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Roy J. Snell**

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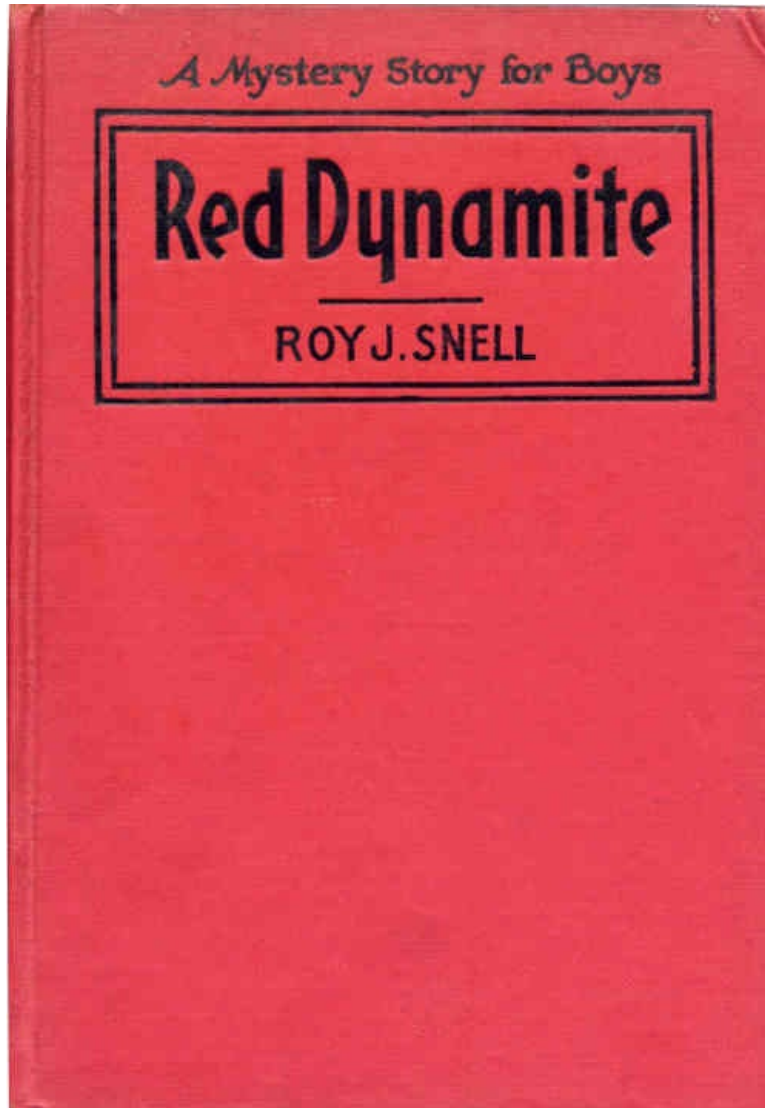
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RED DYNAMITE ***



A Mystery Story for Boys

RED DYNAMITE

By
ROY J. SNELL



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I GOLD FROM THE SKY	11
II THE BRIDGE FALLS	27
III WITH THE AID OF NICODEMUS	40
IV THE HAUNTED POOL	52
V THE CRIMSON FLOOD	62
VI OLD KENTUCKY	76
VII PANTHER EYE'S RETURN	85
VIII HA! HA! BIG JOKE!	94
IX THE "GHOST" WALKS AGAIN	106
X KENTUCKY'S DOWNFALL	119
XI A RIDE IN THE NIGHT	133
XII STRANGE WEALTH	141
XIII A STRANGE BEAR HUNT	152
XIV WILD MEN, BABOONS, AND SOMETHING STRANGE	162
XV VICTORY	175
XVI ONE MINUTE TO PLAY	181
XVII GLIDING TOWARD FRESH ADVENTURE	193
XVIII TEN GALLONS OF AIR	199
XIX WITH THE SPEED OF A WHIRLWIND	210
XX IN THE GRIP OF A GIANT	219
XXI DYNAMITE TAKES IT ON THE CHIN	234

[11]

RED DYNAMITE

CHAPTER I GOLD FROM THE SKY

"You mean to say he takes those big, jug-like things down there empty and brings them up full?" Johnny Thompson, the boy from Illinois who had travelled far and seen many strange things, stared at Ballard Ball, the red-headed boy of the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky, with surprise. If the truth were told, he found himself doubting the other boy's story.

Here he was standing in the grinding room of an

old fashioned mill watching massive stone wheels grind the corn he had carted from his cousin's store and at the same time discovering what promised to be a first class mystery right down here in the slow old Cumberland mountains where, he had supposed, nothing unusual ever happened.

"But what's down there?" He was looking at the floor of the mill. At the same time he was hearing a curious sound, a sucking and hissing that might, he thought, have been the working of a small steam engine. But of course there was no steam engine, for there was no smoke stack and no smoke.

"Nothing down there but water. Some machines he brought months ago. They're down there. The water wheel runs them," the other boy drawled. "Of course he wouldn't bring water up in the jugs and cart them away. Why should he? There's water everywhere. This river runs for miles. Besides," his voice dropped, "that stuff he brings up is queer. It's cold and it smokes. Yes sir, a sort of white smoke comes off it all the time."

"White smoke," Johnny said slowly. "And it's cold. That's odd!"

"You'd have thought it was odd!" Ballard gave vent to a low chuckle. "I stood with my leg against one of those jugs—if that's what they are—once and all of a sudden my leg tingled and went sort of dead. I jumped away quick, but not quick enough. Three or four days after that, the skin all peeled off the side of my leg."

"Cooked your leg!" Johnny exclaimed.

"It must have!" Ballard amended.

"How—how long's he been doing it?" Johnny asked.

"Almost a year!"

"A year!" Johnny whistled. "And you never asked him what it was he was bringing up nor how he got it?"

"No-o." The other boy smiled a queer smile. "He pays me for my work here, keeping the grinding mill going, pays me well and besides—" He hesitated. "Well, you know, we mountain folks don't like for other people to ask us too many questions so, naturally, we don't ask too many ourselves."

"Not," he added hastily, "that there are not people round about here who are burning up to know all about it. There are. But up to now nary a one of 'em's learned anything worth telling."

"You're a good watchman," Johnny laughed.

"I sleep here at the mill," the mountain boy said simply. "And the lower part of the mill, down where he makes that—that stuff, whatever it is, is boarded up pretty tight, all two inch planks, spiked good and plenty. You see—" Ballard broke off. "Wait a little. There's Aunt Sally Ann Setser out there. She's got rheumatism, sort of stiff in her joints. I'll take down her bag of corn to her."

Left to himself, Johnny allowed his eyes to roam

[12]

[13]

[14]

about the place. This was no ordinary grinding mill. It was much larger. Before the stranger came with his unusual hissing machinery or pumps, and his more unusual something that was produced apparently from water, or air, or just nothing at all, it had been used in other ways. He remembered hearing Cousin Bill say it had been a sawmill, that logs had been floated down to it in the spring when the water was high. But now there were no more logs and no sawmill.

Johnny's eyes strayed through the open door and up to the crest of the rocky ridge known as Stone Mountain. "Worth exploring," he told himself. "Caves up there I've heard,—and bears. Sometimes the natives hunt them. Boy! Fellow'd have to watch out!" Johnny heaved a sigh of contentment. He loved these slow-going mountain people, loved the mountains as well. In the spring when all the little streams, and the big ones too, went rushing and roaring by, when the birds sang to the tune of those rushing waters and white dogwood blossoms lay like snow banks against the hills, that was wonderful!

In the autumn when leaves turned to red and gold, when chestnut burs were opening and the coon hunter's dogs bayed from the hills, that was grand too.

[15]

Yes, Johnny liked it all. But this mystery of the old mill promised to make his stay doubly interesting. "Just think of an old man coming down into these hills and setting up a mill for creating something of real value out of water and air," he murmured. "Gold from the sky, almost. But I'm going to find out about it."

Once again his thoughts swung back to mountain scenes. His cousin Bill, who was a young man with a family, had moved down here and set up a small store. Bill was doing very well. Johnny was always welcome. He clerked in the store, made trips like this to the mill and helped in every way he could.

"Somebody told me there was a cave up there along the ridge," he said to Ballard, as the boy came shuffling back into the mill room.

"Yep. There is. Regular good one!" he answered. "Lot of these white icicles in it. Look like icicles but not really icicles you know."

"Stalactites and stalagmites," Johnny suggested.

"That what you call 'em?" Ballard stared. "Looks like there might be an easier name to say. But they're there anyway. Want to go up there? Don't have to go back right away do you? I'll be through in less than an hour. Then we'll go up."

[16]

"We—ll," Johnny reflected for a moment. "Just so I get back by early candle light. I guess it will be all right." Just at that moment had there been any mountain imps about, and if there were such creatures as imps, we might imagine one whispering to Johnny: "As if you'd ever get back by early candle light!" But there are no imps, so there was no whisper.

As Johnny stood there a feeling of uneasiness, not to say of guilt, crept over him. At first he was at a loss to know what it was all about. Then,

like a sudden bang from a squirrel hunter's gun, it came to him.

"Ran away!" he exclaimed in an undertone. "Ran away. That's what I did."

Yes, that was just what he had done. The call of the Cumberlands had been too much for him. The whisper of breezes among the hilltops, the chatter of squirrels in the chestnut trees, the gleam of water in deep pools where sly old black bass lurk, had been too strong for him. He had run away.

[17]

Run away from what? The strangest thing! Not from his home. Johnny had no home except the home of his grandfather at old Hillcrest. There he was free to come and go as he chose. He had not run away from his job either, at present he had no job. He had run away from a promise.

In Hillcrest, the little home city of his grandfather, there was a college, not a large college, but a very fine one. The students were a sturdy hard-working lot, the professors wise and friendly.

No, Johnny had not promised to attend college. "College is fine for some people," Johnny had said. "Fine for a lot of fellows, but not for me. Imagine me sitting still for a whole hour listening to a lecture on Plato or the fifth nerve of a frog. Some people are born for action. That's me. I can't sit still."

Action. Yes, that was the word, and it was action Johnny had promised. He had told Coach Dizney that he would get out and scout around among the nearby small cities for good football material. The coach had a good team—almost. He was short two or three good players. More than all else he needed a left half-back. Johnny had promised to find him that particular player.

[18]

"And I failed!" Johnny groaned.

So he had. Johnny did not play football. He was handicapped by a bad knee that doubled up under him as soon as he ran fifty yards. But Johnny knew a good player when he saw one. Johnny was a lightweight boxer of no mean reputation. He could put a man through a series of action that told him very quickly what he would be worth behind the line of scrimmage. Even Coach Dizney admitted that it was uncanny the way Johnny picked them. He had sent Johnny out to scout, then had hurried away for a vacation in the north woods. Johnny had scouted faithfully for two weeks with no results worthy of mention. Then the call of the mountains had got him.

"I failed him," he groaned. "Failed the good old coach."

He was full of self reproach but the lure of the hills held him. Oh well, there were still two full weeks before college opened. He'd have a breathing spell here in the Cumberlands. Then he'd go back and pick 'em. Oh! Wouldn't he though?

[19]

A half hour later all guilty thoughts were banished by Ballard's cheerful drawl: "All right now, we can go. Buck Howard's here. He'll tend the mill. Your corn will all be ground by the time

we get back." These mountain mills, like the mills of the gods, grind slow but they grind exceeding fine. Cousin Bill made a nice profit by trading "brought on" groceries, sugar, baking-powder, and spices for corn. He had the corn ground at this mill then shipped it out to special customers who liked this fine ground corn meal.

"Here's little Bex Brice," Ballard said. "He wants to go along. Real name's Bexter, but we call him Bex. Old as I am, Bex is, but you forgot to grow, didn't you Bex?"

The short, sturdy-looking, freckled faced boy grinned and said, "I reckon." Then they were away.

"I suppose you know every rock up here," said Johnny, as they went scrambling up and up, over an all but perpendicular trail.

"Mebby I do," Ballard admitted. "But Bex knows 'em better. He's a regular mountain goat, Bex is."

[20]

"Saw a bear up here day before yesterday," Bex put in eagerly. "Regular big one. Scared me half to death."

"Sure nuf?" Ballard paused to stare. "Must have come over the mountains."

Without quite forgetting the bear, they struggled on up the rocky slope. Johnny was thinking, "Suppose we get back into the cave and the bear comes after us?" He did not quite know the answer to this. To ask, however, might be showing what these folks called "the white feather," so he did not ask.

Instead he began wondering again what that old man could produce down there beneath the mill, out of water and air. "He takes nothing down but brings something up." Here indeed was a puzzler. "If he took some of the corn down there you might think he was making moonshine whisky," he told himself. "And—and perhaps he does when Ballard is asleep. And yet—"

Someone had told him that this old man, Malcomb MacQueen, had a noble character, that he had helped bring well educated teachers down to the school at the fork of the river. "Wouldn't do that and then go peddling poisonous moonshine," Johnny thought. There had been men who did good deeds to cover up the evil that was hidden in their hearts. But somehow, he had a feeling that moonshine was not the answer. "What can it be?" he asked himself. Johnny's reflections were broken in upon by a word from Ballard.

[21]

"Listen," he whispered, as seizing Johnny's arm he brought him to a sudden halt.

To Johnny's keen ears came a faint, high keyed sound.

"It's a pig, a young pig! He's squealing. Something's got him!" It was Bex who whispered this excitedly.

For one full minute the three boys stood there, breathing softly, silently listening. Then Ballard murmured low, "He's coming this way. We—we'd better hide." His eyes, searching the ridge above, spied a cluster of beech trees clinging to

the rocks. "Up! Up there."

Next instant, without a sound they were scrambling from rock to rock on their way up. Just as they reached the cluster of trees, Ballard's foot loosened a rock that went bumping and bounding downward to make at last one wide leap and land in a narrow meadow far below.

[22]

"Oh!" On Ballard's face was a look of consternation.

Johnny's lips formed one word: "Why?"

"There's been hog stealin'," Ballard whispered. "Uncle Mose Short has lost three. Lige Field lost two. If we catch the thief it will just naturally be something."

For some little time after that there was silence. From time to time, ever a little louder, there came the frantic appeal of the pig.

Then, quite suddenly, a fresh sound burst upon their ears. A blue and white airplane came swooping across the ridge.

"Going to Frankfort," Johnny suggested, "or Louisville." To him the soaring plane was not a novel sight. To the mountain boys, it was an object of wonder. Even Johnny was surprised and a little startled when the plane, instead of streaking across the sky, circled twice then, like some lone, wild duck, came to rest on the narrow meadow far below.

"Motor trouble forced him to land, perhaps," Johnny whispered.

"Reckon we can't hardly be sure of that," was Ballard's surprising reply. "Judge Middleton rented that meadow to a stranger. When he asked him what he meant to do with it he said he wasn't prepared to say. Mebby he's just got it for his airplane."

[23]

"Boy! Oh, boy!" Bex whispered excitedly. "I sure do hope so! I've always wanted to see one of them things right close up. I—"

"Sh!" Ballard put a hand over the small boy's mouth. There was scarcely need for this. At that moment from very close at hand, there came the heart-rending cry of a baby pig in mortal terror. And, before one of the boys could move or breathe, along the trail, below them and all too close, there came the hugest bear they had ever seen. And closely gripped between his gleaming teeth was the hopeless porker.

"There—there's your hog thief," Johnny whispered low, as the bear vanished round a boulder. "What you going to do about it?"

"N—not a thing," Ballard stammered. Whereupon the three boys, seized with a nervous desire to laugh, all but burst their sides holding in.

In the midst of this, Ballard sobered with a suddenness that was startling. With a shaky finger he pointed as he hissed: "Look! Just look down there!"

[24]

The other boys looked, then stared. Almost directly beneath them was a narrow, swinging

bridge across a rocky chasm. It was a foot bridge made of boards and light cables. Ballard had crossed this bridge hundreds of times, but always on foot. Never had he seen horse or mule attempt to cross it. But at this moment, as they stared, expecting instant catastrophe, they saw, standing at the very center of the old and fragile bridge, a huge, black mule.

"It's Sambo," Ballard said hoarsely. "Uncle Mose Short's Sambo! Poor old Uncle Mose! His mule will never make it. The cables are sure to break. The mule will be killed. It's the only mule Mose ever had, or ever will have. Wonder what made him try to cross?"

"Got untied somehow," Bex suggested. "Went out hunting for Mose. We got to do something. We really must."

Just at that moment, the small pig gave an unearthly squeal.

"The bear!" Ballard whispered in an awed tone. "He's up there ahead of us on the trail somewhere. There's no way to get down to the bridge but to go right up ahead there where the bear went."

[25]

Johnny rose. He wanted to go but something seemed to hold him back. He knew Uncle Mose, the oldest mountaineer of that region, knew and loved him. Uncle Mose was a famous cook. He could make the most marvelous stewed chickens and dumplings. Uncle Mose's mule should be saved somehow. But how?

Just then Ballard spoke. "Look! There's someone coming from the other way! Why! It's Mr. MacQueen! The man that owns our mill!"

Johnny stared. So that was the man! The man who went down into that mysterious lower portion of the ancient mill. "He takes down empty jugs and brings them back up full," he whispered to himself.

"Malcomb MacQueen, that's his name," Ballard said as if he had read Johnny's thoughts.

This small, gray haired man with a quick nervous stride had appeared around a bend. At sight of the mule on the bridge, he stopped and stared. He stood there for ten seconds only. Then he sprang forward.

[26]

"Look!" Ballard was on his feet, ready to slide down the slope to the trail and to follow that trail, to face the bear and fight him if he must. "Look! Mr. MacQueen is going on the bridge! And he must not! Must not! The cables won't hold another pound. One side is half rusted away. Come on! Come on! Come quick!" Slipping and sliding, he led the way down the steep slope to the trail below.

Johnny's mind was in a whirl. "The bear, the bridge, the mule, Malcomb MacQueen," he thought over and over. For all that, he followed Ballard as closely as he dared.

Strangely enough, at that moment, like a sudden burst of light, his duty to Hillcrest College and the coach stood out before him. If he went down there when would he come back? Somehow he felt himself being drawn from the path of duty.

And yet, when approaching tragedy calls, one must obey that call.

[27]

CHAPTER II THE BRIDGE FALLS

The moments that followed were the wildest ever experienced by the young trio, Johnny, Ballard, and Bex. Casting aside all caution, they went gliding down the rocky mountainside at a perilous speed.

"Come on!" Ballard cried. "We gotta' stop him, save him. He's the best man that ever lived. He's fed folks when they were nearly starving. He put our school back where it's fine. He—he's helped hundreds of people. Now if the bridge breaks—if he goes down—"

He did not finish. His feet came down hard on the narrow trail. This brought back to his mind with the force of a blow, the realization that but a moment before, a huge bear had gone up that trail. The bear carried a half-grown pig in his mouth.

"You don't dare molest a dog when he's eating," he whispered to his companions. "No more do you dare interfere with a bear. But we gotta' go that way. Have to be sly and cautious, that's all. Not a word now."

Next instant, on tiptoe but with utmost speed, he was away.

[28]

Johnny caught his breath, then followed. Little Bex brought up the rear. Now they rounded a huge boulder. Was the bear there? No. A clump of pines lay straight ahead. Behind those, waiting, ready to roar and spring perhaps?

Strangely enough, though he moved forward silently, Ballard was not thinking of the bear. He was thinking instead, of the little drama, that like a moving picture, was being played out beneath them. The swaying bridge, the mule, the gray haired benefactor of a whole community, all played a part in the drama, that for the time, was hidden from their view. What was happening? Would the man go on the bridge in an attempt to save the mule? Mr. MacQueen loved Uncle Mose, indeed he loved every one. That mule was Uncle Mose's chief treasure. Without him, he could not earn a living. If the gray haired man went on the bridge, would it break? And if it did? Ballard could not bear to think. And all the time he was speeding forward.

Soon he would be at a point where once more he could look down and see that bridge. From this point, by following a trail that was little more than a chance to slide over the rocks, he could hope to reach the bridge.

[29]

"But first the bear," he thought. "I must be careful. I must—"

He broke short off. Just at that moment, a mountain of dark, brown fur, went rolling away from him to disappear through a dark hole that led into the side of the mountain.

"The cave!" Ballard panted. "I forgot all about it! He's gone in there. We're safe. But come on. Come on quick!"

One moment more and they were looking down on the bridge. The mule was still there. It seemed more than probable that his fat sides had stuck between the wires along each side of the bridge, that he could neither go ahead nor turn back. This, the boys will never know for certain.

Their eyes did not linger long on the mule for there, stepping boldly out on the slightly swaying bridge, that even seen from above appeared to shudder, was the mysterious, little gray haired man, Malcomb MacQueen.

"Go back! Go back!" Ballard shouted these words. But the wind was against him. The aged man was slightly deaf. Apparently he did not hear for he walked straight on.

[30]

The three boys stood aghast, watching. Now he was ten feet from the solid rock he had left, now twenty, now thirty.

"I—I'm going down there," Bex muttered hoarsely. Next instant like a miniature landslide, he went plunging down the perilous slope.

Cupping his hands, Ballard shouted once again:

"Go back! Mr. MacQueen! Go back!"

This time, his voice, sharpened with an edge of despair, carried far. The man on the bridge paused. He looked up. Ballard heaved a sigh of relief. "Surely now he will turn back," he told himself.

But apparently he had not been understood for the old man merely waved a hand, then went on, a step, two, three steps,—while the ancient, rusty bridge shuddered and swayed more and more.

Then, when all hope seemed gone, a miracle appeared to have happened. Bex who, mere seconds before, had stood beside the boys, appeared at the end of the bridge beneath them.

"Mr. MacQueen!" he screamed, "go back! The bridge is not safe. Too much weight. It will break. Go back! Go back!"

[31]

"It's Sambo," was the astonishing reply. "What could Uncle Mose do without Sambo?" He took one more step.

"Mr. MacQueen go—" Bex did not finish for at that instant the thing happened. Something like a pistol shot rang out, the breaking of one cable. For ten terrible seconds, while the man clung to wires and the mule hung trapped in midair, the other cable held. And then, with a sickening swirl, the bridge went crashing down and over until it struck the rocky wall below.

"Come—come on," Ballard breathed hoarsely. "We got—gotta' go down."

Just how they went down that rocky wall, Johnny will never know. Now he found himself hanging by his hands to a ledge feeling with his toes for a foothold, now racing along a shelving bit of rock where a slip meant disaster and now, gripping

the root of a gnarled and twisted tree, he fairly threw himself into the waiting arms of an evergreen below.

A short, brief, breath-taking struggle, it was. Bruised and scratched but with no serious injuries, they reached the bottom at last.

[32]

To their vast surprise, as they neared the wreck of the bridge, some huge creature reared himself on high, uttered a startling "he-haw-he-haw," and went clattering away over the dry bed of the ravine.

"It's Sambo!" Johnny said in an awed whisper.

"You can't kill a mule," Ballard muttered. "He should have known that." He pointed at a crumpled heap of gray on the ground. That heap was Malcomb MacQueen.

With aching heart, the mountain boy bent over him.

"He's unconscious, but he's breathing," he said slowly. "We've got to get him out of here. It's less than a half mile to the end of the run. Then there's a meadow."

"And an airplane," Johnny replied hopefully. "Remember? That plane landed there."

"That's right!" A look of hope came to Ballard's face. "Do you suppose he—but we'll have to have some way to carry him."

"Here!" Johnny's strong arms were tearing away at a short section of the broken suspension bridge. "Here I'll tear this off. Break those wires. There, there you are! Now. Just lift him up. Gently! Gently!"

[33]

The groans of the aged man, as he was moved, brought tears to Ballard's eyes.

Strangely enough, Johnny was thinking. "He made something out of nothing, sold it and used the money to help others, took gold from the sky, you might say. This man did that." Little did he dream that his words "took gold from the sky" were almost literally true.

But there was no time for wandering thoughts. There was need now for strength, speed and wisdom. The bed of the dry stream over which they must travel was boulder-strewn and rough.

Strong arms and willing hearts enabled them to accomplish the difficult task. Just as the stranger in his airplane was warming up his motor for a take-off, he saw two boys come out on the end of the meadow. They were carrying something. He guessed it might be an injured person. They put down their burden and waved frantically. Shutting off his motor, he hurried toward them.

"What's happened?" he demanded when he came racing up to them.

[34]

"The bridge! The—mule," little Bexter stammered. "He—he fell."

"You see," Johnny explained more coherently. "The suspension bridge fell when he was on it. We—we're afraid he's badly hurt."

"Let's look him over." The aviator was young,

brisk and business-like. His slim fingers moved rapidly over the silent form. "Leg broken, that's sure," he muttered. "Bump on the head, not too bad.

"We've got to get him to a doctor at once." His voice took on a note of command. "Where's the nearest doctor?"

"At the Gap, fifteen miles away!" Ballard's tone told his despair. "Wagon road, all rocks. Take hours!"

"That's out!" the aviator decided instantly. "Come on," he said to Johnny. "Lift him up. I'll take this end, now! March!" He led the way toward the airplane on the double-quick.

"I've got blankets. Make him a litter on the floor of my airplane cabin. We'll have him at a city hospital in short notice," the aviator said.

"You'll take him by air?" Ballard stared.

"Sure! Why not?"

[35]

"Tha—that," Ballard replied huskily, "will be noble."

"Now then," the pilot said ten minutes later. "Who's going along to look after him? Two of you if possible."

"I—I. How I'd like to!" Ballard was near to tears. "But he'd want me to stay with the mill. It—it might be terribly important."

"All right you other two!"

Little Bexter gulped. He turned first red then white. It was evident that he had never ridden in a plane.

"I'll go," Johnny said quietly. "Be glad to." An airplane was nothing new to him.

"I—I'll go," little Bexter breathed. "Bal—Ballard," he caught his breath sharply, "you—you tell my folks I might not come back nev—never."

"Oh come now, sonny!" the aviator exclaimed. "It's not half as bad as that. Tell his mother he'll be home for breakfast. Hot cakes and molasses. Hey, son?" He gave Bexter an assuring slap on the back.

Two minutes later they were in the air, all of them but Ballard. Skimming along over the narrow meadow, they rose higher and higher until the whole beautiful panorama of the Blue Ridge—Big Black Mountain, Little Black, Pine Ridge, and all the rest, lay spread out beneath them.

[36]

Little Bexter drew in a long, deep, breath, then shouted in Johnny's ear: "I never dreamed it could be like this. I—"

He broke off. A pair of keen, gray eyes, were studying his face. Malcomb MacQueen had apparently regained consciousness.

Johnny too saw those eyes and liked them. "Keen eyes," he thought. "He knows a great deal. Hope I can get to be his friend." Then again came that haunting question: "How could this man go

down into a mysterious space beneath a grist mill and by setting some sort of machinery in motion, produce something very valuable out of nothing but air and water?

"Perhaps he will tell me," he thought. "But at least, not now." He saw those gray eyes close, whether in unconsciousness or sleep, he could not tell. Sleep under such unusual circumstances appeared impossible, but this, he realized was a remarkable man.

It seemed to Johnny that the time consumed in that journey was remarkably short. To his utter surprise, he found himself circling over the roofs and chimneys of a sizeable city. Next moment, with a speed that was startling, they were shooting downward for a landing.

[37]

"Qui—quick trip," he said to the pilot a moment later.

"Been quicker if my new motor were complete!" was the mysterious pilot's strange reply.

But here were officers, doctors, an ambulance, all ordered in advance by two-way airplane radio. The little gray haired man was lifted out tenderly, then whisked away.

"You making a new kind of motor?" Johnny asked the pilot when everyone had departed.

"Motor's not as new as the fuel I'll use," was the reply.

"What kind of fuel?" Johnny ventured.

"You'd be surprised!" The pilot looked away. "More foot pounds of energy for its weight than any yet discovered. Go around the world in non-stop flight—perhaps."

"Whew!" Johnny breathed.

"Say! I'm starved!" the pilot exclaimed. "Guess we've done all we can for your friend, at least for the present. Want something to eat, you boys?"

[38]

Did they? Little Bexter grinned from ear to ear.

Early next morning they found themselves once more standing beside the airplane. A boy about Johnny's age had just arrived.

"I'm Donald Day, Malcomb MacQueen's grandson," he introduced himself. "I want to thank you for looking after my grandfather," he said to Johnny and Bexter.

"How—how is he?" Little Bexter's words stuck in his throat.

"He's pretty badly busted up!" Donald Day wrinkled his brow. "But he's tough. He's always lived right. The doctors say he will pull through but it will take a long time. And during that time," he squared his shoulders, "during that time I'm to carry on his work." He jingled a bunch of keys.

"In—down there in that space beneath the mill?" Johnny breathed.

The other boy shot him a quick look. "Yes. Down there," he replied quietly.

A hundred questions were pressing in Johnny's mind demanding an answer. He asked none of them.

"All right boys," said the pilot. "I promised to have this little fellow home for breakfast." He touched Bexter's shoulder. "So guess we better step on the gas."

"Yes," Johnny thought. "Same old gas. But what fuel could he have been speaking of yesterday? A fresh mystery. I'm sure going to solve that one too."

Then, as the big man-made bird took to the air, he thought once more of his promise to the coach. "Told him I'd find him a real half-back," he thought for the hundredth time. "Be strange if I found him right down here in the mountains. But then, of course I won't. Oh well, I'll have a day or two of fishing. After that I'll go back on the hunt for a half-back. Pray for luck, that's what I'll do."

CHAPTER III WITH THE AID OF NICODEMUS

Anyone witnessing the return of little Bexter to his home that morning might well have supposed that he had made at least two non-stop flights round the world, instead of one short trip to Louisville.

"Oh! Bex! Y'er back!" his small brother exclaimed. "You bin way up in the air! You bin all the way to Louisville!"

"Yes, I reckon," Bex's eyes were on his mother. She said never a word. Her face was a mask. "All the same," Ballard whispered, "she's dabbing at her eyes when we don't look."

"It's a great moment for Bex's folks," Johnny smiled a happy smile. "I'm glad we got him back safe. They'll never forget."

"Now you all just draw up chairs and take yourself some pancakes," Bex's mother invited.

"Sorgum!" Ballard whispered to Johnny. "Sorgum molasses on real buckwheat pancakes. Yum! Yum! You can't beat 'em."

Nor can you. Johnny Thompson and Donald Day found this out soon enough. This mountain cabin was small. The kitchen was the smallest of its three rooms, but shone upon by the good mountain woman's gleaming face, and warmed by her glowing hospitality, it became for those four hungry boys the largest, most gorgeous room in all the world.

"Sorgum," Ballard murmured blissfully a half hour later. "Sorgum molasses and buckwheat pancakes."

"Take yourself another helping," said Bex's mother.

"I couldn't," Ballard's eyes rolled as he patted

his stomach. "And I got to be going. I came away from the mill just to bring Bex home. Now I must go back."

The mill, Johnny thought with a start. Oh yes, that mysterious mill. Perhaps Donald Day will show me its secrets.

A glorious golden moon hung like a Japanese lantern over the jagged ridge that is Stone Mountain when Johnny on the evening of that same day wended his way toward Cousin Bill's home.

Although Johnny travelled over a trail that, winding along the mountainside, went up and down like a roller coaster, he did not look down upon rocks and ridges but upon a broad and fertile field, level as a floor. There are many such farms to be found in the narrow valleys of the Cumberland. This particular farm belonged to Colonel Crider. The Colonel, Johnny had been told, was rich. Smart racing horses, sometimes taken to the Kentucky Derby, contentedly grazed in his rich pastures. He had a daughter. Just about sixteen years old, Johnny guessed she was. Johnny had seen her only once and that at a distance, yet even at that distance, there was something about the dancing rhythm of her movement, the tilt of her head that had suggested a spirit of light gayety no one could despise.

[42]

Johnny was not at this moment thinking of Jensie Crider. His thoughts were gloomy ones. Truth was, he was engaged in one of those mental battles that come to every boy, a fight between his own desires and what he believes to be duty.

"I promised the coach I'd find him a real half-back and I haven't done it," he groaned. "But up there on Pounding Mill Creek there's a pool where the biggest old black bass is lurking. I've seen him twice. I almost had him once. Now I've got just the right bait—"

[43]

At that moment his eye was caught and held by something moving down there in the Colonel's back pasture.

"It's Nicodemus," he thought. "But what's got into him? He's scooting across his pen like mad. Just as if he was after something. And—and he is! Or—or something's after him!"

He came to this decision with a sudden mental jolt. Nicodemus was the Colonel's favorite ram. Very highly pedigreed and quite old. Nicodemus, until a short time before when a stout pen with a high board fence had been built for him, was the terror of the community. Three times he had broken loose. Each time he had left fear and destruction behind him.

The first time old Deacon Gibson, a local preacher, had been hiving a swarm of bees when Nicodemus arrived on the scene. Nicodemus had failed to assist in hiving that swarm. Worse than that, he had butted the unfortunate parson into three beehives and released three other swarms upon him.

On his second escape, Nicodemus had boldly entered the log school house while school was in session. The teacher had climbed on top of the

[44]

table. Since there were only holes where windows should have been, the children swarmed through the window holes leaving Nicodemus with the situation well in hand. Since it was a warm day and Nicodemus was tired, he had fallen asleep beneath the table. Needless to say there had been no more school that day.

Johnny laughed aloud as he recalled these stories of the Colonel's prize ram. But now his eyes were glued upon the high walled pen in which Nicodemus was confined. Some living creature beside Nicodemus had entered that pen. He and Nicodemus were having it out. Was Nicodemus chasing the intruder about or was the wary old ram at last on the run?

"Might be that bear we saw yesterday," Johnny told himself. "I—I've just got to see."

Johnny knew the Colonel and liked him. A big, bluff, red-cheeked, jovial southern gentleman, he was the idol of every boy who came to know him. Nicodemus, despite all his reputation for breaking up beehives and dismissing schools, was a valuable ram. If anything seriously threatened his safety, the Colonel should know of it. Besides, there was a chance, a bare chance, that Johnny, through this little adventure, might become better acquainted with the Colonel's daughter, Jensie.

[45]

Soon enough Johnny discovered that Nicodemus was not in the slightest bit of danger, unless, like many an aged and crusty human being, he was in danger of bursting a blood vessel because of unsatisfied rage.

As Johnny climbed the high board fence, to peer with some misgiving into Nicodemus' pen, he barely held back a gasp.

"Of all things!" he muttered. Then, having lifted himself to a secure position atop a post, he sat there, mouth open, eyes staring, witnessing a strange performance.

There were indeed two living creatures in that pen. One was the invincible Nicodemus. The other, instead of being a bear, was a boy, the fleetest footed boy Johnny had ever seen.

Johnny wanted to laugh. He longed to shout. He did neither, for this would have broken up the show. "And that," he told himself, "would be a burning shame."

And so it would. The boy and the ram were playing a game of artful dodging. And the boy, apparently, was a match for the ram. Hugging some roundish, brown object under one arm, he dashed squarely at the ram. Leaning always toward the ram, he came within three paces of him when, like a flash, he bent to the right and, with the speed of a snapping jack-knife, swerved slightly to one side and passed the charging beast like a breath of air.

[46]

Voicing his disappointment in a low "Ma—maa," Nicodemus shook his head until it seemed his massive horns would drop off, then prepared to charge once again.

This time, as the ram came bursting down the field, the boy stood stock still. With arms outstretched, he appeared to offer his brown,

oblong burden to the ram.

"Now! Now he'll get him!" Johnny breathed.

But no. As the ram appeared about to strike the boy amidship, with lightning-like speed, he withdrew his offering, pivoted sharply to the right to go dashing away, just in time to avoid the terrific impact.

"That," Johnny mumbled, "that sure is something!"

Then, like the whizbang of a fire cracker, a thought struck him. Yes, this WAS something! Something real indeed. Like a flash it had come to him that the thing this strange boy carried was a football, that this boy was a marvel, that here was the answer to his prayer, the fulfillment of his promises and his dreams. Here was the much needed half-back. He wanted to climb on top of the board fence and let out one wild shout of joy.

[47]

But wait. Who was this boy? A mountain boy to be sure. Was he through high school? Probably not. Few mountain boys are. His hopes dropped.

"But who is he?" he asked himself. "Who can he be?"

To this question, for the time, he found no answer. The boy wore a long vizored cap, pulled low. The shadows hid his face. Yet there was, Johnny assured himself, something familiar about that slender form, those drooping shoulders.

For a full quarter of an hour, awed, inspired, entranced, Johnny witnessed this moonlight duel between a boy and the champion of all butting rams. Then, with a suddenness that was startling, the affair came to an end. The boy tried a new feature of the game. A dozen swift steps backward spelled disaster. He tripped over something behind him, recovered, then straightened up just in time to receive the full impact of the irate ram's headlong plunge.

[48]

The boy shot backward like an empty sack. At the same time there was an explosion like the bang of a shotgun.

"Good grief!" Johnny exclaimed, starting to the rescue.

But there was no need. The boy, still able to travel under his own steam, made his way across the field, to climb atop the fence and to cling there panting.

He was now not twenty feet from Johnny. But as yet he appeared unconscious of Johnny's presence. In the final scrimmage, his cap had been knocked from his head. Johnny recognized him on the instant. It was Ballard Ball, the boy from the mystery mill.

"Well," Johnny spoke before he thought, "he got you. But—"

He broke off as he caught the gleam of the other boy's deep-set, dark eyes.

"I—I'm sorry," Johnny apologized instantly. "I didn't mean to spy on you. I saw you and Nicodemus, thought you might be that bear."

[49]

"That bear," Ballard laughed—his good humor having suddenly returned. "No bear'd ever have a chance with old Nicodemus. He'd be knocked out cold in the first round."

"I believe it," Johnny began sliding along the fence. "But say!" he exclaimed. "Where did you play football?"

"I never did, not very much, you see," Ballard laughed. "We tried it over at the Gap. It went fine until Squirrel-Head Blevins called Blackie Madden a name he didn't like. Blackie went home and got a gun. If the teacher hadn't caught Blackie with it, Squirrel-Head wouldn't be living now. So that's all the football there was."

"At the Gap?" Johnny breathed a prayer. "Did you go to high school there?"

"Yes, I—I sort of graduated there last June," Ballard admitted modestly.

"Thank God," Johnny breathed. Then—

"Ballard, you're going to college. You're going to play real, big-time football."

"Oh no! I—I can't," Ballard was all but speechless. "I—I've got less than fifty dollars. You—you can't go to college on that."

[50]

"Sure you can!" Johnny's tone was one of finality. "My granddad's one of the trustees of Hillcrest College. He endowed a scholarship. It's open. That will pay your tuition. You can work for your room and board. More than half the boys do that. Yes, you're going to college. And will the coach be pleased! Ballard, old boy, you're the answer to my prayer."

"But Johnny," the mountain boy's voice hit a flat note, "I read somewhere that college freshmen are not eligible to play football."

"That's only in the big colleges and universities," Johnny explained. "You'll be eligible in Hillcrest all right."

"And now," Johnny said more quietly after a moment. "Now I can go fishing with a good conscience."

"What's college got to do with fishing?" Ballard asked in surprise.

Johnny told him.

"I must go to college so you can go fishing," Ballard laughed. "Well, one excuse is better than none. Wait till I get my ball and I'll go up the creek with you. He busted my ball, the old rascal! But then maybe that sort of saved my ribs. I'll not try the back-step after this. Wait!" He sprang into the pen, and before Nicodemus could arrive, was back on the fence with the deflated ball. And that was how Johnny made his first move toward fulfilling his promise to Coach Dizney of old Hillcrest. He had done it with the aid of Nicodemus. There was more to come, very much more.

[51]

[52]

THE HAUNTED POOL

Next day Johnny disappeared among the rhododendrons and mountain ivy that grow along the right bank of Pounding Mill Creek. His step was light, his heart was gay. And why not? Had he not fulfilled his mission? Had he not discovered the much needed half-back for the Hillcrest coach? And did he not carry in his hands, beside a short split bamboo rod, a can of "soft craws"? And were not soft craws the bait of baits for this season of the year? He looked with pride and joy upon the half dozen crawfish, that, having recently shed their shells, held up soft and harmless claws for his inspection.

"I'll get that old sport, the king of all black bass, today," he assured himself. "I'll have him in less than an hour."

He might have fulfilled this promise had it not been for a lurking shadow that, passing silently on before him, came to rest at last on a rocky ledge, above the second deep pool in Pounding Mill Creek.

Johnny had little interest in that second pool for the present. In fact that particular pool had a peculiar sort of horror for Johnny. A man had been drowned in that pool. He recalled the story with a chill. A group of foreign laborers, so the story went, had driven up the creek from the Gap. They had meant to dynamite this pool and get a mess of fish. Since this was against the law and since they found Zeb Page, a deputy sheriff, sitting on a near-by boulder, they had decided to take a swim. The pool was deep, all of twenty feet. Four of the foreigners could swim. The water was fine. They enjoyed it immensely.

They had all crawled out on the bank to sun themselves when one of their number, who had never known the delights of swimming, said, "That's nothing. I can do that." He dove in, clothes and all. He disappeared beneath the placid surface of the pool. Ten seconds elapsed, twenty, forty, a full moment, and he did not reappear.

Alarmed, his comrades dove for him. Ten minutes later they brought him to the top, dead. In each of his two coat pockets, they found a heavy revolver.

"I always said," old Uncle Joe Creech always exclaimed after telling this story, "that totin' pistol guns would keep a good man down. And that to my notion mighty nigh proves hit plumb fer sarton."

"And folks do say," he would add with a lowered voice and shifting eyes, "that this here foreigner can be heard on a still night in the dark of the moon, a shootin' off of them there pistol guns. But then shucks!" he would squirt tobacco juice at a crack in the floor. "Shucks! How could he an' him drowned and dead?"

Sure enough, how could he? All the same, Johnny never dropped his bait in that deep pool. He always had a shivery feeling that it might catch on something soft and that if he hauled in hard enough, he'd bring a dead body to the top. Pure fancy, he knew this to be, but anyway there

[53]

[54]

were enough other pools to be fished in. Why not pass this one up? He meant to pass it up on this day, as on all others, but fate had decreed otherwise.

Quite forgetting the deep pool that lay just beyond the last clump of mountain laurel, Johnny happily dropped his first wriggling soft craw into the shadowy waters of the pool next to that one where, more than once, a grand and glorious old black bass had eluded him.

[55]

"I'll get him," he whispered. "Get him for sure."

But would he? He waited. Lurking in the shadows, he watched the dry line sink down, inch by inch. Then, with a soundless parting of the lips, he saw the line begin shooting away.

"Bass," he whispered. "Big old black bass."

The bass he knew, would run a yard, two, three yards, then pause. Should he give the line a quick jerk then, setting the hook? Or, as many wise anglers advised, should he wait for the second run?

The line ceased playing out. Old bass had paused. "Now," Johnny whispered. "Now? Or—" He gave a quick jerk. He had him. His heart leaped. He began reeling in.

Then his hopes fell, only a little fellow. It must be. No real pull at all. Nor was he mistaken. Close to the surface there appeared a beautiful young bass, perhaps nine inches long, the kind those mountain natives call "green perch." With a deft snap of his line, Johnny switched him off, then watched him as, for a moment, stunned by the suddenness of it all, he stood quite still in the water. Johnny's thoughts were all admiration. How beautiful he was, like the things a Chinaman does in green lacquer.

[56]

But the big old black fellow, still lurking down there somewhere in the shadows? What of him? At once Johnny was alert. Drawing in his line, he offered up one more precious soft craw on the altar of a fisherman's hope.

Down, down went the craw-dad. Down, down sunk the line. But what was this? Of a sudden the line shot away. Startled, eyes bulging, Johnny watched his line play out, a yard, two, three, four, five, all but the length of the pool.

Then, "Now!" he breathed once again. And—what? Was he snagged on a rock? It seemed so. But who could be sure? He strained at his line cautiously. It did not budge.

"Fellow'd think it was an alligator," he whispered. He put a little more strain upon his line. It gave to his touch. Then, of a sudden it went slack.

"Dumb! Got off! He—"

[57]

At that instant the pole was all but jerked from his hand and at precisely the same instant, the most magnificent fish he had ever seen leaped clear of the water. He leaped again and yet again. Johnny's heart stood still. Then as he saw the fish vanish, felt the tug and knew he still had him, his heart went racing.

It was at this precise second in the long history

of the world that Johnny's ears were smitten by an unearthly scream. It came from the direction of that other pool, the foreigner's death pool, the haunted pool. The scream was repeated not once but twice. It was followed by a loud splash.

There could be but one conclusion. Someone had been about to fall into the pool. That someone could not swim. Someone HAD fallen into the deep pool.

Johnny dropped his pole, heaved a sudden sigh of regret and at the same time dashed through the bushes. Arriving breathless at the edge of that other pool, he saw a head rise partially above the water. A mass of crinkly brown hair floated on the surface. Without further thought, Johnny plunged, clothes and all, into the pool, to begin an Australian crawl toward the spot where the head had been. But where was it? For a space of ten seconds, he could not locate it. When at last his racing gaze came to rest, it was upon a spot close to the opposite bank. The head was there, also a pair of fair, round shoulders.

[58]

Johnny paused in his swimming to see a girl, of some sixteen summers, emerge, fully clothed and dripping, from the pool.

Just then she turned about to look at him and say, as a rare smile played about her lips, "Oh! You in swimming too?"

To measure Johnny's emotions at that moment would be impossible. The girl was beautiful. But the witch? Why had she screamed? Had she meant to deceive him? And his fish? Gone of course. Even a Tennessee shad could loose himself from a drifting pole like that.

"No," he said, speaking slowly. "I'm not in swimming. I fell in, same as you did."

"But I didn't fall in," the girl shook the water from her hair. "I jumped in."

"And do you always scream like that when you dive?" Johnny was puzzled and angry.

"Nearly always." The girl sat down upon a rock in the bright sunshine. "There's some sort of bird that screams before he dives. I like it."

[59]

"And I suppose," Johnny said mockingly, "that you always go in clothes and all?"

"Always," she said soberly. "It wouldn't be quite decent not to unless you have a bathing suit. And I haven't one. I've asked Dad to buy me one many times but he always forgets."

"Who's Dad?" Johnny asked quickly.

"Dad is Colonel Crider. I'm Jensie Crider. Now please," there was a friendly note in her voice, "stop being ugly. Come on out in the sun. We'll be all dry in a half hour. I want you to tell me about a lot of things."

Jensie Crider, Johnny was thinking to himself. The very girl I've wanted to know. And such a meeting as this!

"You made me lose a black bass, a—a whopper," he grinned in spite of himself.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" she was all sympathy. "But I'll

find you another, a bigger one. You wait and see!" She stood up to shake herself until her damp garments spun about her. "Now please do come up and get all dried out."

Who could but obey this order from so beautiful a siren?

[60]

"Now tell me," she said when Johnny had settled himself upon the rock, "what do you do besides catch fish?"

"Sometimes I go scouting for football players."

"Do you find them?"

"Found one last night."

"Down here in the mountains?" she voiced her surprise.

"It's Ballard Ball. You'd be astonished. He's an artful dodger. I—" he was about to tell her how he had found him but changed his mind. "I—I'm going to take him with me to college."

"Oh, college." The girl's voice dropped. "Father wants me to go to college. I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"Why should I?"

Johnny told her why. He spoke in such glowing terms of big football games, wild rallies, of bonfires, and sings around great open fireplaces, the joyous friendships of youth and the satisfaction to be had from learning something new every day that at last quoting from last Sabbath's Sunday School lesson, she murmured:

"'Almost thou persuadest me.'"

[61]

"But see!" she sprang to her feet. "Now we are all dry. And I shall keep my promise. Now for that big, black bass!"

[62]

CHAPTER V THE CRIMSON FLOOD

Several days later, Johnny Thompson found himself crouching on the western sidelines of the football field at old Hillcrest. He had been there a half hour. During that time a variety of interests had vied for the attention of his active brain.

For a time he had thought of the mill down there at the foot of Stone Mountain in the Cumberlands. All that seemed quite far away now. Yet the strangeness and mystery of it lingered. He had not forgotten his resolve to solve that mystery. In his mind's vision now he saw it all. Now the ancient mill, its secret trap door and the serious minded Donald Day presiding over it all. Johnny had hoped that Donald would tell him the secret of those strange recesses at the bottom of the old mill. He had pictured himself saying, "Donald, old son, how can you take an empty, double walled jug down there and bring it back full of

something quite valuable when there is nothing down there but air and water?" He had never asked the question, had never quite dared. So the mystery of the mill remained a mystery still.

The old master of the mill, Malcomb MacQueen, was still in the hospital. Apparently his fall, when the bridge came down, had resulted in very serious injuries. No one seemed to know when he might be about again. One thing was sure, everyone would be glad when that day came. "How those mountain people do love him!" Johnny whispered as he crouched on the sidelines waiting for action.

[63]

And Ballard? Ah, that was the question uppermost in Johnny's mind at this moment. As he crouched there waiting for the kick off of that first of the season's games, he asked himself over and over, "What about Ballard?"

When he told the coach that he had found a star half-back for him, a sure winner who in all his life had played but three games of football and had been given no opportunity to shine in these, the coach had indulged in that quaint but classic expression: "Oh yeah?"

But Johnny had remained undismayed. "You wait and see!" had been his only reply. He had not told of the late night tryst with the champion butter of all rams, old Nicodemus. It seemed a little strange to him as he thought of it now. "Wait and see," he had repeated. That was all. Now they were waiting. They were to see. The zero hour was approaching. Cedarville, the visiting team, would kick off to Hillcrest. An important game? All games of a series are important. Seven games were to be played for the championship of the Little Seven League.

[64]

No one wanted Hillcrest to win as Johnny did. He wanted his find, Ballard Ball, to turn out to be a star of the first magnitude. He wanted the Hillcrest boys to win because he knew and loved them. More than that, Hillcrest had been his father's school. Johnny's father had died while he was still young, not, however, until he had fired Johnny's boyish mind with tales of football battles of good, old, half forgotten days.

"They used to win," Johnny had said to Ballard that very morning. "Win and win and win! Last year Hillcrest lost and lost and lost. Hillcrest has not carried off the pennant for six years."

To this Ballard had made no reply. Johnny thought he saw the lines tighten about his thin, serious face. He was sure he caught a gleam from those dark, deep-set eyes. That was all. It was enough. "He'll do," had been his mental comment. Now the eternal question came back to him, "Will he do?"

[65]

"Here they come!" a high-pitched voice cried. The speaker was close beside Johnny. "Here they come! The Crimson Tide!"

It was Jensie Crider who, wakening Johnny from his reverie, brought him to his feet with a snap. Yes, Jensie, the same Jensie, who had screamed three times then leaped, full dressed, into that mountain pool was here. And, miracle of miracles, wild and free as she had been down in the hills, today she was garbed in a sober costume and going to college, Johnny's college,

old Hillcrest. Something to marvel at here.

No time for that now though, for indeed, here they came, the Hillcrest team, the Crimson Flood as Jensie had named them.

The ball had been kicked off. A long, high, rocketing kick, it had been gathered in by Punch Dickman, the Hillcrest full-back, and now here they came.

To Johnny at that moment, they seemed a crimson tide indeed. Their red jerseys flaming in the sun, they were like the onrush of a flaming prairie fire. Johnny's own heart flamed at sight of them.

[66]

Among them all, one figure stood out boldly. A large, heavy boned boy, he moved with the determined gallop of a stubborn two year old colt. He ran just ahead of the ball carrier. When a boy in orange and blue leaped toward the carrier, he was met not by the big full-back but by this other boy. Hillcrest's left end whose name was Dave Powers. Dave spilled him as easily as he might have a tea-wagon laden with dishes. Two others of the orange and blue went down before him.

"Look at 'em!" Johnny thrilled to the core of his being. "Thirty yard line, forty, forty-five, fifty. Over the center, forty-five! Forty! There! There he's down on the Cedarville thirty-seven yard line. Yow-ee! What a run-back. It's a good sign, Jensie! A very good sign!" He slapped his companion on the back as if she were a boy. And she came back with a feigned punch to the jaw.

"But Ballard?" Johnny's thoughts sobered. Ballard, the slim dark-eyed mountain boy was in there at right half. The coach was giving him his chance.

[67]

"Good old Dizney!" Johnny muttered. "Here's hoping!"

"He'll make good," Jensie exclaimed. "Ballard will make good. I'm sure of it."

"That's a pal," Johnny's heart warmed toward the girl. Once down there in the Cumberlands he had fairly hated her for making him lose a fine black bass. He was all for her now.

Hillcrest had the ball. The run-back had been wonderful, but, after that for a time, things were not so good. Johnny saw at a glance that the Hillcrest team was outweighed fifteen pounds to the man. And, in the beginning games at least, weight does count.

Hillcrest tried a smash through right tackle. No good. They attempted an end run with Ballard carrying the ball. Johnny caught his breath as he saw the mountain boy tuck the ball under his arm. "First blood," he muttered. Two enemies broke through the line. Ballard dodged one, appeared to offer the ball to the second, then pivoted and faded out to the right.

"Great stuff!" Johnny murmured.

[68]

In the end, however, the mountain boy was thrown for a loss of two yards. One more down, then came the punt.

A Cedarville man carried the ball to his own

forty yard line. Then followed a terrific pounding of the Hillcrest line that resulted in four first downs, a thirty yard run through the line and at last a touchdown by the invaders.

"Oh!" Jense sighed, it was the first real game she had ever witnessed. "How can we win when they ram the line like a flock of goats?"

"Or rams?" Johnny chuckled in spite of himself. "But wait," he consoled her, "our team will take to the air. Then you'll see."

"Take to the air?" Jense was puzzled.

"We'll have to beat them with passes," Johnny explained.

He looked at the girl beside him and marvelled. From his strange introduction—or lack of introduction—back there in the mountain pool, he had suspected her of being a trifle crude. To his vast surprise, he had found her very much of a lady.

As he thought of it now, while Cedarville took time out before a try at the goal, as he recalled the few happy days spent with her there in the mountains, he found himself thinking of her as he might have thought of the fine type of English girl, who rides after the hounds, plays golf, cricket, and tennis, and is a fine-spoken, properly dressed young person for all that.

Ride after the hounds? Well, they had not quite done that. They had followed the Colonel's favorite hounds over the ridges, hunting squirrels. They had risen two hours before dawn to walk through the dewy moonlight to a cornfield. There they had treed two fat, marauding old coons and had, as Jense put it, "Shot them at sunrise." They had—

But there was the kick for the extra point. No good, off to the right. Johnny cheered with the rest but his gaze was wandering from the coach to Ballard, then from Ballard to the coach again. What was the coach thinking of Ballard? Probably nothing. He hadn't been given a chance. He—

"There! There they go!" Jense cried.

At once Johnny's eyes were on the ball. Cedarville had kicked off to Hillcrest. By some strange chance, it was Ballard who caught the ball. It was no mere chance that Dave Powers, the left end, was at Ballard's side—he had a way of being near the runner. Together they sprinted down the line, but not for long. Ballard's course was too much of a snake-dance for Dave. He dodged there, pivoted here, leaped straight at a would-be tackler, then shot to the right. Eluding all would-be tacklers, leaving his team mates far behind, the slim Kentucky boy set the bleachers howling with delight. Had it not been for the lone safety man who rushed him and downed him at the fifteen yard line, it must surely have been a touchdown from a run-back—a marvelous feat. As it was Hillcrest went wild with the yell:

"Yea Ballard! Yea Ballard! Ballard! Ballard! Touchdown! Touchdown!"

A touchdown it was, and that on the very next play. Little Artie Stark, Hillcrest's midget

[69]

[70]

quarter-back, took the ball, lateralled a slow pass to Dave Powers at end, and Dave, plunging like a bucking bronco, shot through the line.

"Yea! Yea! Yea!" even Jensie, who until now had watched the game in passive silence, joined in the cheering.

[71]

The kick was good. The score stood 7-6 in favor of Hillcrest.

There followed moments of tense struggle. Hillcrest won the ball and lost it. Cedarville battled their way to the ten yard line only to lose the ball on a fumble. Hillcrest took to the air but with little success. Pass after pass dropped to earth incomplete.

At last there was but seven minutes left to play. The day was warm for autumn. Both teams showed the strain. Hillcrest tried one more forward pass only to meet with disaster. It was intercepted by the opponent's right end. He went romping down the field for a second touchdown. The kick was good. Score 13 to 7 against Hillcrest.

"Cheer up, boys," Johnny shouted as, having taken time out, the Hillcrest boys lay sprawled out before him. "You'll win. There's six minutes yet to play."

"Than-thanks Johnny. Thanks for them few kind words," came from a member of the team. Ballard did not so much as look up.

"He's dead on his feet," Johnny whispered to Jensie. "The coach should take him out, but he's afraid he'll break him if he does."

[72]

"Poor Ballard," Jensie whispered back. "I wish he'd have some luck."

Jensie was deeply interested in Ballard. They had gone to school together, she and Ballard, for years. It had mattered little that her home was large, her father rich; his home small, his family poor. They were friends.

When grade school was over Jensie had been sent away to a high class private boarding school for girls. This had lasted exactly three weeks. Jensie had pined away for her beloved mountains, her childhood comrades, and the glorious freedom of public schools. She ran away from Madame Farar's select finishing school. She came home to the mountains. Her father had chuckled over her rebellion and had sent her, with Ballard and all her other childhood pals to the high school at the Gap.

She had not wanted to go away to college. The appearance of Johnny Thompson on the scene had changed all that. Johnny had painted glowing pictures of college, of basket ball, football, pep-meetings, evenings about the open fire in the big "dorm" and all else that goes to make college glorious. Johnny himself was a rather glamorous figure. And Ballard was going. That was enough. So, here she was. And here was Ballard of her own Pounding Mill Creek, on a football team that apparently could not win.

[73]

"They MUST win!" She set her teeth hard.

"They shall win!" Johnny exclaimed.

Would they? It did not seem so, for once again, as play was resumed, the opponents began battering their shattered line, marching down the field toward one more touchdown.

But not so fast! The Hillcrest line stiffened. Three downs and no gain. Cedarville was forced to kick. The ball shot skyward like a rocket to drop right into Artie Stark's waiting arms. Artie raced forward for a gain of twenty yards. With a tackler at his heels he hurled a forward pass to Dave Powers. Dave sprang into the Cedarville mob. He dodged here, pivoted there, was about to be tackled, then lateralled back to Artie Stark half way across the field and all alone.

By this time the Hillcrest bleachers had gone mad. Even the Cedarville rooters were screaming at the tops of their voices.

"Touchdown! Touchdown!" yelled the excited mob. Johnny looked at his watch. "One minute to play, one minute for a touchdown. Regular Jack Armstrong football," he murmured.

[74]

Almost, but not quite. Finding himself in the open and in full possession of the treasured pigskin, Artie Stark once again shot forward toward the goal line. An enemy appeared on the right. He dodged him. One on the left, another on the right, a third directly before him. No chance. His eyes roved the field. "Than—thanks, good fortune," he murmured as he sent the ball on a long, looping curve toward Ballard Ball, the slim Kentucky boy, who stood waiting all alone on the enemy's five yard line. It was a perfect pass. Ballard was not obliged to move a foot. The ball dropped squarely in his arms. Yet—Johnny could not believe his eyes—the ball went bouncing in air to at last strike the earth and roll away.

"Incomplete pass," Johnny groaned. "One, two, three passes, all incomplete. The ball goes back miles and miles. And with only a half minute left to play." He groaned again and all Hillcrest groaned with him. And well they might for, scarcely had the teams lined up for play when the whistle blew. The game was over. Hillcrest had lost 13 to 7.

[75]

When Johnny and Jensie went in search of Ballard they did not find him on the field. He had vanished.

"Johnny, we must find him," Jensie exclaimed. "We really must! I know Ballard. I've known him a long, long time. He's too good to be true. He'll blame himself for the loss of that game. He—why he may start for home tonight. You never can tell."

[76]

CHAPTER VI OLD KENTUCKY

After a futile search for Ballard, Johnny wandered back to the Blue Moon. The Blue Moon was Johnny's latest financial venture in a strange and troubled world. It promised to be a grand flop and Johnny was duly unhappy about

it.

The establishing of the Blue Moon had been a suggestion of Johnny's grandfather. The old man was seldom wrong. This time, however, it did seem that he had erred.

It had started with Johnny's determination to find his young Kentucky friend a job, anything at all that would enable him to earn money for food and lodging. At first it had seemed simple enough. In the end it proved impossible. Everything was taken.

"Way to get a job these days," Johnny's grandfather had said, "is to make one for yourself."

"Sure," Johnny grinned, "but how?"

"Not so hard as it might seem," the old man rumbled. "I've been thinking about it for quite a spell. You know college boys like a place to gather and talk things over, have a cup of coffee or hot malted, sort of a gathering place of the clan."

[77]

"I know," Johnny agreed.

"I've been watching them. They wander down town, go in here, go in there, gather in places, not so bad, not so good either, little gambling, slot machines and all that, little bad language from rough town folks, all that sort of thing. If I had a boy away from home, I'd like him in a better place. So why not, Johnny?" The old man leaned forward eagerly.

"Why not what?" Johnny asked.

"Why not turn that abandoned bowling alley building just off the campus into a sort of student's retreat, place where they can buy little things they need, sit down for a hot drink, gather around for a bit of conversation, all that.

"I've got the fixtures for you, took them on a bad debt. They're in storage. I'll finance it for you. Make a job for both you and Ballard. What do you say?"

"Grand!" Johnny had all but hugged the old man.

They had worked hard to make the place attractive, Johnny and Ballard had. Jensie had added a feminine touch, with a picture or two and colored curtains. She had imported for them a southern negro cook who could make famous little meat pies and apple turn overs, the sort that melt in your mouth.

[78]

The place was, Johnny decided, to have very few rules, one was that this was a place for men only. Perhaps this rule was a mistake. One thing was sure, the student body had not, as yet, found their way in any great numbers to the Blue Moon, as Johnny and Jensie had named it. The place gave promise of being a prodigious failure.

"I suppose the boys like to wander down town and fill their eyes with the bright light of neon signs," Johnny told himself gloomily, as having entered the big, front room of the place, he prodded the fire, thrust in three large logs, then seated himself for a short spell of gloomy meditation.

This meditation was broken in upon by Jensie who thrusting her head in at the open door said, "Johnny, do you think Ballard could have lit out for our native hills?"

"Don't know," was Johnny's slow reply. "Guess not though. Probably just went for a long walk to wear off his grief at dropping that ball. Come on in and have a meat pie an' a cup of coffee. It's on the house."

[79]

"Can't, Johnny."

"Why not?"

"Rules, Johnny."

"Hang the rules!" Johnny exploded. "We made 'em. We can break 'em."

"Besides," his voice dropped to a disconsolate note, "I think the place is a flop."

"No! It can't be. It mustn't be," Jensie exclaimed.

"You can hang a hollow log up in a tree," was Johnny's strange reply, "but you can't make a squirrel choose it for a nest. Anyway come on in. I'm sure the coffee is still hot."

It was. They drank three cups apiece and felt better, much better. Two banjos lay on the shelf back of the counter. Taking up one of these Jensie put a hand on the counter, gave a little spring, and there she was, seated on the counter as she had been many a time in Cousin Bill's store down in the Cumberland mountains.

She touched the strings and at once, strange, quaint mountain melodies began pouring forth on the still night air. They were alone, just Johnny and the girl. But not for long. The door was open. The thrum-thrum-thrum of the banjo carried far. Into the dim lit room, shadowy figures like dark ghosts began to glide. One by one, each in his corner, they came to rest. Johnny could not see their faces. He could guess who they were and was glad. It promised well for the future of the Blue Moon.

[80]

Then a tall, slim, slouching figure appeared. Both Johnny and Jensie recognized him at a glance. Johnny felt a wave of warmth creep over him. Jensie gulped, paused, then played on.

"Here, gimme that thar banjo," drawled a low, melodious voice. "Blame me, if you ain't the sorriest banjo picker I mighty nigh ever heard." It was Ballard.

Jensie did not give up the banjo. Instead, she reached over, took down the second banjo, then slid over, making a place for Ballard beside her.

"Come on, boy," she whispered, "let's give 'em a little touch of old Kentucky."

A moment more and two banjos were thrumming where one had been before, and two melodious voices were drawling the words of "Kentucky Babe."

[81]

The sound carried farther now. New recruits to the voluntary audience were arriving. Some were boys and some girls. Two gray-haired professors sidled into a corner. Rules? Tonight

there were no rules. They had lost the first big game of the season. One and all they were in need of consolation. They were getting it from these mountain singers.

From "Kentucky Babe" the melodious pair went to "Moonlight on the Wabash" and "Springtime in the Rockies." Then, with a sudden low strumming of strings, they drifted away into some sweet, haunting melody of the mountains, a song without words, never written down but loved and remembered by every new mountain generation.

A hush fell over the audience as it ended. The hush deepened as the strings took up an old, old refrain and the untrained melodious voices began: "The sun shines bright on my old Kentucky home."

The hush continued all through the song. Surely no audience had ever accorded a more perfect reception. For a full moment there was silence. Then a voice exclaimed:

[82]

"Yea, Kentucky! Yea! Yea! Old Kentucky!"

Instantly the throng was on its feet as the rafters rang with the shout:

"Kentucky! Old Kentucky!"

Johnny choked something down his throat. Perhaps it was his heart. By Old Kentucky, he knew they meant Ballard. The name would stick. Ballard was made for life. So too he hoped, was the Blue Moon. He touched a switch. Instantly like a smile from Heaven the light at the center of the ceiling beamed down upon them. Johnny found himself looking into a half hundred smiling faces. The team was there, almost to a man. Some of the girls were there. Those professors and six strangers completed the list.

But here was Artie Stark. He was on his feet. He was speaking: "Folks, this is to be a pep meeting, not a funeral!" Instant applause. "What we need to do is find out what it takes to win next Saturday's game. I'll tell you." Artie's round freckled and usually smiling face was serious. "I'll tell you what we need. It's practice! How can we win? By getting out on the air! Basketball! That's it. Basketball on the football field. That takes practice, hours and hours of practice. I know what you're going to say, 'Where's the time? All right for you,' you'll say, 'you don't have to work, Artie.' Look!" Artie broke short off to allow his eyes to circle the crowd. "Who's the best ball carrier we've got this year? Who's the artful dodger? There he is!" He pointed straight at Ballard. "Old Kentucky. That's who it is!" Once again the crowd cheered, this time long and huskily. Ballard turned red, struggled with something in his throat, made a few gurgling sounds, then sat there in silence.

[83]

"What does he need?" Artie demanded.

"He needs practice, to become air-minded. That's what it will take to win! And practice, that's what he's going to get. I'm going to serve up chocolate sodas, banana splits, and ham sandwiches in this old Blue Moon of Johnny's. I don't have to work but I'm going to, for good old Hillcrest and all she stands for."

"No, I—" Ballard was on his feet. It matters little what he meant to say. Wild cheers drowned all his efforts at speech.

As for Johnny, his head was in a whirl. Artie Stark was to be his aid at the Blue Moon! Artie, the most popular boy in the whole school! What a boost the old Blue Moon was going to get!

An hour later, when arrangements had all been made for the future and the crowd had melted away, Johnny was preparing to throw the light switch, lock the door and go home, when his attention was attracted by some stranger who still lingered in the shadows.

Wonder what he wants, Johnny thought. There was something familiar about the stooping shoulders, the large, dark glasses of the stranger. "Did—did you want something?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes I—" the stranger came forward. "You may have forgotten. It's been quite a while Johnny, but I—"

"Good grief!" Johnny exclaimed. "It's Panther Eye! My old pal Panther Eye!" Next instant he was gripping the other boy's hand until it hurt.

CHAPTER VII PANTHER EYE'S RETURN

"Sit down, Pant," Johnny's mind spun like a top. "Pant! Good old Panther Eye. Sit down here. I'll switch off that big light. There now! That's more like it. What's the good of light for a fellow like you? See in the dark well as the light. I—I'll be right back, Pant. Got coffee! Lot of good hot coffee and hamburger, just right hamburger. Have a feast, Pant, and talk just like we used to. Jungles, Pant, and the great, white wilderness. Submarine in the Chicago river. Man! Oh, man!"

At this, as if suddenly realizing he was talking like a madman, Johnny ducked away toward the kitchen where, with shaky fingers, he laid crisp, brown hamburgers between round sliced rolls and poured great, steaming mugs of coffee.

All the time he was thinking. Panther Eye of all people! Panther Eye, you will know if you have been Johnny Thompson's friend for long, had for a long time been Johnny's boon companion. Then, quite suddenly and mysteriously, he had dropped out of his life. Nothing very strange about this for, after all, Pant had always been a mysterious person. He could see in the dark quite as well as in the light. This marvelous gift had more than once gotten them out of a tight place. Rumor had it that Pant and a great surgeon had been hunting panthers. A panther had torn out the boy's eye. The surgeon had shot the panther, cut out its eye skillfully, set it in the place of the one Pant had lost and now, like all cats, he could see in the dark. A likely sort of story. But then, how could you explain it? Pant had once told Johnny he did it with the aid of some mechanical lighting device. Johnny had not quite believed that. What was one to believe? At

any rate, here was Pant back again. Where had he been? Johnny wanted awfully to know. They'd have a grand talk about old times. Pant would tell of some fresh adventures. And then? Johnny was actually trembling with anticipation. Things would happen, they always did when Pant was about, weird, mysterious things. Oh well, this made life seem worth living. So let them come.

"Remember the Dust Eater?" Pant was saying three minutes later. "Remember the airship and all those little brown men way up there in the north?" Pant's strange eyes shone.

[87]

"And the Siberian tiger?" Johnny exclaimed.

"Yes! Yes, Johnny! Them were the days!"

"Every day is a good day," Johnny philosophized. "Every day's got to be better than the one that went before. There's no turning back Pant, old boy. We've got to go forward. But what have you been doing, Pant?"

"What Satan always does," Pant smiled strangely.

"What's that?" Johnny stared.

"Don't you remember, Johnny? You should read old and treasured very old books. They help a lot in understanding life. Satan when asked where he had been is supposed to have said he had come 'From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.'"

"Well," Johnny grinned. "Who's got a better right to follow Satan's example than you, Pant. But where did you walk?"

"Africa, Ethiopia to be more explicit."

"Oh!" Johnny's breath came quick with surprise. "The one place I'd most like to have been! What were you doing? What happened? Plenty I'll bet! Tell me about it."

[88]

"Well you know," Pant slumped down comfortably in his chair, then, as there came some slight noise outside, sprang half out of his seat.

"You're nervous," Johnny looked at him in surprise. "Nervous as a cat."

"You'd be too, Johnny, if—" Pant did not finish.

"Well, Johnny," he began again a half minute later, "I've got a brother. Didn't know it, did you?"

"No I—"

"I have, Johnny. And like myself, he's a bit queer, only in a different way. He's a naturalist of a sort. He hunts up all kinds of queer animals. And Ethiopia's the place to look for them. You'd hardly believe the truth, Johnny, antelopes no taller than a good sized cat, crows with great, thick bills, monkeys with capes growing on their backs to keep off the rain, and baboons! All sorts of man-like creatures! That's Ethiopia. My brother went down there to hunt out these creatures. He got himself lost and I had to go find him.

"It's a strange place, Johnny, awfully strange.

[89]

Things happen that you don't forget, you'll never forget." Pant's eyes sought the dark corners of the room. His slim fingers toyed nervously with his coffee cup.

"Did you find your brother?" Johnny asked.

Pant did not appear to hear. Perhaps he did not. There are times in all our lives when we are living so much in the past that nothing close to us seems real.

"There are spots in that strange land," Pant went on as if Johnny had not spoken. "Spots so beautiful you fancy they may have been the Garden of Eden. Beautiful? Yes, beautiful beyond compare—" Pant drew in a long, deep breath. "Just imagine, Johnny, passing through a tropical jungle. You can imagine, can't you? Remember —"

"Yes," Johnny said quietly, "I remember Central America. The mahogany forests, tangled bushes and vines. The hush of night at noonday in the deep shade of the forests, the bright flash of birds, the damp, sweet smell of a thousand flowers."

"Yes, Johnny," Pant sighed, "you do remember. And, Johnny, African jungles are wilder, ruggeder, grander, more lonely. Johnny," his voice fell, "imagine all that, then try to think what it would be like to catch a sound, a voice, singing beautifully. Not a bird's voice, Johnny, a human voice, a girl's voice."

[90]

"Not in the jungle either," again Pant paused, he seemed to be experiencing it all again. "Think of walking a few steps forward then, after parting the bushes, to find yourself looking down upon a—a sort of paradise.

"Try to picture it, Johnny." Pant leaned forward. "Try to see it as I saw it then, a broad, green pasture, flat as a floor and green as no pasture in America ever is. Back of that pasture a grove of date palms and among these, set like a diamond in green jade, a jewel of a house.

"Bananas hung on bunches at the edge of a garden near by," Pant breathed deeply. "Oranges and grapefruit all green and gold, were there too. And, Johnny," again his voice fell, "Johnny, right in the foreground of that picture, as if she had been put there by an artist, and the whole thing was not real, just painted, was a girl."

"A white girl?" Johnny spoke at last.

"She may have been all white," Pant spoke slowly. "I don't know about that. Queer isn't it? I was with her for hours. I never asked myself the question, not once until now. But then, when you're helping a pretty girl who is in great peril you don't ask yourself, 'What race does she belong to?' now do you?"

[91]

"Helping a beautiful girl in great peril!" Johnny sat up.

"Yes, that's what it came to in the end. That's what I was going to tell you—

"But say!" Pant broke off suddenly. "Here it is eleven o'clock! I've got just ten minutes to make it!" He grabbed for his hat.

"Make what?" Johnny received no answer. Pant was gone.

"Same old Pant," Johnny murmured after a moment's thought.

Johnny sat there for a short time staring into his half drained coffee cup. Life had, he thought, always been strange. Curious, mysterious things were always bobbing up. Life was a joyous affair too. It sure was good to live. The coming weeks promised to be full of interest. There was that queer old man and his nephew, Donald Day, down there in the mountains. They took jug-like affairs into a dark, cavern-like place beneath a mill, carried them down empty and brought them up filled with some precious fluid. How could they? What magic was this? He was going to know. His grandfather had given him a small car, a long, low one with a nose like a chisel. Cut the air like a knife, this car. He'd go spinning down to the mountains in it. Take Jencie or Ballard with him.

[92]

"Old Kentucky. That's what they all called Ballard tonight," he whispered. He was thinking of Ballard. Yes, surely life was joyous, grand and joyous. Things had a way of coming out right if you got a proper start and kept plugging. There was the Blue Moon now. It was going to be a success. Students needed such a meeting place, good, clean atmosphere, and all that.

"Just takes one good push," he murmured. "Tonight it got that push. Ballard got his push too. He'll make a great football star. I'm sure of it. I—" he broke off.

Then, like a ghost, a mental picture of Panther Eye came floating into his consciousness. "He's been into something I'll be bound," he said this aloud to the empty room. "Nothing bad, but something that's likely to get some people into a lot of trouble of one sort or another. Pant's just naturally that way.

[93]

"Trouble for some people," he repeated musingly. "But I won't be one of those people."

"Oh won't you though!" He would have sworn that a voice whispered this in his ear. Springing to his feet, he flashed a look here, there, everywhere.

"No one!" he exclaimed. "Of course not. Time I was going home. Been a wild day. I'm beginning to hear things. Be seeing them pretty soon."

At that he switched off the light, opened the door, then stood on the threshold listening, peering into the dark. Strangely enough, at that moment a curious notion took possession of his mind, it was that the mysterious Panther Eye had not been there at all, that Pant was dead, that only Pant's ghost had been to visit him here in the big room of the Blue Moon.

"Boo!" he shivered.

He was sure he caught an answering "Boo!" But after all it might have been some lonesome old owl talking to himself.

[94]

CHAPTER VIII

HA! HA! BIG JOKE!

The game on the following Saturday was strange. Johnny, who journeyed with the team to Chehalis, where the game was to be played, had never seen anything like it. Something quite mysterious and startling happened at the beginning of the second quarter. The score stood at 7-7. It was Hillcrest's ball on their opponent's twenty yard line, second down, and ten yards to go.

At that moment, while it was being returned from an unsuccessful attempt at a forward pass, in some strange manner, the ball came into contact with a Chehalis player's toe and went bouncing into the bleachers. Johnny saw this but thought little of it. He was to think a great deal more of it later.

The ball was slow in getting back onto the field. This was not strange however, it was a cold day. Many blankets tended to hamper the spectator's movements.

When the ball came back it was Rabbit Jones, Hillcrest right half, who received it. The ball, he thought, seemed queer, yet he said nothing. Twenty seconds later the ball was in play. Rabbit had it and was preparing to throw a forward pass to Dave Powers, who had run around left end to receive it.

[95]

Then Rabbit did a strange thing. To the vast surprise of all his team mates, instead of carrying out the play, he allowed his arm to drop to shoot the ball at last far and high, curving away toward a spot where no one was.

"Don't touch that ball!" These words were on Rabbit's lips. He did not say them. Nor was there any need, for as it reached the highest spot in its long, broad curve, with a boom like a cannon shot, the ball burst.

A sudden cry of surprise rose from the bleachers. But from one pair of lips—Rabbit heard it distinctly—there came, "Ha! Ha! Big joke!"

Who had said it? Rabbit's gaze from face to face of the opposing team came to rest upon the big right tackle. "Yes," he assured himself, "he said that. And it was his toe that pushed the ball into the crowd a moment ago. Something queer there."

Though the boy thought all this, not one word, for the moment, did he say to his team mates. The whole affair puzzled him greatly. Why had he changed his mind so quickly? Why had he thrown the ball for that long forward pass into the great nowhere? Had he known the ball would burst? Well, scarcely that. It had all been very strange. The ball had been cold like ice. He had imagined that he felt it swelling. He had acted, perhaps, on instinct. Who knows?

[96]

But no more of that. Here was a new ball. The whistle was blowing. No time, this, for dreaming. Hillcrest must win. Just must! They had lost the week before. The score now stood at

a tie. Twenty yards from a touchdown.

"Come on now boys!" Dave Powers urged. "Let's get in there and win!"

"Dave," Rabbit whispered, "Dave, send me through their right tackle."

"That fellow!" Dave stared. "He'll smear you. He's twice your size."

"Try it!" Rabbit was pleading now. "Third down! Please, Dave—try it."

In the huddle Dave gave his orders quickly. Rabbit was to take the ball through right tackle. His team mates gasped but said never a word.

[97]

Rabbit's fingers trembled as they touched the ground, prepared for the play, but in his eye was a strange gleam.

Snap! The ball hit his hands. He was away. Guard and tackle on his team did their bit. It was not enough. As he leaped at the opposing line, the big tackle blocked his path. Then Rabbit did a strange thing. Coming to a dead halt he said in a low, tense tone:

"Ha! Ha! Big joke!"

Next instant he plunged head on. He struck that big tackle. He brushed him aside like a bag of straw, then plunged forward for a clean gain of nine yards.

"Made it! Made it! Made it!" chanted the Hillcrest rooters. "First down. Ten to go! We want a touchdown! We want a touchdown!"

"Again!" Rabbit panted, as he came up to Dave. "Just one more time."

"One more time it is," Dave grinned. "Don't see how you did it, but it's worth one more try."

Again it was. Same play, same old forward plunge, same results. This time Rabbit did not say it all, only "Ha! Ha!" then he plunged. Again the jinx worked. This time he went all the way for a touchdown.

[98]

Amid the deafening din made by rooters, Punch Dickman kicked the goal and the score stood 14-7 in Hillcrest's favor.

"Game's not over," Dave warned his team mates. "Not by a long mile. And we've got to win."

"Yes," Johnny whispered to himself as he heard the words, "They must win."

He was thinking at that moment, however, more of Ballard than of all the rest of the team. Ballard, he knew, had been practicing entirely too hard. He was nervous and jumpy. If too much of the game depended upon him, he might do something rather terrible. He knew little about the strange events that were throwing the game, almost entirely, to Rabbit's side of the team. He was thankful it was so.

"If only Ballard can get through a game without any mishaps," he said to Jensie. "And if he can see his own team win, it will help a lot."

"Yes," Jensie agreed soberly, "it will."

[99]

"Dave," Rabbit whispered, as they marched down the field for the kick-off. "That football did not just burst. It was blown up."

"Blown up!" Dave stared. "How could it be? How could you blow up a football that's been constantly in play for a half hour?"

"It went into the bleachers."

"And came right out again. Rabbit, you're crazy!"

"No," said Rabbit, "I'm not. That big tackle knew all about it. That secret knowledge made him soft. I went right through him twice."

"Twice. That's right," Dave whistled low. "It's the queerest thing I ever heard. How could they? And why?"

"Wanted to get our goat maybe. Perhaps it's what they'd call a practical joke."

"And look!" Rabbit pulled at Dave's arm. "They're taking that big tackle out, putting in another man."

"Well," Dave grinned, "you can't go through him if he's out of the game."

This was true. The full force of its truth came over the Hillcrest team as during the moments that followed, they battled to hold their lead.

[100]

Through a series of line plunges and end runs, Chehalis pushed them back, back, back to their own three yard line. Then the Chehalis quarterback fumbled and Dave retrieved the ball.

This gave Hillcrest a short breathing spell. Then again disaster descended upon them. Rabbit fumbled the ball. It shot high in air. A Chehalis man caught it and carried it across for a touchdown. The goal was kicked. The score was tied. The grandstands became places of wild pandemonium. Then the whistle blew for the end of the third quarter.

"Rabbit," Dave whispered as they dropped down upon the grass for a moment's rest, "we're thinking too much about that busted football. Perhaps that's what they wanted. Anyway we must not. We've got to get in and win! Win! That's what!"

"We—we will," Rabbit exclaimed beneath his breath. "All the same," he added, "I'd like to know how—"

"There you go!" Dave laughed. "Forget it!"

Yet Rabbit could not quite forget it.

With the score standing at a tie the teams settled down to a grimly fought fourth quarter. Chehalis attempted two line plunges, and one end run. Failing to make their downs, they kicked.

[101]

Hillcrest caught the kick, carried the ball to their own forty yard line, tried a line plunge, a forward pass and an end run, then kicked. So for ten minutes struggling, sweating, racing, plunging, all to no purpose, they beat their way

back and forth across the field.

With five minutes left to play, Chehalis fought their way to Hillcrest's twenty yard line. There for three downs they stuck. Then, like a flash out of the blue, from his position behind the line of scrimmage, the Chehalis full-back booted the ball straight over the bar for a field goal.

"Three ahead," someone groaned as play was resumed. "They've got us."

"Nothing like that," Rabbit retorted. "Four minutes left to play. Touchdown! Touchdown!"

And the bleachers were chanting: "Touchdown! Touchdown!"

The struggle was resumed.

Time out for Chehalis. A player limped off the field. By this time Rabbit was too weary to see who replaced him. Soon he was to know and smile.

[102]

Once again play was resumed; Hillcrest's ball on the opponent's forty yard line.

They went into a huddle! Came out. The play called for two short lateral passes behind the line. While this was going on Rabbit was to break through the opponent's scattered defense and prepare to receive a long pass.

Could he make it? He breathed hard. Snap! They were away. So was Rabbit. To reach his required position was easy. Where was the ball? Had the two laterals served their purpose? Yes! Yes! Here came the ball, straight for his outstretched hands and not an opponent near. What luck!

But wait! As he caught the ball and turned to run, he saw before him, not ten yards away, a huge player, in fact, none other than that right tackle, the one he suspected of some unfair trick. He had been returned to the game.

There are times when Rabbit's mind works with the speed of a steel trap. This was one of those times.

Speeding straight at his opponent, he held the ball straight out before him, at the same time hissing:

[103]

"Here! Take it! It might blow up!"

For a space of seconds the big would-be tackler halted in his tracks. The expression on his face was a study.

As for Rabbit, he stopped short, pivoted to the right, flashed by his opponent to speed away and across the line for a touchdown. Hillcrest went into the lead.

In the last two minutes of play, Chehalis made a desperate attempt to score. Two forward passes were knocked down. An end run was blocked, a third forward pass was intercepted. Hillcrest marched down the field for a gain of twenty yards. Then the whistle blew. Hillcrest had won!

There followed the usual wild applause and the hearty congratulations, then Dave and Rabbit sauntered toward the exit.

"I tell you it's nonsense!" Dave burst out. "Under such circumstances you just couldn't blow up that football. Suppose it was full of gasoline or gun powder, how would you light it? I tell you it's impossible!"

"I suppose it is," Rabbit laughed. "It happened all the same. And I haven't got a single theory about how they did it. One thing is sure, Dave, the ball was cold, cold as ice. I—

[104]

"Look! There's something under the bleachers, something shiny—dollar maybe.

"Nope," he said a moment later, "it's a football pump. And look! What a fat one it is!

"Sayee!" he stopped and stared. "This is the very spot! The ball went into the bleachers right here."

At that moment Johnny Thompson came up to them. Jencie and Ballard had gone off the field. Ballard was happy, he had played in a successful football game. True, he had been given no very important part in it, this he knew, was more or less a matter of chance. Next time,—well, anyway, he had on this day made no serious breaks. The future might take care of itself.

Johnny, however, was not thinking of Ballard at that moment. He was turning that strange air pump over and over in his hands. It was, he saw, a very ordinary pump, over which had been soldered an outer casing. The space between the pump and the casing was padded with asbestos. "As if the pump might get too hot," he said to Dave as, assisted by Rabbit, Dave told what they knew of the strange occurrence.

[105]

"Keep still about this," Johnny counseled at last. "The crowd thought the ball just naturally blew up; that happens, you know. Let them think it. We'll get at the bottom of this mystery yet."

Strangely enough, as often happens, this mystery was closely related to another and, had Johnny but known it, the solution of one would go far toward untangling the other.

[106]

CHAPTER IX THE "GHOST" WALKS AGAIN

That night the "ghost" walked again—that is, Panther Eye returned. It was late, how late Johnny did not quite know. He was seated beside the great, wood-burning stove in the great front room of the Blue Moon.

The crowd was gone. And what a crowd it had been, a merry mob of college folks celebrating a football game. Yells, songs, wild, fantastic dances and eats, lots of eats, and good, hot drinks, that was what the long evening had been. The Blue Moon was a success, a howling success. As he sat there in the half-darkness—one dim light shone in a far corner—Johnny was in a mellow mood.

And then, without a sound, the door opened. There came the shuffling of feet. Johnny caught

the pale gleam of two balls of fire. "Pant's eyes," he whispered with an involuntary shudder.

"Hello, Johnny, I'm back," came in a hoarse whisper.

"Hello, yourself," Johnny was on his feet. "Wait. The coffee's still hot. There are mince pies, the turnover sort you can hold in your hands. I'll be back in a flash." He was.

[107]

"Pant," Johnny leaned forward eagerly as his strange visitor finished his last bite of pie. "Last time I saw you, you were telling me of a beautiful valley in Ethiopia and something about a girl, perhaps a white girl, you didn't seem to know. You said—"

"Yes," Pant gave forth a low, hollow chuckle. "Yes, Johnny, that was strange and—and exciting too.

"You see," he settled back in his chair, his unusual eyes half closed. "That girl was watching a small herd of cattle. They don't have fences in Ethiopia, at least, not in most places. So there was the girl and her cattle, the green pasture like a magnificent oriental carpet, and the small house set among the palms.

"It was warm, midafternoon. I sat down on a fallen tree to rest myself and to just—well sort of enjoy that beautiful picture.

"I must have fallen asleep—" suddenly Pant's eyes opened very wide. He went through the preliminary motions of springing to his feet. "Yes, I MUST have fallen asleep for, of a sudden, I heard a most unearthly scream.

[108]

"I sprang to my feet just in time to see a huge, dark-faced man leap into the brush. And, Johnny," Pant drew in a long breath, "he was carrying something on his back, carrying it like a sack of oats. He was carrying that girl."

"Oh-oo," Johnny exclaimed.

"It's quite common, that sort of thing there in Ethiopia," Pant went on more quietly. "You see, Johnny, they still have slaves in Ethiopia, perhaps a million or two, no one seems to know exactly. And if you're to sell slaves, you must steal them. That's what this fellow was doing. Probably he was a Mohammedan, most of them are, a pretty low-lived lot."

"And you—" Johnny began eagerly.

"Well, Johnny—" again the low, hollow chuckle, "it wasn't any of my business, not really. I hadn't come there to reform the country. I just wanted to see what it was like and to hunt up my brother. But this fellow, that big, dark-faced man with a hooked nose, I learned about the nose later, that fellow had spoiled my picture—you know, the girl, the cattle, the carpet of green, the jewel of a house. It was all spoiled after he had taken the girl. I wanted that girl back in the picture. So—natur—ally—" Pant's voice dropped to a drawl, "I went after him."

[109]

"Pant," exclaimed Johnny, "you are queer!"

"That's what I've been told," Pant grinned broadly.

"So you went after him," Johnny prompted.

"Yes—I followed him. And that was the longest bit of following I've ever done. That man, with the girl on his back, kept me coming along at a good pace for hours and hours. Didn't even stop for dark, just marched on and on. Must have known every step of the way. And I—there I was pussy-footing along, expecting every minute to have him whirl about and drop me with the young cannon of a revolver he had slung from his belt.

"I didn't carry a weapon, Johnny, just a big pocket knife, that's all. I'd left my light rifle at a bamboo shack in the jungle. I figured that the night, darkness, and that fellow's falling asleep was my only chance. And here he was marching on and on.

"'Might as well give it up,' I told myself, 'he'll be breaking into a clearing before long,—into a whole village of his sort. Then what will be the good?'"

[110]

"I was really about ready to give up when the fellow turned abruptly to the right, went staggering up a stiff slope for maybe a thousand feet, then vanished, just vanished—" Pant paused.

"A—a cave," Johnny breathed.

"A cave," Pant nodded his head.

"Just what you wanted."

"Just that—" Pant nodded once more.

At that instant, through the half open window there came the high shrill note of a whistle—just such a night call as Johnny had once heard in the heart of a jungle at midnight.

Pant sprang to his feet. He went gliding to a window. There, crouching low, he peered through a crack beneath the drawn shade out into the night. He remained thus while the clock ticked off three full minutes, then, without a word of explanation, resumed his place by the stove.

"You see," he went on exactly where he had left off, "he had taken that girl into the cave. He was armed, I was not. I could see in the dark, he could not. But probably he had matches. Most likely he'd make a fire. I had to have that girl back for my picture there at the edge of the jungle. Besides—" Pant paused to stare at the floor, "I don't like slavery. Do you?"

[111]

"No one does, Pant, at least no one but those who keep slaves or make a business of selling them."

"That's just it!" Pant agreed. "So of course I had to rescue that girl. Don't get me wrong, Johnny. I'm no romancer. Not a bit of it. But I had to get that girl."

"For your picture."

"For my picture.

"He fell asleep—that man. I crept into the cave. The girl was there unharmed. Terribly frightened, of course. Bound hand and foot. I

should have killed him, that slave-snatching son of Ali. But to try that would have been dangerous. Besides I hate corpses. Don't you, Johnny? Can't seem to forget 'em ever. Remember that man in the mine back there in Russia?"

Johnny nodded.

"I never forgot how he looked, Johnny."

[112]

"So you carried the girl away and that was all of it?" Johnny relaxed.

"No." Once more Pant was on the prowl. Springing to his feet, he wandered like a cat looking for a mouse all over the place. Then he came back and sat down. "That," he went on, "was only the beginning. You'd be surprised, Johnny, you really would. Perhaps—" he spoke slowly, "perhaps, you won't believe the rest of it. I—I guess I better not tell you. It's too—"

"No! No!" Johnny's voice rose. "Go on. Tell it all!"

"It wasn't easy—" Pant went on at last in a slow drawl, "to find the way back over the way we came, in fact, it was impossible. I tried to remember the way we had come. But you know the jungle, Johnny, vines that trip you and thorny bushes that turn you back. Rough and rugged it was too, great rocks here and deep ravines there.

"The girl found it difficult to walk, she'd been bound for hours. I helped her along until she showed me she could go it alone.

"Strange sort of girl, that one, Johnny. Never said a word—just marched straight on behind me. Perhaps she didn't know my language. Quite surely she didn't. Think of the languages spoken in Africa—French, Dutch, Italian, German, and all the black lingos.

[113]

"We marched on for hours," Pant heaved a heavy sigh. "All the time I was looking for the way back. I found a river I'd seen. Then, in passing around a rocky barrier, I lost it. All I could do was to make sure we were going down, not up. That would take us toward valleys. What valleys? Who could tell?

"All the time I was thinking of the girl. Was she all white or only one of those white-blacks they call albino. And what did she think of me? Perhaps she thought me one more slave trader who had stolen her from this big fellow with the hooked nose.

"Johnny," Pant sat up quite suddenly, his strange eyes gleaming, his tone mysterious. "Johnny, did you ever see a man in one place, just see him a time or two, not know him very well—and then, weeks later did you think you saw him again in a different place thousands of miles away where he couldn't very well be?"

"No," Johnny grinned. "There are some things that have never happened to me. That's one of them. Why?"

[114]

"Oh—oh nothing," Pant settled back. "About this girl now. It was queer, Johnny, downright queer. We'd come to the top of a high ridge. Dawn had come, as it always does in the tropics, with a

rush and with the joyous scream of a thousand birds.

"We stood there on the ridge looking down at a sort of barren plateau when some baboons, a whole troop of them, came marching out from the jungle. Huge fellows they were. Powerful beasts with arms a foot longer than mine. Powerful? Johnny, one of them could have grabbed me and broken every bone in my body. But they wouldn't, Johnny, I knew that well enough. Once, for a whole week, I'd lived in such a place, just to watch them. If I met one on the trail he'd try to bluff me. He'd march straight at me swinging his huge fists and cracking his teeth as if he meant to tear me to bits. When he was twenty feet away he'd stop dead in his tracks. Then I'd laugh at him, laugh big and loud. And the poor old fellow would turn and go slouching away like some huge bully who's been running a bluff.

"No, they wouldn't harm us, Johnny, those baboons, but they were interesting to watch. They played a sort of ball game with a cocoanut, tossing it about. They did the leap-frog act better than any boys you've ever seen. They had just seated themselves in a circle for some other game, when all of a sudden, a sound from the jungle startled them."

[115]

"A sound?"

"A shot, Johnny, a shot fired close at hand! You may think I wasn't startled. That big boy with the hooked nose was my first thought. I dragged the girl into the fronds of a low growing palm.

"It wasn't the big fellow with the hooked nose, Johnny. Worse than that." Pant rose to take one more prowl about the room. "Wild men, Johnny, a whole troop of them! And were they wild! Such faces! Such bodies! Such weapons!

"Scared, Johnny? Of course I was scared. All these wild men hate whites. All whites looked the same to them. One glimpse of my face and the face of the girl! That's all that would be needed. They'd get us, those wild men. Worse than a whole drove of those little tropical pigs, these wild men were. They'd sure get us.

"I looked around for some place to hide. Then I glanced back where the wild men were. I saw right away they had troubles of their own. They were looking back and scurrying for shelter all at the same time.

[116]

"Somebody was after them. We were close to the border. Had they been on a raid? Were whites after them or some other black men? There wasn't time to settle that.

"Gripping the girl by the wrist, I led her back among the bushes, then along the ridge a short distance. And what do you think I saw, Johnny?"

"Can—can't guess," Johnny stammered.

"A cave, Johnny, a perfectly good cave. Wouldn't believe it would you? Well, you'll not believe what happened after that—you couldn't."

"Yes, Pant," Johnny's voice was low, "I'll believe it if you say it's true. Couldn't be any stranger than the things that happened to us up there on

Behring Straits in Russia.”

“Don’t seem that they could be,” Pant rumbled down deep in his throat. “You’ll be surprised, Johnny. Downright surprised. We—”

[117]

Pant broke short off to sit staring at the window. The shade was drawn. Only one small light was turned on. This left the window in deep shadows. The light from a street lamp was brighter than the light from within. The wind was blowing, tossing tree branches about. Like ghostly fingers, these branches traced strange moving patterns on the shade.

Johnny was shocked by the change that had come over his companion’s face. Lips parted, nostrils wide, eyes aglow with strange fire, he sat there staring as if entranced.

“Only the shadow of tossing branches,” Johnny said reassuringly.

“No, Johnny,” Pant’s voice sounded hollow, “No, Johnny, that was not all. Excuse me, Johnny. I—I’ve got to go.” Next instant without a sound the boy was gone.

Then Johnny, staring once more at the curtain saw, for an instant only, a pair of massive shoulders, a giant head, a strangely hooked nose—all this appeared in dark silhouette on the window shade. One instant it was there, the next it was gone. Only the eerie, wind-traced tossing shadows were left.

For a full five minutes Johnny sat there staring. At last, with a heavy sigh, he arose to go.

[118]

Once again, as he snapped off the light, then for a period of seconds, stood in the doorway, as on that other night, he was seized with a strange notion, that Pant had not been there, only his ghost; that the strange boy had been killed over there in Ethiopia—his spirit returned to haunt his friends.

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed. “It’s true I didn’t touch him but ghosts don’t eat mince pie.”

[119]

CHAPTER X KENTUCKY’S DOWNFALL

The change from the shadows of the Blue Moon and the weird whispers of Panther Eye to the low roar of Dave’s boiler room and Dave’s own low rumbling voice was almost startling. Dave was real, and quite human, the heating plant, made up as it was of bricks and pipes, pumps and boilers, was about the most substantial thing in the world. No spooks here.

In this place for six hours every day Dave reigned as king. He had come to love that room as some people love their homes. The mild, clean air, made pure by the constant breathing in of those twin boilers, brought unconscious joy to his heart. The low hiss of steam, the faint roar of the fires on the grates, the quish-quash of the pumps, were music to his ears.

To his nicely tuned ears, every sound had a meaning. If the hiss of steam increased, if a pump bumped ever so softly, if the fire's low roar sank to a whisper, he was on his feet. His hands grasped a shovel, a valve, or a wrench and in a trice all was right again.

More than this, the old heating plant stood for a very definite change in his life. The moment he stepped through those doors and good old John MacQueen said, "Your work will be this. You will do it this way and that way," he had become important both to himself and to others. He was a worker.

He loved to sit there, with the green shaded light gleaming low, with the shadows leaping among the pumps and the pipes, and picture the rooms in those other buildings. In the gym, all aglow with light, a practice game of basketball was in progress. Soon the players would go bounding down the stairs to the showers. In the old brown stone building across the way, Prexy, in his office, dictated letters, in another room the treasurer thumbed his ledgers. Far up beneath the rafters were bat-roosts where a score or more of boys bent over tables reading intently, or figuring feverishly. In the red brick "dorm," at the far corner of the campus, more than a hundred girls garbed in lounging pajamas, kimonos, or more formal garb, were studying.

"All these," he would think with a smile, and a glad tug at his heart, "are warm and comfortable on a damp and chilly night, because I am here watching these old furnaces and listening to that hiss of steam. I am part of a big thing. I am a worker."

Ah, yes, what more could any boy ask, a chance to study, to listen to the talk of men older and wiser than himself and then to do his part in making all this possible for many others.

Did Dave think of this often? Probably not. His head was full of forward passes, lateral passes, touchdowns, college algebra, chemical formulae, and all the rest that made up his life. For all that it was good at times just to sit there listening and thinking, just thinking and listening—nothing more.

A sturdy, cheerful, independent lot were these Hillcrest boys who worked their way. And there were scores of them. On the football team there was Stagger Weed, who tended a string of furnaces; Rabbit Jones, who swept a dozen floors every day; Punch Dickman, who was a hash slinger at the Golden Gate, and many others, happy warriors all.

"Howdy, Johnny! How's things?" Dave greeted as Johnny came in blinking from the light.

"Fine, Dave."

"And the Blue Moon?"

"Wonderful, Dave." Johnny dropped into a chair beside Dave's small desk. "Dave, how's football?"

"You saw how it was Saturday," Dave laughed.

"Yes, but—" Johnny's brow wrinkled, "you didn't

use my good pal, Kentucky, very much."

"No-o," Dave spoke slowly, "we didn't. He's trying too hard. Have to let him slow down a bit. But he's a fine kid, Johnny, a mighty fine kid. I like to see him run. Wait until next Friday. You know we play on Friday this week, Naperville's request. You'll see a thing or two. Just you wait!"

Johnny was willing enough to wait if Dave felt that way about it. He did wait. He did see things, wonderful things for a while—and then—well—yes, and then.

[123]

* * * * *

"Look!" Dave's tone was low, tense with emotion. "We gotta' beat that Naperville gang. We just got to. And we can do it, Old Kentucky." He placed a hand affectionately on the mountain boy's shoulder.

The great day had come. The Naperville game was about to start. Never before had there been such crowds, so much color, enthusiasm, and cheering.

"We can do it," Dave went on, "just you and I. No one can dodge the way you can. And I—I'm a battering ram. I'm good! I even admit it," he chuckled. "I'll go through 'em. You follow on and make the gains. We're going to have a touchdown two minutes after the first whistle. I'll tell you how," his voice dropped to a mere whisper. "Artie will give you the ball. I'll hit their tackle, hit him hard and ram their line into a heap. That makes a hole. You go through, far as ever you can." He drew a long breath.

"And then?" Kentucky asked in a low, quiet drawl.

"Same thing. Four times running," was Dave's reply. "Every time we'll gain a little less ground. Shouldn't wonder if you'd be thrown for a loss on the fourth. There's a bright sophomore on that Naperville team—too bright. Plays right guard. He'll break through and smear you. Let him!" Dave chuckled. "And then," another long breath, "then Artie will send you through the spot where that same right guard belongs. He'll be feeling so happy about smearing you, he won't be watching, or if he is, he'll expect that same play. You should get through, all the way through, kid! Make it a touchdown, boy. Make it a touchdown." He wrung the younger boy's hand. "There's the horn."

[124]

Who can say what went on inside the Kentucky boy's mind as he crouched behind the line waiting for the snapping of the ball? As yet all was quite new and strange to him. They expected so much of him. They wanted him to beat this Naperville team. Naperville meant nothing to him. But to his team mates and all the old grads, the letter men of other years, it meant a great deal.

But here was the ball. He felt its hard smoothness in his hand, saw Dave plunge forward to send a player crashing to one side, saw the opening and went through for a gain of a yard, two, three, four, eight yards. Then a bolt of lightning appeared to hit him and he went to earth.

The instant the whistle blew, he felt Dave's hands on his shoulder, helping him to his feet.

"Grand, Old Kentucky! Better'n I expected. Now make it a first down."

A first down it was. The crowd on the bleachers screamed its approval. The boy could hear them shouting: "Na—per—ville! Na—per—ville! Beat 'em! Beat 'em! Smear 'em! Smash 'em! Kill 'em!" The shout, coming in slow motion at first, picked up speed until it sounded like an on-rushing train.

"Steady, boy!" Dave warned. "Don't expect too much. Remember!"

"I—I'll remember," Kentucky's breath came short and quick.

There was need to remember, for on the second down he failed to gain and on the third he was thrown for a loss of two yards. It was at this moment that the mountain boy became conscious of that Naperville guard. He was not only a smart boy, he had a mean turn to his nature. He leered as if to say, "Ha! Ha! Big joke! Smeared you, didn't I?"

Ballard's face was a mask as he took his place for the next play. Then, as he received the ball, he faked that same line plunge, saw that leering guard leave his place, then, like a flash of fire, shot to the right, through that opening and away.

[126]

Then a strange thing happened to his mind. As a player flashed past him, he was to him no longer a player, but old Nicodemus, the Colonel's ram. And now here was another off to his right. Oh, well! offer him a hip, then fade. He faded down the field. To the left a third Nicodemus appeared. He too was dodged. But here he was now straight ahead of him, not Nicodemus, of course, but the Naperville's safety man, all that remained between him and a touchdown.

With a friendly grin, holding the ball straight out before him, the Kentucky boy sprang straight at the waiting giant.

Thrown off his guard, the giant reached for the ball. But, of a sudden, the ball was not there. Stopping dead in his tracks, Kentucky had pivoted sharply to the right and was away for that touchdown.

Then how the bleachers roared.

"See! I told you," Dave grinned as he came up with the Kentucky boy. "Two minutes to a touchdown, exactly by the watch!"

[127]

Kentucky did not laugh. He did not even smile. Strangely enough, at that moment he was seeing a face, an unfriendly, leering face, the face of Naperville's right guard. A chill shook his slender frame. He wanted to plead with the coach. Strange as it may seem, he wanted to be taken out of the game. "But how foolish!" he muttered. "What reason could I give?"

He did not quit the game. He played on, but ever and again, as there was time-out and he lay flat upon the ground relaxed, with eyes closed, he seemed to see that leering face and always it caused him to shudder.

After their brilliant start, the team slowed down a bit. The quarter ended without another touchdown.

In the second quarter, Naperville took the ball and, for the most part, kept it. With the dogged determination of a slow, heavy team, they at last pounded their way across the field to a touchdown. Since both teams had made good on kicks, the score was now tied.

But not for long. Hillcrest went into the air. The grilling practice of that week did not go for nothing. Three times their forward passes were complete. It was a short lateral caught by Kentucky and hurled high and wide to Dave that at last scored their second touchdown of the game. The kick was good.

[128]

Then again came tough going. The Hillcrest team was tiring. Like shock troops, a half dozen husky subs were pushed into the Naperville team and again they battered their way across the field and over the goal. The kick was good. Once again the score was tied.

Then came the five last tense moments of the game. Even faces in the grandstand were drawn into hard fixed lines. Men were there, stout, gray haired men, who, in their day, had gone romping over their ancient enemy to victory. Now they wanted that victory once again, wanted it terribly. True, there was one more game scheduled with this team, but every game counted, every game! There was no time like the golden now.

"Smash that line!" they chanted. "Smash that line! Smash that line!"

As they went into a huddle, Dave muttered to his team: "Remember what we did in the beginning? They've forgotten by now. Same play, all the way through, except just three plunges through left tackle, then one through right guard."

[129]

Hillcrest's ball on the enemy's thirty-yard line. Four minutes to play. First down, ten to go.

Snap! The ball fairly cracked as it reached Kentucky's hands. Dave broke a wide opening. Kentucky went through to a first down.

"Break that line! Break that line! Smash 'em! Smash 'em! Smash 'em!" the bleachers chanted.

Kentucky passed his hand before his eyes—that leering sophomore was there again.

Now he was off once again for a gain of six yards.

"Make it a first down!" Dave muttered grimly.

From the enemy's bleachers there came a mighty roar: "Stop that man! Stop that man! Kill him! Kill him!" Dave knew they meant him. He grinned broadly. A moment more and he was laughing, for the bruised and battered tackle of the opposing team straightened up to shout back to the now silent bleachers:

"Stop him yourself! He ain't no man! He's a stick of flaming red dynamite!"

[130]

"Red dynamite!" The Hillcrest bleachers caught the words and hurled it back. "Red dynamite!"

Red dynamite! 'Ray for Red Dynamite!' And so, in a flash, Dave was named for life.

They did not make it a first down, not that time, for, as if he had rehearsed the act, that grinning, leering guard broke through once more and threw Ballard for a loss. As he did so, he hissed some words in the mountain boy's ears. Kentucky heard it but indistinctly. Even so, his blood raced. His fingers itched for action. As he rose, he stood there like a marble statue, white and cold.

The next play came with the speed of thought and, like a radio flash, was executed. Kentucky went straight through the place left by the leering guard. It looked like a touchdown. But no, he was thrown hard, just one yard from the goal line.

"What a break!" Dave exulted. "First down and a yard to a touchdown!"

The crowd saw it all and went into hysterics. Hats soared high. Girls screamed. An old grad fell backward off the bleachers, barely escaping a broken neck. The bleachers were a riot.

[131]

But what was this? Players on both teams leaped into action. They began piling up, pulling and hauling. When it was all over, Ballard, white faced and panting, was dragged from the bottom of the heap.

There had been a fight going on beneath that pile. Kentucky and that leering Naperville guard had been at it tooth and nail.

"He was cho—choking me!" the Naperville guard gasped. "He—he nearly killed me."

"What happened, Ballard?" the coach asked, crowding in.

The Kentucky boy made no reply. He was white as marble and shaking like a leaf. He turned, pushed his way through his own team and walked unsteadily to the bench to drop upon it like a sack of sand.

A hush fell over the throng. The referees conferred. There was nothing for it, whatever the cause, the Kentucky boy had started a fight. Fifteen yards penalty for Hillcrest.

Less than two minutes to play and sixteen yards to a touchdown. Hillcrest lost heart. Four downs and only four yards gained. Naperville took the ball. They booted it down the field. The whistle blew. The game was over.

[132]

"Only a tie," came a murmur from the bleachers. "Only a tie and we might have won."

"Only a tie and we might have won," the words were taken up by more than one player. But Ballard, Old Kentucky as they had lovingly called him, such a short time before, did not hear. He was not there. He was far away, how far no one seemed to know.

[133]

CHAPTER XI

A RIDE IN THE NIGHT

An hour later Johnny Thompson found the Kentucky boy sitting in a chair beside the range in the cook room of the Blue Moon. He was all crumpled up like a rag doll and still shaking like a leaf in the wind. Once, when Johnny was in Central American jungles, he saw a monkey caught in a wire trap. He too had been all crumpled up and trembling. Ballard was like that. A great wave of remorse swept over him. "Shouldn't have brought him up here," he told himself savagely. "Belongs down there in the mountains, he does, down there where men are free as squirrels or woodchucks."

And yet, as he paused for sober thought, he could not be sure. What should be done?

"Boy, why did you do it?" he asked in a voice that vibrated with kindness.

"Can't nobody call me no name like that," the Kentucky boy grumbled without looking up. "Just can't nobody at all."

"So that sneering guard called him a vile name!" Johnny thought to himself. "There's a penalty for that too, but Kentucky didn't know. Too bad! No good to tell him now."

[134]

What should be done? He was seized with a sudden inspiration.

"Ballard," he spoke in as steady a tone as he could command, "I'm driving back to the mouth of Pounding Mill Creek for the week end. Want to go along?"

Ballard did not look up. He replied in a word of one syllable: "Yes." Yet it is probable that few spoken words have ever expressed so much.

"All right. We'll start in an hour. With luck, we'll be there in seven hours."

For a boy, Johnny had a very long head. There were many things he might have done. He might have remonstrated with Ballard, told him that in the mountains you could kill a man for calling you the wrong kind of name, but not in Hillcrest. He might have sympathized with him, might have said, "We'll get even with that Naperville mob." The thing he did could not have been more right, had he been advised by a score of older heads.

When at last they started, there were three in the car instead of two. He had run across Jensie. She had insisted on going along. The car seat was wide. Johnny was not slow in accepting her challenge. So, with an hour of sunlight and many hours of glorious moonlight before them, they took the long, broad, winding trail that leads south.

[135]

Mile after mile sped by and not a word was said by anyone. They are strangely quiet people, these mountain folks—yet there are times when they appear to speak without saying any words. Their very silence speaks for them. Johnny had felt this many times. He was feeling it now. Jensie seemed to be saying, "Don't be too hard on him, Johnny. Don't let the boys be too hard on him. It's our mountain ways." And Ballard? He seemed to be saying, "I won't go back. I'll never go back. I won't go back," repeating it over and over. Strangely enough, because of this

repetition, Johnny felt sure that in the end he would go back and he was glad.

They came at last to the crest of Big Black Mountain. There, without quite knowing why, Johnny cut off the gas and allowed his car to go rolling along to a gliding stop.

A second look told him why he had not gone on. He had been stopped by the sheer beauty of the scene that lay before them. Big Black Mountain is not a peak, it is a tree-grown ridge stretching away for miles and miles. To right and left of it are other ridges, Little Black Mountain, Stone Mountain, Pine Ridge, and all the rest. These ridges, covered as they were with the golden coat of autumn and shone down upon by a matchless moon, made a picture of breath-taking beauty. Jensei too felt the glory of it all, Johnny knew, for he felt her heart leap.

[136]

"It—it's grand!" she murmured. "And to think! This is MY country."

"Yes," Johnny's voice was low with emotion, "it's your country."

As he said this he was not thinking of Jensei, but of Ballard, who sat motionless in the car, saying nothing at all. This was HIS country. What was he thinking now? Johnny would have given a dollar to know.

"His country," Johnny whispered to himself. Along those ridges chestnuts and beechnuts were falling. Squirrels were frisking about on the ground. With a gun and a good hound-dog—Ballard owned one of the best dogs in the mountains—you could have a perfect, gloriously golden day, hunting those squirrels and keeping an ear open for the distant gobble-gobble of some wild turkeys who might, just might, be hiding in those hills.

[137]

"What a life!" Johnny barely escaped saying the words aloud. "What a grand and glorious life!" Deep down in some hollow a fat old coon was at this moment stealing corn. Rabbits were frisking in the moonlight; Johnny saw one go dashing across the road. Down there, far below, was a two-room log cabin, Ballard's home. In the narrow, coal-burning grate, a low fire would be gleaming. Above the mantel hung Ballard's rifle. Beside the fire slept his favorite hound-dog.

"And I'm going to ask him to give it up," Johnny told himself. "Going to tell him he should go back to college, to books, to serving coffee and hot dogs, and back to football. How can I?"

"And yet—" Johnny touched the starter. The car went purring down the slope. And yet—yes, he would ask him. What if it was good sport to wander the hills in search of game? What if the mountains did call? What would it get you in the end? With an untrained temper, the rifle that sends a squirrel tumbling over and over from the top of a tree might at last be turned upon some human being. And after that, long years in jail.

[138]

"That," Johnny told himself soberly, "is what football's for, to teach a fellow to take it. Not to take vile names. The referee will take care of that, but to take a tumble, to be thrown, thrown hard again and again, to be bumped and bruised and still be able to smile. That's football, a grand

and glorious sport!" Yes, he'd ask Ballard to go back. He MUST go back!

"I—I'll get off here," Ballard broke in upon Johnny's solemn meditations and high resolves. "There's a short cut through the hills. I'll be home in a quarter of an hour." As Johnny stopped the car, Ballard hopped out.

"Thanks, Johnny! Thanks a powerful lot."

"Good-bye, Ballard," Johnny called.

"Good-bye, Ballard," Jensie echoed. "We'll be seeing you."

"We'll be seeing you," the hills echoed back. Ballard was gone, swallowed up by darkness and his beloved mountains.

Jensie did not speak again until they were before her own gate. Then she said quietly: "I'm going hunting with Ballard in the morning, Johnny."

[139]

"Does he know it?" Johnny asked in some surprise.

"No, but he will. It won't be the first time we've gone hunting together, nor, I hope, the last.

"Thanks, Johnny." She was out of the car now. Her hand was on the gate. "Thanks awfully for bringing us down." Next moment she too had vanished into the darkness.

For a moment Johnny sat in his car thinking. Yes, these were strangely silent people. Jensie had not asked him to go with them on that hunting trip. She had given no reason for not doing so. There was a reason. She expected him to know the reason. He did—and was glad.

As he drove on to Cousin Bill's place, he was able to dismiss Ballard from his mind. He thought of the old mill and its mystery, of Donald Day and his grandfather, who was still in the hospital. He thought of the young aviator down in the valley who said he had found a wonderful new fuel for his airplane motor. Ballard had told him that this aviator had become Donald Day's best customer. "He's bought an old horse and wagon," Ballard had said. "Every day he comes up and carts away three or four of those queer jugs."

[140]

"Wonder what's in those jugs," Johnny had replied. "Really, don't you know?"

"Cross my heart," Ballard had answered.

"Well, I'm going to find out," Johnny had said with determination. But would he? Well, here he was at Cousin Bill's. Now for a few winks of sleep.

[141]

CHAPTER XII STRANGE WEALTH

"Want to come down with me?"

It happened as simply as that. Johnny Thompson caught his breath, breathed hard twice, then

said, "Y—yes. Sure I would."

The boy who had asked this surprising question was none other than Donald Day, grandson of the wizard of Stone Mountain who in a mysterious manner managed to make something of great value out of air and water alone. It was the next day. Jensie and Ballard were away in the hills with dog and guns but Johnny and Donald were standing at the door leading to the mystery room beneath the mill. The key was in Donald's hand and he was saying quietly, "Want to come down—"

"Wonder if he does not know that his grandfather kept the whole thing a secret?" Johnny thought to himself. "Wonder if I should tell him. I—"

At that moment little Bexter Brice burst through the outer door. "The worst things do happen," he exclaimed. "Poor old Uncle Mose Short!" He dropped down upon a rustic seat.

"What's happened?" Johnny asked, for the moment allowing his interest to be drawn from the enthralling mystery below.

[142]

"Well, you know," Bex was speaking slowly now, "Mr. MacQueen always took a great deal of interest in Mose. Mose is old, really old, no one knows just how old, but he's been game. He's worked. Times have been hard but all he's asked is a chance to earn a poor sort of living and now—" he sighed. "Now it looks as if that chance would be cut off."

"You see," he turned to the city boy, Donald, "your grandfather was trying to save Mose's mule when he had that terrible fall."

"So," Donald flashed him a friendly smile, "it's sort of up to me to take on the burden Grandfather has been forced to lay down?"

"Something like that," Bex agreed.

"But you know," he went on, "Uncle Mose has earned money mining coal beneath his little patch of land and selling it to people down in the settlement. It's a terrible sort of mine. The coal doesn't lay flat down. It stands half on edge. Mose has managed somehow. But now—" he sprang to his feet. "Now Blinkey Billy Blevens, the meanest old skunk out of jail claims that his father bought the coal rights on all the land up on Mose's creek, and he says he can stop Mose from mining it."

[143]

"Why he can't do that can he?" Johnny stared.

"Of course he can if he wants to. What we'll have to do is to make him not want to. But how? That's the question." Bex stared at the floor.

"Appeal to his better nature," Johnny suggested.

"He hasn't any that anyone has ever discovered. People have tried to find some good side to him many times," Bex answered gloomily. "They've never found it."

"Some people can be frightened into doing what is right. It's not very nice but sometimes it's the only way. What's he likely to be afraid of?" Donald asked.

"Lightning," Bex replied promptly. "Lightning out of a clear sky. He claims he was once knocked over and nearly killed by what he calls a 'bolt from the blue.'"

"H'm," Johnny mused. "That's a large contract."

Then the new boy, Donald Day, said something very strange. What he said was, "I shouldn't be surprised if we should be able to arrange it."

[144]

"You mean—" Johnny stared.

But just then someone called to Bex from outside the mill and Donald said once more to Johnny:

"You want to go down?"

At once Johnny's mind was all awl with thoughts of mysterious whispers and wheezes from those lower regions of the mill, and with the strange wealth that came from those depths. "Sure," he said once again. "Sure I would." So the other boy turned the key in the lock and they went down.

"I've helped my grandfather at this sort of thing quite a lot," Donald said as he switched on a light—the place below had no windows. "He used to have a shop just outside of the city. That was where I worked with him most. But the air there was too impure, too much dust. Lot of smoke from chimneys and factories.

"So he came down here." The boy seemed to be talking to himself quite as much as to Johnny. "Air down here in the mountains is about as pure as you can hope to find anywhere. No cars shooting along kicking up dust and coughing out gas. If any smoke passes over, it crosses at the mountain tops, not down here.

[145]

"Another thing," he pushed a lever. There came the sound of rushing water and slowly revolving wheels. "Another thing," he repeated, "this power down here is cheap. Don't cost you anything. All you have to do is to keep up the dam and see that the mill is in good repair. You've really got to have cheap power. Costs only about half as much down here."

"What costs half as much?" Johnny thought this question but did not ask it. Johnny could wait.

From one corner came a sucking sound. This increased until the room seemed full of the sucking and hissing of a steam engine, yet there was no steam. It was strange.

Donald dragged a canvas-covered something from a corner. This proved to be a large jug. It was not made of clay however, nor of glass.

"Porcelain," Donald explained as he saw Johnny eyeing it. "Better than metal because it is a slow conductor of heat. Shrinkage in this business is terrible. A gallon may last a week—then it's gone. And you can't confine it. Oh my, no! That is, I don't think you can, at least not in any small way. There's a great manufacturer somewhere up north, I've heard it said, who does confine it in large quantities. But it's dangerous. Some secret process. No one allowed near it. Blows the end out of a building now and then. You can imagine what this place would look like after an explosion," he laughed. After that he slid the big jug in a corner to connect it with a pipe. From

[146]

the pipe there came a sort of white smoke.

"White smoke," Johnny recalled Ballard's words of some time back. "But what's it all about?"

During the moments that followed, his curiosity grew and grew and grew. Then of a sudden, the other boy said:

"Look!"

Dragging the big jug free, he tipped it over to pour some white, steaming liquid over the palm of his hand, then quickly shook it into the air.

"You can do that—" he slid the jug back into its place. "You can even take some in your mouth. But you better spurt it out quick. Just imagine, 216 degrees below."

[147]

"Wha—what is it?" Johnny managed to gasp.

"What?" The other boy stared. "You don't know? Why I—" He stared afresh. Then he pronounced two magic words: "Liquid Air!" If Johnny did not think there was any magic in them at that moment, he was soon enough to know.

"Air isn't a liquid," he protested. "It's a gas."

"Water's not a liquid either," Donald smiled. "Not always. When you get it hot enough it becomes steam, a gas. When you get it cold enough it is ice, a solid. Air is just the same, only difference is you have to get it terribly cold before it becomes a liquid. That's just what I'm doing now."

"Watch those pumps. They're putting air under great pressure. That makes it cold. When it's just so cold, I run it over pipes full of more air. That makes air number two pretty cold. I put air number two under great pressure. Then it is cold enough to turn into a liquid, part of it. It drips off just as condensed steam does."

"And so-o," Johnny drawled, "you get liquid air. How much is it worth?"

[148]

"From fifty cents to one dollar a quart."

"Whew!" Johnny whistled. "High priced air I'd say."

He dropped into a chair. "So that's how your grandfather got something valuable out of nothing but the sky! Gold from the sky!" Johnny chuckled.

"But say!" he was on his feet again. "Who wants the stuff? What's it good for?"

"Well," replied Donald after turning a valve and setting one more pump hissing, "men go about the country lecturing on liquid air, freezing up tennis balls so hard they crack on the floor like an egg shell, making tuning forks out of lead by freezing it up, all that. They buy liquid air."

"Big mills that manufacture locomotives use liquid air. They freeze up whole engine wheels with liquid air, then put on the tires, which are not frozen. When the wheel thaws out it expands and there you have your tire on tight as a drum. Funny business isn't it?"

"But mostly," he slid another jug into position,

[149]

"liquid air is split up before it's used."

"Split up?" Johnny stared.

"Sure," Donald grinned. "Air contains six gases. The principal ones are oxygen and nitrogen. Oxygen is used a great deal, nitrogen very little, except in time of war.

"But the other gases are used a great deal too. Ever walk down the streets of a big city at night and notice all the gleaming, flashing signs?" he asked.

"Sure have!"

"Remember the inches of glass tubing all full of something that glowed red, blue, green, yellow?"

"Sure."

"Well, those tubes each contain gas, krypton, argon, or neon. That's why they are called neon signs. A great deal of that gas comes from liquid air or is separated by the aid of it. So you see, if we can supply manufacturers with clean, cheap liquid air we have—"

"A fortune!" Johnny drew in a long breath. "How wonderful!"

"Well," Donald said slowly, "perhaps not a fortune but a chance to live and to help others a little, and that is something these days.

[150]

"Liquid air," he went on after a moment, "makes a wonderful explosive. You see the oxygen in liquid air is free to join with carbon. All you have to do is to soak charcoal in liquid air, attach a fuse to it, scratch a match then run. The result is a glorious explosion."

"Swell for Fourth of July!" Johnny enthused.

"Wouldn't it be though—"

"But say!" Johnny exclaimed. "Why not use it for mining coal?"

"It has been done in Europe."

"Look!" Johnny stood up. His eyes gleamed. "Bex says that old Uncle Mose's mine contains the toughest vein of coal he ever saw. He picks away at it for hours and only gets a small load. Suppose you could spare a little of that liquid air?"

"Yes. Sure."

"I've got some charcoal," Johnny was growing enthusiastic. "Whole lot of it. I got it from a charcoal burner. Got some fuse too." He was fairly dancing about. "We'll make up some of that carbon-liquid air explosive and loosen up ten tons of coal for old Uncle Mose. What a lift that will give him!"

"All right," Donald agreed. "I've always wanted to try that thing out. We'll do it this very afternoon. What do you say? Around four o'clock?"

[151]

"Suits me fine." Johnny grabbed his hat. "Got a thing or two that must be done. I'll be back later for my next lecture on liquid air. It sure is great!" He was away.

CHAPTER XIII

A STRANGE BEAR HUNT

Four-thirty that afternoon found the two boys trudging along the mountain trail which Johnny, Bexter, and Ballard had followed on that sad but eventful day when the swinging bridge went down.

In Johnny's pocket was a bundle of tough paper bags. Slung across his shoulder was a sack of pulverized charcoal. In a sling, Donald carried a jug of liquid air. "Looks like a water jug," Donald laughed. "One drink from that jug would be your last. Two hundred and sixteen below zero!"

"We saw a bear on this trail a while back," Johnny broke in. "He had a young pig in his mouth. Somebody's got to get that bear. Old Uncle Mose lost another pig last night."

"What if we met him now?" Donald stared ahead.

"Probably miles away," Johnny replied quietly.

A moment later they rounded a curve and, off to the right, a dark opening appeared.

"That's the cave," Johnny explained. "Grand place I guess. Bear went in there."

[153]

"Suppose he's in there now?" Donald's tone was eager.

"Probably not."

"Let's just go in a little way. Always did want to see the inside of a cave. I've got a flashlight."

"All right. Can't stay long though. We've got to blow up a coal mine. Don't forget that."

A moment more and they were winding in and out over a narrow passageway. This passage soon widened into a large room. Still another moment and they were standing speechless while Donald's flashlight played over massive pillars of faultless white.

"It—it's like a great, beautiful church," Donald murmured low. In that still place even his murmur echoed and re-echoed from pillar to pillar.

"What a place for silence," Johnny whispered. Yet, even as he spoke that silence was smashed into a million echoes by a tremendous outburst of sound, a roar that might, Johnny thought, have come from the throat of some prehistoric monster. But Johnny was not deceived, this was no mythical monster. It was the bear.

What was to be done? The passage was narrow, the bear apparently all but upon them.

[154]

"Here!" With hands that trembled slightly, Johnny filled a paper sack with charcoal, then thrust a length of fuse into it.

Again there came that terrifying roar.

"Here. Give me that jug." Tipping the jug on one

side he saturated the charcoal in the paper bag with liquid air. After that, drawing on heavy mittens, he pressed the mixture into a solid mass.

"Now," he breathed. "We'll see."

Donald was trembling from head to foot but Johnny was calm. He stared straight ahead toward the spot where the bear at any second might appear.

With the roar of the enraged bear still ringing in his ears, Johnny calmly lighted the fuse leading to the sack of liquid air and charcoal.

The fuse sputtered and flashed. It was a fairly long fuse. Would it last thirty seconds? Longer perhaps. Johnny felt the hair at the back of his neck prickle and rise. It was a tense moment. Before him was the bear, behind, a narrow passage and at his feet that strange explosive, liquid air and carbon.

"Will it explode?" he said aloud.

[155]

"It will," Donald, his companion, replied. Then, as if awaking to a new and terrible danger, he fairly shouted in Johnny's ear, "Come on! Run! Run for your life!" Without a further word, he turned and fled.

Johnny, who understood not at all, stood still watching that fuse grow shorter and shorter.

Then came the bear. With tongue lolling, white teeth all agleam, he came roaring out of the shadows. Johnny turned as if about to flee. Then, remembering that a bear was fast, that in that narrow passageway, he had no chance, he turned resolutely about.

The bear, apparently catching a glimpse of that sputtering spark of fire, reared himself on his hind legs. With a sudden inspiration, Johnny seized the bag of strange explosives and hurled it at the bear. To his vast surprise, he saw the bear catch it neatly between his steel-like jaws.

"A chilly mouthful," was Johnny's mental comment as he turned and fled.

Never in all his life had he travelled so fast as now. Unconsciously, as he ran, he waited for something. Just as he reached the last straight stretch that led to daylight, the thing happened. There came a dull explosion and Johnny, as if seized by soft but powerful hands, was lifted and pushed up and out of the cave to land, sprawling, on a pile of gravel.

[156]

"Ah! There you are!" Donald exclaimed. "Ten seconds more and you would have been too late.

"But what happened?" he asked in a puzzled tone. "You had enough explosive there to fairly blow the roof off the mountain."

"The bear caught it." Johnny's head was in a whirl. "He—he must have chewed it up and wasted most of it. Do—do you suppose it got him?"

"Well," Donald chuckled, "I'm not going back to see."

"Neither am I," said Johnny. "So let's get going."

We've got a coal mine to blow up before dark."

The mining experiment was a complete success. Donald made up small parcels of liquid air and carbon while Johnny drilled holes in the coal. The charges were quickly stamped, the fuses were lighted, and then they were scampering up the rope ladder leading to the mine and were away. There followed six loud booms.

[157]

"That should do it," Johnny grinned.

As Johnny and Donald were walking back to the mill, Donald stopped quite suddenly. Looking away toward the top of the ridge where a single power line cut across to a distant coal mine, he said, "We might do it."

"Do what?" Johnny asked in surprise.

"Bring a bolt out of the blue. At least we might make it seem that way for the benefit of that man, Blinkey Bill Blevens you know, who's been going to make it hard for old Uncle Mose."

"You might?" said Johnny.

"Yes. Anyway, I'll give it a good think," was Donald's reply.

Truth was, Johnny had only half heard him. He had suddenly remembered something. Jack Dawson, the aviator, who had come to live down there on the edge of the meadow, had said, "We'd have made the trip faster if we'd had my new motor going."

"A new kind of fuel," Johnny whispered to himself. "That's what he said. More foot pounds of energy than any other fuel. Wonder what it could be?"

[158]

At a rather late hour that same afternoon, Jensie and Ballard sat on the trunk of a fallen tree. They were both deliciously weary. All day they had tramped the hillsides. The dry leaves had rustled beneath their feet. From time to time beechnuts had come showering down upon them. At other times too, the deep baying of Ballard's big red hound had told them of squirrels up a tree. It had been grand.

Now they could see the sun casting long mountain shadows over the valley far below. At their side rested six red squirrels and one big fat striped coon. Yes, it had been glorious. Garbed in her knickers and russet red sweater, the girl seemed a part of it all.

"Listen!" Ballard exclaimed quite suddenly. "Bees!"

Jensie listened but heard nothing. The sharp-eared boy was not long in pointing out a huge, hollow chestnut tree. Some thirty feet from the ground Jensie caught sight of a faint, wavering line.

"It's a bee tree!" Ballard was excited. "A big swarm. Hundred pounds of honey, mebbly two hundred. Monday I'll come up and cut it down."

[159]

"Monday, Ballard?" There was a power of suggestion in the girl's tone.

Ballard made no reply. His face, as he looked away at the hills was a study.

"Ballard," the girl's voice was low and husky, "we've been to school together all our lives. We belong to the mountains, you and I. And because we belong, we have to do all we can for the mountains.

"Yesterday, I saw the coach." Ballard shifted uneasily. "I asked if he'd take you back on the team. He said, 'Ballard's never been off the team.'"

The girl paused. Ballard's hand clutched at the log. His lips moved. He did not speak.

"The coach said," Jense went on after a time, "that he understood the code of the mountains. He's lived down here. But he says the code of the mountains is not the code of Hillcrest. He said that people who call other folks vile names don't have to be killed for it. In time they kill themselves. They get to talking out real loud and then they lose all their friends. After that they may not be dead but they might as well be."

Once again the girl paused. The shadows in the valley had grown longer. All the meadow lands were in the shadows now.

[160]

"Ballard," she began again, "we mountain folks can't be quitters. I quit once. Daddy sent me away to school. I couldn't take it. I came home. I—I've always been sorry for that.

"But you, Ballard," she touched his hand, "you are a boy. Boys are strong, you can't quit. It's for the mountains, Ballard, and for your future, all the glorious, golden days that lie ahead.

"I—I think we better go down now." She took up her gun. The big red hound sprang to his feet. They were off.

Their way home led past Cousin Bill's store. Johnny sat on the bench beside the door. He was whittling and talking to old Noah Pennington.

"Hello, Johnny," Jense greeted. "When are we going back?"

"Any time you say. How about nine tomorrow morning?"

"Tha—that will be fine, Johnny. Won't it?" The girl turned to Ballard.

[161]

"I—I—yes, I suppose so," Ballard stammered.

"Will you come to my house or shall we pick you up at the rim where we dropped you last night?" Jense asked cheerfully.

"I'll be at the rim, Jense."

"All right. We'll be going on down. Come and see me, Johnny."

"See you at nine," Johnny grinned happily.

"Leave it to the women," Johnny murmured when they were out of ear-shot.

"Yes," old Noah Pennington, who sat at his side, agreed. "Leave it to the women. Be a lot sorrier times in this here world if it weren't fer the women folks."

[162]

CHAPTER XIV

WILD MEN, BABOONS, AND SOMETHING STRANGE

The shadows of night had fallen when the three wanderers, Jensie, Johnny, and Ballard in their car came to a gliding stop before the Blue Moon.

The door stood half open. A mellow glow of light shone at their feet as they hopped out. From within came the murmur of voices and low laughter.

"The old Blue Moon is still doing fine," Johnny smiled happily. "Come on in and have a snack."

No sooner had the door framed their faces than a voice shouted: "Here's Old Kentucky! Kentucky and that mountain gal. Come on, Old Kentucky, give us a tune."

At once the crowd, composed of all the team and many of their friends, was on its feet and cheering huskily.

Seizing his companions, Johnny pushed them to the front. Picking up Jensie as if she were a sack of sugar, he set her down on the counter, then thrust a banjo in her hands as he whispered, "Do your durndest. Nothing could be better than this." She flashed him an understanding smile. Then, after motioning Ballard to a place by her side, she began thrumming the chords, and "Old Kentucky Home" came whispering through the room.

[163]

Greeted by abundant applause, the two young Kentuckians played and sang their way through a half score of melodious mountain tunes into the very hearts of their listeners.

Then, of a sudden, Jensie struck her banjo a thwack. She ran her fingers across the strings to begin "Roll, Jordan, Roll! Roll, Jordan, Roll! Oh! Oh! Oh! I want to go there, to hear old Jordan roll."

Instantly every boy and girl in the room was on his feet and singing. How the rafters of the old Blue Moon rang.

Song followed song. Quaint, beautiful, melodious negro minstrels that fitted the closing of the Sabbath day, they filled the minds of happy, carefree youth with a mellow joy that is experienced oh, so seldom, in a long, long life.

"They're a wonderful bunch," Johnny said huskily as he helped Jensie into the car an hour later. "A wonderful, wonderful bunch of fellows. Next Saturday they will go out on the field and romp all over it to the tune of a dozen touchdowns. And already, thank God, they've forgotten Kentucky's blunder that cost them a game."

[164]

"Old Kentucky will be the hero of the hour next Saturday, you'll see," Jensie exulted. "Kentucky! My Kentucky forever!"

That night Johnny sat long musing beside the fire. Surely there were matters enough to occupy his thoughts. Kentucky was back. These

mountain people had a way of winning their way into people's hearts. He was glad of that. But what of the games that were to come? Could this mountain boy control his hot temper when things went wrong? He wondered and shuddered a little.

He thought of the bear and laughed. The bear was dead all right. He had told Lige Fields about that explosion in the cave. Lige was short of fresh meat. To a Kentucky mountain man, nothing is better than a good juicy bear steak. He had found the bear with his head blown clean off.

"Powerful stuff, liquid air and carbon," the boy said to himself. He had some of the bear steak in his car. They'd have it for dinner in the back room of the Blue Moon tomorrow. He'd invite Coach Dizney and a few of the boys.

[165]

He thought of Old Mose and his mule, thought too of the "ornery no-count" Blinkey Bill who planned to beat Mose out of his coal mine.

"He said we might fix up a little bolt of lightning out of the blue," Johnny murmured. He was thinking now of Donald Day. Queer sort of fellow, Donald was, mighty fine too. He wondered how a fellow'd go about manufacturing a "bolt from the blue." He'd like to be around when it happened, would too if it were possible. He could steal away down there in the middle of the week. Artie Stark would manage the Blue Moon in his absence. Plenty of boys needed work.

Another thing he meant to look into. He wanted to visit that young aviator down there in the Kentucky valley. What kind of a motor could he be building? Johnny was interested in all sorts of mechanical contraptions. He had once owned a car that ran on dust, just ordinary coal dust.

"Couldn't be that," he whispered to himself. "Couldn't—"

[166]

Johnny was growing drowsy. But now, of a sudden, he was wide awake. The latch clicked. There came the sound of shuffling feet. Johnny caught sight of a shadowy figure.

"Pant," he called. "Panther Eye, is that you?"

"Yes, Johnny," the strange fellow's voice was low. "Yes, it's me. But don't talk so loud Johnny, not quite so loud."

As on those other occasions, Johnny prepared a small feast for his wandering friend. Tonight, instead of talking, he sat silently watching until the last bite was gone. Then he said quite suddenly:

"Did he find you?" Johnny eyed Pant eagerly.

"Who find me?" Pant stared.

"Have you forgotten?" Johnny asked in surprise. "The shadow. That giant with a hooked nose."

"Did you see it?" It was Pant's turn to be surprised.

"I'll say I saw it. Gives me the creeps just thinking about it now."

[167]

"No-o," Pant said slowly, "he hasn't found me, not—not yet."

Pant dropped into a chair. At once his face became a mask. Only the gleam of his curious pink eyes, told that he was alive. Johnny knew the meaning of this, Pant, like a turtle, had withdrawn into his shell. Johnny settled into his place to take up a pencil and begin tracing geometric figures on a square of paper.

Pant was first to break the long silence that followed. When he did speak it was as if the many hours that had passed since their last meeting had not been.

"You'll be surprised, Johnny," he said as an amused smile played about the corners of his mouth. "Perhaps you won't believe what I tell you—but I've got to finish that thing I was telling you."

"Go on," Johnny urged.

"Well, we went into that cave, that mysterious girl that may have been white. I don't know about that—

"We hadn't been in there ten minutes when we heard a shuffling sound by the cave's entrance and what do you think?" Pant paused to stare at a spot on the wall. "What could you expect? Almost anything. What was it but that troop of giant baboons!" Once again Pant paused.

[168]

Involuntarily Johnny allowed his eyes to stray to the window shade. No shadow there tonight. Even the tree branches were still.

"Well, sir," Pant gave vent to a low chuckle, "there we were, that girl and I crowded way back in the cave. And there were the baboons. They came shuffling in, like thirty or forty boys playing hooky from school. And silent! Say! I didn't suppose any wild creature except maybe a tiger could be that quiet.

"The girl was scared. Plumb scared to death. As she crowded close to me, I could feel her heart beat madly like it might burst. Surprised me that did, because these natives all know a baboon won't hurt you. Made me think she was all white. Suppose she was, Johnny?"

"Don't you know? Didn't you find out?" Johnny asked in surprise.

"No—I—but where was I?" Pant broke off. "Oh, yes! That wasn't all, not half, Johnny. You won't believe it but I'm going to tell you just the same. The baboons hadn't much more than got good and settled, when there came another quick shuffle outside the cave and in popped—who do you think?" Pant drew in a quick breath. "That whole band of wild men."

[169]

"Must have been a large cave."

"It was!" Pant exclaimed. "But not big enough for all that outfit, anyway not if that something strange that was after them decided to come in too.

"Well," Pant went on after a pause, "the strange thing didn't come. Perhaps there wasn't anything strange. Maybe these wild fellows just imagined it. But there were baboons and wild

men and that girl and I—which was a whole lot too many. The baboons kept crowding back, back, back, until one big fellow was square against my side and that girl between me and the rocky wall of the cave. And all the time that bunch of huge baboons, scared stiff by the wild men, who are always hunting them, crowding more and more until I was sure we'd be crushed.

"Something had to be done, Johnny, and I did it. I had a short hunting knife in my belt. Getting a good grip on it I lifted it high to bring it down square between that nearest baboon's shoulder blades. And then—" Pant broke off to indulge in a prolonged reminiscent chuckle.

[170]

"Come on," Johnny urged, "you'll see that shadow again."

"No, I—well—to tell the truth, Johnny, there's little left to tell. That baboon let out a most terrific roar. After that there was noise, dust and confusion. That lasted three full minutes I guess, and after that, believe it or not, they were gone, baboons, wild men, and all. That cave was as silent as a tomb.

"I was sorry about that baboon," Pant went on after a moment. "I never like to hurt any living creature. But what else could I do?"

"N—nothing," Johnny shook himself. Had he been listening to a fairy story or a real adventure?

"We waited an hour, that girl and I," Pant continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "After that we crept out into the bright sunlight. We looked about. There was no one to be seen, not even a baboon. You better believe me we got out of there quick.

"Well—" Pant stretched his long legs, "I found that river again. Then I knew where I was."

[171]

"And the girl?" Johnny breathed softly.

"She had no idea where we were. And I feel quite sure—" Pant paused to consider, "yes, I'm certain she had no idea what I was up to. She followed me as she might have followed that big man with a hooked nose, had he given her the chance, followed because there was nothing else to do.

"I kept getting more and more signs. A fallen tree, a particular cluster of hanging vines I'd noticed before, a tumble-down native hut, all these told me I was on the right track.

"Just a little before sunset, I came to a spot I was sure of. It was not a hundred yards from that clearing, the picture clearing, you know."

"Yes, the pasture, the cattle, the gem of a cottage," Johnny supplemented.

"And the girl lost out of it," Pant broke in. "I was going to put her back into the picture. I DID put her back," there was a note of triumph in Pant's voice. "I stopped dead in my tracks, pushed the girl on before me, then pointed straight ahead.

"At first she did not seem to understand, just stood there staring. In the end, I'm sure she only half understood, for she seemed to go reluctantly.

[172]

"I watched her until she was ready to part the branches that were to give her a glimpse of home, then I ducked.

"I can hide, Johnny, hide anywhere, always could. It's a gift. I wasn't a minute too soon, for I was scarcely under cover when she let out a scream."

"A scream?"

"Sure! One wild scream of pure joy. She had seen her home. Probably up to that moment, she had never hoped to see it again. Who wouldn't scream?"

"Then," Pant indulged in a broad grin, "what do you suppose she did after that?"

"Went down through the jungle like a scared rabbit," suggested Johnny.

"No. You're wrong," Pant heaved a sigh. "She stood there for a moment. Then she turned and started back. Looking for me—wouldn't you say?"

"Sure would."

"But she didn't find me," Pant added dryly. "You bet she didn't. I can hide, you know that, Johnny. That's one time I did a good job of hiding."

[173]

"Why?" Johnny stared.

"Well, you know, Johnny," Pant replied slowly, "you can never tell what a lady will do when she discovers quite suddenly that you've done her a very good turn. You can't now, can you, Johnny?"

"No, you can't," Johnny laughed. "You really can not. I've known them to throw their arms about their benefactor and—"

"Kiss him," Pant made a face. "And that, Johnny, would have been horrible!"

"I don't know," Johnny said slowly. "That's purely a matter of taste. Anyway, you were not quite fair to her. You had saved her from slavery, worse than death. You didn't even give her a chance to thank you."

"I thought of that, Johnny. Went back to the edge of the clearing the very next day. Had some notion of showing myself. But I didn't—" Pant broke off abruptly.

"Why?"

"The picture was there, Johnny, pasture, cattle, house and even the girl. There was one slight change. A man sat before the cabin, a tall, thin man in a white suit. Across his knees lay a long-barreled rifle. How that barrel did gleam in the sun! So-o, Johnny, I didn't go down."

[174]

"He wasn't looking for you."

"Probably not. But people do sometimes make mistakes. And really, it didn't matter."

This was one time when Pant was mistaken, more mistaken than he could imagine. It did matter. It mattered a great deal.

"Well, I'll be going, Johnny," Pant stood up.

"What's the hurry, Pant? No shadows tonight!"

"There might be, Johnny, you never can tell. Good-night, Johnny." He was gone.

"The shadow of a glorious past," Johnny murmured low.

[175]

CHAPTER XV VICTORY

The look of grim determination on Ballard's face as he took up practice next day was both inspiring and disturbing to his good friend, Red Dynamite, who, by this time had come to love the Kentucky boy as he might a younger brother.

"Steady, son," he warned as Ballard overran three long forward passes in a row. "Head work counts more than footwork."

Ballard quieted down. For a good hour and a half after that, the work of run-and-pass, pass-pass-and-run, then pass again went on without a pause.

"There!" Dynamite exclaimed at last, "That should do for one day. Come on over to the Blue Moon for a hot chocolate malted."

Kentucky dropped in beside him. Together they tramped from the practice field.

"You know," Dynamite said soberly, "when you've been around a place like this long as I have you get to love it. Every foot of ground, every stick and brick, every man and woman comes to mean something to you. They give you a chance here. Suppose I could go to one of those big schools? Not a chance! But here, here I sit and listen to the hiss of steam in the old boiler room. Every fifteen minutes I hop up to feed in some coal and prod the fires. Every day I eat dust and breathe a little smoke while I drag the ashes out. That's all I have to do and that gets me a college education. By and by, a degree."

[176]

"And all the time," he drew in a long, deep breath, "all the time I'm living. Living grand, Kentucky, better than I may ever live again. You'll come to love it too, Kentucky. You'll want to fight and fight and fight for old Hillcrest."

"Here's the Blue Moon," he exclaimed as if afraid he had been guilty of preaching. "Fill 'em up, Artie!" he held two hands wide apart. "Two big long ones. Double malt and triple chocolate, steaming hot."

"Two long ones coming up," Artie grinned broadly. "How's Kentucky coming on?"

"Fine!" Dynamite banged the table with his huge fist, then made the sound of wind whistling through his teeth. "Just watch us next Saturday! I smack 'em down and Kentucky goes through for a touchdown. Score'll be about thirty-one to nothing I'd say."

[177]

But would it? As Dynamite watched the

Kentucky boy practice, each day he seemed to see him growing slimmer, more hollow-eyed and nervous. Nor was he the only one who watched. Kenneth Roberts the English professor was a real fellow. He knew boys as well as English. He had written three books for boys, real thrillers that clicked. When on Thursday, Kentucky sitting on the front seat slept all the way through his class, English B-3, he asked the boy to remain after class.

"Ballard," he said without a smile, "you slept through my class."

"I—I'm sorry," Ballard blushed.

"A class room," the teacher's voice took on a mellow, kindly note, "is a poor place to sleep. You've been practicing too hard and too long. You'll defeat yourself. I want you to do three things, stop practicing, sleep twelve hours tonight, cut all your classes tomorrow. I'll fix it up about the classes. We—we're watching you, boy. We're pulling for you, son, and—and praying for you."

"Than—" the boy's chin quivered, "thanks awfully. I—I'll do whatever you say."

[178]

It is said there is power in prayer. If this is true the good professor's prayers were not in vain. Hillcrest had never witnessed such a game of football as was played on their grid-iron the next sunny Saturday afternoon.

As they watched, it seemed that their own team consisted of but two men. One had been dubbed Old Kentucky, the other Red Dynamite. This, of course, was not true. There were eleven men on the team. On the defensive, blocking and tackling, they were all one. Even on the offensive, in his own quiet way, each man did his full share.

Even so, as the fans watched, they saw again and again a strapping fellow in red jersey break through the opponent's line to go flaming down the field. At once the cry arose:

"Dy-na-mite! Dy-na-mite! Red! Red! Red! Dy-na-mite!" The rooters came in time to turn that cry into a series of explosions, like the clash and clatter of a front-line battle.

But always, with a pigskin tucked in the hollow of his arm, there followed a slender torch of red. And this was Old Kentucky.

As they advanced down the field, Dynamite, with uncanny wisdom, picked the onrushing opponents one by one. Those who remained, sprang all in vain at the wisp of red that, like a flaming cardinal, went fluttering past them to a touchdown.

[179]

Twice this unusual pair achieved a run of sixty yards to a touchdown. When the game was over, the score stood one point below Dave's prophecy: 30-0.

"You sure done uncommon good today!" Johnny exclaimed dropping into a slow Kentucky drawl as Ballard entered the Blue Moon.

It was closing time. The lights were low. The fire in the big stove gave forth an inviting mellow glow. The mountain boy dropped silently into a

chair, stretched his feet straight out before him, then, eyes half closed, sat there silent while the clock ticked off a full quarter hour.

"Yes," he roused at last, "that's what old Noah Pennington would call a 'right smart of a ball game.' But, do you know, Johnny, I don't think I'll ever do my part as well again."

"Probably you're right," Johnny agreed, understanding on the instant. "There are times in all our lives when some special thing gives us a mighty push and we climb to heights we may never hope to reach again."

[180]

"But, Ballard, old boy," he hastened to add, "you'll do well enough. Now you've got going, nothing can stop you. For once Hillcrest has a winning team and I'm glad, mighty glad."

"Tomorrow I'm coming back to work here in the Blue Moon," Ballard said quietly.

"Artie Stark has done enough for me. Every fellow's got to make his own way," he continued.

"All right, Ballard," Johnny's tone was as quiet as the other boy's, but he felt a surge of warmth work its way through his being. He loved every boy who took his place in life's battle-line prepared to do his part.

"You'll be a lot of help, Ballard," there was real enthusiasm in his voice. "You'll be popular. That will help the Blue Moon."

"I—I'm glad you think so, Johnny," there was a wealth of gratitude in the mountain boy's tone.

[181]

CHAPTER XVI ONE MINUTE TO PLAY

On the following Monday evening a meeting of the team was called by Coach Dizney. When they gathered in the back room of the Blue Moon, the players found a blackboard hung upon the wall. Lines, circles, and arrows had been drawn upon the board.

"Next Saturday, as you all know," the coach began, "we are to play Pitt Tech. And I'm giving you fair warning that we are up against a stiff proposition. Like the other teams we've played, they're heavier than you are, ten or twelve pounds to the man. Worse than that they are fiends at breaking up forward passes. I've looked up their record for this year.

"So," he paused, "so what shall we do?"

"New plays," suggested Stagger Weed, the center.

"That's it," the coach smiled. "Newer, bigger, and better plays and trickier ones. Now here," he turned to the board, "here is a play that's a humdinger if you boys have the brains and the nerve to carry it through."

"Yeah brains," Punch Dickman laughed, "we check them in the class room before we pass

[182]

out.”

“You better bring them along next Saturday,” the coach snapped back.

“Now this,” he began once more, “as you will see, as far as the line goes, is a balanced formation. The right half is behind his own tackle, full-back behind right guard two yards from line of scrimmage and left half three yards back behind center. Quarter is in regular position.

“Now,” he drew in a long breath, “the ball goes back to quarter. Right end and right tackle plunge ahead prepared to block any interference. The right half and center drop in to fill these places, to prevent a break through the line. The left half-back goes out about five steps directly to the right, then turns and starts back.

“Are you following me?” He did not wait for a reply. “When the quarter gets the ball he immediately faces left and the left end comes round like an end-around play. The quarter fakes giving him the ball but hugs it tightly to his noble breast. When the Pitt line has swung round after our left end, the quarter leaps to position and laterals the ball to Old Kentucky.”

[183]

“And Old Kentucky goes racing forward to a touchdown,” Rabbit Jones the right half breathed. “How sweet!”

“It’s a keen play,” Red Dynamite exclaimed. “If we only know it well enough.”

“You’re going to know it well enough!” the coach struck the table with his fist. “That one and two or three more as hard to learn and as swell to play, if only you know how. Will you do it?”

“Yea—yea—yea—” they exclaimed in unison.

“We’ve just got to do it!” Stagger said with solemn emphasis.

“And now the next play,” the coach wiped the board clean, drew more circles then started explaining a second trick performance.

All that week, sweating and toiling, working the old beans overtime, the team went through the business of acting out plays that in the beginning were confusing but in the end as natural and clear as the bright light of day.

More than once, during those gruelling hours as Johnny stood beside him watching, the coach turned to him with a smile to exclaim low:

[184]

“Good boy, Johnny! You sure found us a player. I never saw anything like the way that Kentucky boy takes in those new plays. Quick as a whip too! I suppose it’s his Kentucky breeding.”

“Sure is,” Johnny grinned. “There are times down there in the mountains when there are just two classes of people. The quick and the dead. The quick one gets his gun out from under his coat, the other just naturally goes to the cemetery. Kentucky’s grandfather was killed in a feud. His father had a silk handkerchief drawn through his chest once, where a bullet had gone first.”

“Whew!” the coach whistled, “No wonder he’s

quick!"

Strangely enough, despite the coach's warning, apparently disregarding all their trick plays, Dynamite, who was captain and called the plays, started the game with a series of forward passes. The first two were blocked. The third, almost a lateral pass, was good for a gain of five yards.

They punted, held the opposing team to a single first down, then, as the opposing team punted, began again with forward passes. The second of these was intercepted and, but for a lightning-like tackle by Old Kentucky—which brought the spectators to their feet—might have resulted in disaster.

[185]

"What's the good?" Stagger grumbled. "Lose our shirt, first thing we know." Dynamite made no reply.

Once again as they came into possession of the ball, the opposing team failed to gain. They tried for a field goal at forty yards. No good.

Hillcrest's ball on their own twenty-yard line. Once more a pass. This time, by great good fortune, it was received by Dynamite who blasted his way down to the enemy's forty-five-yard line.

After that more passes. Scarcely was the Hillcrest team in a huddle when a certain half-back began shouting: "Pass! Pass!"

Then something strange and startling happened. The team lined up and, as the ball was snapped, Kentucky, Artie Stark and Tony Blazes raced to receiving positions. The enemy, eager to block or intercept a pass swarmed after them.

But the ball was not passed. Just as Punch, the full-back, posed the ball for the throw, like a blackbird after a cherry, Dynamite seized it from behind, went sweeping away around left end which was all but deserted, bumped squarely into one lonesome Pitt player, sent him sprawling and romped away to a touchdown.

[186]

"Did you see that?" a letter-man of other days exclaimed. "The old Statue of Liberty play. And gloriously executed!"

"Glorious!" echoed his companions. "Say! These boys are making football history! And I'm told that more than half of them are working their way. Quite wonderful!"

"Wonderful and terrible," was the other's reply. "We old grads ought at least to furnish a training table, where they could eat without cost during the season anyway."

The score, after the kick, stood 7-0. The boys were jubilant. They were playing a supposedly superior team and beating them.

That was the end to forward passes. All the passes that had gone before were in preparation for this one grand stroke. Now it should be something else.

[187]

The next play they tried was too difficult. Artie Stark was smeared for a loss of three yards. Worse still the ball bounced from his grasp and was pounced upon by the enemy.

After that, despite the team's heroic efforts to block them, their heavy weight enemies battered their way to a touchdown. The kick was good. The first half ended a tie.

The Hillcrest team received the ball at the start of the second half. Punch Dickman carried it back to his own forty-yard line. When the team went into a huddle, Dynamite hissed two words that made them gasp: "Modified suicide!" This was all he said. It was enough. Every boy's nerves tingled as they lined up for the play. It was a strange formation, five men to right of center, one, the end, at the left. Kentucky was in his usual position only two yards back. Rabbit Jones, the other half-back, was thirty yards out from the end of the line. Center and full-back crouched behind the line. Signals were to be called on this play.

Artie Stark was calling, "Six—ten—seven—ten—"

Dynamite was listening. Stagger Weed, big, a little too fat and very obviously the center, moved uneasily, but no one noticed this. As the last "ten" was called, Dynamite stepped in behind Stagger's great bulk. Rabbit Jones moved forward to the line of scrimmage. Someone from the bleachers roared, "Forward pass!" He was right, more right than he knew.

[188]

The eyes of the opposing back field were on Rabbit Jones. "Six—seven—nine—eleven" Artie droned the numbers. The ball was snapped. It went to Punch, the full-back. He leaped to the right, took three backward steps, then threw the ball high and far, not to the right, but to the left. Not to Rabbit Jones, but to Stagger, the center. Stagger gathered the ball to his ample bosom then went lumbering like a freight train toward the distant goal. And why not? There was no one to stop him.

Then such a roar as went up from the Pitt side of the bleachers. How the Pitt team crowded around the referee.

"He's their center!" they protested. "Their center! The center is not eligible to receive the ball."

"You're all wet," was the good natured referee's reply. "When the ball was snapped, there was no player at the left of center. That made him left end. And so-o—"

[189]

He did not finish. There was no need. The disconsolate Pitt players, wandered back to the line.

The kick was good. "Fourteen to seven," Dynamite exulted. "If only we can hold it. And we must!"

They did not hold it, at least not for long. There is something about being totally deceived, that makes men see red. The Pitt men had been thoroughly tricked. They saw red, very red indeed. In the next five minutes they took the ball from Hillcrest, made three first downs, threw a long forward pass, then went over the line. The kick, however, went wild. They were still beaten unless—

The whistle blew for the end of the third quarter.

"We've got to hold 'em!" Dynamite muttered to Kentucky as they lay on the grass. "We've just got to."

"Best way to do that is to better our lead," was Kentucky's courageous reply. "Remember how we went through left tackle?"

"Sure."

[190]

"Try it again."

Dynamite did try it again and with results he could not foresee.

The very first time Kentucky took the ball and Dynamite blasted him a trail, they went clean through the defense line of the enemy and were away. Then the fighting flight was on. Dynamite hit a husky opponent and sent him spinning. A second man appeared on the horizon. Dynamite took him on. He was big and powerful. Perhaps he fouled by holding, Dynamite did not quite know. At any rate they went down in a heap and Kentucky, the slim, fast-footed half-back sped on.

A vast shadow loomed before him—the opposing team's safety man. Grinning, Kentucky sprang forward to offer him the ball.

Perhaps the giant had heard of this trick. Perhaps he was too dumb to want the ball. Whatever it may have been, he did not reach for the ball. Instead, he lammed straight at the slim youth. Kentucky was not quick enough. With an impact that could be heard all over the field, they went down in a heap. And Kentucky did not get up. Even when the referee took the ball from his hands, he did not stir. He was out for keeps.

"Poor Kentucky!" It was Jensie who spoke these words. She had seen it all and had come racing onto the field. It was she who directed the boys that picked him up, ever so gently, and carried him from the field.

[191]

Meantime the game went on. Football is the game of war. When a few wounded have been carried from the field, a battle does not stop.

It was a grim battle that followed. No one blamed that big full-back, not really, and yet—They must not win now. Pitt must not!

The crippled Hillcrest team battled hard but could not gain. They punted. Pitt carried the ball far into their territory. Two brilliantly executed passes by Pitt men brought the ball to the Hillcrest ten-yard line. One line buck and the distance to a touchdown was cut to five yards, one more line buck and a slim yard stood between Pitt and victory.

The Hillcrest bleachers were screaming: "Hold that line! Hold that line! Hold that line!" From the wall of blue on the opposite side came the words of a song: "Forward! Forward! March against the foe!"

Little more than one moment to play with the ball on Hillcrest's one-yard line. It was a tense situation. Pitt went into a huddle, snapped out of it quickly, crouched like tigers, shuffled uneasily for ten seconds, then—the ball sped. Dynamite followed it with his eye. "There! There! There it is!" His muscles registered a sensation that may

[192]

never have reached his brain.

The Pitt full-back had the ball—that same giant whose hurdling force had crushed poor, slender Kentucky. Dynamite bore him no grudge—it was all in the game. And yet—“It’s all for Old Kentucky!” he hissed as, straight as an arrow, he shot at the full-back. He struck him with the sudden, solid impact of a bullet. The ball leaped from the opponent’s hands. By some strange chance, it shot straight into the air. It came curving down into Artie Stark’s arms. Too astonished to believe in his luck, Artie started streaking down the field. Only one opponent half-heartedly followed. The moment was all for Artie. So too was the game for, a half minute after the play, the whistle blew and Hillcrest’s most exciting, most astonishing game was at an end.

[193]

CHAPTER XVII GLIDING TOWARD FRESH ADVENTURE

Artie Stark was carried off the field in triumph. This was natural enough. Dynamite did not in the least begrudge him the honor, for had it not been his spectacular run in the last minute of the game that saved the day? How many had seen Dynamite’s wild plunge through the line, the plunge that broke up the opponent’s play? Very few. Such things are not seen. It is the lad with the long run to his credit who receives the cheers. Dynamite did not care. He did not so much as think of it. His mind was occupied with other matters. He and Johnny Thompson walked off the field together.

“Poor Kentucky,” Dynamite was saying. “He doesn’t seem to have any luck.”

“All the same,” Johnny replied quietly, “it was he who won today’s game.”

“That’s just it,” his generous hearted companion agreed. “To think of practically putting the game on ice, then being smashed up!

“I only hope,” he added soberly, “that it’s not too bad. We sure don’t get the breaks. Just when we’re all keyed up and ready to go after anything, then to lose our best man!”

[194]

“It is tough,” Johnny agreed.

“And next Saturday,” Dynamite groaned afresh, “we’re up against St. Regis, the lightest, fastest team in the Little Seven. Think what it will be with Kentucky out of the game. But then,” he sighed, “it may not be so bad.”

“You’ll get over to the infirmary and see him won’t you?” Johnny asked.

“Right away.”

“I’ll see you later,” Johnny turned to the right. “Have to get over to the Blue Moon. The place will be a wild scramble.” It was, all of that and more. Plenty of work for everyone. The Blue

Moon was coming to be a huge success.

Four hours Johnny worked at top speed. Dishing up ice cream, pouring out steaming hot chocolate, slicing buns for hot dogs, directing his three helpers, he found little time for thinking. When, however, the last straggler had wandered through the open door and Aunt Mandy had said, "If you all don object, I'll be agoin' on home," Johnny found time to think of many things. As his eyes moved swiftly over the place, taking in his three candy cases, all but emptied in a single evening, as they rested on the polished counter and the shining table, a feeling of joy and pride swept over him. He had said to the hostile world, "Here I am, ready for work. Shove over. Make me a place." The world had answered, "There is no place." He had replied, "O. K. then I'll make myself a place."

[195]

He had done just that. The Blue Moon was a success, would be more and more of a success in the months to come. It had become an institution, and part of old Hillcrest. Yes, he, Johnny Thompson, was a part of something big and fine. It was wonderful, this association with some of the finest young people in the world.

"I made a place," he whispered proudly. "A place for myself and Kentucky."

Kentucky, the name awakened him. How was Kentucky? He must know. Slamming the stove drafts shut, snapping off the lights, twirling the key in the door, he was away to the heating plant, hoping to find Dynamite.

He was not disappointed. "It might be worse," the big boy said soberly. "General shock and one cracked rib. The doc has him all taped up. Sure can't play next Saturday."

[196]

"That," he added slowly, "is not so bad. We can afford to take one more licking. But when it comes to week after next, when we go up against our ancient rival, Naperville, for that final game of the season, and, like as not, for the championship, then, if Kentucky's out for good, it's going to be just too bad!"

"We'll do the best we can for him," said Johnny. "And here's hoping the best is good enough."

Dynamite's dire prophecy regarding the St. Regis game was not without foundation. At the very beginning, playing on their own field, St. Regis took the lead. But then, with two "pony" teams pitted against one another and with Hillcrest's best pony in the paddock, or rather on the bench, what chance did they have? Hillcrest took a good licking and Kentucky took it hardest of all. At the end the score stood 21 to 6.

Seeing how down-hearted the mountain boy was, Johnny Thompson said, "Never mind, Kentucky old boy, about the middle of the week, when trade is lightest, we'll step on the starter and go spinning back to our beloved hills. There are some things down there I'd like to look into a little further. What do you say?"

[197]

"That," said Kentucky, with a broad grin, "will be somethin'." His grin was even broader than Johnny had expected it to be. Little wonder, for this boy had thoughts all his own. He was

thinking, "Doc won't let me go out on the field and practice, 'fraid I'll get this old rib bumped again. Down in the mountains Doc has nothing to say about it. I'll just slip out into the moonlight for a little practice with old Nicodemus." He chuckled a wise chuckle. But to Johnny he said never a word.

On Wednesday afternoon of that week they were on their way.

Our minds are strange. For some of us a place left behind is a place forgotten. It was so with Johnny Thompson. The moment that Stone Mountain loomed up before him, Hillcrest was forgotten. Like the passing of the morning mist, the Blue Moon, Red Dynamite, the entire football team and all that was Hillcrest at its best, were forgotten. At once his mind was filled with other scenes, other problems. The old mill with its sucking pumps producing its strange liquid treasure, Donald Day, poor old Uncle Mose, the ornery and penny-pinching Blinkey Bill, the proposed lightning from the blue sky, the aviator down in the valley with his new type of motor, all these clamored for first place in his imaginative mind.

[198]

"Kentucky," he said, throwing back his square young shoulders, "life is wonderful!"

"It sure is," Kentucky agreed. He was thinking of old Nicodemus and the moon that would hang like a Japanese lantern over the hills that night.

And so they glided on down past Stone Mountain to the mouth of Pounding Mill Creek and fresh adventure.

[199]

CHAPTER XVIII TEN GALLONS OF AIR

Johnny's first visit on the following morning was at the old mill. He found Donald Day busy as usual, compressing liquid air.

"Glad to see you, Johnny," were his welcoming words.

"Thanks," Johnny grinned. "Had a bolt of lightning from the blue sky yet?"

"Not yet, Johnny, but soon," Donald smiled a mysterious smile.

"How's the chance of helping you?"

"Fine, Johnny, when the time comes. Just now though, there's something else you might do."

"What's that?" Johnny was ready for anything.

"Got something for the aviator down there in the valley. Want to take it?"

"Sure do!" Johnny's reply was full of enthusiasm. "He helped us take your grandfather to the hospital. Never forget that."

"We sure won't, Johnny. Just now he wants some liquid air. This is the tenth order I have received

[200]

from him. He wants ten gallons. It's ready, so you'll take it down, you'll be doing me a great favor."

"Liquid air," said Johnny. "What does he want with liquid air?"

"Don't know. Going to peddle it, like as not. Good profit in it. And an airplane's the thing for carrying it. Gets it there quick so there's little loss by evaporation."

"Mebby that's it," Johnny agreed. Down deep in his mind, however, he did not agree. He had quite another notion, a very startling notion it was too.

"More foot-pounds of energy," he muttered as he went on his way. "Wonder if that could be true."

"Good!" exclaimed the young aviator, as, an hour later, Johnny appeared with a two wheel cartload of liquid air. "I'm just wanting that."

"So you're really going to use it?" Johnny grinned. "I thought so."

"Going to use it," the man stared at him. "Sure I am! Why not?"

"Donald thought you might be going to peddle it."

"Not I," the aviator laughed. "I'll be using a lot of it. Want to stay and watch me?"

"Sure I do!"

Ten minutes later, Johnny found himself looking at the strangest airplane motor he or anyone else had even seen.

"And does it really use liquid air for fuel?" he asked.

"Sure it does!" The aviator had reached for a small jug of liquid air. "Watch and see. Liquid air and carbon, that's what she eats.

"You put the liquid air in here and the carbon here. The mechanism mixes it and throws it into the combustion chambers in just the right quantity.

"I've had a tough time," he straightened up. "Liquid air was so cold it froze up all my lubricants. But I've solved that. Got two sets of feeders. One set is being thawed out by the exhaust while the other's working. Going to be great now. Stick around until I get the motor hooked up and we'll take a ride on air—liquid air." He laughed a joyous laugh.

"But say!" His voice changed. "Tell that boy up at the mill that his grandfather is much better. Got that word on my short wave wireless. He'll be coming home soon. Fine thing. Great old man!"

"Never was any finer," Johnny said huskily. "He's done a lot for these people. He helped them to make a living. On Sunday he talked to them like a father. He told the ones who have been doing a lot of fighting—"

"Feud fighters?"

[201]

[202]

"Yes, feuds. He told them they couldn't do it and be good citizens."

"Right too, exactly right." The aviator reached for a pair of pliers.

"Now!" his tone changed. "Just give me a lift shoving this thing into place and we'll be away before you know it."

A half hour later the airplane rose above the meadow and soared away. It was a trial flight and the stout little ship was handled with greatest care. They climbed far up into the blue sky but never was the narrow meadow out of their sight. Johnny knew enough about flying to realize that from that height, even though their motor went dead, they could go gliding down to a safe landing.

"Working perfectly," he shouted in the pilot's ear.

Just then, as if to give the boy a shock, the motor let out a sudden pop-pop-pop. The aviator, after touching a lever, tapped his head with his knuckles as much as to say:

"Knock on wood."

A half hour later they came soaring back to earth. "She's working." The pilot heaved a sigh of content. "Two or three more days and I'll be ready to cross the continent. Tell that boy at the mill to freeze me up a good lot of liquid air."

"All right, I'll tell him," Johnny agreed. "It's—it's wonderful!" he cried. "Riding through the air with only air and carbon for fuel. Is it practical, a truly great thing? Will people everywhere be using liquid air for airplane fuel before long?"

"No-o," the pilot replied slowly. "I'm afraid not. Fuel that costs two or three dollars a gallon is hardly practical. Besides, there may be other drawbacks that haven't appeared yet. How will the steel parts stand freezing and thawing? Things like that.

"I'm afraid it's just a sort of sporting proposition," he added. "Anyway, I'm just sort of playing at it.

"There's this much about it though," the drawl left his voice. "On a very long trip it would be wonderful, this liquid air fuel! It has more power per pound than any fuel you can carry. And that means more miles. I shouldn't wonder," he grinned broadly, "but that if they get this stratosphere flying worked out perfectly, some fellow will one of these days load his motor with liquid air and circle the globe in a non-stop flight. I—I'll take you on a regular trip some of these days."

"But not around the world," Johnny chuckled.

"No. Not quite yet."

Truth was, this "regular trip" was to be taken much sooner than they imagined, and for a very important reason.

"Guess I better get going," Johnny said.

"All right. Don't forget to tell that boy about his grandfather."

[203]

[204]

Johnny did not forget. He hurried away at once to break the good news.

"Thanks," Donald smiled his gratitude when the message had been delivered. "That takes a load off my shoulders. Now, perhaps I can get my mind on other things."

"What things?"

[205]

"Old Uncle Mose and Blinkey Bill come first," Donald's brow wrinkled. "Blinkey Bill claims he owns the coal rights on Uncle Mose's land. He's stopped him mining coal there. Old tight wad! That's making things hard for Uncle Mose. No coal to mine. Poor old Mose and his wife will starve. Think of it, the oldest couple in the mountains! You'd think—"

"There's nothing fair about it," Johnny broke in. "I doubt if Blinkey Bill owns the coal rights on that land. If he does, his father got it by some sharper methods that Uncle Mose didn't understand. And Uncle Mose didn't get a thing for it, you can be sure of that."

"Thing is," Donald turned to Johnny, "you and Ballard have got to play your part, sort of work up the psychology, my professor would say. This evening," his voice dropped, "just before dark, you boys just happen by Blinkey Bill's house and stop to talk. He'll say:

"'Jest come up and set a while and rest yourself,' he always does. So you just go up and set." He laughed a low laugh.

"And while you set," he went on, "you start talking about Uncle Mose, what a hard time he has, how old he is and how wicked it would be if any one would take a mean advantage of him. Just get Blinkey Bill to feeling about as low down as the hind leg of a glow worm.

[206]

"Then just casually," he took a long breath, "just slow like, as if it sort of occurred to you, say something about how deadly lightning can be, especially when it comes out of a clear sky.

"The sky's going to be real clear tonight," he added as if it were an afterthought.

"Yes," Johnny agreed, guessing he knew what would happen. "It's going to be uncommonly clear."

Sometime later, an hour after darkness had fallen, Johnny and Ballard found themselves seated on hickory-bottomed chairs on Blinkey Bill's porch. They had been there for some time and had talked considerable, especially about poor Uncle Mose. Blinkey Bill had listened and as he listened, had appeared to shrink deeper and deeper into his chair. When, however, Johnny said quite suddenly:

"It sure is queer about lightning—the kind that comes out of a clear sky!" Blinkey Bill sat up quite suddenly.

"What's that you all are a sayin'?" he demanded.

[207]

"I said it's queer about lightning out of a clear sky."

"I don't believe there ever was any," Ballard put in.

"Sure there were!" Blinkey Bill's eyes were popping. "I saw hit my own self. Knocked me down. Might nigh kilt me, it did. I—"

He broke short off. His eyes shone like stars as he stared at the crest of the mountain, for there, sharp and distinct against a clear, black night sky, a flash of light went zig-zagging away. It was followed ten seconds later by a low, rumbling roar.

"Lightnin'! Lightnin' out of a clear sky!" The look on Blinkey Bill's face at that moment was a terrible thing to see.

"It does sort of seem like lightning," Johnny said quietly.

"Seem like!" Ballard had not been let into the entire secret. "It IS lightning!"

"Shore! Shore hit's lightnin'!" Blinkey Bill was trembling like a cottonwood leaf in a high wind.

Once more there came the zig-zag flash across the sky. This time the roar that followed was fairly deafening.

[208]

"Hit's judgment!" Blinkey Bill mumbled. "Judgment of the Lord almighty!"

"What you all been a doin'?" Ballard asked, dropping into native speech.

"Nothin'. Not nary a thing! I tell you nary a thing!" Blinkey Bill fairly screamed these words.

"How about Uncle Mose and his coal mine?" Johnny suggested softly.

"That no-count old—" Blinkey Bill broke off. Mouth open, eyes staring, he once again took in that terrifying spectacle that, so far as he knew, was a special act of God, a bolt from the blue.

"Tell you the truth," he was fairly whimpering now. "Fact is I ain't for sartin' sure my Pappy bought in them coal rights."

"Then," suggested Johnny, "you better let Uncle Mose mine his coal."

"I reckon as how I orter do that," Blinkey Bill agreed.

"Wait. I'll write it out." Johnny drew pencil and paper from his pocket and pretended to write. Truth was he and Donald had carefully prepared the release on Uncle Mose's coal rights hours before.

[209]

"There," he exclaimed at last. "You sign right there."

"Now wait a leetle," Blinkey Bill began to hedge. "I ain't plumb sure fer sartin' that—"

Just then the most dazzling flash of all zig-zagged its way across the blue-black sky. It was followed at once by a terrific roar.

"Here! Here!" Blinkey Bill's voice trembled so he could scarcely speak. "Here! Gimme that air paper. Hit's proper to sign hit, plumb proper."

So the paper was signed. The boys departed and old Uncle Mose's coal mine was saved for all time.

CHAPTER XIX WITH THE SPEED OF A WHIRLWIND

Later that night had anyone happened along the mountain trail above Colonel Crider's pasture, as Johnny Thompson had done one night some time before, they might have seen as on that other night, two dark figures darting back and forth across old Nicodemus' pen. One led, the other followed but not once did the one catch up with the other. At last, the one that always led, climbed up the side of the pen to go tumbling over it and disappear in the shadows that lie thick along the Stone Mountain trail in the moonlight. The Kentucky football star had been having a little practice. If one were to judge by his action it might be proper to say that Nicodemus had enjoyed this nocturnal adventure quite as much as the boy.

* * * * *

"Here," Johnny was smiling as he handed a folded paper to Donald next day. "Here's the release for Uncle Mose's coal rights. It worked like a charm. But tell me, how did you do it?"

"Not so difficult when you know how." Donald pointed to a long, irregularly formed glass tube in the corner. It was in three sections. "There's a transformer up there on the ridge. The line carries power to a coal mine. Hope they don't arrest me for stealing power. Guess they won't if I tell my story.

[211]

"You see," he went on after a chuckle, "I had some gas extracted from liquid air in those tubes. When they were all connected and hung down from a tall tree they made quite a long, zig-zagging line. By running a powerful current through the gas in the tubes, I was able to give you a fairly accurate picture of what lightning is at its best.

"Just a neon sign really," he added quietly. "Sort of irreverent to imitate God's wrath perhaps, but I trust I'll be forgiven."

"I see," Johnny's tone told his admiration. "But how about the thunder?"

"Simple enough, but costly. Nice little explosion of liquid air mixed with carbon."

"You're an artist in your line," Johnny complimented him.

"Perhaps," the other boy agreed. "Also something of a nut. Rather wild sort of way to get what you want. I shouldn't care to recommend it as a regular thing."

[212]

Later that day Johnny found himself in his car threading his way over a difficult passage. The hour for his departure with Ballard for Hillcrest and the great game on the morrow was rapidly approaching. He did want one more word with the aviator down in the valley so he had decided to have a try at reaching him in his car.

This try was to end in disaster. Just as he was negotiating the last twenty rods of the trail something went wrong with his brakes. He shot down a short, steep slope, took a sudden shock that all but sent him through the windshield, then, with a sinking heart felt his right front wheel crumple from the impact.

"Here we are," he groaned. "No train until morning! No car available. And tomorrow's the big game. Hillcrest will be defeated without Old Kentucky. What's worse, Kentucky will die if he is not there. Could anything be worse?"

"See you're in a fix," a friendly voice said. The speaker was close at hand. Johnny looked up. It was the young aviator.

"Yes, a terrible mess!" Johnny's voice carried conviction.

[213]

"Tell me about it."

Johnny told of his dilemma, told it as he had never told anything before.

"But why not let me fly you over?" the other suggested simply.

"With your liquid air motor?"

"Why not?"

"Suppose it fails?"

"It won't fail!"

"Done!" Johnny gripped his hand. "I—I'll go get Kentucky and-and thanks."

"Save that for the end of the trip," the pilot grinned.

"Are—are you," Johnny had been struck by a sudden thought, "could you use a little publicity on your new type of motor?"

"It would be thankfully received."

"You shall have it," Johnny was away.

On his way to find Kentucky, Johnny scribbled a note, then thrust it together with two new paper dollars into Lige Field's hand.

"Here Lige," he exclaimed, "hop on your pony and ride like sixty to the Gap. Get this message off. The change is all yours."

"Thanks, Johnny! Thanks a powerful lot!" Lige was away and so was Johnny.

[214]

After racing up the creek and over a low ridge to notify Kentucky of their good-bad fortune of a wrecked car and a promised airplane ride, without waiting for the other boy to pack his bag, he hastened back toward the meadow and the waiting plane.

On the way he caught up with Donald Day. "Come on along with me to the meadow," he urged. "We're flying back to Hillcrest for tomorrow's game."

"Boy! You're going high-hat in a big way!" Donald exclaimed, increasing his speed.

"Case of necessity," Johnny explained.

"One thing I wanted to ask you," Johnny said after a moment of silent marching. "What would happen if you pumped a quantity of liquid air into a football?"

"Football would get mighty cold, nearly freezing, perhaps worse."

"And then?"

"Then it would expand until it burst. You can't confine liquid air, at least not in any ordinary way."

"That," said Johnny, "was just what I suspected. Those fellows played a trick on us. A player kicked the football into the bleachers, one of the fans substituted another ball he'd just given a shot of liquid air."

[215]

"Strange sort of thing to do," Donald's brow wrinkled. "Tell me about it."

Johnny did tell him about that football game and the bursting ball.

"Queer sense of humor," was Donald's comment. "Lost them the game, didn't it?"

"At least they lost it," Johnny chuckled. "Hope there'll be no monkey shines tomorrow. Guess there won't be. Good clean, hard-fighting crowd, that Naperville team. But they've got to take a licking. And they will if only the old Doc will let Kentucky play."

"Here's hoping!" said Donald. "And here we are at the meadow. There's Ballard coming over the ridge. You can't stop that boy. He's a great fellow. My grandfather is very fond of him. You're doing wonders for him, Johnny. Got to be getting back. Here's luck for tomorrow!" The young scientist gripped Johnny's hand. Then he was away.

Five minutes later with their strange, air-burning motor hitting hard on every cylinder, the boys, with their pilot, felt themselves being lifted high into the bluest of blue skies that so often smile down upon the Blue Ridge Mountains of Kentucky.

[216]

To the inexperienced person it is impossible to judge the speed with which an airplane travels. With no trees, no telephone poles, no nothing speeding past him, he is likely to think of himself standing still in mid-air. Not so Johnny Thompson. He had ridden in many planes and under every possible condition. He had come to have a sort of sixth sense. This was a feeling for speed. As he now sped through the air he became wildly excited for he was, he knew, travelling faster than ever before.

"It's the fuel," he told himself. "Liquid air and carbon." Stealing a glance over the pilot's shoulder, he watched with amazement as the speed indicator rose from two hundred to two-fifty, then to three hundred.

"With a little tail wind, we'd beat the clock," he chuckled. "Be there before we know it."

They were, but not until Johnny had time for a few serious thoughts about tomorrow's game. That game meant a great deal. For Hillcrest it meant a final triumph over an ancient rival. All

[217]

the old grads would be there. Some had wired for reserve seats from a distance of a thousand miles. Some, like himself, were to come by plane. Johnny thrilled at the thought.

He closed his eyes for a moment and into his mind's vision there floated the "Crimson Flood," the team: Stagger Weed, Tony Blazes, Jack Rabbit Jones, Artie Stark, Punch Dickman—all marched before him. And after that, most important of all, Red Dynamite and Old Kentucky. "Good Old Dynamite!" he whispered. "And Kentucky! They must win! They—"

But what was this? Had something gone wrong with the motor? A chill set him shuddering. They were circling for a landing.

Then he laughed. Seizing Kentucky's hand, he gripped it hard. "We're here!" he shouted. "Kentucky, we are here! The emergency landing a mile from Hillcrest is right beneath us." And so it was. They had come with the speed of the wind, no ordinary wind either, the speed of a whirlwind.

Fast as they had come, the news of their strange and daring flight with a new and little-tried motor had preceded them. Johnny's message had come through. A crowd had gathered to see them land. In that crowd were reporters and camera men. Their pictures would be in all the morning papers. Johnny, Kentucky, and the inventor of this new motor would be there. All this would be grand publicity for the inventor and his motor. It would help to swell the crowd at tomorrow's game. Johnny was glad.

[218]

[219]

CHAPTER XX IN THE GRIP OF A GIANT

That evening, just before nine, the team was gathered in the back room of the Blue Moon for a last look at unusual plays and a cheering word from the coach.

"Football is a game of war." The coach spoke earnestly. "Back there in those hard days of 1918 when some of us paid a long visit to France, we practiced long weeks before we were sent into the trenches. That practice was real, the realest thing any of us had ever known. It had to be. When, in bayonet practice, we went after a dummy—a gunny-sack stuffed with straw—that was, to us, not a sack but a man. It must be a man, for tomorrow, next day, the day after, we would go over the top. Then it WOULD be a man. Everything must be real.

"Football is like that, you must go after things hard. You must buck the line in scrimmage as you do in a real game.

"Football is like war in other ways. If a battalion cannot go through the enemy's line, it attempts to go around him. If an army is too light for ground fighting, it takes to the air. You do the same thing in football.

[220]

"In war, practice is not enough. When the zero

hour arrives, a soldier must have a clear head, his body must be fit, he must have his nerves under control. Only so can he win and live.

"You boys have practiced hard. You have given the best there is in you. You are prepared. Tomorrow you must be at your best. Keep your heads. Get a good grip on your nerves. Don't let the other fellows get your goat. Go in to win!"

"Yea! Yea! Hear! Hear! Hear!" came in a roar from the team.

"Thanks," the coach smiled. "And now—" he broke off to stand at attention for a period of seconds. Had his keen ears caught some unusual sound? Johnny, who sat in a corner close to a half open window, would have sworn he caught a faint rustle from the outside. "But who'd be around this time of night?" he asked himself. "And after all, what does it matter? All Hillcrest is loyal to our team."

"Now," the coach went on at last, "we'll go through two or three plays rather rapidly." Picking up a bit of chalk, he stepped to the blackboard. "This play," he drew circles rapidly, "is one of balanced formation. You'll likely try it after a couple of long, and probably unsuccessful passes. In the play—"

[221]

Again he paused to listen. This time Johnny did hear some sound from without, he was sure of it. "Might be Panther Eye's black giant!" he told himself with a shudder. "But then," he asked himself, "is there a black giant?" He rather doubted it. He had come to think of that giant as a black ghost. Panther Eye too might be a ghost for all he knew.

"In this play," the coach began once more, "Artie passes the ball from quarter to Punch at full. Punch poses as for a long pass. But Dynamite swings round close behind the line of scrimmage and the ball is thrown to him. In the meantime, Rabbit and Tony dash round left end in position to receive a pass. Dynamite, you go through the line for whatever gain you can, then, if there is a chance, shoot a pass to Rabbit or Tony. After that," he grinned, "it's your game. Let your conscience be your guide."

"Have you got that?" he demanded.

[222]

"Yea! Yea! Yea! You bet!" came from every corner.

"All right. Now this next one is a trick play. It—"

He did not finish, for at that moment, from somewhere outside, there came a most unearthly scream.

"Who—what's that?" Every man was on his feet.

They dashed to the window just in time to witness a short, sharp struggle between two shadowy figures. One was of ordinary size, the other a person of huge proportions, a giant. Apparently it was the smaller person who had screamed, for now, as he half broke away, he let out one more blood-curdling cry.

The next instant he was free and dashing toward the front of the Blue Moon. Ten seconds later some heavy object launched itself against the locked door of the place and an agonizing voice

cried:

"Let me in! For God's sake let me in. He'll kill me!"

There was no opportunity for letting him in. Before anyone could reach the front of the large room, he broke the door open, and fell panting on the floor.

[223]

Walking calmly past the prostrate figure, Johnny stepped out into the moonlight and took a sweeping survey of the surrounding territory. Nothing unusual was to be seen. The giant had vanished.

"Never-the-less there was a giant!" he said slowly. "Pant's big, hooked-nose giant, I'll be bound. But why, I wonder, was he man-handling that other fellow?"

The reason was not far to seek, at least Johnny felt that way about it, for the moment he laid eyes on the frightened stranger, who by this time had risen from the floor, he recognized in him, the sneering Naperville sophomore, the very one who had come near to causing Kentucky's downfall.

Every boy in the room had recognized this fellow, the coach as well, but—Johnny thought this a trifle strange—not one of them all gave any indication that they knew him. For that matter, however, the boys seemed willing enough to let Coach Dizney do the talking.

As for the stranger, Johnny thought he had never seen anyone so thoroughly frightened. Eyes wild, nostrils widely distended, lips far apart, he stood there panting.

[224]

"Well, son?" the coach's tone was disarming.

"He—he would have killed me," the boy spoke with difficulty.

"Who?"

"The big, black giant."

"Giant?" The coach looked at him strangely. "We have no giants in Hillcrest. Must have escaped from a circus."

"Yes—yes, I—I guess that was it," the boy seemed relieved.

"But what were you doing out there?" the coach asked quietly.

"Just—why, just passing—just walking by." The stranger appeared slightly confused.

"There's no sidewalk there," the coach said.

"Johnny," he turned about, "suppose you get the Chief on the wire. Tell him to run over here."

"O. K.!" Johnny was on his way.

"I—I—" the stranger gave the coach an uncertain look. "Well you see I—I got lost so I—I just sort of cut across."

The coach seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. "Perhaps," he suggested, "a good hot drink would brace you up. Cup of hot chocolate perhaps."

[225]

"Yes, I—"

"Kentucky," the coach turned to smile, "one cup of hot chocolate on me."

"One cup of hot chocolate coming up." The look on Kentucky's face was a study. Was he amused? Was he afraid, perhaps, that he might be tempted to throw the drink in the stranger's face? Who could say? Enough that he did his duty as host faultlessly.

There came the stamping of feet and the Chief of Police arrived. "What's up?" he demanded. The stranger stared at him, gulped down the last of his cocoa, then swallowed hard.

"This boy says he saw a giant that broke loose from a circus." Was there a twinkle in the coach's eye?

"Dangerous," said the Chief.

"He—he shook me," the boy stammered.

"Bad! Very bad!" said the Chief. "Then what?"

"He broke in the door to this place," said the coach.

"The giant?" the Chief appeared to stare.

[226]

"This boy," the coach replied.

"Oh, this boy! So!" The Chief's face was sober. "Breakin'-an'-enterin'. That's it. Thirty days at least, I'd say."

"But—but—" the boy's face paled, "he was after me."

"Any confirmation?" the Chief looked about. "Johnny, did you see him, this 'ere escaped giant?"

"I went out and looked around," Johnny said truthfully, "I didn't see a soul."

"Breakin'-an'-enterin'," the Chief repeated slowly. "Pretty bad. Thirty days, I'd say."

"But, Chief," the coach appeared to protest, "that would be rather hard. Perhaps—"

"Got any relatives, son?" he turned to the intruder. "Anyone a hundred miles away or so?"

"Yes—yes I got an uncle in Springer," the boy's tone was eager.

"Would you stay there three days if you were sent there?"

"Yes—yes I would," his eagerness increased.

"How about it, Chief?" The coach smiled.

"Whatever you say, coach."

"Fine! Will you see him on his way, Chief?"

[227]

"Be glad to, coach. Come on, son."

The Chief and his prisoner passed through the door, to enter a car and go rolling away.

"Snooping, that's what he was," said Dynamite indignantly. "Trying to get on to our plays and signals. Oh well, we'll not be bothered with him"

tomorrow, and, old son," he turned to Kentucky, "you won't have to choke him for calling names. He won't be there to call 'em."

"I shore am right smart 'bliged to hear that," Kentucky drawled. "That there is the name-calling'est feller I might-nigh ever seed!"

At that every boy in the room burst into a hearty laugh.

"Perhaps," said the coach thoughtfully, "that was taking an unfair advantage of the enemy."

"Not a bit of it!" Dynamite exploded. "They beat us out of that last game because he wasn't penalized for a foul. Besides, all spies should be shot at sunrise. You let him off easy."

"Glad you think so," the coach heaved a sigh of relief.

"But what about this giant?" he wrinkled his brow. "How many of you really saw him?"

[228]

"I—I—I—sure! Sure we saw him," came in a chorus.

"I think I might shed a little light on that. All of you get set for a lemon soda and I'll entertain you with a yarn not one of you'll believe." It was Johnny who spoke.

While they drank their soda, Johnny told the story of Panther Eye, the giant, and the kidnapped girl, told it through to the end, or at least, as far as the story had gone. "Now," he ended, "can you beat that?"

"Can't even tie it," the coach said solemnly.

"Well, boys," the coach rose, "big day tomorrow. Time to start pounding your ears." The team filed silently from the room.

Later that night Johnny received a strange visitor. The last freshman to drop in for a chocolate bar had left the door ajar. Since the evening was mild and the room was warm, Johnny had not troubled to close it. Instead he sat by the stove musing on many things. In his imagination he heard again the roar of a bear, the loud boom of an explosion, the roar of a thousand voices shouting for Hillcrest and victory.

"Victory," he whispered. "Tomorrow's the day. Will they win? And Kentucky, will he have a part in it?" In his mind's eyes once more he saw them marching by, the team: Rabbit Jones, Tony Blazes, Stagger Weed, Punch Dickman, Artie Stark, Dynamite, Old Kentucky, and all the rest. What a fine bunch they were! And what a season it had been! His blood warmed at thought of it. "To be a little part of a big thing like Hillcrest College. Ah! That was something! It was—"

[229]

His thoughts broken short off, he sat there staring at the apparition that stood in the opening of the door. A girl, she was tall and gracefully slender. And how fair she was! Her hair seemed mere moonbeams, her face was like shimmering silk. Was she a ghost? Johnny started but did not move. He had met up with ghosts of a sort before and had found them harmless.

"Pardon me," the girl's voice was low, musical.
"Are you Johnny Thompson?"

"Speaking," Johnny was on his feet.

"And are you a friend of a person they call Panther Eyes?" Her English, though perfect, was spoken with a foreign accent. Johnny was plagued by the notion that he had seen her somewhere before.

[230]

"Yes," he replied, "Panther Eye and I have been great friends. Won't you sit down?"

The girl accepted the chair offered to her then, turning eagerly toward him she said, "Can you tell me where he is—this Panther Eye? It is important that I should know. He saved me from death, worse than death—I wish to thank him. My father would reward him."

"That," Johnny smiled, "happened in Ethiopia."

"Yes—yes," her tone was eager. "You know about it. He has told you. Where is he?" She glanced hurriedly about the room.

"He is not here," Johnny said. "I do not know where he is, may never know again. He's that sort."

"Oh!" The girl voiced her disappointment. "That's—that's really terrible. You see," she went on, "Father is—you might say—rather well to do. Oil and all that. He went to Ethiopia to study oil prospects. He found a valley there and came to love it. He sent for me. We lived there happily. And then—then—" she covered her eyes for an instant. "Then that terrible black giant carried me away. And—and your friend saved me."

"There's been a black giant around here," Johnny said. "I'm sure of that. Could he have been the same man?"

[231]

"Oh, no! God forbid!" the girl laughed uncertainly. "That was our servant. We brought him from Africa. He—why, come to think of it, there is a resemblance. But he—Oh my! No. He's not the man!"

"You see," she explained as Johnny gave her a questioning look, "we set Hassie, that's our servant, to hunt up your friend, Panther Eye. He did a good piece of work—almost. In the end though, he allowed him to slip away."

"He would have had a hard time stopping him," Johnny chuckled. "Even if he'd known everything, he would have vanished."

"You see," he leaned forward, "Panther Eye just wanted to take you back so you would be in that picture again, the broad, green pasture, the cows, the banana field, and all that. When you were back he was satisfied. He isn't romantic, not in the least. And as for money, he never appears to need it much. So—"

"So it's not much use looking." The girlish figure drooped. "I—I did so want to thank him!"

[232]

"You might leave your address." Johnny suggested.

"Yes. Yes. So I might. Will you loan me pencil

and paper?"

As Johnny stood close to the girl while she wrote down the address, he became conscious of two things—that she was no ghost but a real person, and that she was really quite charming.

"And you," she favored him with a rare smile, "you will come and see us?"

"Well—yes, perhaps."

She held out her hand. Johnny took it in his own. It was a good firm hand. Johnny liked the touch of it.

"I said I would," he whispered, as she disappeared through the door. "But will I? I wonder?"

"Tomorrow," he thought with a thrill one minute later, "tomorrow is the big day." Already the mysterious girl and her giant escort were crowded from his mind. The team, the game, these filled his entire horizon.

One more recollection slipped into Johnny's mind and out again before he fell asleep that night. A half hour after their landing at Hillcrest he had come upon Kentucky practicing football all by himself. He was dropping the ball and picking it up, bouncing it on the ground and catching it, retrieving it in every manner imaginable. One thing was strange, the ball was soaking wet and the field was dry.

"How'd your ball get wet?" he had asked.

"I soaked it," Kentucky dropped it, then fell upon it.

"Why?" Johnny had asked in surprise.

"Well," Kentucky had replied quite soberly, "the weather man predicts dampness for tomorrow. If it rains, somebody's going to drop the ball. And I'll be ready to pick it up."

"He doesn't miss much, that boy," Johnny murmured to himself just before he fell asleep.

[233]

[234]

CHAPTER XXI DYNAMITE TAKES IT ON THE CHIN

Never before had there been such excitement about a Hillcrest football game. By one o'clock in the afternoon, Hillcrest was deserted. Coaches, busses, trucks and private cars had been forced into service. All Hillcrest, professors, students, men, women, boys, and girls, everyone journeyed to Naperville where the game was to be played.

When the time for the kick-off came, they were all there. Old grads were there too, hundreds of them. One man had journeyed all the way from New York. Crimson banners and pennants fluttered in the breeze. The College band roared, boomed and blared then settled down to, "Hail to Hillcrest!" Ah, yes, it was to be one glorious

occasion.

A fine misty rain was blowing in from the east. But what of that? Blankets, heavy coats, and ulsters defied the weather. As for the team, they were all pepped up for the battle. Weather meant nothing to them. Bumps, bruises, even cuts would mean nothing to them. Nothing short of a broken leg could stop them today.

Today was the day of days. Year after year they had gone down to defeat. Today? Today! Just wait and see.

[235]

One thought disturbed Dave Powers as he took his place. Old Kentucky was in his suit but his bright, new crimson jersey did not shine out from the field. Instead it was hidden beneath a heavy gray blanket. Kentucky was on the bench. There, shivering from the cold, excitement, and bitter disappointment, he awaited the kick-off.

"Your rib is about healed," the doctor had said to him. "However, if you should go into the game, and be tackled and thrown hard, it might result in permanent injuries."

Well, doctor's orders were doctor's orders, but to Kentucky, had it not been for his teammates, they would have meant nothing. What were a few broken bones to the loss of the year's game of games? It was Dynamite who had said, "You stay out until I need you."

"But promise me," Kentucky pleaded, "if the battle goes against you and if you think I can help, promise you'll let me in."

"Help, kid?" Dynamite had exclaimed. "Of course you could help. You and I could lick that Naperville bunch all by our lonesomes. And will I holler if we are getting the worst of it? You better believe I will, son!"

[236]

All the same, as Dynamite went into the game it was with a wordless prayer that little Kentucky might not be needed.

From the very start it was a thrilling game. From the first, too, Dynamite was to recall the words of Kentucky's passed on by Johnny: "Somebody's going to drop the ball."

Naperville led off with a great kick. Punch, who received the ball, was tackled almost at once, on the Hillcrest thirty-yard line. On two line plunges, Hillcrest picked up seven yards. Then, as Bud Tucker, who played in Kentucky's place at half, came round the left end, he was hit hard and thrown. The ball leaped from his grasp and was recovered by a Naperville man.

"Ha! Ha! Big joke!" one of the opponents yelled. They had heard this from a defeated team. Now they evidently meant to use it against Hillcrest.

To have the ball in the opponent's hands on one's own thirty-seven-yard line at the start of a game is no joke. The hard-hitting Naperville steam roller crushed the Hillcrest line again and again. "First down and ten—" and scarcely a moment later once again, "First down and ten—" From the bleachers came a roar like the breaking of a wild sea:

[237]

"Hold that line! Hold that line! Hold that line!"

Kentucky sat like a mummy in his blanket, shuddering and mumbling to himself.

Then, when it seemed that a touchdown was inevitable, once again, "somebody dropped the ball." This time it was little Artie Stark who recovered. Hillcrest's ball on their own thirteen-yard line. A quick huddle, a sudden snapping of the ball, a ducking of the head by Punch Dickman, as if to run with it, then a leaping upward like the rise of a submarine, and a quick kick that, catching the opponents off their guard, sent the ball rolling, all unmolested to Naperville's ten-yard line.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Shedding his blanket as a snake sheds its skin, Kentucky leaped into a wild Indian dance.

But wait! Again that relentless beating back. There came line buck after line buck that Hillcrest's slender line could not withstand. And after that, with startling suddenness, forward passes. Naperville, too, had learned how to invade the air.

[238]

One pass was complete, then a second. As this last pass was caught by a Naperville end, Dynamite too far away to do more than watch, saw him go coursing straight down the field. The ball carrier was followed by his own left-half.

"Punch is there," Dynamite congratulated himself. "He'll spill him. And how!"

He had spoken too soon. Punch did spill the runner, spilled him plenty, but the instant before Punch struck him, the runner threw a lateral to the man who followed him. The lateral was good, Punch went down with the Naperville end. The trailing Naperville half went through for a touchdown and the Naperville rooters burst the head of their big bass drum from sheer joy.

As for Old Kentucky, he shuddered more violently than ever. "Here!" There was a sharp, girlish voice close at hand. It was Jencie. She was holding out a small jug filled with something piping hot. What was in the jug? Kentucky knew and Jencie too. What did it matter about the rest? He drank it all and shuddered no more.

[239]

The game went on. Reenforcements were sent in to the Hillcrest line. This stiffened up the game. For the rest of that quarter and all through the second quarter the teams took turns bucking lines, trying passes, and punting on the fourth down. Neither team made great gains. At the end of the half the score stood at 7-0 against Hillcrest.

"Dynamite," the slim Kentucky boy whispered tensely as for a moment Dave took a place beside him on the bench, "you can't let them beat us! You just can't. All the old grads are here. They're burning up for a victory. I heard one of them say there'll be a training-table for the team next year if we win this game. A free training-table, Dynamite! Think what that'll mean to the boys who have to work! Let me come in, Dynamite. Just let me!"

"They'd bust you in pieces," Dynamite grumbled.

"They'll never touch me," Kentucky's eyes shone with a strange light. "No one ever has except

[240]

that once and that—that was sort of an accident, you might say.”

“They’d get you, Kentucky. Those boys are out for blood. They’d murder you and then Doc would have me up for getting you killed.”

Kentucky made no reply. For a full moment he sat there in silence. “All right, Dave,” he said at last. His voice was low and flat.

“This is terrible,” Dave thought to himself.

“Give us one more quarter,” he pleaded after a moment of silence. “If we don’t score in the third quarter, you’ll go in. I swear it.

“But one thing,” he added in a low tone, “you’ll swear on the Bible you won’t let them tackle you. You’ll throw the ball away—anything at all.”

“Swear it on a stack of Bibles,” Kentucky grinned happily.

Never had Dave worked, hoped, and prayed for a scoring punch as he did in that third quarter. Never did the team back him up with greater determination. Never had they attempted such dazzling plays.

“Eighty-six,” was the first order they received as they went into a huddle.

“Eighty-six coming up,” Artie Stark gasped.

[241]

The team lined up as usual, balanced formation. Punch Dickman dropped back as if for a punt. The ball was snapped to him. He held it for a period of seconds. Dynamite came sweeping in close behind the line of scrimmage. Punch shot a shovel pass to him. He dashed round right end for a gain of five yards. As he was about to be tackled he shot it to Rabbit Jones. In the meantime Punch had followed Dynamite around right end. As Rabbit saw the end of his own eight-yard break for liberty, he lateralled it back to Punch and Punch went forward for a clean twenty yards.

“Yea! Yea! Yea!” came from the bleachers. “Touchdown! Touchdown! Touchdown!”

“Ninety-three,” Dynamite whispered. They were in a huddle and out again. They snapped into position, five men behind the line, three a yard back of the line, and two others one yard farther back. Punch received the ball. Artie Stark touched the ground. He was behind the line but this made him a technical lineman. Bud Talliver, a quarter who was also temporarily quartered behind the line, took a short pass from Punch to shoot around left end for a gain of twelve yards and one more first down.

“Repeat,” Dynamite whispered in the next huddle. There was a growing note of confidence in his tone.

[242]

They did repeat and at once met with disaster. The right guard of the enemy smelled the play. Somehow he broke through to throw Bud so hard that the ball bounced out of his hands and was lost to the enemy.

“No good!” Dynamite muttered. “But we gotta’ score! We just gotta’ score!”

There are some things in this life that “just must” be done but, in the end, because of circumstances beyond our control, cannot be done. Hillcrest did not score in that quarter.

Never in all his life had Dynamite been so disappointed, and never had he looked upon a more radiant smile than he saw on Kentucky’s face as he approached the bench.

“We’ll get ‘em,” the mountain boy promised. “Two touchdowns in the last quarter. It’s written in the stars. I saw it in my forecast this morning.”

“You been studying the stars?” Dynamite asked.

“It’s all written down in a book,” Kentucky was shedding his blanket. The hot drink from Jensei’s brown jug was still coursing through his veins.

[243]

“But, Kentucky,” Dynamite remonstrated, “perhaps Doc won’t let you.”

“He’s gone,” Kentucky grinned broadly. “Somebody’s sick, an auto accident or something. He left fifteen minutes ago.”

Dynamite was sunk. “I’d rather we lost the game,” he muttered.

By the time the whistle blew he had snapped out of that mood. Indeed he felt more cheerful than he had at any time that day. Somehow, without Kentucky at left half the picture had not been right. Now it was perfect. “All the same,” he muttered, “I’ll not send him through the line. That would be murder.”

When the hundreds of Hillcrest enthusiasts saw the slim Kentucky boy rise from his place on the bench, throw himself through a series of wild antics to set his blood racing, then walk quietly to his place behind the line, a strange silence came over them. This lasted for some twenty seconds then, like the coming of a wind storm in summer, there arose a sound that increased second by second until at last it filled all the sky. Speaking of it long after, Punch Dickman said it made his ears tingle. “It was a sign,” he added. “A sure sign of victory.”

[244]

But was it? At the start things went badly. Three line-bucks failed. The punt that followed shot straight into the air. Rabbit almost retrieved the ball, but failed. Fighting like tigers, the Naperville boys battled their way to Hillcrest’s twenty-yard line.

As Dynamite scanned the faces of his men, he read their dogged determination, but something else—a note of despair. Kentucky was not like that. He was smiling. His eyes shone. His lips were parted. He was murmuring something. Dynamite listened. What he heard sounded strange: “It’s a wet day. Somebody’s going to drop the ball.”

Then the thing happened. On a third down, the opposing team tried a forward pass. It struck the receiver’s hands, seemed to rest there a split second, then went spinning into the air. When it next came to rest, it was in Kentucky’s hands. Like a rushing prairie fire he streaked down the side line for the far away goal. Once again, in his own mind, he was in old Nicodemus’ pen. It was

[245]

moonlight. A shadow approached him, a Naperville man. Flash! He was past that shadow. Another, another, and another. Flash, flash, flash, he was past them all. Two tall, slim shadows stood out before him—the goal posts. Flash, he was past them as well. Then, with a deafening roar in his ears, he came to rest standing up. A touchdown for Hillcrest. The kick was good. The score was tied.

“We can’t let it stand there,” Kentucky said tensely as Dynamite came up. “We must not!”

“You’re wonderful, Kentucky,” his team mate whispered. “But think if only one of them had hit you!”

“Dynamite,” the Kentucky boy whispered to his running mate, “I had three uncles in the great war. Only one came back. Do you think they asked themselves about machine gun bullets and shells? Football is war, Dave.

“Besides,” he added, “they can’t get me. Nobody can. Even old Nicodemus couldn’t.”

The battle was begun once more. Enheartened, Dynamite took a chance. He put his team through that five-men-back formation. Somehow it failed. The tackle was thrown for a loss. Doggedly determined, he tried again. One more loss. Third down and seventeen to go. A punt and the enemy had the ball.

[246]

By four brilliant forward passes Naperville carried the ball back to Hillcrest’s ten-yard line.

“Touchdown! Touchdown! Touchdown!” came from the right bleachers. “Hold that line! Hold that line!” came from the left. The nerves of every player on the field were stretched to the breaking point. Naperville charged the line. No gain. They charged again. No gain. Flash! They shot a pass. It never reached the receiver. With a leap that took him high in the air, Dynamite caught the ball, then plunged head foremost into the oncoming wall of opponents. Never had a tree been blasted, nor a mountain exploded more perfectly than was that line torn away. Never had Dynamite so deserved his nickname. He went through everything to their forty-yard line. There he was downed by the opponent’s safety man.

“Dave,” the Kentucky boy whispered, when next they prepared to line up. “One minute to go. We—we gotta’ have that touchdown. You—you know how. Don’t think of me, Dave. Forget the bullets and shells. It’s war, Dave. Let’s go through together.”

[247]

Dave set his teeth grimly. “It’s a go, Kentucky!”

And they went through. Throwing all the force of his marvelously developed body in a line plunge, Dynamite blasted a hole so wide that both he and Kentucky went through.

But Naperville had been expecting a forward pass. Her ends and half-backs were a full twenty yards behind the line. Like a troop of wild bears, they sprang at the onrushing pair.

“They must not hit him!” Dynamite was saying to himself. “They must not.” Hurling himself at the first man, he sent him spinning to the right. He

tipped the second to the left. The third he missed altogether. And all this time the slim Kentucky boy hugged the ball and sped on behind him. Ten—twenty—thirty yards—for—

Dynamite struck something that was like a stone wall. He went down in a heap.

But Kentucky, racing like an escaped colt, sped on to the winning touchdown.

And then the whistle blew.

[248]

The crowd would have rushed upon the field but officers held them back. All plays begun before the whistle must be completed. There must be a trial for the extra point.

As the players began lining up, they missed Dynamite. Sudden consternation seized them as they discovered him lying quite senseless on the field.

"He's out for good. That full-back smashed him. Take him off the field," a doctor ordered.

"Kentucky, you may call the play," the coach said quietly.

"All right, boys," Kentucky whispered in the huddle, "a line plunge. Make it a good one."

"A line—" Rabbit Jones who started to speak, felt a hand over his mouth.

A line plunge it was, and a good one, but not good enough. The score stood 13 to 7 and all Hillcrest went wild—all but one, Dynamite.

They would have picked Kentucky up and carried him on their shoulders, those Hillcrest fans, but the boy would not have it. "Dynamite," he shouted. "Save all that for good old Dynamite. He knew it was he or I, and he—he took it." There were tears in Kentucky's eyes—and the crowd loved him for it.

"Kentucky," Coach Dizney dropped in beside the slim boy as the team marched off the field, "you may ride back to Hillcrest in my car. Your friend, Jensie Crider, rode over with us." There was a strange, new light of friendliness in his eye.

[249]

"I—" Kentucky hesitated, "I sort of reckoned maybe I'd ought to see about Dynamite."

"Dynamite is all right," was the coach's reply. "He's in good hands. He's with Doc Owslie. He's a fine, dependable doctor. Besides—" he was tempted to say more but stopped at this. "The other might not be true."

"Al—all right," Kentucky agreed. "That will be grand!"

Johnny Thompson had somehow felt from the beginning that this was to be a Hillcrest victory. No one in all the world would have given so much to watch it from the sidelines. This had been impossible. There would be, he knew right well, a grand and glorious celebration in the old home town after the game. The team would be back. All their admirers and all the girls of the school would be there and all the old grads. Were they to wander from place to place down town? By no means! The old Blue Moon was the spot for this jollification. And he should be

prepared.

Having bought out an entire bakery, he had rented its ovens. Into these ovens on great dripping pans, he thrust two legs of beef, five leg o' lambs, three hams and a half dozen pork loins.

[250]

"We'll have hot sandwiches for all," he said to Aunt Mandy, his colored cook. "Hot ones for all. And you, Aunt Mandy, all I ask of you is three hundred little turnover pies, all mince."

"Lands o' livin', child," Aunt Mandy exclaimed. "Three hundred!"

"Three hundred."

"All right, son, three hundred comin' up." And three hundred it was.

Ah yes, it was a grand and glorious feast Johnny prepared. One thing he forgot, the big room at the Blue Moon could scarcely accommodate sixty people standing up. And a mighty horde in trucks, busses, and private cars, some even on bicycles was pouring toward the Blue Moon at sunset.

"Kentucky," the coach said with a side-wise glance at the boy as their car glided toward home, "I gave you a chance at being captain of the team. In that last play, you could have called for a goal kick. Punch would have sent it over for that other point. You called for a line-buck. How come?"

[251]

"Well you see," there was a tremor in Kentucky's voice—he loved the coach and feared his displeasure more than almost anything in the world, "you see, coach, I overheard you tell Dynamite he'd played great ball this season, which he had, and that, if he won that game you'd see that he got the ball for himself for a keepsake. That—that I thought was swell.

"But you see, coach," Kentucky was desperately in earnest now, "you see there was a big crowd heading for the gate, just back of the goal. If we tried for a goal, we'd make it all right but the ball would go into the crowd and then—somebody'd plug a hole in that ball, let out the air and tuck it under his coat. So-o—"

"So you passed up your chance to give Dynamite a break."

"Yes—yes. That's it. It was all right wasn't it, coach? Wasn't it now? We—we didn't need the point. The game was over and we—we'd won and everything."

[252]

"Yes, Kentucky." There was a wide smile of approval on the coach's face. "It was more than all right. It was sporting! Just grand, Kentucky!"

"I—I'm glad," Kentucky murmured. Kentucky had been worried about Dynamite but the instant he climbed from the car he spotted him. He was standing at the edge of the gathering crowd. Grinning a broad grin he said, "Lo, Kentucky. Who won the game?"

"It's all right, old Kentuck," he laughed. "I'm not a ghost. It takes more than a Naperville man to knock me out for keeps. That fellow rammed his head up under my chin and put me to sleep, that's all. When I woke up, I felt better than

ever. I'd had a good rest." He laughed merrily.

When Johnny saw the crowd, he called loudly for help. The team responded to a man. They carried two steaming legs of beef, five leg o' lambs, three hundred pies and all the rest of the feast to the big gym floor. There everybody feasted to his heart's content.

Who was to pay the butcher and baker? In such a jam there was neither time nor opportunity to collect nickels, dimes, and quarters. Johnny had been too busy to notice such a trifling detail. It was not, however, entirely neglected.

[253]

"And now," a big burly grad, wearing a tall paper hat exclaimed, "we shall proceed to pass the basket."

Seizing one handle of a huge baker's basket, he invited a pal of other days to join him, and together they made the rounds. The clink of silver and the flutter of green paper was heard and seen in every corner of the broad floor.

At last, hunting up Johnny, they set the basket before him. The leader said:

"With the compliments of an admiring throng to the good scout who discovered our winner, Old Kentucky."

Then such a shout as went up from the throng. "Give and it shall be given unto you," Johnny thought as he tried in vain to swallow a lump in his throat.

"Well, Kentucky, old boy," Johnny said as they sat by the big glowing stove in the Blue Moon sometime later, "the big war is over. All you got to do now is study and help me here a little. All I got to do is to keep making this place a success. The old Blue Moon," he murmured these last words softly.

[254]

"Yes," the slim boy agreed, "that's all, but somehow, Johnny, that makes me feel like a plumb flat tire."

"That," said Johnny in an impressive tone, "is just the way I feel."

Did the old Blue Moon and Hillcrest hold them both? When Johnny sat dreaming of Panther Eye and his two strange companions of another world, did he always succeed in dismissing them from his memory?

Your guess is as good as ours, but if you really want to know you will have to read that other book *The Seal of Secrecy*. What was the seal and what the secret? Read and see.



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