to the track. There had been no time for tricks, Pant had flashed it direct, and he was there now. The

[229]



great cat would be upon him in another minute.

Even as he sprang after the cat, Johnny thought for the first time of the magic perfume, the catlick Pant had given him. Drawing this from his pocket, he uncorked it as he ran. He was not a second too soon. Already the beast's fangs were at Pant's throat.

With mad hope beating at his heart, Johnny dashed a few drops of the precious perfume at the beast's head.

Prepared as he was for miracles, he was astounded at the result. The wild beast became at once a mere house kitten rolling upon the ground. Over and over he tumbled, while Pant, limping painfully, crept away.

Throwing a glance about him, Johnny saw Tom Stick's house to the right of him, and remembered how it had been built around a cage.

"Door's still on the hinges and open," he muttered. "If I only can!"

[230]

Six steps he took, and with each step, spilled a drop of the precious fluid. Then, with a breathless leap, he was inside the dwarf's house. Dashing the vial against the wall, he caught his breath at the thought that the cat might trap him here; then with a wilder leap than before, he cleared the door and breathed the outer air.

He was not a second too soon. Hot on the trail of that burst of perfume, the cat flashed past him and into the house that was a cage.

Johnny banged the door shut and barred it, then sank down upon the ground for a quiet breath.

Soon he rose and, making his way to the bushes, examined the spot where the black cat had pinned Pant to the ground.

As he flashed a light about, he uttered a low exclamation, and stooping, picked up the bent and lenseless ruins of Pant's glasses. He dropped these a second later to gather up a mass of fine wires and strangely tangled tubes and peculiar instruments. These he crammed into his jacket pocket, and, having cast one more glance about him, hastened away to find the twins.

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## **CHAPTER XVIII**

### **HOW JOHNNY GOT THE RING**

The first red streaks of dawn were appearing as Johnny sat down on the beam of a railroad bridge a quarter of a mile from the wreck.

It had been a strange, wild night. Many startling things had happened; many mysteries had been solved. Now that these mysteries were uncovered he had come down here to think.

Tom Stick was not one of the counterfeiters; he knew that now. Neither was the steam kettle cook, nor the conman with the ragged ear. The real culprits had attempted to cast the guilt upon them, that was all. The arch criminal, Black McCree, was dead. Jo-Jo, the elephant, had thrashed the life out of him when McCree had attempted to murder his master, the midget clown. The fat accomplice of Black McCree had confessed that his partner was that notorious criminal. He had denied having any knowledge of the working of that strange color-photo camera. Black McCree had chosen to take that secret with him to the other world. Pant had turned the whole matter over to two of his assistants and had disappeared. That the remains of the camera could be pieced together was doubtful.

In the struggle with Black McCree, Tom Stick had been beaten into unconsciousness, and had suffered severe bruises, but would be back at his work in two or three weeks.

[233]

The twins had been taken to a near-by farm house, where they were safe for the night. Fortunately, their ponies had come out of the wreck uninjured. In an hour or two Johnny would accompany them to their grandparents' home. Should he return to the circus? He doubted it. The mystery of the whereabouts of the diamond ring was yet unsolved. Gwen had had it. So had Millie. He half blamed himself for not demanding the right to keep it when it was in his own hand. But Gwen was such a good sport. He had hoped a more appropriate time might come. Now he believed he would go to his former employer and make the best of an unbelievable story. He made a wry face at thought of it.

But Pant? He had disappeared again. Johnny had not seen him after the fight with the black cat. Mother Kelly had dressed his wounds, which were slight, and he had vanished.

[234]

At thought of Pant, Johnny dug into his pocket and drew forth the mass of wires, tubes and instruments which he had picked up on the spot where the cat had attacked Pant.

He toyed with this mass musingly. He thought it had dropped from Pant's pocket. "Some part of the counterfeiters' equipment," was his mental comment. Twisting the wires about, he turned a thumb-screw here, pushed a tiny lever there, pressed a bulb—when, of a sudden, his eyes were struck by a blinding flash of blood red light.

His unnerved fingers released the mass of wires, tubes and instruments, and the next instant his startled eyes saw it disappear beneath the muddy waters of the river.

[235]

"The crimson flash!" he moaned. "And I had the secret of it here within my grasp!"

For a time he considered the possibilities of recovering it, then dismissed the thought as futile.

Then for a while he sat there speculating on the strange phenomenon of the crimson flash. How had Pant achieved these wonders? Where had he worn this mass of delicate instruments? There were times when the flash had come and gone

with the speed of the blink of an eye. Perhaps the switch had been attached to Pant's eyelid. Such things had been done. Yet, all this was speculation. Johnny shook his mind free from it. Speculation is always futile.

He was about to rise and return to the wreck, which was even now assuming the appearance of a train again, when he heard footsteps approaching.

It was Gwen. Johnny rose to meet her as she came toward him.

"Sit down, Mr. Clown," she smiled. "I want to talk."

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"You're a good old clown," she smiled again, as they seated themselves, "even if you did come near breaking your neck."

"Somebody fired the balloons with arrows shot from an air rifle."

"What!"

"Sure. I thought it was Tom Stick, but it wasn't. He saved my life last night. Guess someone must have stolen his air rifle to pull the trick."

"As I was about to say," continued Gwen, "you're a good old clown, and just for that I want to give you something. So, 'open your mouth and shut your eyes, and I'll give you something to make you wise.'"

"Steady there," warned Johnny, as he cupped his hands solidly together. "If it's of any value don't drop it. I've lost one secret in the river already."

"It's valuable, all right."

Johnny felt something touch his hand. The instant his fingers closed upon it, he knew what it was.

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"The ring!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; that's it," she laughed. "The twins told me all about it last night. Of course we didn't know it was yours, or we wouldn't have kept it. When we first found it, we three girls thought it was glass. When we discovered it was a real diamond, we were already in Chicago and didn't know what to do, so we just kept it, and took turns wearing it. But Johnny, when you had it in your hands that day, why didn't you keep it?"

"That's what I don't know," smiled Johnny. "I guess you were such a good sport I hated to lose you as a friend, and I hoped a better time would come."

"It has come, Johnny; but something tells me I am the one to lose a pal. You'll leave the circus?"

"Yes," Johnny admitted reluctantly. "I guess I'm going to do that."

"It's always the way with a person who is used to living in a house," sighed Gwen. "The circus is for circus people. Anyway, I can wish you good luck!"

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They rose. She put out her hand. He gripped it heartily.

"And Johnny, if ever the big top calls to you, just

remember the outfit I'm with, and there'll be a job waiting for you. I'll want you for my clown."

She turned and walked rapidly away.

Johnny watched her for a moment, then, crossing the bridge, made his way toward the farm house where the twins were awaiting him. He would escort them back to a safe dwelling place; the ring should be returned to them, and if possible, he was resolved that the circus career of the millionaire twins should be a secret shared only by those to whom it was already known.

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