A Mystery Story For Boys

The Hidden Trail

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Mystery Stories for Boys

The Hidden Trail

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Two men, armed with rifles, appeared in the road across the creek.—Page 163

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THE HIDDEN TRAIL

CHAPTER I
A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"We—we've killed him!" These words, stammered from the lips of Johnny Thompson, brought no denial from his pal, "Pant."

Instead of denying, or even questioning the statement, the other boy gripped the side of a ragged rock and peered over the edge of a sheer precipice. Fully five hundred feet from base to top, this abrupt break on the Kentucky side of Stone Mountain stood as square and straight as a prison wall.

A tremendous current of air was sweeping up its rugged face, and even as Pant leaned over the edge he felt something whiz past him. Carried by the current of air far above the boys' heads, the object at last came fluttering down at their feet.

"That's his," whispered Johnny. He did not touch the thing, merely stood dumbly staring at it. **[10]**

It was a battered old hat. The edge of the brim was as notched as a discarded circular saw. It had no band and it came to a ridiculous peak at the top.

There is something intensely personal about an old hat, and as if accepting this shapeless bit of felt as final evidence that the boy they had spoken of had actually jumped from this dizzy height, Pant crept gingerly back from his perilous position and for a long time sat moodily staring at the pathetically ragged old hat.

"That's what you get for trying to help somebody," he grumbled. "I told you it wasn't any of our business and that we'd better leave him alone. Now—now he's lying down there at the foot of this cliff—dead!"

"Yes, I know," agreed Johnny, "but he was such a hungry looking fellow, and he didn't seem to have a friend in the world. I thought that if we could catch him and hold him long enough to make him feel we were his friends we might help him a lot. There must be something wrong somewhere, or he wouldn't be hiding out here in the mountains the way he is." **[11]**

"The way he *was*, you mean," Pant corrected, "he *isn't* any more."

Again he glided toward the edge of the cliff.

"Hold my feet," he said, "I'm going to take a good look down."

For a full three minutes there was no sound save the rattle of bits of rock that went over the edge to go plunging to dizzy depths below.

"Humph," grunted Pant, as he at last drew himself back and sat up, "there's a strange pink spot down there among the trees at the bottom. Looks small from here, but it can't be. It's a long way down and everything looks small. A cabin would look like a beehive."

"Well," said Johnny with a sigh that spoke plainly of a very sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, "since we chased him over this place, we can't do less than go down and try to find him. Perhaps someone here in the mountains knows him. Maybe he has some relatives. If he hasn't we'll have to see what can be done." **[12]**

The two boys had meant the stranger no harm. Their work had called them into this rugged mountain country of the Cumberlands in Kentucky. Of that work we will speak later. It was a strange set of circumstances that had brought them to this home of mountain feuds and moonshine. While at work on these supposedly uninhabited slopes, they had more than once discovered evidence of someone living up here. A bed of leaves in a deserted shack; the skin of a freshly killed squirrel; a meager trickling spring carefully dammed with mud to make a pool of fresh water; these were the signs.

Then they had caught a glimpse of the stranger. He was a tall, gaunt boy; the poorest, hungriest looking person one might hope to see. Johnny's sympathetic heart had gone out to him from the first. Twice they had seen him. Then as they caught sight of him the third time, racing away like a deer, Johnny had proposed that they give chase; that, if possible, they capture him and establish friendly relations. **[13]**

To all appearances the result had been disastrous. The mysterious boy had headed straight for Pillar Rock, which was at the top of the highest cliff in the mountains. Once there, he could not hide from his pursuers. His only way of escape was to leap over the precipice. The ragged hat which lay at Johnny's feet seemed proof enough that he had done that very thing.

"But what did he do it for?" Johnny half sobbed as he picked up the hat and fastened it solidly to the stub of a broken branch of a scrub pine tree.

"That," answered Pant, "is just what I don't know. Might not have been right in his head; might have been scared out of his senses. Anyway, we'd better go down."

It was a long and winding trail that lead toward the bottom. Nothing was said by either boy for some time. Beneath a spreading pine tree they paused long enough to gather up some surveying instruments—transit, tripod, red and white pole, and steel tape. These they carried down a steep slope, concealing them at last in the hollow trunk of a spreading chestnut tree. [14]

They had descended half way to the bottom of the cliff when Pant, turning abruptly to the right, jumped down a rocky ledge to a spot where the waters of a large spring welled forth from the rocks. Below were two other springs. These three springs sent quite a volume of water racing down the steep slope. On either side of the stream rhododendrons and mountain ivy grew in wild profusion, and meeting overhead formed a perfect archway.

"This'll get us there sooner," Pant said, and bending low and leaping forward he lost himself from sight beneath the arch of strange, flat-leafed evergreens.

Johnny followed in silence. The pent-up air of the leafy tunnel, chilled by the rushing spring water, was as cool as an autumn night. [15]

"Like going down into a well," Johnny whispered to himself with a shudder.

To tell the truth, Johnny Thompson's nerves had been greatly shaken by this sudden tragedy. He had experienced many thrilling things, as you will remember if you have read the other stories about him: "Panther Eye," "White Fire," and others. He was a brave youth and knew no fear. Yet he had been born with a desire to be friendly to all human beings. He had always tried to be helpful; had meant to help the mysterious waif of the mountain, and had miserably failed.

He felt so down-hearted about the matter as he thought of the terrible probabilities that awaited their search at the base of the precipice, that, in a halting way, he began to pray about it. He prayed that they might not find the boy dead; that he might not die. Johnny had faith in prayer when it was uttered in the right spirit, and after he had whispered his petition he felt greatly relieved.

So, splashing through water that reached half way to the tops of his high laced boots, now slipping over smooth, mossy stones, and now letting himself down little falls by clinging to overhanging branches, he fought his way downward until at last he saw a gleam of light ahead. [16]

"That's where it joins Turkey Creek," said Pant, pausing to mop his brow. "Man! Oh Man! What a secret trail! Must be a half mile long with all its windings. What a bully place to use in escaping from an enemy. Once here you could certainly lose yourself. I tell you what, Johnny," he paused impressively, "the

time may come, and that mighty soon, when we'll need just such a hidden trail as this."

"Yes, it might," Johnny agreed.

The time did come, and that even sooner than either dreamed it might.

After leaving the shelter of the hidden trail they rounded a rocky slope, then climbed to a place where ragged pine trees grew among the rocks. Here they paused to look up at the towering precipitous wall.

"Ought—ought to be about over there," Johnny said as he pointed toward a rugged field of rock. **[17]**

With mingled feelings of hope and fear, they picked their way over the rocks until they found themselves at the very base of the cliff.

"Must have been about here," said Pant in a tone of conviction. "The lone pine on the crest is just a little to the right. That's where we saw him last."

Much to their surprise, a half hour's search revealed no sign of the missing boy.

"Well! What do you make of that?" exclaimed Pant, by this time completely mystified. "He couldn't have landed safely and gone away?"

"Of course not."

"And he wasn't hiding on the top of the cliff."

"Couldn't have been."

"That beats me!"

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know." Pant sat down and scratched his head. "All I know is that we've searched every spot where he might be lying, and haven't found him. We've done all we can do. Might as well go back to Crider's." **[18]**

"Shall—shall we tell them about it?"

"Wouldn't do any good, would it? What could they do that would help?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"And they're such queer folks that they might do a lot that would harm."

To these boys who had spent all their lives in the active centers

of the north, the people of the Cumberlands, with their queer homespun ways, their strange manner of speaking and their suspicion of all "Foreigners"—as they called outsiders—had seemed queer indeed.

Pant had a suspicion that these mountain people were planning in some way to hinder the work he and Johnny had been carrying forward. He had no proof of this intent, but he had been made uneasy by certain whispered conversation held outside the cabin where he slept.

It was a strange mission that had brought the two boys back here in the Cumberlands some thirty miles from the railroad. Pant had long believed himself without a living relative. A few months back he had been searched out by a lawyer and informed that a great-uncle of his had recently died, leaving him a legacy. **[19]**

A queer sort of legacy it was, too; the deed to a Blanket Survey of Harlan County, Kentucky. With little notion of what it all meant, Pant had been inclined to treat the whole matter as a joke. But Johnny, who was endowed with a natural legal mind, had delved about in musty law books, asking questions here and there until he had learned that in the early days, when settlers had taken up all the land that was considered of immediate value in a certain county, the Government had sold all the bits of land that remained here and there in the mountains of that county to one man. The property was known as a Blanket Survey.

"There's no telling what it might be worth," Johnny had said to Pant. "Land worth nothing twenty years ago is worth a lot now. You'd better go down there and look things over." **[20]**

"I'll go if you will," Pant had said, "and share half and half of what we make out of the land."

"That might not be fair," Johnny demurred, "but I'll go. We'll pick up enough knowledge of a transit to enable us to run lines, then we'll have a grand time wandering around among the moonshiners, dodging feuds and looking for boundaries of your property. Property! Don't that sound grand!"

They had learned a bit about running lines, had bought a second-hand surveyor's kit, and had come to the mountains.

On consulting county records they found that most of Pant's "property" was to be found at the head of Turkey Creek.

"Why, you're rich, Pant!" Johnny had exclaimed joyously. "There must be all of three thousand acres in one tract up there on Turkey Creek!"

"Let's go see it," was all Pant would say.

They had gone, and Pant had laughed at what he saw. He had

heard of the Bad Lands and had hunted in the Rockies, but never had he seen anything rougher than his own three thousand acres. [21]

"Come on," he had said after his laugh, "you couldn't raise mountain sheep on it. Let's get away and forget it."

"Aw, come on. Let's stick. Let's run the lines. You never can tell," Johnny had insisted.

For ten days now the boys had been living with the mountain people and running their lines. Each day had brought the boys face to face with new conditions of which they had not dreamed. Now Johnny was sure of one thing; Pant's land, barren and rocky as it might be, was valuable; quite worth the trouble of surveying it and, if need be, fighting for afterward.

Without any word of the strange experiences of this day, the boys entered the long, low, two room cabin owned by a man known as Blinkey Bill Crider. Here they had been boarding. Having removed their coats and "washed up" at the spring above the cabin, they proceeded to do justice to a meal of corn bread, sorgum molasses, fried bacon and eggs. [22]

Twilight passes quickly in the mountains and the boys were soon ready to retire. As Johnny crept beneath the homespun blankets and allowed his eyes to rove about the room he caught sight of something strange. A long barreled squirrel rifle hung on the mantel above the fireplace. It had been there before, but to-night there was a bright and shiny new cap to be seen beneath its hammer.

"I wonder," he asked himself, "what that could mean?" A moment later he was fast asleep.

When he awoke some hours later he was conscious of a movement in the room; then the flash of a torchlight was thrown in his eyes as a gruff voice said:

"I reckon hit's time you wuz a'stirrin. Climb outen that air bed and git yer clothes on!"

Sitting up quickly, Johnny found the room full of men with rifles. Tall, lanky men they were; men with faces as brown as a side of leather and as wrinkled as a weather beaten shoe. [23]

"Wha—what—"

He meant to ask what they wanted. Something in their deep set eyes told him it would be useless to ask. Pant was already silently drawing on his trousers and Johnny followed his example.

He dressed as quickly as he could. A moment later he found himself astride a horse behind one of those grim-visaged mountaineers. Pant, similarly mounted, rode just ahead.

All this time his head was fairly humming with questions. What did it all mean? One moment he was sure this strange affair was connected with the surveying of Pant's land; the next he was quite certain that they were to be accused of causing the death of the mysterious boy of the mountain and were to be hanged for it.

So it was that a thousand half-formed plans ran through his mind. Slowly there came the realization that whatever the reason for this journey, these silent captors were not friendly; that somehow he and Pant must escape. **[24]**

All the time, proceeded and followed by grim, silent horsemen, they rode forward into the cool, damp night.

[25]

CHAPTER II
A DASH FOR FREEDOM

Though Johnny Thompson had been taken entirely by surprise and was somewhat bewildered by the sudden attack of these night-riding mountaineers, he was not entirely overcome. His mind was working like a six-cylinder motor running in high.

His muscles, as ever, were ready for action. Hard as steel, trained for speed and strength, he felt sure that he would be able to outwit these grim, slow-going mountaineers. No person, without giving a plausible reason, had ever laid hands upon Johnny Thompson without regretting it. Born for action, he had kept fit by training and clean living. There were few boys of his age who were his physical and mental equal.

He was a little troubled about one question: What direction would the night riders take? A mile below the cabin the trail forked. One lead about the base of the mountain along the bed of Turkey Creek; the other followed a larger stream, Big Bear Fork. **[26]**

"If only they turn up Turkey Creek," he whispered to himself, "if only they do!"

He was a little troubled by thoughts of Pant. While he knew that Pant was abundantly able to take care of himself, would he think of the same plan that he, Johnny, had thought of? He had not forgotten the hidden trail, but had Pant forgotten?

He held his breath when, upon reaching the fork, three of the men reined in their horses and held a whispered conversation. It was with a deep feeling of relief that he saw their horses turn up Turkey Creek.

"The lower end of the Hidden Trail is now only a half mile away," he told himself, feeling the muscles swell in his coat-sleeves, "then it's time for action."

Moments dragged slowly by. Only the steady thump of horses' feet on the sandy trail broke the silence of the night. Here they rode beneath low-spreading branches that made the trail black as a cave, and here came out into a patch of moonlight where they might study one another's faces. Those were trying moments to Johnny. What if these men had planned some action before they reached the mouth of the Hidden Trail? What if they had planned a hanging beneath the giant beach tree that stood by the creek, not forty rods from the mouth of their Hidden Trail? Johnny shivered at the thought. **[27]**

In the meantime the moments dragged on. The distance grew

less and less. There was no new revelation of the purpose of their captors. They had ridden to within ten yards of the entrance to the Hidden Trail. Johnny, with muscles taut and nerves a-tingle, was poised for swift action. Then, all of a sudden, a strange thing happened. Directly above their heads, seeming to come from nowhere, there burst a light so intense that no creature, man or beast, could face the glare of it.

As for Johnny, he did not attempt to look at it. Realizing that this was the time for action, though knowing nothing of the origin of the light, he seized the man who rode before him, wrenched him from the saddle and threw him crashing to the ground. **[28]**

Before the man could move, Johnny was off the horse and up the steep bank which lead in the direction of the Hidden Trail. He had not covered half the distance when the strange light flickered out. The darkness at that moment was such as Johnny had never before experienced. The sudden glare of light, followed by instant darkness, left him blinded. Yet, travelling by instinct, he at last reached a thicket of rhododendrons. These were so densely matted together that he was a full minute crowding through them, but when he had at last accomplished this he found his feet sinking into the gravel bed of the stream that was the bottom of the Hidden Trail.

So rapidly had events moved that Johnny had taken no conscious note of them, but his mind had registered them all. As he crouched low, checking his panting, he recalled that there had been shouts and after that two shots. A bullet had cut the air over his head. Had he been seen? Would he be followed? There had been other shots. Had one of them found its mark? Had Pant been wounded? Recaptured? These, and many other questions, raced through his excited mind. **[29]**

There had been loud talking. Now there was dead silence, such a silence as only a mountain knows at night; the trickle of water over stones; a night-hawk's scream; these were all that broke the death-like stillness.

Not quite all. As the boy strained his ears to listen he caught the sound of rolling pebbles. Someone was stealing up the slope. Had he been seen? Should he remain where he was, or should he attempt to make his way further upstream?

The bed of the stream was wet and slippery. To follow it without causing a splash would be impossible. He decided to remain where he was. A moment passed; another and another. Then suddenly, seemingly at his very shoulder, a hoarse whisper broke out: **[30]**

"Where d'y' reckon them Furiners got to? It's plum quare!"

"Gits me!" came a whispered answer. "All I got to say is thet thet thar little feller is the rastlinest young 'un I ever seed.

Why, he jest naturally lifted up Squirrel Head and throwed him off'n his horse same's if he ware a bag o' meal."

"Sarves Squirrel Head right. I done told him he needn't meddle with them Furiners, but if'n he ware plum sot on hit he'd better hog-tie 'em. Hit's the best way."

Johnny's heart was in his mouth. The mountaineers were on the other side of the brushes. Holding his breath, he waited.

"What d'y' reckon that thare quare light was?" came the whisper again.

"Star busted er somethin'. Plum quare, I'd call it. Devil fer sartin, I'd say. Hit's a lot healthier livin' up in my cabin than down on this crick, and thet's where I aims to light out fer soon's Squirrel Head's through nosin' round to no purpose." **[31]**

There was the sound of rattling gravel which told of the departure of the two searchers. After that silence reigned once more.

The whispered conversation had given Johnny food for thought. Who was this man they called Squirrel Head? Whoever he might be, he was doubtless the leader of the party. Johnny smiled grimly as he realized that it was the leader he had pitched from his horse. The fact that they spoke of Squirrel Head's attempt to carry them away as meddling, seemed to indicate that the affair had to do with Pant's land claims rather than with the mysterious boy of the mountain.

"You can't be sure," he told himself, "but it looks that way. Perhaps this Squirrel Head imagined the claims of the Blanket Survey had been dropped since no one had been here to look after it, and he has been planning to take the land. Then again, perhaps he hasn't. More than likely he hasn't. He may be a moonshiner and don't like outsiders snooping about. Or he might be planning to start a feud." Johnny thought this last guess a wild one, but stranger things had happened. As for moonshiners, they had escorted many a stranger to the border of this very county and had told him to keep traveling. **[32]**

"It's certainly a strange experience," Johnny concluded. "Looks as if we had lost our happy home. We'll have to manage to complete the survey some other way, but how we are going to do it without food or a place to sleep, and with these keen eyed mountaineers on our trail, is more than I can tell.

"Boo! How cold it is in here!" he shivered. "Wish Pant were here. Wish—"

His thought broke off short. His ear had caught the sound of a movement downstream. Crowding far back into the bushes he waited. Then the sound came again; a faint splash. Someone

was coming; was all but upon him. Was it an enemy, or was it Pant?

There are certain habits that at times lead to great consequences. The way a certain spy folded his napkin once brought him to court-martial and death. A robber's habit of twisting a lock of hair over his right forefinger led to his capture. Had Johnny taken the person toiling up the bed of the stream for a stranger; had he leaped upon his back, serious consequences might have followed. But he did not leap. [33]

Pant had a curious habit of pursing his lips and letting forth a half-audible whistle when something unexpected happened to him. His foot slipped on a smooth rock; the little whistle escaped, and Johnny knew at once that this was Pant.

It was a joyous reunion. Pant had escaped injury. He reported that all the mountaineers had ridden away. So now they were free to make their way up the Hidden Trail, or any other place they chose to go.

"Question is," Johnny said, "what next?"

"Yes," Pant agreed, "that's our problem." [34]

"We can't quit."

"No, we can't."

"Well, what shall we do?"

"Huh," Pant yawned, "I'm sleepy. I move we get away from this chilly creek and find a dry spot for a bed. Maybe the sunshine will suggest something."

Beneath the spreading boughs of a great pine the boys spent a night of restless sleep. Morning came at last, but the early sunlight told them no more than they had known, save that they were very hungry and had nothing to eat.

"Rather tough situation," said Johnny, "can't tell who to trust. There are people in the mountains who would help us; I'm sure of that, but who are they?"

"Can't tell," said Pant. "If you go round guessing you'll like as not stick your face right into this Squirrel Head's cabin, and there you'd stay. They'll hog-tie us if they get us again."

"What's worrying me more than my breakfast," said Johnny, "is the thing that happened yesterday. Where is that boy? If he isn't dead, and if we can find him, he might help us. He seems to get along one way or another." [35]

"That's right," agreed Pant, "isn't such a bad idea. Suppose you drop down there to the spot where we thought he might have landed, and I'll go scouting up over the mountain a bit."

It was a strange bit of good fortune that finally brought the boys their breakfast. After an hour's search among the rocks and scrub pines at the foot of the cliff, Johnny was making his way back up the mountain side. He was discouraged. The search had yielded nothing but a torn piece of pink silk cloth about the size of a man's handkerchief. He couldn't see what it had to do with things, but he had stuffed it into his pocket.

Now, as he struggled upward, he became suddenly conscious of a bumping sound just above him. The next instant, to his great surprise, he saw a big red apple come bounding toward him. He jumped forward to catch it. It was followed by another and another, and still others. He found himself springing nimbly from side to side, catching them as they came. When he had muffed two and bagged fourteen, the shower ceased. **[36]**

"Well!" he exclaimed, "that's what you might call a miracle. Apples off beech and chestnut trees. Thanks, kind Providence, thanks very much!"

[37]

CHAPTER III
JOHNNY FORMS AN ALLIANCE

A wild-eyed girl with flying hair came running down the hill after the apples. Barely avoiding bumping into the astonished Johnny, she threw herself flat upon the ground and stared at the pile of apples.

Johnny looked at her in silence. Scarcely twelve years old, bare-footed and hatless, clad in a single piece dress of blue calico, she was unmistakably a mountaineer's child. That she was a sturdy out-of-doors girl with abounding health was shown by the smooth, brown roundness of her bare arms and the freckled dimples in her cheeks.

"Are those your apples?" Johnny asked. His voice carried a note of regret, for he was very hungry.

The girl nodded her head in bewilderment. **[38]**

Then a new light of joy came into the boy's face. "I'll buy them from you," he said quickly. "How much?"

"Over at the mines I git five cents apiece. Hit's a long way over to the mines."

"Of course it is," encouraged Johnny. "Here's seventy-five cents for the lot. Got anything else to sell?"

Again the girl nodded. "Yaller termaters," she said.

"All right. How much?"

Without answering she turned and began climbing the hill. Johnny followed. She paused at the edge of a path that led around the mountain. Here was a partly overturned basket half full of small yellow tomatoes. It was evident that the girl, tripping over a root, had dropped her basket; and the apples, having been piled on top, had rolled out of the basket to go bouncing down the hill.

"How much for the tomatoes?" Johnny asked.

"Twenty-five cents about right, I reckon." **[39]**

"All right, here it is."

The girl thanked him and was turning to go when he stopped her with a question.

"What are you going to do now?"

The girl smiled. “Goin’ sangin’. Grandmother won’t expect me back fer nigh on to four hours. Hit’s a long way to pack things over to the mines.”

“What’s sangin’?” asked Johnny.

“Don’t you know sang?” The girl’s tone was incredulous. “Oh, I know!” she cried suddenly, “you’re one of them thar Furriners!” A look of fear flashed across her eyes.

“But I’m not afraid,” she laughed a second later, “I see lots of ’em over at the mines. Once one of ’em give me a nickel.”

“Well, you know,” she said thoughtfully, seating herself on a log and allowing her brown feet to dangle, “sang grows in the mountings. You know hit by hit’s leaf. You pull hit up and hit’s roots is worth a lot. Once I got a whole half dollar for a two-pronger.”

“Say!” exclaimed Johnny, “can you keep a secret?” **[40]**

“Try me!” The girl’s dark eyes flashed a challenge.

“Well,” said Johnny thoughtfully, “you go sangin’ to-day, and to-morrow you get your grandmother to send you to the mines again. Only tell her the folks you’re selling to want some sweet potatoes and a pound of butter. I’ll buy them from you and you can go sangin’ again. Won’t that be grand!”

The girl nodded her head.

“Only,” said Johnny, allowing his voice to drop to a whisper, “you mustn’t tell your grandmother that we’re up here in the mountain; nor tell anything about us. Do you understand?”

In answer the girl put a finger impressively to her lips. “I know some other secrets,” she whispered, “an’ I hain’t never told none of them.”

“What’s your name, little girl?” Johnny asked as she turned to go.

“Gene,” she flashed back, and was gone.

Yellow tomatoes and apples are strange rations, but with black berries added to them they did fairly well. After the simple meal the boys stretched out beneath the leafy branches of a clump of laurels, listening to the indignant chatter of a red squirrel. **[41]**

“Far as I can make out,” said Johnny, “we’ve got to do the rest of our surveying by night. Old Squirrel Head, whoever he is, will have his men watching round here in the mountain during the day. I don’t know what they’d do if they caught up with us, but I’d hate to give them a chance to do it. I—”

His whisper suddenly ceased as Pant caught his arm. Together they listened to the distant clump-clump of hobnailed shoes.

"That's one of them now," Pant whispered.

Ten minutes later the report of a rifle came roaring down the mountain.

"Pretending he's squirrel hunting," Johnny smiled, "and it's my opinion that there'll be a lot of squirrel hunting on this mountain from now on."

"Johnny, I believe they want my rough land." Pant's voice was low and earnest. **[42]**

"I *know* they do."

"But why? What good is it?"

"That's what I don't know," Johnny whispered back.

The footsteps, sounding less and less distinct, died away in the distance. Hours passed. The boys slept a little; talked a little in subdued whispers; ate the rest of the apples and tomatoes; stole cautiously down to a bubbling spring for a drink of water cold as ice; then crept back to sleep some more.

As Johnny lay with his ear to the ground he caught a low rumble. Like distant thunder it was, only more steady and less distinct. "That's strange," he told himself, "wonder what it could be?" At last he fell asleep. He was destined to hear that rumble again, many times. It was directly connected with one of the problems they had not yet solved.

Twilight was hovering over the mountains when Johnny was disturbed by a different sound. This time it was a steady thump —thump—thump. "Like someone driving a post in the side of the mountain," he told himself, "but of course it couldn't be. No one would be driving posts away up here." **[43]**

Nevertheless, he became more curious as the steady thump—thump continued. The shadows were heavy now. One might work his way from shadow to shadow without being seen. Placing a hand on Pant's shoulder, he shook him gently. When Pant awoke Johnny whispered for him to follow, though he gave him no reason for this sudden move.

By turning about until the strange sound was directly to the left, he was able to get the direction perfectly.

"Right around this side," he said.

Skirting broad-spreading pine trees, dodging through berry thickets, sneaking along in the shadow of a fallen chestnut tree, with the sound growing louder and louder, they came at last to the edge of a bramble grown clearing which at one time had

been planted to corn.

"He's right over there to the left, on the other side of the clearing," Pant whispered. "I think I saw something moving over there." [44]

"Sure you did," Johnny answered in a subdued voice. "There it is now. See it! It's the top of a young sapling."

"That's queer," said Pant, scratching his head.

"Come on," Johnny murmured, "I've got an idea."

They had covered half of the remaining distance when the thumping suddenly ceased. A moment later, as Pant peered cautiously over the top of a fallen beech tree, he saw that the young hickory tree that had been bobbing so violently up and down now stood quite still.

"That's queer," he repeated.

"Come on," Johnny urged.

When within ten yards of the young hickory they crept round a wild gooseberry bush for a look. A large round block stood beneath the hickory. That was all they saw for a time.

"There's something hanging in the sapling," said Pant, pointing out the young hickory tree. [45]

Johnny looked and shivered. "Sort of spooky," he said, "looks like a hanging or something."

"Couldn't be anything bigger than a cat. Nobody there. Let's have a look."

"Wait!" Johnny's hand was on his arm. "Might be a plant; just a trick to get us in a trap."

Over to the right a chipmunk chattered. To the left a robin chirped his goodnight song. Above them a blue jay screamed shrilly.

Distant sounds came to them; the far away gong of a supper bell, the lowing of a cow, the tank-tong of bells on the necks of cattle. Fifteen minutes they waited in silence. Then Johnny, standing up to ease his cramped muscles, spoke in a low voice:

"C'mon. We'll risk it."

Darkness had come. The object in the hickory loomed out of the dark. With quickened heartbeats they approached the spot whence an hour ago had come those mysterious sounds. As they came near to the large, round, up-ended block of wood beneath the hickory, Pant threw back his shoulders and gave vent to a low chuckle. [46]

“A pounding-mill,” he laughed.

“A what?”

For answer Pant thrust out a hand and first moving his fingers about a circular cavity in the top of the block, held them to Johnny’s lips.

“Taste,” he said.

“M-m, corn-meal,” was Johnny’s astonished answer.

“Sure thing,” Pant chuckled. “Natives used pounding-mills for beating their corn into meal long before they had water or steam mills.”

“But how—how do they work?”

“Simple enough. That block hanging by a rope to the flexible sapling is square on the end and has two short handles to it. You put your corn in the opening here, then bring down that chunk of wood and beat the corn into meal. The tree lifts the chunk for you. All you have to do is to bring it down. See!”

Reaching up a hand he brought the chunk down with such force that the jarring thud set both boys at nerves’ end. **[47]**

“C’mon!” urged Johnny, “we’ll be caught.”

As they reached a distant shelter Pant said, “I don’t think there was really any danger. The fellow who is using that old pounding-mill is hiding out himself.”

“I wonder why?”

“Reason enough, probably. There are always men hiding out in these mountains. A few days ago Crider told me of two men who were hiding in these hills. One a bond-jumper and the other a moonshiner who shot two customs officers. Pretty hard to get them in this rough country.”

A strange thrill ran up Johnny’s spine at the thought that somewhere in these very woods, perhaps watching them at this moment, might be some desperate criminal who was in hiding. It might mean death to cross his path.

“I wonder,” he suddenly questioned, “why that boy was hiding up here? Do you suppose he had jumped a bond or committed a crime?” **[48]**

“He didn’t look like a criminal,” Pant answered. “Anyway, if he is still living and I had a chance to help him I’d do it and ask questions afterwards.”

“So would I.”

“Pant,” said Johnny, “did you ever see any airplane silk?”

“Of course.”

“Snap on your flashlight for a moment.”

Pant obeyed.

Johnny spread out a ragged square of pink silk cloth. “Anything like that?” he asked.

Pant stared for a few seconds, then he felt of the cloth, rumpled it, tried to tear it, then handed it back to Johnny.

“Tough stuff,” he mumbled, “can’t hardly tear it. It’s like airplane silk, only that isn’t ever pink. Where’d you find the piece?”

“At the foot of the cliff where we thought that boy crashed.”

“Huh!” grunted Pant after a moment’s silence, “there might be something in that, too.”

“Only,” he said after another period of silence, “that boy didn’t have an airplane up there on the ledge. We’d have seen it and heard it. So maybe there isn’t so much to it after all.” **[49]**

“Maybe there is, and maybe there isn’t,” said Johnny thoughtfully, “but I’ve been thinking it might have been—” He paused as if for further reflection, and left the sentence unfinished.

“Pant,” he said after a time, “that burst of light over us just as we reached the entrance to the Hidden Trail last night was queer.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” said Pant dryly.

“Brightest thing I ever saw. Fairly blinded a fellow.”

“Good thing it blinded Squirrel Head and his gang. They’re uncommon fine shots,” Pant added, grimly.

“It’s queer about that light,” Johnny reflected.

Pant said no more, so again they lapsed into silence. Johnny was wondering if Pant had anything to do with that mysterious light. In the past this strange fellow had proved a very wizard at causing all manner of red lights and white fires to do his bidding.

“It wouldn’t be strange,” he told himself, “if Pant had a hand in it. Then again, maybe he didn’t. I’ve heard of lightning out of a clear sky. It was certainly like that.” **[50]**

“Look!” Breaking in upon his meditations, Pant gripped his

arm.

“Where?”

“Over there. A light.”

“That’s right,” Johnny breathed, “and it doesn’t move. Must be a camp or cabin up there somewhere. Question is, is it our outlaw of the pounding-mill?”

“Or,” questioned Pant, “is it our wild boy come to life?”

For a time, not knowing what else to do, they lay there watching the light. At the same time, like a panorama, the events of the past few days flashed through Johnny’s mind. They came to the mountains to look at Pant’s land. It seems valueless; yet as they linger on the mountain it seems to find new value. They chase a mysterious boy and he appears to leap over the cliff, yet they do not find him at the bottom. They are mysteriously kidnapped, but thanks to the Hidden Trail, they escape. Providence takes a hand in furnishing them food. Someone on the mountain uses a pounding-mill and has a light. Who is he? **[51]**

“And what’s next?” Johnny wondered.

[52]

CHAPTER IV
A PERILOUS RIDE

"I know where our friend the outlaw, or whoever he may be, gets corn for his pounding-mill," said Johnny, "and I'm going to get some, too. A good cornpone would taste mighty fine. Guess we won't have much trouble borrowing the pounding-mill."

"Guess not," grinned Pant.

Three days had passed since the night they had discovered the pounding-mill and the mysterious light shining through the trees. The search for that light had brought them nothing. Like a will-o-the-wisp, it had vanished before they had crept over half the distance to the point where they had expected to find it. Whether they had frightened the owner away, or he had merely extinguished the light in his regular course of action, they were unable to say. All that really mattered was that they found themselves apparently alone in the mountain forest, with nothing more exciting to do than to drag their steel tape through dew drenched patches of weeds and brushes, to snap on a light and set a transit here and there; in short, to run their lines as best they could in the dark. [53]

It had been slow, heart-breaking work. To search out a tree blazed twenty years ago, to rediscover a moss-covered jagged rock with a "dished spot on its upper side" was task enough in the daytime. At night it was next to impossible. Yet such were the marks described in the deed as forming the metes and bounds of Pant's rugged estate.

In spite of these handicaps they had made progress. In another week or ten days they would be through.

"And then?" Pant had said to Johnny as they calculated the time it would take to finish.

"And then," answered Johnny slowly, "my old friend Panther Eye will be a southern gentleman who can stand and cast his eye over a vast estate and say: 'All this is mine.'" [54]

"And then?" Pant repeated.

"Oh! go bury your 'and then'," Johnny laughed.

"Where'd you find out about the corn?" Pant asked.

"Gene told me."

Gene had proven to be a great find. True to her promise, she had not whispered a word regarding their presence on the

mountain. Daily she brought them the food they asked for, and daily received her pay, to go joyfully away "sangin'."

Once she told Johnny she thought she had as much as two pounds of ginseng roots. For this Johnny was glad. His enjoyment in helping others was greater than in doing things for himself.

Nights had been cold. Dry leaves made a poor blanket, so he had asked Gene if her grandmother had some home-woven "coverlids" to sell. Gene found that she had, and had brought them up. They were wonderful blankets. Made of pure sheep's wool, carded, spun and woven in the mountains, they shed rain like oilcloth. Johnny had bought the two she brought. Then it was that Gene had told of seeing someone in a deserted patch of corn at the foot of the mountain. **[55]**

"What did you do?" Johnny had asked.

"Run home fast as I could. Hit was gittin' dark."

"Who left the corn there?"

"Jim Fielding went and died down yonder in the cabin. Hit wore too lonesome fer Miz Fielding, so she lit out to Ousley County. Corn don't b'long to nobody now."

"In that case," Johnny said to Pant, "we're going to have some of it. I'm going after it right now."

"In the daytime?"

"Sure. It's not a hundred rods from the end of the Hidden Trail. I'll make it without being seen."

In this he was greatly mistaken. **[56]**

The corn field lay directly below the entrance to the Hidden Trail. Johnny had just finished gathering an armful of ears, husks and all, when he caught some movement on the trail above. He ducked quickly, but was too late. The three men had undoubtedly seen him, and to his consternation he saw that one of them was Squirrel Head. His pulse quickened. Undoubtedly these men carried revolvers; the long, wicked-looking, blue-barreled kind. Would they shoot?

Seeing a clump of bushes to the right, he dropped his corn and made a dash for it. A shot rang out. A bullet whizzed dangerously near.

"The—the villains!" he hissed through set teeth as he reached safe cover. Safe for a moment only. He was not a hundred yards from the men and they would soon be upon him. Glancing up and down the brush lined fence he made sudden choice to go up. He could not hope to make the Hidden Trail. The men were between him and that goal. There was timber a few hundred

yards above. If he could but make that!

Now, for the hundredth time, he was thankful for a well kept body and perfectly trained muscles. Like a shadow he sped up the hill. Always under cover, yet always in danger of being sighted through gaps in the brush, he ran low; creeping under obstructions, tearing through thorny bushes, dodging first to right then to the left, he at last reached the shelter of a group of pines. Here he paused to map out his future course. Men who wanted him badly enough to shoot at him would certainly give chase. [57]

He decided to attempt to reach the top some distance from their usual hiding place. The timber up there, being heavier, would make his escape easier. When night came he could easily make his way back along the side of the hill to camp.

These plans came to naught. Johnny had not been this way before. To his consternation he saw as he approached the top of the ridge that there was a long, insurmountable barrier of rock a few hundred feet from the top. He had just reached the base of this obstacle when he caught sight of a skulking figure a short distance below. [58]

“Still following,” he groaned. “Only thing to do is to go along this wall.”

Bending low, he scooted along parallel with the rocky ledge. A quarter of a mile found him quite tired and with no greater hope of reaching the ridge and cover than before.

Came new calamity. The clear blue sky broke through the trees before him and the next moment he found himself viewing a most wonderful panorama of lights and shadows; of blue mountain peaks that blended with the sky; of nearer forest-clad hills that looked like a great tumbling sea of green.

The tragedy of it all was that he viewed this from a perpendicular wall of stone some two hundred feet high. Behind were his pursuers.

“Trapped!” he breathed. “Only thing to do is to surrender. Then what?” He shivered at the thought. [59]

Even as his mind swung to this conclusion his eye caught some bulky object that, apparently traveling through space, was making its way slowly up the hill.

Then it was that he saw what he had not noticed before; a heavy steel cable extended from the ledge above to the valley below.

“A tram!” he exclaimed. “A tram for hauling logs over the mountains. That moving object is a load of logs.”

His mind worked like lightning. Was there a chance of escape?

A quick glance about revealed a pine tree clinging to the cliff some twenty feet below him.

"I could reach that by clinging to the bushes and to that scrub pine above it. The tram car must pass directly beneath it. There is a chance. I'll dare it."

Grasping the bushes, he let himself down over the cliff. The dizzy depths below were filled with grim, gray rocks, and he knew that these awaited him, once he slipped. From bush to bush he swung. Now the branch in his right hand gave way, but his left hand saved him. And now—now he had reached the pine tree that hung over the tram cable. He caught his breath as he saw that the cable was more than twice his height below the tree. **[60]**

"Going to be hard," he breathed, "but I've got it to do. Don't believe I could get back up there if I wanted to, and I don't want to."

Creeping out along the slanting trunk, he concealed himself in the dark green mass of pine needles.

"There's a chance they didn't see me go over," he mused. "Sure would be tough to be shot out of this tree like a squirrel," and he smiled at the grimness of his humor.

The tram car, moving slowly, was still some distance below him. To his excited fancy it seemed to be travelling at a snail's pace. A moment passed; two; three; four. A glance through the branches showed him three men standing on the ridge, scanning the country about them.

"Didn't see me go over," was his mental comment, "may see me yet." He crowded closer to the tree trunk. **[61]**

The car was nearer. The supreme moment was rapidly approaching. Now the car was twenty yards away; now ten; now five; and now—now catching his breath, he slid off the tree-trunk, gripped a stout branch with both hands and then, as the car moved forward, he whispered a little prayer for safety and dropped!

The next instant he found himself on the top of a huge load of massive poplar logs. Between the second and third of these was an inviting hollow space large enough to hide him. With a prayer of thanksgiving he crawled into this shelter. For the time he was safe. He did not know whether he had been seen or not, nor did he care. No bullet from the enemy could reach him here.

"But what of the future?" he asked himself. "Where am I headed for now?"

This question he could not answer, having never before heard of this tram, and he knew but little of the country. **[62]**

The tram car moved slowly upward toward the crest. When he felt it lurch slightly, then tilt in the opposite direction from that which it had been tilted before, he knew that it had crossed the ridge and was descending on the other side.

He was curious to know what kind of country was below him. "I'm a regular Gulliver," he laughed, "venturing into an unknown land exactly as if I was being carried there by an eagle."

Remembering that it was not possible for his three pursuers to mount the ridge, he realized that he was safe from them. Then he sat up to have a look.

The world over which he hung was one of wondrous beauty. Two hundred feet below him, passing slowly by like a panoramic picture, were massive piles of rocks. Farther down were dark green forests, and far beyond these were little farms, looking so small in the distance that they seemed but a patchwork quilt.

Suddenly, from far below him, there rose a shrill whistle. At the same instant his eye caught sight of a column of smoke moving slowly upward among the trees. **[63]**

"Railroad," he murmured. He knew at once the reason for this tram. It was carrying logs to the railroad. Once there, they would be loaded on flat-cars and hurried away to the mills.

"Say," he straightened up with a start, "that timber must be coming from the very land we are surveying—Pant's land."

"Well," he added a moment later, "mebby not exactly from his land. Maybe lower down; but anyway, it's worth looking into. That's one reason why we must hurry and get those lines run; only way we'll ever know just what belongs to Pant. Guess we won't get much done to-night, though," he added ruefully, "take me hours to get back to camp."

With nothing else to do, he began studying the tram. The affair was simply an endless cable with cars attached to it here and there. A considerable distance before him a loaded car was moving forward. Another followed him. Now and then an empty pair of slings passed to his right, moving back up the hill. **[64]**

"Wish I was astride one of those," he said, "I'd soon be back at camp." Vain wish.

So his car crept downward. They had passed over the rocky portions of the mountains and were above the forest when the tram came to a sudden stop. Five minutes he waited for it to start. "Engine trouble, I suppose," he murmured.

Another five minutes passed. The sun was hot; the air still. He

had not slept that day. All night he had worked and he was desperately tired. As he gazed down at the slightly swaying masses of foliage beneath him it seemed a soft inviting bed into whose billowy depths he might drop and be at rest. Leaning back upon the logs he closed his eyes and the next instant was fast asleep.

Five minutes later the tram once more moved downward, but Johnny still slept. In his sleep he was journeying to an unknown land. **[65]**

Swinging like a captive balloon high in air, the tram car moved slowly downward toward the spot whence came the smoke and screech of a train. Johnny slept on.

Arrived at its destination the tram stopped with a movement so slight that it did not waken the sleeper. Had Johnny but known it, he was in greater danger this very moment than he had been when the mountaineer shot at him down in the corn-field; greater even than when he stood alone, trapped by the towering ledge of rock.

A boy, not much older than Johnny, stepped forth from a cubby-hole of a shack. He was a clean looking youth with frank blue eyes. Without bestowing more than a casual glance upon the logs, the boy reached for a long iron bar with a hook at the end of it. He was standing on a raised platform. Beneath him was a huge pile of logs.

Ready for loading, these logs awaited their turn at a flat-car. In a moment, unless some kind Providence intervened, the logs on the tram, swaying slightly backward and forward, would go bumping down to join their comrades. The hook on the end of the rod in the boy's hand fitted a ring in a short lever on the tram. Once pulled, this lever would release the cables that held the logs. Gravity would do the rest. **[66]**

Gravity is a cruel master at times. Johnny was lying asleep between two of those massive logs. Fully six feet through, weighing thousands of pounds, the instant they were released they would go rolling, grinding, crashing down, to leave Johnny a senseless, broken form at the bottom of the pile. Johnny slept peacefully on, unmindful of the impending doom.

The iron bar was raised half way to the ring; the blue eyed boy was gazing away at the distant hills. The thing was about to happen when, of a sudden, there flashed across the boy's vision a vivid yellow flame.

Dropping the lever for an instant he stared straight ahead. The flash of yellow was a wild canary that had gone streaking across the light. For one instant, fairy-like, the bird paused to tilt back and forth on the cable above the logs, then fluttered away. **[67]**

Insignificant as was the flight of this tiny bird, it had doubtless saved Johnny's life. For, as the boy with the bar glanced from the bird to the tram-load of logs, his face blanched. He had caught sight of a hand lying at rest on a log—Johnny's hand.

The next instant he had climbed upon the swaying car and was prodding Johnny vigorously.

"Hey! Hey there! Wake up! You'll be killed!"

Johnny sat up with a start, stared wildly about him for an instant, then broke forth in a hearty laugh.

"I must have gone to sleep," Johnny said, when the laugh was over.

"I'll say you did. Mighty dangerous bed you had. Know what'd happened if I'd pulled the lever on this tram? You'd been crushed like an empty eggshell!" **[68]**

Johnny shivered.

"Come on. Get down. You're holding up the show," said the other boy, "I got to unload."

"Watch this," he said a moment later as, pulling the lever, he sent the logs thundering down.

The sight of this spectacle, and the realization of the full significance of what the averted tragedy meant, for the moment left Johnny paralyzed; the next he put out a hand which the other grasped.

"Thanks, buddy. Thanks awfully. You've saved my life."

"You're welcome. But how did you happen to be on our tram?"

"Got on at a little station by the name of 'Leaning Pine'," smiled Johnny. "I was trying to leave somebody behind."

"Chasin' you, were they? Might I ask you if there was a fellow known as Squirrel Head mixed up in it?" **[69]**

"There was."

"Thought so. He rules up there, so they say. What he can't rule, he ruins."

"He can't rule me," said Johnny, setting his teeth hard, "and if I can help it, he won't ruin me, either."

"What's that?" he asked, as a long, low rattling sound came to his ear.

"Coal going down the chute."

"Where from?"

"Mines."

"Coal mines here?"

"The mountains are full of 'em. Finest in the world. Five veins to the top of the mountain; four to nine feet thick. All you got to do is mine it and chute it down; that is, if the veins are level. They tilt quite a bit 'round here. You see," he smiled, noting Johnny's intense interest, "these veins run clear through the mountains. At some period after nature had deposited the coal here there was a disturbance on the earth's crust and the land was tilted. That means that the coal veins are all lower on the other side than here; means you've got to have power to pull it up that grade and powerful pumps going night and day to keep the water out. Drainage is naturally all the other way. Some day they'll have a railroad on Turkey Creek across the mountain where you came from. Not so long off, either. Then all the coal will be mined from that side. This man Squirrel Head owns most of the land over there, so that will be a clean-up for him. They say, though, that there's a strip of rough land at the head of the creek that he can't show clear title to." [70]

"I should say there is!" The words were on Johnny's lips, but he checked them. He had learned the folly of confiding in strangers. Instead, he asked:

"Where's the trail that leads back over the mountain?"

"Down to your right. Follow up the creek. Take the left fork when you come to it. You can't miss it. Well, here's another load of logs. Gotta get busy. Good luck!" [71]

Johnny climbed down the shaky stairs and sought out the beginning of the long trail that was to take him back to his own camp.

"That boy," he said to himself, "has done me two great favors; saved my life, and given me some valuable information. I never saw him before; may never see him again. It sure is a strange old world."

Darkness fell when he was only half way up the mountain, but he plodded on. [72]

CHAPTER V
THE SMOKING TREE

In the meantime Pant, too, had been treated to a surprise. Having waited with growing impatience for the return of his pal, he at last crept out from cover and keeping in the shadow of the bushes, made his way to the entrance of the Hidden Trail.

Just what he intended doing he did not know. Had he formed any definite plan it would doubtless have been upset, for just as he was nearing the spring at the head of the trail his keen eye detected a movement off to the right.

Throwing himself flat behind a fallen tree, he peered over the top of it. There was some person moving over there; of that he was certain, though he could not see who it was.

"Probably Johnny," he told himself, and the thought relieved him. "Can't be sure, though. Better not call to him. Better scout around after him and make sure." [73]

Then he proceeded to stalk the person as a hunter stalks a deer. Moving in an ever narrowing circle, he dodged from tree to tree. Now he caught sight of his quarry, and now he lost him. Now he was sure it was Johnny, and now sure it wasn't. He had lessened the distance between them by half when the person suddenly turned and bounded away.

"That's not Johnny," Pant concluded, "he doesn't run that way. Looks like—why it looks like that lanky boy we chased over the cliff! But shucks! It couldn't be."

Finding it impossible to resist the temptation to follow, he broke into a brisk run. For fifteen minutes he and this unknown person played hide and seek among the trees. Then suddenly, near the base of a giant chestnut tree, the stranger disappeared. Pant saw him plainly. He had been leaning against the tree and bending over as if lacing his shoe. Then he had moved around the tree. At this movement Pant charged the tree. Since the chestnut stood in a clear spot where there was no brush, it did not seem possible that anyone could have raced away from its shelter. Yet when Pant came puffing up there was no one to be seen. [74]

"Well, now what—" he said, bewildered.

Just then he heard a scratching sound above him. Glancing upward, he thought he saw a movement among the lower branches.

"Um!" he muttered. "Couldn't be. Forty feet to the first branch

and five feet through if it's an inch. The fellow don't live that could climb that tree."

Just then he was sure he heard a low chuckle. He was certain it came from the top of the tree. Wheeling about he looked steadily upward, but saw nothing unusual.

As his gaze finally dropped it came suddenly to rest on the trunk of the tree. Here and there at regular intervals were small, fresh cuts or jabs in the bark. These marks extended as far up as he could see.

"Huh!" he grunted, "that wasn't any man I was following; it was an ape!" [75]

Then, as if afraid the ape would send a shower of cocoanuts down on his head, he hurriedly retreated. Even as he did so he again heard that low, subdued chuckle.

Pant could not escape the haunting mystery of the sudden disappearance of the unknown stranger. Could it be that this youth who had so suddenly disappeared at the foot of the chestnut tree was the boy he had thought dead at the base of the cliff; or was it some outlaw seeking refuge in the hills?

Deep in thought, he was slowly making his way back to camp when another mystery, more uncanny than the first, drew him off his course.

He was just rounding the sloping side of the mountain when his keen eyes caught sight of something that seemed strange. About the trunk of a scraggly chestnut tree there hung a white smoke or vapor.

"That's queer," he said, "sky's clear as a bell. Hasn't been a drop of rain for a week and there wasn't any fog this morning. Yet that white vapor hangs there. How come?" [76]

He was about even with the point on the tree where the vapor hung, but the base of the tree was thirty feet down the slope.

"Limbs hang low," he muttered, "could climb it. Guess I will."

A moment later he was swinging nimbly up into the first branch. Climbing steadily, he mounted upward until with a final scramble he threw himself on the very branch about which the vapor appeared. He sniffed the air once, then discovering a squirrel hole, he applied his nostrils to it.

"Smoke—wood smoke!" he exclaimed in surprise. "No question about it. Tree's hollow. It's on fire. Wonder what set it on fire? Wonder—"

He did not finish his wondering. Instead, he began a swift and hurried descent. The thought had struck him that if the tree was really on fire, the fire must be at its base; that it might burn off

and go crashing down at any moment. He had no desire to be up there when the tree fell.

On reaching the ground he was more puzzled than before. The trunk of the tree, though undoubtedly hollow, had not a single opening at the bottom. What was more, it showed not the slightest sign of heat. [77]

"That's the queerest tree I ever saw," he said. "Good as Moses' burning bush. Hasn't a single place to give fire a draft, yet it smokes. It must be on fire, yet it doesn't grow hot. Shouldn't wonder if I'd find it still smoking if I came back in twenty-four hours."

He did return in twenty-four hours and it was still smoking; but other things of importance happened before that. Pant was destined to make a third startling discovery before that day was done.

"This is the weirdest mountain I was ever on," he said as he turned toward camp. "First I follow a fellow who climbs huge tree trunks like an ape, and then I discover a tree that smokes but does not burn. What next?" He stole silently back to the camp beneath the pines to think it over; to wonder what had become of Johnny; then to sleep a little. When he awoke it was dark. [78]

Much disturbed by the fact that Johnny had not returned, a great uneasiness seized him. He thought of a thousand and one things that might have happened to his pal, and moving about he at last crept out into the darkness that brooded over the mountain side. He had not gone a hundred yards when, off to the right and down the slope, he saw a gleam of light.

"Some of these mountaineers may have captured him, and that may be their camp," he mused as he moved toward the light.

As he came closer he discovered that the light was in a deserted cabin at the edge of a little clearing. Creeping silently forward, he at last peered cautiously through a small paneless window. What he saw caused him to step back as if he had seen a ghost.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "May I be jiggered! If it ain't him!" [79]

CHAPTER VI
BAITING A STRANGE TRAP

"Johnny," said Pant, "I've seen our mystery boy of the mountain."

"You—you have?" Johnny's sleepy eyes flew wide open in surprise.

"Yes sir, I have! He's alive as you are."

"Where'd you see him?"

"In the cabin above the clearing."

"Did you get him?"

"Didn't try; and you wouldn't have, either, if you'd been there."

"Why?"

Pant did not answer at once but sat staring dreamily at the little fire they had kindled on a shelving rock. The rock, hidden away as it was in a dense thicket, made an excellent hearth on which to broil bacon and brew coffee.

It had been late when Johnny at last came to the end of his journey over the steep and weary miles that lay between the log landing and his camp. He was dead tired. Now that his appetite had been appeased he felt that he could fall asleep sitting up and sleep till morning. **[80]**

Pant's news of the discovery of the lean and hungry mystery boy, safe and alive, when they had thought of him as lying crushed and lifeless at the foot of the cliff, was too sensational to permit of rest until the whole story had been told. There was but one door to that cabin. Without question Pant could have stolen upon him unawares and trapped him there.

"Did he have a gun?" Johnny asked.

"Huh?" Pant was startled by the question. "Who? Him? No; not that I saw."

Another theory exploded. Johnny again lapsed into silence.

"Johnny," Pant mused at last, "this thing that men call 'love for home' is a thing I can't quite understand. I've never had a home. Sometimes, though—" he paused to stare dreamily into the fire—"sometimes I think there's a lot that I've missed by not ever having a home; a home where I was born and brought **[81]**

up and didn't ever leave until I was old enough to go out to make my own way. Some boys run away from home but they usually come back. Why? Home draws 'em back. There must be something wonderful about a home. Sometimes a home'll bring a fellow back when he knows there isn't anything there but the old house and the old garden; no folks, no furniture, garden grown to weeds, roof leaking; and yet a fellow'll haunt it like a ghost. Why?" A huskiness had crept into Pant's voice.

"Memories," Johnny said, his own voice faltering.

"Memories," Pant repeated thoughtfully, "I suppose that's it. That's why I didn't try to get that slim boy to-night."

Again he ceased speaking, as one who senses that the thoughts of his companion are keeping pace with his own.

The fire had died down to a few glistening coals. From somewhere in the distance a bird disturbed from his dreams uttered a low, plaintive night call. Then all was silence again. **[82]**

"Johnny," Pant's voice was full of emotion, "it doesn't seem to take an awful lot to make a home. I've seen people up in our country spend thousands of dollars to build a home. Rooms and rooms there were, and great porches. Broad, green lawns, gardens an' flowers an' everything, yet no one seemed to think of it as home. Went off to the seashore, or mountains or city, and didn't come back until they had to. Place wasn't home.

"And then, I've watched some of these people down here. A log cabin, two rooms and a door; mebby two windows and a little porch; some splint-bottom chairs; two home-made rope beds and a spinning-wheel. And Johnny," he put his hand on his pal's knee, "Johnny, sure's I'm here, that makes a home; a place men'll fight for, a place a lonesome boy thousands of miles away will yearn for until his yearning brings him back. I don't understand it all, for I've never had a home; but somehow I have a feeling that a home, a real home that you long for and ache for when you're away, is about the most wonderful thing in all the world.

"Johnny," Pant's voice lowered with intense earnestness, "that little old tumbled down cabin is that strange boy's home, the home where he was born and brought up. And Johnny—he wasn't alone in that cabin tonight. He'd found a chair somewhere and had set it before the hearth. There was a little fire in the fireplace to keep off the night chill of the mountains. He was sitting on the floor in the corner by the hearth. There was someone else sitting in that chair; for him there was—. That's why I didn't disturb him, but just crept away and left him alone." **[83]**

It had been this same mysterious boy of the mountain that Pant had seen through the window of the cabin.

Johnny asked no further questions. He understood Pant's mood and knew what he meant by the someone in the splint-bottomed chair. Visions of his own home and happy childhood crowded round him, and for a little while he lost himself in memory—memory of those who in earlier years had gathered round an open hearth fire. [84]

"Johnny," Pant said after a long silence, "if you wanted to catch one of these mountain squirrels alive you wouldn't try to run him down, now would you?"

"No, I should think not," laughed Johnny.

"It wouldn't be sense, and it wasn't sense for us to try to run that boy down, either. If you wanted to catch a squirrel you'd set a trap and bait. That's what we're going to do with that boy. He looks bright. He could help us a lot, and we can help him. He needs friends. We'll sleep to-night; not work at all. To-morrow we'll set a trap for him."

"How?"

"Gene brought up some pork chops this morning."

"Pork chops!" Johnny's mouth watered.

"Yes. Grandmother had a pig killed. I put 'em in our box by the cold spring. Don't suppose that boy has had any pork chops for weeks, mebby months, do you?" [85]

"Don't suppose so."

"Well then, he'd pretty near go to jail for some. That's how most of us like pork chops. If we cook 'em on an old pitchy pine stump near his cabin, so the smell of 'em drifts in at his cabin door, they'll bring him out of his hole like water brings out a gopher."

"Might."

"You wait and see if it doesn't."

A short time later the two boys, wrapped in their homespun blankets, were fast asleep.

Next morning, long before dawn had appeared on the crest of Big Black Mountain, Johnny and Pant were creeping away toward the cabin at edge of the deserted clearing.

Arriving at the pine stump, they laid the fire with extreme care. This done, they sat down to await some sign of life at the cabin.

As the first faint streaks of dawn appeared they caught a better view of the tumble-down house. It was indeed a forlorn and ragged shelter, this place that had once been a home. Weeds [86]

and brambles surrounded it, and in the midst of them all, braver and more hardy than the rest of the race, a single hollyhock lifted a row of flaming scarlet blossoms toward the sky.

"Like the slim boy," Johnny thought to himself, "the last of his clan."

"There's his light!" whispered Pant. "Time to set off the fire."

The next moment a column of smoke rose straight up among the tree tops.

"No wind," Johnny said, shaking his head.

It was a tense moment. Would there be enough wind to carry the savory odor of frying pork chops to its goal? Would the smoke, reaching the cabin too soon, spoil their plans? The boy, too, had a fire; the smoke of it was beginning to rise out of the dilapidated chimney. That was good. If he smelled their smoke he might think it came from his own fire. The pork chop odor would be different. But would it reach him?

Moments passed. The fire had burned down to a mass of bright red, smokeless coals, when Providence sent a gentle breeze creeping up the mountain. **[87]**

"Now, now's the time!" Pant whispered.

In a rude broiler made of wire, Johnny held the pork chops over the coals.

"M-m-m!" murmured Pant. "Never smelled anything half so good. Feel like I hadn't had one for a year. He can't resist it, Johnny, honest he can't!"

Turning their backs to the cabin, as if ignorant of the presence of the strange boy, they waited.

"Listen," said Johnny, "he's singing."

Sure enough, through the still morning air there came a humming sound. The humming broke up into words:

> "From Widdertown to Watertown is fifteen miles,
> From Watertown to Widdertown is fifteen miles."

It was with great difficulty that the boys suppressed a laugh, for he sang on and on in the droll chant of the mountain country, now and then placing an uncommon emphasis on "fifteen miles," but otherwise singing the words over and over again. **[88]**

Then suddenly he broke off in the middle of a line.

"He's got it," Pant breathed excitedly, "he's smelled our bait! Now we'll see what we see."

A minute passed; two; three. The chops were done to a delicious turn on one side. The other side was reaching that same stage of perfection when there sounded the snapping of twigs behind them.

"Don't turn round," Pant cautioned, "he's fallen for it. Swallowed hook, line and sinker. He's coming!"

He was right. A half moment later a quavering voice said:

"D'you fellers mind givin' me a chaw at them pork chops? I ain't et nuthin' but taters an' corn pone fer nigh on a month; be a whole month, comin' Tuesday."

"Sure thing," grinned Pant, "sit right down. We've got plenty of them." **[89]**

As the boy stared at their ample supply a look of doubt appeared on his long, droll face.

"You hain't—you hain't been out a hog killin' hev ye? 'Cause if y'hev I couldn't eat narry bit of them thar pork chops; never hev had nothin' to do with hog-killers and never will."

Johnny, not knowing what he meant, stared at him in perplexity. He read in the boy's face a look of pain which showed plainer than words that he feared some scruple might yet rob him of his feast.

"I know what he means," said Pant with a laugh, "he wants to know if we've killed some hog that was running wild in the mountains and didn't belong to us."

"No," he said, turning to the stranger, "we didn't. We bought those chops from a girl named Gene."

"Oh! Gene," the boy's face broke into a smile.

Then remembering some of the words of former hosts, Pant indulged in a bit of mountain dialect: **[90]**

"Draw up a cheer. Make a long arm, and help yerself."

The boy flashed him a smile, then put out a hand for a chop.

Although evidently ravenously hungry, he refused to accept more than an equal third of the food. For the most part they ate in silence. Taking a long nibble at his last chop, then throwing the bone away, Johnny turned to shoot a sudden question at the boy:

"What you doing up here all by yourself?"

"Me?" The boy stared for a second. "Me? Why, I'm jest sort of hidin' out up here, I reckon. What you?"

Johnny looked at him and smiled. “Guess we’re sort of hidin’ out up here, too. Want’a join us?”

“I don’t mind. Hit’s a bit lonesome up here all alone.”

Johnny put out his hand. The other boy grasped it with firm, bony fingers. Thus a compact was formed that was destined to bring fresh adventures to both the parties entering into it. [91]

“That your home?” Johnny asked, jerking his head in the direction of the cabin.

“I reckon it are. Leastwise it were.” the boy hesitantly added. “They’re all gone now—all but me—Pap, Marm an’ Mary.”

As they made their way round the mountainside Johnny did not ask Pant where the person was who had been seated in the chair by the fire the night before. He knew that that person was the boy’s mother and that she had been there only in the lonely fellow’s imagination. Walking along he whispered to himself: “What Pant said about folks and their homes is about as near right as you could make it.”

Just after dark that night the mountain boy stole out of camp, returning an hour later with his arms full of corn taken from the deserted field, and his pockets bulging with potatoes that had grown wild in a deserted clearing. After that, all night long he wielded an ax, clearing the way for the boys as they ran their lines.

Such splendid progress did they make that night, so eager were they to complete the survey of a certain tract, that they failed to note the approach of dawn. [92]

As Johnny stood with his flashlight focussed upon his red and white pole, awaiting Pant’s low whistled signal, he was puzzling over some of the problems and mysteries in connection with this strange adventure. Would Pant be able to complete his survey? Would he be able to establish his claims to the land? What was the land worth? Did Squirrel Head want it? And why? Was he—Johnny—right in guessing that Pant’s rough land was the key to all the wide coal tracts back of Turkey Creek?

Pant had told him of the new mysteries; the tree climbing man, or ape, or whatever he might be, and the smoking tree. What could be the solution of these? And this mysterious, hungry-looking boy, what of him? “I wonder why he’s hiding out. I wonder—”

His wonderings were suddenly cut short by a shrill whisper in his ear. [93]

“Hist! Look a yonder!”

It was the strange boy speaking. Johnny looked up quickly and

what he saw made his heart skip a beat. Morning was here. A fog had suddenly lifted, revealing three men on the mountainside not a hundred rods away. One of them was Squirrel Head.

"Cum on," the boy urged. "I know a safe place; they'd never find us thar."

He pulled at Johnny's coat sleeve. The next moment Johnny found himself joining Pant and following their fleeing guide around the mountain. The three men, with Squirrel Head in the lead, were in full pursuit.

CHAPTER VII
TRAPPED IN THE HIDDEN MINE

The slim boy's skill at getting through thickets, down steep shelving banks and over ledges, was most astonishing. No less remarkable was his ability to keep the entire party under cover and safe from a possible shot from their pursuers.

They skirted the hill, circled a clump of pine trees, crept along beneath a tangled mass of undergrowth, dropped down a brook-bottomed hidden trail, then suddenly turning to the right, sped along beneath dark, damp foliage of rhododendrons to at last enter a den-like hole in the earth.

To Johnny's astonishment he saw that this cave, extending for three or four hundred feet in the earth, was lined with stout props cut from tree trunks.

"What sort of a den is this?" he asked himself. "And who could have gone to all the trouble of digging it? Weeks of hard work, for what purpose?" [95]

As he brushed against one of the poles he realized that it had been placed there years before. Its surface was soft with damp moss and rot; the whole place was cold and damp as a grave. After pushing along through the darkness for some three hundred feet they came to a sudden halt.

"Here we are," the slim boy whispered, "now for a light and a little fire."

"A fire!" Johnny fairly gasped. "How can you have a fire in such a place? You'll smoke us out like coons in a hollow tree."

"Oh no," the boy chuckled, and striking a match he lighted a candle. "I've got a sort of stove rigged up here. Hit don't smoke narry bit."

Johnny smiled. He'd like to see a stove that wouldn't smoke in an underground cavity.

To his great astonishment, he found that it did not smoke. The stove was an ingenious affair. Made of a discarded sheet-iron wash tub, it was topped by a small stovepipe which had doubtless been fashioned from old tin cans. The pipe rose to the low, rocky ceiling and stopped there. The stove burned wood, and had a perfect draft. [96]

"Some magic there," he whispered to Pant.

Pant grinned, but said nothing. If he had guessed the secret he did not say so.

"We kin have some breakfast," said the boy in a business-like tone, "I got some taters and some corn meal."

He proceeded to prepare a meal that was relished by the hungry boys, despite its exceeding plainness.

As Johnny leaned back he brushed against something that gave forth a metallic rattle.

"What's that?" he asked, as he turned about to stare at some curious instruments of rusty steel and black leather.

"Climbers," said the boy. "Can climb anything with them. Got the notion from some fellers that put electric wires on poles. There's a steel bar that runs along your leg and curves under your foot, an' there's a barb that sticks in a pole or a tree. You just strap them to your feet an' go right up." **[97]**

To Johnny this meant very little, but to Pant it suggested the solution of a mystery. He had not forgotten the race across the hillside, the marks on the giant chestnut tree, and the mocking laugh from the top.

Had the boys known it, this humble pair of pole climbers was destined to play a part in making them, together with their new companion, the heroes of all this mountain country.

"That man," the slim boy drawled as they sat by the fire, "did he want you?"

"It seems," grinned Johnny, "that he does. I don't quite know why."

"That's Squirrel Head Blevins," the boy said slowly. "He wants me, too."

For a time he sat silently staring at the fire. Johnny wished to ask him why he was wanted by their common enemy. There were other things it would have pleased him to know; how the boy had escaped from the top of the cliff without being dashed to his death on the rocks below; whether the patch of pink cloth that looked like airplane silk and which at this moment reposed in his pocket, had anything to do with it. There were questions enough that he might have asked, but at present this boy was his host. He had saved them from possible capture. For this Johnny was grateful. To ask questions under certain circumstances is rude. He respected the other's secret and held his tongue. **[98]**

In this he was wise. There was no need to ask. The boy, as he sat there, was arranging thoughts in his mind. That he might tell it well, he was thinking his own story through.

"I reckon," he drawled at last, "you think hit's plum quare that I'm hidin' out up here, and I reckon as how it is. I always lived in the mountings until a year ago. Then Squirrel Head sent me away with a man from the outside, a right mean sort of man

with a big, black mustache. He told me he'd give me a heap of money, but he never did, not hardly narry a cent.

"I reckon you know that cabin up yonder at the edge of the clarin' was my home. Once I had folks; you know that, too. You don't know that the land we was surveyin' over last night was said to be my Pap's once. Yep, a hundred acres more or less. There waren't no deed that we could find, so Squirrel Head took hit and sent me away with this here man. [99]

"Peers like I never got fat. Suppose you thought I was skinny cause I was starved. That ain't so. I was always skinny. Well, this here man he said he'd put me in an exhibit that he was takin' round to county fairs an' he'd pay me big money; but he never did, not narry a cent.

"There was a fat woman in the exhibition, and a tattoed man an' a feller that took rabbits an' things out of a hat. Me—they called me the 'livin' skeleton.' Yep, that's what they called me, but I didn't mind that narry bit. Made me sleep on straw, they did. They didn't give me much to eat so's I'd stay poor, but I didn't mind that none neither. Hit don't take much fur me.

"Say!" he leaned forward impressively, "do you know what I minded? I reckon you wouldn't understand, fer you never lived in the mountings. There was two things I couldn't get used to. You know how the water bubbles up clear and cold from these here mounting springs? Well, there ain't no other water that's really meant to drink. Hit's plum quare, but I couldn't never git used to drinkin' out of a pipe er a tank. [100]

"And there was the mountings theirselves. You hain't never lived much in the mountings. If you had, you'd know what it is to yearn fer 'em. They say if you get yer foot wet in Turkey Creek you'll never leave it fer good. I reckon that's jest naturally a fact. I wanted to come back to the mountains and Turkey Creek, to the cool springs and to—to—" his voice grew low with emotion, "to the cabin up yander that me and Pap and Marm and Sis once called home. So I ran away and came back. I like it. I can't never go away again. Not never. I'm hidin' out up here so's Squirrel Head won't git me an' send me back."

For a time the three boys sat there in silence. The story of the young mountaineer sank deep into the hearts of his hearers. Each in his own way was resolving that from this time forward the safety and welfare of this boy, and the restoring of his father's land to him, should be of greater interest to them than their own safety and the land to which they held claim. [101]

"What's your name?" Pant asked.

"Napoleon Setser," said the boy. "Most folks calls me Pole."

Johnny had difficulty in suppressing a smile. "A queer name,"

he thought to himself, “but then, these mountain people are queer.”

“Might as well sleep,” said the mountain boy, “kinda damp here, but the fire helps.” He thrust some fresh wood into the stove and stretching before it, he was soon fast asleep.

“Going to have a look around,” Pant said as he disappeared into the dark. A moment later Johnny saw the round, white glow of Pant’s flashlight playing on the walls of the cave. [102]

This cavern was surely a strange place. Someone had dug into the mountain-side at the cost of many days of arduous toil. Why? Johnny had found a smooth place on the rocky floor and had all but wondered himself to sleep over this problem when he heard Pant speak:

“Say, this place’s a mine!”

“Couldn’t be,” Johnny protested, “can’t ship coal where there’s no railroad.”

“It is, though. I tell you the walls are solid coal.”

Johnny let out a low whistle. Here was good news indeed. A coal mine on Pant’s land! What could it mean?

“How far back does it go?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Didn’t go clear back. Just wanted to make sure I knew the way out. Might as well go to sleep now.”

“Guess so.”

A rock floor does not make a good bed, but the boys had abounding health and a great need of sleep. They were soon in the land of slumbers. [103]

How long they slept Johnny could not have told. At last he awoke with a sudden start. A flash of light had played across his face.

There was no light now but he thought he caught a faint breath of air on his cheek. “Probably Pant moving,” was his mental comment, “something’s wrong, I’m sure of that.”

His nerves were all a-tingle. With little quivvers running up and down his spine, he sat there listening. For a moment he heard nothing, then there came a low subdued whisper:

“Steady now, and we’ve got ’em. I saw ’em. They’re asleep. Hit wasn’t ten feet from here. Couldn’t be—Get ready! When I flash on the light throw your guns on ’em. ’Twon’t hurt none to shoot. Nobody’d ever find ’em here.”

Johnny’s blood ran cold. The whispers undoubtedly referred to [104]

them. It must have come from Squirrel Head. In another second a light would flash; one move from him and a revolver would crack. That sound might be the last he would ever hear. Something must be done, and that quickly.

The ten seconds that followed seemed a year. All Johnny's life stood out before him as if upon a screen. His heart was pounding frightfully. At the moment when he had decided that he must move he found himself staring into the blinding light of a powerful electric torch.

It was a brilliant light, but the flash that instantly followed was a hundred times more blinding. It was the light that had burst above them on the night they had escaped from Squirrel Head near the Hidden Trail. For a second it paralyzed Johnny. The next instant he heard a voice in his ear:

"This way out!"

Then, half dragged by Pant, he began making his way in a direction quite unknown to him. The truth of the matter was that in the confusion he had lost all sense of direction.

CHAPTER VIII
THE HEROISM OF 'POLE

Before he knew what had happened, Johnny found himself blinking in the full light of day. The next moment he was speeding along through the brush with his companions, headed for the upper end of the Hidden Trail.

Now and then they heard the sound of voices, and anxious to leave Squirrel Head and his men well in the rear, they raced on until at last they found rest and shelter in the cool bed of the brook that bubbled along beneath thickly entangled rhododendrons.

"They found us!" A low groan escaped from the lips of 'Pole. "Hit's my last hidin' place. What'll I'll do now? I've got nary place left to go."

"Don't you worry," Johnny stoutly encouraged, "we're with you to the last ditch! Eh, Pant?" **[106]**

Pant nodded vigorously.

"We'll do as much for you as we would for ourselves, and more."

The hollow, deep-set, brown eyes of the mountain boy flashed his thanks.

"Thing that gets me," said Johnny, "is how they happened to find us? Saw the smoke from the stove, probably."

"Reckon not!" protested 'Pole. "That thar chimney of mine was the slickest ever, if it was a tree."

"A tree?"

'Pole offered no further comment and Johnny checked a question that was on his lips. He did not see how a tree could be a chimney. Pant, however, understood. He remembered the smoking tree that did not burn and he concluded that it must have been just about over the mine.

"Tell you what," said 'Pole, "we'll be safe here till night. Even if they found us here they'd never ketch us. Hit's a regular rabbits' runway; little branch here, 'nother thar. We could plum wear 'em out. T'ain't likely they'll find us, neither. N' after dark, what say we go down to Ages? That's a settlement at th' mouth of Turkey Creek. I got a friend down thar, Bud Thurman. He's th' fightenest man I most ever seed. Don't never pack narry gun, Bud don't; don't never have to. About everybody's afraid of him without narry gun. He's plum square, Bud is. He **[107]**

likes Furiners, too. Hit's more'n likely he'll help us.

"Anyway," the boy's voice grew mellow with recollection, "Ages is where my old school is; th' Mission School, they called hit. Kinda like t' see hit. Kinda like to sit in my old seat and gaze outa th' window. Guess you won't understand, but hit's sort of quare what ideas a feller gets about them things."

Johnny nodded. He did understand. He, too, would gladly have gone back to the school he had attended as a beginner; to crowd himself into the small seat and gaze out of the window at the drifting clouds.

"Hit's plum quare," 'Pole continued, "I reckon us mounting folks is funny thet away, but you know thar's the cold spring above the school whar all us youngsters used t' rush at noon an' recess. Well, sir, I'm a-honin' to get a drink from that thar spring. I reckon hit's somethin' like this here King David when he war away from home wantin' a drink from the old well." **[108]**

'Pole shifted uneasily, as if against his will his feet would carry him back to the old spring. Something rattled at his side. Johnny held up a warning finger.

"My tree climbers," 'Pole explained. "Lot of help sometimes."

Johnny was reminded of the time the boy had disappeared from the top of the cliff. He wanted to ask how it had been accomplished, but after a moment of reflection decided to let the matter rest.

The shadows of night had already fallen when the three boys, emerging from the bushes at the lower end of the Hidden Trail, made their way toward the cluster of houses that nestled near the base of the mountain at the mouth of Turkey Creek. **[109]**

An hour later the three boys sat in the deep shadows of a beech tree that grew over the cold spring above the school, and gazed down at the little town that lay a hundred feet below them. Lights were blinking on here and there. A steady glow of light streamed from the window of a room some forty feet above the ground.

"That's the school," whispered 'Pole, with intense enthusiasm in his voice. "Thar's whar I went t' school. My seat, hit war th' second from the back, first floor, by th' windey. That windey whar the light shines is whar some children study's with the teacher nights."

Johnny was thinking of the school and glorying in the mountain boy's love for it; thinking, too, of the school which he once loved, when there came a sudden exclamation from Pant:

"What's that smoke?" he cried, jumping up. **[110]**

"Where?"

“To the right.”

“Hit’s fire!” exclaimed ’Pole, leaping to his feet and jumping aimlessly about in his excitement. “The school’s on fire. Look! Look! Thar’s flames! Hit’s by the stairs, an’ thar’s children up thar an’—an’ like as not a teacher.”

Springing to his feet, Johnny cupped his hands and sent out a roaring warning:

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!”

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!” the mountains caught up the cry and sent it echoing from peak to peak.

In a moment of time the two narrow streets of the town were swarming with people. Wildly excited, women screaming, men shouting, children crying, they raced for the school house. A few minutes later the three boys, unnoticed, joined the throng. Squirrel Head Blevins was there. Johnny brushed shoulders with him. In the excitement of impending catastrophe all else was forgotten. A half score of children and their teachers were in that third story room. Leaning far out of the windows, they could be seen calling for aid. What could be done? The fire, starting near the stairs, had cut off their only avenue of escape. In that small town there was no fire company, no water-works, no ladders long enough to reach half that height. Yet something must be done. The screams of women, the shouts of men vainly suggesting plans that could not be carried out, and the shrill crying of children grew steadily louder, increasing the noise and din. **[111]**

Suddenly there came a lull. A gaunt figure of a boy with a rope about his waist had walked to the corner nearest the window where the light still burned, and firmly grasping the tin water-spout that ran down the corner of the building, sent first one foot and then the other crashing against the poplar siding. The first foot rose, then the other. He was climbing the corner of the building. Up he went, step by step. Now he was even with the top of the first story window; now the bottom of the second story.

How did he do it? The gasping, silent people did not know. They only knew that in this boy there rested the last remaining hope for the best loved teacher of their school and for the brightest children of the village. **[112]**

Very few of the anxious watchers knew how it was being accomplished, this uncanny scaling of the board wall, yet they sensed that much depended upon the strength of the clapboards. One rotten board, a crushing, crumpling sound, and down would come the rescuer, crashing helplessly to the ground.

It had been Johnny Thompson who had suggested the plan and Pant had hastily secured the rope. ’Pole, with his tree-

climbers, was attempting to climb the corner of the building.

As he rose higher and higher the murmur of astonishment changed to words of encouragement. As he at last came to the level of the window where waited the white-faced teacher, 'Pole put out a hand and, steadied by the brave protector of her little flock, swung through the window. A shout of applause arose that set all the mountains echoing.

In a moment the rope was fastened to a beam inside the room **[113]**
and a second later Johnny was going up hand over hand. With strong and steady skill in the face of fierce flames that leaped at them and smoke that stifled, they lowered away first the children, then the teacher. Then, black and grimy, Johnny and 'Pole came down hand over hand.

As they reached the ground the crowd surged back. Already the walls were tottering. The school was doomed. Three minutes later, with a leaping rush of flames, the whole structure caved in—a mass of smouldering ruins.

With tears of gratitude streaming down their faces the simple mountain people crowded around the rescuers. The boys took their honors modestly. 'Pole even tried to slip away, but the press of people was too great.

In the midst of this there came a loud voice of command:

"Let me though thar. Let me hev them boys." **[114]**

Johnny caught sight of the small round head of Squirrel Head Blevins.

"I tell you, let me though," Squirrel Head bellowed. "I seed 'em by the light of the flames. I been lookin' for them boys. They done me dirt. I mean to arrest 'em an' hog-tie 'em."

A great hush fell on the crowd, such an ominous silence as comes before a storm. They faced about, but did not give way. Instead, men, women and children alike appeared to crowd closer as if to protect their heroes.

Pushing slowly through the crowd, making his way to the front, was a very small man with keen blue eyes and short cropped hair. He was a most insignificant looking person, clad in blue denim shirt and overalls. Johnny noticed that he carried no gun.

"Hit's Bud Thurman," 'Pole whispered in Johnny's ear, "you watch."

When the small man had reached the outer edge of the crowd, **[115]**
fixing his eyes on Squirrel Head who carried two heavy guns strapped to his person, he said in a quiet, steady voice:

"Squirrel Head, I reckon you hain't got no call to start any of your rough tricks here. People round about the mouth of Turkey

Creek is known as peaceable folks, but we don't mind a fight, narry bit. We know perty well just what yer quarrel with these boys is, and we don't join in with hit much. Things bein' as they are, and bein's we're plannin' to show these boys a little mountain hospitality, I reckon you and your men better be at the upper edge of the settlement in three minutes and still a goin' up."

Then he took his watch from his pocket and in the dead silence Johnny fancied that he could hear the steady ticking of that watch.

For a moment Squirrel Head faced them, grim visaged but irresolute. There was probably not a gun carried by any member of the group. They had come to fight a common enemy —fire, and not men—but there was something far more threatening in that grim silence than in the rattle of many firearms. Dropping his eyes he turned slowly around and closely followed by his men, strode away. Not a word was spoken by any member of either faction, and even Squirrel Head's men followed after their leader without word of command. **[116]**

[117]

CHAPTER IX
"HIT'S WAR"

For a moment, as if for mutual protection, the tense group stood massed together. Then, as Squirrel Head and his men disappeared into the darkness that lay beyond the flaming ruins, the people scattered into little parties. Some stood mournfully watching the last flashing flames devouring the school they had loved so well. Others, squatting on the ground, conversed in low whispers. As Johnny stood listening he had a subconscious feeling that this was but the fore-runner of a greater tragedy; a grim spectre that appeared to loom out of the darkness and cause his knees to tremble a little and his heart to feel suddenly cold.

The name he caught most on the lips of these whisperers was "Squirrel Head." Why was this? He knew but little about this man who had been hunting him down. The boy across the mountain at the other end of the tram had said that Squirrel Head ruled this country. That might be partly true, but not entirely so, for he had been sent cowering up the creek a few minutes before by a strangely brave and unarmed man—Bud Thurman. [118]

Suddenly Johnny realized that he was living among people whose ways were as foreign to him as were those of people dwelling in the heart of Africa or India. If he and Pant were to own land down here; if they were to plead their claims and win; if they were to develop their resources, cut away their timber and mine their coal, then they must come into a better understanding of these simple mountain folk.

"Fortune," he said to himself, "has been kind in one way. The daring act of our friend 'Pole has apparently made us many friends. From this beginning perhaps we can at last become members of a clan; but it will never be Squirrel Head's clan. It will be—"

His thought broke short off. From the side of the hill there came a flash, followed instantly by the crack of a rifle and the sing of a bullet. It brought an exclamation of terror to every lip. [119]

The bullet passed so close to Johnny that it burned his cheek. He heard the dull thud as it struck someone behind him. Turning about he saw 'Pole grip at his chest, then reel for a fall. Like dust before a storm the people were scattering and disappearing into the dark.

Lifting the wounded boy in his arms, Johnny sprang for cover. He was not a moment too soon, for again the rifle cracked, again a bullet sang past him. A second later he halted behind a

tree, where for the moment he was safe.

"Here," called a voice behind him, "bring him this way." It was the little man, Bud Thurman, speaking, and his eyes spoke admiration for Johnny's courage.

Leading the way, he at last reached a two-room log cabin that was dark. Pushing open the door, he waited for Johnny to pass with his limp burden. [120]

"That's a bed yonder by the far wall," he said, "have a light in a minute."

"I reckon," he drawled, as he pulled down a shade, "thet thet thar shot wuz meant fer you. Hit got 'Pole in yer stead. Hit were Squirrel Head thet fired thet shot. I knowed the crack of his gun. He's as mean as pizen and crooked as a snake, and there hain't no dependence to be put in him. Hit's the last low down dirt he'll ever do. Recollect whut I say. The time is come. The men are gatherin' at the store this minute and oilin' of their guns as they come. They won't put 'em down right soon, nuther!"

"Why?" asked Johnny.

"Hit's war," the mountaineer answered.

No sooner had the shades been pulled and a candle lighted than there came a knock at the door.

"Who's thar?"

"Doctor."

"Come in. You're needed."

The doctor was followed by several women and a few men. Having admitted the doctor, Bud pushed Johnny gently toward the door. [121]

"You tell 'em to stay out," he said, "too many'll be bad fer the boy."

Passing out into the darkness, Johnny delivered Bud's message; and because he was a stranger, because he had assisted in saving their children, the mountain folks turned about and moved slowly away.

The women went to their homes, but the men struck across lots to the long, low building that was Bud Thurman's store. Johnny followed the men.

True to Bud's prophesy, he found the store half filled with men and boys. By the light of three kerosene lamps and twice as many candles, they were oiling and polishing rifles and revolvers. Some of the rifles were of the long-barrelled

squirrel rifle type, but many were modern, lever-action and automatic. The revolvers were all long, blue-barrelled, wicked-looking shooting-irons.

Little was being said. There was such a grim tenseness about the place as Johnny had never felt before. Surely these were strange people. There could be no doubt as to the meaning of all this preparation. All too well he read the drawn faces, the still glow of deep-set eyes, the firmly set lips. [122]

Johnny had lived a great deal, as you will know if you have read "Panther Eye" and "Triple Spies." You will know, too, that he had fought little yellow Orientals on far Siberian shores, and the brown natives of the far North. He had listened for half a night to the drunken threats of Western men who boasted that they were "bad" and bent on killing. He had heard them talk a great deal, but had seen little of their killing. He felt now that these mountaineers were different. Their silence seemed a deadly thing. There would be fighting. Not much would be said. They could shoot, and they would shoot to kill.

He shivered at the thought, yet a strange exhilaration seized him. The spirit of the mountains was upon him. He was to be a member of a clan. In spirit he was living in the days of feudal lords and chivalry. [123]

"If only I had a gun," he said to himself. Then, remembering that he had not seen Pant since the shooting, he began looking around the store for him.

He saw him a moment later. There was a peculiar look on his face, the look Johnny had seen there but a few times, and those times when they were in tight places and Pant was figuring a way out. He was sitting on a counter, squinting at a candle through the barrel of an automatic. He was so occupied that he did not see Johnny until he felt a hand on his knee.

"Oh! Hello!" he said, "how's 'Pole? Will he pull through?"

"Don't know. Doctor wouldn't let us stay. Going back pretty soon. Where'd you get the gun?"

"Old fellow with whiskers went out and got 'em for me. Said his boy sent 'em home from the war. Said he liked a six-shootin' pistol-gun better. There's yours." He passed a shining black gun to Johnny. [124]

As Johnny's hand gripped the handle of the superb weapon, an army automatic, his pulse quickened. So this was to be war, and he was to be a part of it. He was a member of a clan, yet at second thought his spirits fell. Squirrel Head could have but a handful of men. What chance would he have with this small army of men. More were coming all the while.

"No doubt he deserves it," he concluded, "but there will be no

joy in it, no honor, no romance; never is in a man hunt."

As if reading his thoughts, Pant shook his head. "No, old Pal, it's not going to be a man hunt. It'll be a battle, and from what I can learn the odds are against us."

"Against us?" exclaimed Johnny. "How could that be? Look at all these men!"

"Yes, I know, but you forget. That shot fired by old Squirrel Head may not be heard round the world, but it will be heard at the head of the longest creek in this county, and the shortest one, too. In less than twenty-four hours every fighting man in this county'll be in Squirrel Head's camp or Bud Thurman's. It'll be war; war to the finish." [125]

"But," protested Johnny in utter astonishment, "this is America."

"Yes, and it's Kentucky, Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky. The thing that you're going to have a hand in has been going on now and then for a hundred years and more. Come on over here and I'll tell you all about it. That big red-headed giant just got through telling it to me."

"This," said Pant solemnly as they crept into a dark corner, "this isn't going to be a man hunt; it's going to be a feud-fight. Unless I miss my guess, it's going to be a fight that'll make history in the county. This man Squirrel Head's a bad one, and it's to be his end; or else," he added slowly, "his beginning. Who's best man? Who's got the most men, the bravest fighters, the best shots; that's the question now.

"Of course you don't understand things down here. I've been here before and learned a little. After that I took to reading history. I haven't been to school a lot; not near as much as I wish I had; but I've read history, and history helps you to understand things. It—" [126]

He paused to listen. Bud Thurman had entered the store. There came the hush of expectancy.

"Lige," he said in a low tone, addressing a boy of fourteen who was polishing a rifle as if he were a man, "you go up Yokum's Creek and tell the Fields and the Madders. Tell 'em to bring pistol—guns an' rifles, an' some grub."

With the promptness of an army courier the boy was away on his errand.

"The gathering of the clans," murmured Johnny, and he thrilled at the thought.

"You, Mace," Bud spoke to a second boy, "go up Turkey Creek an' git Anse Carroll and Carl Fieldin. An' stop at the cabin of that old fox, Preacher Gibbins. Tell him to pick his crowd an' [127]

be quick about hit. Thar's going to be a heap of funerals to preach hereabouts. He kin jine the side that he thinks is goin' to have the most er the least. Only he'd better be quick. If he ain't here by sun-up, he'd better be summers else besides his cabin."

The second courier vanished into the night. Then again came whispers and clicking of gunlocks.

"As I was saying," Pant continued his narrative, "you've got to know all about history to understand these feuds. The people that first settled in these mountains were Scotch and Irish. Ever read Sir Walter Scott's books: Lady of the Lake, Talisman, and the others?"

"No."

"Too bad. You ought to. They tell how those old Scots lived in clans and fought one another. The fellow who could get the most men to stick to him, the most men and the best fighters, why, he just naturally won. That's just the way it is down here. These people are descended from those same old Scottish mountain clans.

"Coming into these mountains when it all was wild and new and when there was no one to make laws and enforce them, they just naturally gathered into little groups like they did back there in the mountains of Scotland. They fought just as their ancesters did, and the best man won. He and his men took the best of the land and left the rest to the ones they licked. **[128]**

"It's just about the same today. Of course they've got a court-house, some lawyers and judges, and all that; but when a big scrap comes up they forget all about them and go to it with pistol-guns and rifles, just as they did in earlier days."

"And Johnny," Pant laid his hand on his pal's knee, "we're members of a clan; Bud Thurman's clan."

At mention of this, Johnny's heart went alternately hot and cold. He was not so sure that he wanted to be a member of a clan. This was not play business; it was war, and in a war someone is sure to get hurt. This was a serious business. **[129]**

Suddenly he thought of the boy 'Pole. "Let's go over and see how he is." He rose to his feet to lead the way out of the store-room that had grown stuffy with bad air and tobacco smoke.

As the chill mountain air smote his cheek he threw back his head and drank deep of it. To the right of them towered Big Black Mountain, and to the left stood Stone Mountain, looming black against the sky.

Johnny thought he never beheld a more peaceful scene. The huddle of cabins sleeping in the moonlight, the cattle curled up in dark corners by the fence, the silent hills; what could be more peaceful than this? Yet even as he thought this there

sounded from some tree top the shrill song of a locust. He knew that on the locust's wings were two black W's—War and Want. That was the meaning of those letters—War and Want!

The two boys crossed the school lot where the grass had been trodden down long ago by romping feet of happy children, and where now the ruins of the school house still smouldered. Passing on, they entered the dark shadows of a neighboring hill, and thus came to the cabin. [130]

For an instant, in dread of what he might see, Johnny held back. Then, slowly lifting the latch, he entered.

A moment later he stopped in shocked surprise. He had expected to find the doctor still here. Instead, there was but the bent form of an aged woman. Then he glanced down, saw, and understood. With a shudder he stepped back. The boy 'Pole, who in this short time had won their love and sympathy, would visit his deserted home no more. Never again would he drink water from the cold spring, nor wander the mountains he loved so well. He had gone to join his Pap and Marm and Mary. A clean white sheet completely covered the cot where he lay; mute evidence of a tragic story.

His ragged hat hung on a nail. Beside it hung his tree climbers, and another object which surprised Johnny. Without knowing why he did it, he took this third object from the nail, and with a husky "C'mon," stumbled out of the room. [131]

As they left the cabin they heard once more the locust's song of war. To Johnny it was something more than the monotonous song of a locust; it was a message of challenge to duty; to the undertaking with others of a great task. That shot, fired out of the darkness into a defenseless group of women and children, should not go unavenged. He was a member of a clan, Bud Thurman's Clan, and he rejoiced because of this.

"I hadn't finished telling you about the meaning of this feud-fight that's going to be," said Pant. "I told you why they had feuds down here. Want to hear the reason for this particular one? The story of it for the last twenty years, I mean."

"I don't need to," said Johnny in as steady a voice as he could command. The image of that sheet on the little cot in the old cabin was still before his eyes. "I've seen enough to make me want to fight. But it won't hurt to know more. Let's go over there beneath that big oak tree; no, let's go up by 'Pole's cold spring. That seems sort of like a sacred place now that he—he's gone." [132]

[133]

CHAPTER X
A BATTLE LOOMS

"You see," said Pant as they settled back in the shadows of the great chestnut which, like some beneficent giant, guarded the cold spring that sang at its feet, "there's always been a fight brewing between the Blevins' and the Thurmans. It goes back further than anyone can remember. Of course, they're not always fighting. There have been times when for twenty years at a stretch not a man on either side would be killed. Then, all of a sudden, over some trifling thing, the feud flames forth. A man is killed; another; another and another. It ends in a regular war. When one side or the other is so weakened that it can fight no more, the war ends; at least it does until the weak side raises a new crop of boys with fighting blood in their veins and with the memory of the wrongs done to their clan stowed away in their hearts. Then it all breaks out again.

"I don't say it's right that things should be that way," Pant said thoughtfully, "but if you belong to a clan it's fight or die. Mostly they fight." [134]

"But when a thing happens such as this cowardly shooting to-night," said Johnny, "it's something more than a mere feud. It's the righteous business of giving a cowardly beast of a man who shoots from the darkness his dues."

"I know," said Pant. "That's the redeeming feature of this battle that's brewing. Squirrel Head is different from most of the mountain folks; always has been, they say. He's cruel and cowardly, but he's shrewd and daring in his own way. Bud Thurman hasn't nearly as many men as Squirrel Head has, but he knows that some of Squirrel Head's own kinsmen don't like him nor trust him. He hopes that they'll hide out in the hills and refuse to fight. There's talk about some of them joining Bud. You never can tell, though. Anyway, Bud and his men have had all they can stand. They're ready to risk a battle. Five of their men have been picked off from ambush in the last year. They figure that if they must die with their boots on they might as well do it fighting. It's better than being shot in the back. [135]

"It was a funny thing that started this present generation of Thurmans and Blevens fighting," Pant continued. "You see, Squirrel Head—he was a young man then; that was fifteen years ago—had ridden up to the head of Pounding Mill Creek to see a girl he liked pretty well. He rode a sorrel horse he was proud of, big fine fellow with long, yellow mane and tail; a single-stepper. Being invited to stay all night he turned his horse out in the pasture. Next morning when he went to catch the horse he found that his mane and tail had all been sheared off close, not any more tail left than a cow has; not as much.

"Of course it made him hopping mad; would make anybody mad, for that matter. There were two Thurman boys living in a cabin lower down on the creek. Squirrel Head suspected them but when he went down and accused them of it they stoutly denied it. Nobody'll ever know whether they did it or not. When Squirrel Head rode—" [136]

"Hist! What's that?" Johnny suddenly gripped Pant's arm and pointed up the creek.

Involuntarily Pant's hand gripped his automatic. There was someone moving up there among the rhododendrons. There might be several men. Perhaps they were spys from Squirrel Head's camp. Perhaps—his heart skipped a beat—perhaps the old fox had gathered his band and was at this moment leading them to the attack. In that case, the score would be settled by dawn. And how would it end?

"Well," said Johnny, as if reading his pal's thoughts, "I'm ready to do my bit."

"So'm I," answered Pant. "If it comes off, we've got a fine position. We'll open up on them from the rear."

A moment dragged by; two; three; four— [137]

The movement of men up the creek became more distinct. Now and then they heard the click of a hob-nailed shoe as it struck a stone.

"Lots of nerve, if it's Squirrel Head's men," Pant whispered.

The men had passed on down beyond them toward the store when Pant let forth a low chuckle.

"False alarm. That's the new recruits that Bud Thurman sent the boy for."

"Guess that's right," Johnny sighed.

A moment later as they saw the light from the door flash out into the night then fade again, they knew it was true.

"This," said Pant, as he settled back on his bed of moss, "is going to be our one great adventure."

"I hope not," said Johnny soberly.

"Why?"

"Someone has said that death is life's greatest adventure. I hope it won't come to us as soon as that."

"I hope not, too," said Pant, "but you never can tell." [138]

For some time they sat in silence, listening to the bubbling of

the spring water as it ran over its rocky bed.

Finally Johnny spoke. “You were telling me about Squirrel Head’s first fight,” he said. “Why weren’t they ever able to tell whether those Thurman boys sheared his horse’s tail?”

“Dead,” said Pant solemnly, “both dead. You see, when Squirrel Head rode down the creek there was a pistol shot fired over his head. One of those boys fired it. They may have been shooting at a squirrel in the top of a tree. Nobody’ll ever know about that either, for Squirrel Head promptly dropped from his horse to a place behind a log and shot them both dead.”

“Shot them dead!”

“Sure.”

“For that?”

“Don’t take much to start a fight down here. Takes a lot to stop it, though. That started one of the bloodiest fights the mountains have ever known. Man riding along the road hears a shot. Next moment he tumbles off his horse dead. Another steps out of his door for a breath of air before breakfast. There’s a flash from the hill. His breakfast is never eaten. He’s dead on his door step. That’s what a mountain feud means. **[139]**

“The Thurmans about all moved off of Turkey Creek. They went over on Sand Fork where they couldn’t raise beans. The Blevens wouldn’t leave them alone there.

“By this time Squirrel Head and his men had become a regular band of outlaws. They terrorized the whole country. State sent the militia down here to end the trouble. Think they could do it? I should say they couldn’t. They were glad enough to get back up into the Blue Grass country without any holes in their jackets.

“About that time Bud Thurman’s father, who was said to be the ‘fightenest’ man of his time, got together a band of men; all the men and boys he could muster. He did it in a single night. Bud carried a rifle in that fight. He was sixteen and even smaller than he is now, but he had his father’s fighting blood. **[140]**

“They sent spies out to locate Squirrel Head and his men. The spies heard them plotting to raid the county seat the next day, burn the court house and jail, then make their get-away out of the county.

“Bud Thurman’s father and his men surprised them. They say that the trees that are cut down near that spot today are full of bullets. But not all the bullets hit trees. Many found softer marks. When the final rush was made the ground was strewn with men.”

"Dead?"

"Not all of them. Mostly wounded. Squirrel Head's gang was broken up. He escaped without a scratch. Some think he cut out and left when the first shot was fired. He went up into Missouri and lived there for twelve years.

"After most of the older men who were in that fight had died off, he slipped back into the county. No one troubled him; wanted to see what he'd do, I guess. First thing he did was to claim all the land of his dead kinsmen. The land was on Turkey Creek. He claims other land, too. He's got a deed to that rough land we thought I owned." [141]

"A deed!" exclaimed Johnny in astonishment. "How could he?"

"When judges and clerks and recorders are all kinsmen of yours, and they're all crooked, you can get a deed to anything, can't you?"

"But if you took it to other courts?"

"He didn't expect anything like that; expected us to stay up north. Let him cut off all the timber and mine all the coal, then what would he care who owned the barren rocks that were left? But that doesn't matter!" Pant said savagely. "Nothing matters except that he's started his dirty work again, and he's killed one of the simplest, kindest-hearted boys I've ever known. Nothing matters except that we are on the eve of a great battle. And in the name of all that's good and kind and just, we must win!"

Johnny was thrilled as he listened. He knew that Pant had never spoken a greater truth. All the adventures and mysteries of other days; all other hopes; all other dreams and aspirations, paled to insignificance before this gigantic thing that loomed just before them. [142]

"Perhaps tomorrow," he said as he settled back for a few moments of rest.

[143]

CHAPTER XI
THE SECRET MISSION

Being a natural boy, and wearied by the strange events of the night, Johnny, as he lay on the soft moss, found himself drifting to the land of dreams.

Pant was of a different sort. His nature, as you already know if you have read "Panther Eye," was like that of a cat. A natural night-prowler, he felt no desire for sleep. Perceiving that his companion had fallen asleep, and anxious to protect him from the chill night air, he started drawing off his own coat to spread it over the sleeper. Stooping over, his eye caught a blotch of pink beside his sleeping pal. Putting out his hand he touched it.

"Silk," he murmured. "What is it? Where'd it come from?"

Lifting the silken folds from the ground he examined it in the dark. Pant could see things in the dark. For him there was no need of a light. [144]

"Hum," he mused, "here's a lot of stout cords. Wonder what it could be?"

Again his nimble fingers went over it. Then with a start he stood up.

"It's a parachute!" he exclaimed. "Of all things! Down here in the heart of the Cumberlands, a parachute!"

For some time he stood staring into the dark. Then once more his sensitive fingers went over his find.

"Yes," he said to himself, "yes, that's it. Here's the place where it's been mended with a stout piece of cotton cloth."

His mind had gone back to the time they had chased the slim boy over the precipice. He recalled that remarkable disappearance; remembered, too, the piece of pink silk that Johnny had found the next morning.

"It's exactly the same cloth," he told himself. "That's the way he escaped us. He leaped from the cliff with a parachute and it opened and saved him. Come to think of it, that pink thing I saw at the foot of the cliff must have been the parachute. Probably caught in a bush or a tree and tore that piece out. The patch is just about the size of the piece that Johnny found." [145]

So here was a mystery solved. There had been a time when the solution of this mystery would have brought great excitement to Pant, when he would surely have wakened Johnny to tell him of this great discovery. But now the shadow of coming events, the

battle that was sure to occur in the near future, made all their past mysteries and adventures seem as thin and formless as the shadow of a tissue paper rose.

After wondering in a vague way how his pal had come into possession of this parachute, he at last removed his coat to spread it over Johnny. Then, having removed his shirt, he wrapped the parachute round and round his body. Drawing on his shirt, he stood up.

"Might use it," he said. "Johnny never would. It's not the sort of thing that's in his line. Me? I might try it, but believe me, I'd have to be in a mighty tight place!" [146]

Had he but known it, not twenty-four hours were to pass before he was in a tight place; a very tight place indeed.

Glancing down at his pal, then away at the hills, he at last turned his face toward Bud Thurman's store. The occasional glimmer of light that told of the opening and shutting of a door gave evidence that the clan was still gathering.

"Better go down and see what's brewing," he decided.

Within the store the murmur of voices and the click of fire-arms had ceased. The men, for the most part, had fallen asleep. Stretched out upon counters, sitting propped up against a corner of the wall, leaning against sacks of medicinal roots, or sprawled out on the floor, they cast grotesque shadows everywhere. With rifles close by their sides they awaited the call that would send them forth to meet the enemy.

Pant studied them with half closed and quizzical eye. Here was a bearded patriarch who beyond doubt had fought in the Civil War. Pant wondered what side he had been on. And here lay a boy in his early teens. A squirrel or raccoon had been the only creature that thus far had met death by this boy's rifle. What of tomorrow or the day after? [147]

Pant shook himself free from these brooding thoughts to turn toward a man who was not asleep—Bud Thurman. For a moment, in the uncertain light, the small blue eyes of the leader studied Pant's face.

"Oh yes," he said at last, "you're the fellow who was with 'Pole. Glad to see you. Been sort of lookin' fer you. We've sort of got to get out some scouts. Got t' get the dead drop on Squirrel Head and his gang somehow. Ought to find out where they're meeting' up. Understand?"

Pant nodded.

"Scout's no good if everybody in the county knows him. He no more'n shows his head than he gets it blowed off. Now Squirrel Head and two or three of his men know you a little. Don't none the rest on 'em know you at all. It ought to be plum [148]

easy fer you to go a fishin', say fer instance over on Sorgum Crick. That's where most of Squirrel Head's folks live."

Pant felt his hair stiffen. Yes, it should be easy to fish for black bass in plain sight of Squirrel Head's kinsmen; for a while it might, but after that—Oh Boy! To be alone in the midst of the enemy! His blood ran cold at the thought.

"'Twouldn't be nary bit hard," the mountaineer went on. "All't you'd haf to do would be t' just keep an eye peeled t' see which way th' men was goin'; then mebby, arter a while, jest mozey along th' top of th' ridge ontil y' knowed where they stooped, then come right back here sort of hot footin' and sudden an' tell us th' noos."

Pant stood staring at him, but said nothing.

"Don't mistake me," the mountaineer half apologized, "I'd go in a minute. Any of the boys here would. But 'twouldn't be narry bit of use. We are all knowed on that crick. There's lots of Furiners come up there fishin'. Prime fishin' fer green pearch on that crick. They won't think nothin' of you bein' up there, not nothin' at all." **[149]**

"Alright," said Pant, slowly, "where's the tackle and the bait? My partner's asleep up by the cold spring. You tell him in the morning where I've gone. Tell him I'll be back for supper, maybe, and that I'll bring him a fine black bass."

"Them ain't black bass. Them's green pearch."

"That's a matter of opinion," Pant chuckled. "Where'd you say I'd find the tackle?"

"There's hooks an' lines on the far shelf to your right. You can split a han'ful of buck-shot fer sinkers. There's a fishin' pole hangin' on the back side of the store. As fer bait, you can dig some worms in Cal Pace's back yard, er you can rustle some grampuses under the rocks, er you might take along a couple yards of cheese-cloth and ketch some chubs. You better be on the crick by sun-up, which means you better be travellin' right smart soon." **[150]**

"I'm gone right now," said Pant, making a dive for the box of hooks and lines. "You just cut me off that cheese-cloth. I'm going to try chubs."

A moment later the little mountaineer gripped Pant's hand as he said huskily:

"I ain't makin' to hide nothin' from you. That Sorgum Crick is the dangerousest place we got fer a scout. If you see any of them fellers lookin' at you suspicious like, jest leg it fer the tall timber an' never mind about bringin' home the fish pole. I aims to lose a lot bigger things in this fight than fishin' tackle."

Pant made no answer. With a bundle of cloth in one pocket and fishing tackle in the other, he stepped out into the night.

Chubs are a special species of minnow that swarm at the bottom of rocky pools. Once arrived at the creek, Pant would convert the cheese-cloth into a minnow seine, using two stout sticks for brailes. Having caught his bait and deposited it in a gallon tin can that he would poke full of holes and set in the running stream, he hoped to enjoy a morning's fishing such as he had not indulged in since leaving the trout-haunted streams of Washington. **[151]**

To reach Sorgum Creek he followed a narrow brook to the point where it lost itself in the upper rocky ridges. From there he struck directly up the low mountain-side, to at last reach the crest and go plunging down on the other side.

Merely to be afoot and alone on such a night as this, when scouts were out and all the mountains were astir with the news of the coming conflict, was in itself something of an adventure. More than once, at sound of some movement before him in his moonlit path, Pant leaped aside into the bushes, there to stand motionless, listening. More than once his heart lost a beat as he fancied he heard the click of a rifle hammer being raised.

However, he made fairly good progress in the ascent. It was on the downward journey that he exercised the greatest of caution. He was now on enemy territory. Were there any cabins on this trail? He did not know. Was Squirrel Head's camp at the mouth of the little stream he must descend? Were there guards watching? These were the questions that raced through his mind, questions he could not answer. **[152]**

"When morning comes it won't be so bad," he assured himself. "To be found fishing a good black bass stream in the early morning, that's one thing. To be found prowling down a mountain brook at dead of night, that's quite another."

Putting his hand on his hip, he gripped his automatic. This gave him confidence. Thus fortified he moved silently down the trail.

[153]

CHAPTER XII
WHILE JOHNNY SLEPT

In the meantime Johnny slept on. His mossy bed gave him soft repose and the bubbling spring sang a low, sweet song. A tree-toad kept up his incessant chant, while from the deep waters of a distant pool there came the occasional hoarse croak of a bullfrog. A fog drifted silently down the valley. Where could one find greater peace than this? War—who could dream of war at a time like this?

Johnny did not dream of war. No such disturbing fancies came to break his rest. It is possible that a tremendous disturbing dream, the kind that brings one at last to his feet with a startled cry, would have been a blessing. However that may have been, Johnny was unconscious of the danger of his position.

The first streaks of dawn were appearing when the bushes directly above the spot where Johnny slept were suddenly parted and there appeared the ugly, vicious face of a young mountaineer. The angular face was covered with a week's growth of stubby beard and little rivulets of tobacco juice ran down the corners of an ugly mouth. In one hand the mountaineer carried an army canteen, in the other a long, blue-barreled revolver. Matted and coarse black hair grew on his arms, like the hair on the arms of an ape. At sight of Johnny he started and stepped back, disappearing in the bushes. **[154]**

Presently he appeared again. No doubt he had discovered that Johnny was asleep. He took a cautious step forward, then another and another. He now carried his right hand forward, gripping the long, blue gun. His steps made no sound, for he was barefoot. These feet were as brown, shapeless and hairy as his hands. Doubtless he could scratch a match on the bottom of them.

It was evident that he had ventured to the spring for water. Was he one of Bud Thurman's men? It did not seem probable, for if he was, there would be no need for such stealth. He had not expected to find Johnny here. What would he do? **[155]**

The newcomer moved forward until he stood beside the sleeping boy. Holding his breath, he bent down close to study Johnny's face, and for a long minute stood there gazing into the face of the sleeper.

"Hit's him," he murmured as he straightened up.

With elaborate care he lifted the hammer of his gun and squinting down the long barrel, aimed it at the boy's head. For a moment he stood so.

"No," he shook his head, "'twon't do. Leastwise not till I git my water."

Lowering the hammer with the same great show of care he backed away to the spring where he allowed the water to gurgle into his canteen. Lifting it to his lips he nearly drained it, then filled it again. Having fastened the canteen to the leather strap that served him for belt, he whispered:

"Thar now! let's have another look. You can't be too sartin about them thar things." **[156]**

Again he bent over the sleeper. This time he looked long. When at last he stood erect, or as erect as such an ape-man ever stands, he made no motion to cock his gun.

"You can't be sure," he mumbled, "you can't no ways be sartin. Hit looks like they said he looked. But you can't be sartin. Hit might be some feller that's peddlin' goods an' is layin' out cause Bud Thurman's crew crowded him out. And beside," he added with a grimace, "if I hit him he'll most like let out a yell, and if I shoot there's the devil to pay. Hit ain't my job nohow. I come fer water. That's my job, so let him lay; them's my sentiments; let him lay."

The burly ape-like man, who came so near bringing the eventful life of Johnny Thompson to a sudden end, had not been gone five minutes when from below the spring there sounded the soft tread of feet that were as light and springy as the step of a mountain deer. **[157]**

Fishing was fine on Sorgum Creek that morning. Just as dawn touched the top of Big Black Mountain, Pant found himself nearing the creek. He paused to make his cheesecloth into a seine and a moment later set it skimming the bottom of a little pool. The wiggle and flap at the bottom of the seine, as he brought it up dripping, gave him a peculiar sense of pleasure.

"One more haul like that," he said as he dumped the struggling minnows into his can, "and it will be enough."

A few minutes later he hurried down to the edge of Sorgum Creek and carefully placed his can of minnows in its clear waters.

Fortune brought him at once to the brink of a broad, deep pool. On the near bank was a great pile of rocks and in the shadow of one of these Pant hid himself. Then, having rigged his tackle, he took the minnow in his hand, allowed as much line to loop out before him as he might hope to throw, and gave the minnow a toss that sent it flying far out over the stream, to at last send a hundred little circles across the water from a center that was fully fifty feet from where he stood. **[158]**

"Not so bad," he boasted.

For ten seconds he watched his line. Then he quickly drew it in some six feet. The minnow, he figured, was not half way to the bottom of the pool. Pulling the line forward would make the minnow appear to be running away. Wise is the bass that can resist such a lure.

"If there is a bass in that pool he must be a wise one," Pant concluded as his line, gradually absorbing water, sank silently from sight.

"All right. Try again," he said cheerfully.

Drawing in the line, he cast again. The result was the same. The third cast he made in a new place. Facing directly down the flat rock beside him, he sent his minnow flying to a spot near the edge of the pool.

"Might be split. Might be one hiding there. Might—" **[159]**

He paused to stare. Hardly had he taken in his slack when, as if seized by an invisible hand, it began to play out again.

"He takes it," he breathed.

Leaning far out over the water, he extended his rod at arm's length. If the fish played out all the line before he came to the end of his run he would snag off, and that would be the end of that battle.

There was still a foot or two of slack when the bass reached the end of his run.

"He scales the minnow," Pant said excitedly. "One, two, three, four—he swallows it! Let her go!"

One short, snappy pull, and they were off. To Pant's utter astonishment he saw that the pull of the bass was taking him off his feet; that he was due for a plunge in the pool. At the same time his eyes caught something that startled him.

Along the road that ran at the opposite side of the creek two men were coming at a brisk, slouching walk. **[160]**

"They might be going hunting," Pant reasoned, "but I think not. They're Squirrel Head's men." At that second the bass got in his best work, and Pant plunged headforemost into the pool.

[161]

CHAPTER XIII
FISHING FOR HIS LIFE

When Johnny awoke he found himself staring into a pair of frank and fearless blue eyes; the eyes of a mountain girl of sixteen. With wavy brown hair flying and feet frankly bare, she was a picture of youth's happy freedom.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, stepping back.

The look of frank admiration on her face did not fade. She had seen Johnny's brave deeds of the previous night. There could be no question about his being her hero.

Under such conditions Johnny had no trouble in scraping up an acquaintance. Since she was quite the prettiest mountain girl he had ever seen, he was not slow in learning that her name was Hallie Sergeant, nor in accepting her invitation to come to breakfast with her.

It is strange how rudely fortune buffets us about at times. First she threatens us with sudden disaster; next she sends us her choicest gifts. It had been so with Johnny. First came the hairy ape-man, one of Squirrel Head's scouts who spent some moments in debating what manner of death to deal him, and who went away without harming him; then came Hallie. **[162]**

That was not all. Five minutes after he and Hallie had made their way smilingly down the spring path, the ape-man again appeared above the spring. This time he bore a message for Johnny, sent by the chief of Squirrel Head's scouts. It was a swift and sure message. Done up in a little brass cylinder with a lead tip, it was to have been delivered by that same long, blue gun the man had carried before.

It was not delivered. Johnny had gone to breakfast.

[163]

In the meantime Pant was in one of the greatest dilemmas of his young life. He had hooked the finest bass that had ever tugged at a line; he was sure of that from the tremendous pull that threatened to yank the pole from his hand as he struggled in the water. He was an ardent fisherman. Johnny, more skillful than he, had always brought home the finer catch. Pant wanted to carry that black bass to Bud Thurman's store to flaunt it before Johnny's envious eyes.

At the same time two men armed with rifles had appeared in the road across the creek. Beyond doubt they were Squirrel Head's men. The moment they appeared they had quickly moved behind a long row of paw-paw bushes. Not being familiar with the road, Pant could not tell whether they had

gone behind the bushes for the reason that the road ran there or because, having seen him, they had recognized him or had guessed him to be one of Bud Thurman's scouts and had hidden behind the bushes to watch him, or perhaps to shoot him in the water as they might a soft shell turtle. This last thought fairly set his wet hair standing on end.

"Got'a git out'a here," he told himself. "Got'a—" [164]

Suddenly he realized that he had left his automatic on the rock from which he had been fishing.

"Fine state of affairs," he complained. "Wouldn't dare climb back on that rock, they'd suspect me and pot me sure."

Then, too, there was the fish to be considered. Pant reasoned that it was nonsense to consider the fish when his life might be at stake, yet he clung to the pole and, half unconsciously, paddled away with one hand to keep himself afloat and to relieve the tension on the line as the fish plowed away down the stream.

"Pretty mess," he grumbled. "Never have let a fish go of my own free will. Seems like I just can't do it now."

Just then the fish gave a lunge that all but tore the pole from his grasp. This whetted Pant's desire, and back-stroking for all he was worth he determined to give that fish a run for his money. Then, strange to relate, forgetting all about the men on the road, all about his mission on the creek, and all about his own peril, he proceeded to play that bass as if his very life depended on his winning the fight. Perhaps it did; who could tell? [165]

With all the natural perversity of a fish, the bass headed straight for the far end of the pool, directly away from the rock where rested Pant's only weapon.

"Go it, hang you!" Pant sputtered. Keeping the tip of his pole a little above the water, he held a tight line and paddled after the fleeing fish.

"He's a powerful beast, a regular shark for punishment. If I'd back tread and let him put the whole weight of his pull on the line he'd snap it like wrapping twine. But I won't let him. I—"

His reflections were cut sharp off. Glancing in the direction of the road he saw two armed men sclouching toward the clump of paw-paws.

"Not the same two," Pant said, "one's older, the other younger."

He saw the men disappear behind the bushes. That line of scrub brush was not over ten rods long. Beyond that was a sheer wall of sand-stone with the road running at the base of the wall. He could not fail to see anyone who passed over that [166]

portion of the road. The first two men had had ample time to pass from behind the bushes and come into view. Watching with one eye, yet all the while keeping track of the movement of the bass, Pant realized that the men had not left the bushy cover.

"Watching me," he concluded with a shudder. "May be steadying a rifle right now to get a good bead on me. Well what —"

At this instant the bass, having come to the end of deep water, executed such a sudden dash for the upper bank that all of Pant's skill was required to prevent him from breaking free. He wondered vaguely why he was keeping up this battle with the fish when his very life was at stake.

"Why not," he reasoned. "If they want to shoot me they can. No way of escape that I can see. As soon be shot in the head while I'm swimming as in the back while I am beating it up the bank. Those birds are sure shots. A fellow's got about as much chance as a coon caught in a bear trap. Might as well have some fun with the fish anyway. If a doctor told me I had only an hour to live I wouldn't ask anything better than to spend that hour battling a big black bass." **[167]**

After settling these points in his mind he gave his entire attention to the fish. There was need of it too, if he was to land him, for the old fellow had at last headed straight for his home beneath a large overhanging rock. Pant hadn't the least doubt but that there were fissures in that rock, splits with jagged edges that would cut the line like an old scythe. There would be jutting fragments at its base and perhaps a tree snag.

"Can't let him do it," he said, and in an effort to draw the fish past the dangerous hole he made a quick turn in the water and threw upon the line every ounce of strength he dared.

His efforts crowned with success, he was breathing more easily when, upon looking up, he once more caught his breath in surprise and fear. Four armed mountaineers were walking down the road. **[168]**

"Not the same four," he said to himself. "They are bigger men. Besides, they're wearing coats and the others didn't. That makes eight. And not one of them has left the bushes. Quite an audience."

As he said the word "audience," there flashed into his mind a new thought. These men were not going to shoot him; not at once. Abundant opportunity had been given for that. To such crack shots his head was ample target. They were interested in the way he maneuvered his fish.

Perhaps they, too, were fishermen. It might be—why, more than likely this wary old bass had a name and local reputation.

Perhaps more than one had hooked and lost him. Now a stranger had hooked him, a stranger enemy. What of that? They would watch the battle with the fish to its end. And then—

Pant breathed hard. He was playing to an audience, with the water as his stage. He might win in his bout with the fish. He might lose. In either case the applause at the end would be the same—a patter of bullets. [169]

"Oh well," he said, "that fish is good for half an hour. Much can happen in that time."

In this he was right—much did happen!

[170]

CHAPTER XIV
JOHNNY BECOMES A KNIGHT

In the meantime Johnny had fallen in the way of an adventure.

The breakfast of flakey biscuits, sorgum molasses, eggs and home cured ham, was all that one might ask. The fact that it was served by the deft hands of the blue-eyed mountain girl added much to its flavor.

Breakfast over, Johnny thanked his hostess and was turning to go when Hallie, laying one hand on his arm and fixing her frank blue eyes upon him, said:

"Are you Bud Thurman's man?"

"You should know," smiled Johnny, not a little puzzled by the question. "If a man shoots at you from the dark and kills in your stead one of your best friends, you're not likely to go right out and join his crowd, are you? Squirrel Head did that to me last night."

Instantly he knew that he had said too much; that he had hurt the feelings of this good little friend. Her cheeks flushed scarlet, then paled, and Johnny regretted that he had not answered her question with more directness. [171]

After a brief moment in which neither spoke, the girl again gripped his arm.

"But—but you have no rifle."

"No," said Johnny, "but I have my automatic and my two good hands. My hands alone have gotten me out of many a bad fix. In most places they are enough."

"Not in the mountains," the girl said, and her lips drew into firm, straight lines.

"Because I like you," she continued, "because I am a girl and can't use it, and because you need it, I am going to part with my dearest treasure."

Reaching up to the mantel she took down a rifle. Johnny's eyes took in the piece at a glance. It was a splendid weapon. Of a recent model, showing the marks of splendid workmanship and excellent care, it gave promise of perfect service. One other thing he noticed, and this gave him a sudden thrill. Two deep notches had been cut into the stock. He had been in the mountains long enough to know the meaning of those notches. Two men had been killed by that rifle! [172]

"It was my father's," the girl said simply. There was now no color in her cheeks, but the clear blue eyes showed never a tear. "He—he was a good man. They found him in the timber where he had gone to find some lost cattle. He'd been shot in the back."

"Squirrel Head?"

"They think so."

"He was Bud Thurman's man?"

The girl nodded.

Taking the rifle in his hand, Johnny stared at the two notches in the stock.

"My father," Hallie said in a tone that was low and deep, "was a good man; not hot-tempered nor mean. He was a deputy sheriff. He killed those two men while doing his duty as a deputy." [173]

For a moment Johnny stood there in awkward silence. Some words of appreciation were due from him, yet no word came. He was a knight, living in by-gone days. Swordless, he had slept beside a spring. He had wakened to find a fair lady bending over him. She had taken him to her lodge and fed him. Now, having learned that he was a member of her own fighting clan, she had taken the weapon of her dead father from the wall and was giving it to him. From this time forth he must fight her battles. Could anything be more romantic than this?

In his tongue-tied confusion he bowed as a knight might have done, and seizing her hand, held it for a moment in a warm, firm clasp.

A deep flush spread to the roots of Hallie's hair, yet with it all there was a smile. As they stood for a moment on the doorstep she plucked a blossom from the crimson rambler and pinned it to his coat as she whispered:

"Go, and may God bless you!"

To think of material things after such a parting required considerable mental effort; yet Johnny did think of them. In their hasty departure on the day before, he and Pant had been obliged to leave their surveying instruments concealed beneath the boughs of a pine tree. Since it did not seem probable that they would be able to resume work for a few days, he felt that he should go up on the mountain and place the tools in a safer and dryer place. Deciding to consult Bud Thurman on the matter, he went down to the store. There he found some twenty men drinking steaming coffee and munching away at cheese and crackers. [174]

"No," Bud Thurman said in answer to Johnny's inquiry, "I

don't think things will be stirrin' much to-day. Squirrel Head may decide to leg it out of the country. Then there won't be a fight. I don't think it, though. He's perty strong and he's had things perty much his own way. Hits perty sure he'll fight, but not to-day."

"I would like to go up on the mountain," said Johnny. "Do you suppose any of Squirrel Head's crowd will be up there?" [175]

"No, I reckon not. Not this mornin' at least. All right for you to go up, I'd say."

"Good," said Johnny. "Have you seen my pal, Pant?"

"Him? Oh, yes." Then Bud told Johnny of Pant's mission on Sorgum Creek. "Ought to be back time you are," he added at the end of the story.

That might easily have been, for Johnny was not destined to make schedule time. In fact, he was in for some thrilling experiences on that trip up the mountain.

As Johnny climbed up from the peaceful valley he said to himself: "There is no war."

Indeed, it seemed to him that there could be none. Across the narrow valley he saw women and children working in the corn fields. With the elaborate care of these thrifty people, they were stripping off the leaves beneath the ears of corn and tying them in little bundles. After that they were cutting off the tops down to the ears and standing them up in little shocks. The ears, on stumpy, leafless stalks, would stand there ripening until frost came, then they would be snapped off and carried to the barn. This was the work the women and children were doing, and they went about it in a peaceful, carefree manner. The tinkle of cow bells was so cheerful. The haze of the valley lifted so lazily toward the mountain tops that Johnny's mind was set dreaming of things of peace. He thought of Pant's land. It would soon be surveyed. He had no doubt but that the title was secure. Of course Squirrel Head's deed was a fraud. The land was valuable. He would share in Pant's good fortune. They had always shared fortunes, both good and bad. [176]

Then his thoughts turned to the unsolved mysteries. Who had dug the mine on their land? How much coal had been taken out? Had it another entrance? Was coal being mined from it now? These and many more questions pressed his mind for an answer as he climbed steadily upward.

So, musing to himself and swinging his newly acquired rifle in one hand, he approached the spot where the instruments were concealed. He had paused and was looking about for the tree which marked the spot when his ear caught the sharp snap of a broken twig. [177]

Wheeling about, he saw a man standing not a hundred yards away, staring at him. The instant Johnny turned his gaze in that direction the man threw his rifle to his shoulder.

The next instant he would have fired, but Johnny was too quick for him. Recognizing the man as one of Squirrel Head's clan, Johnny dropped flat and, still gripping his rifle, went rolling down the mountainside.

He had not rolled far when he was stopped by a thicket of underbrush. Burrowing into this like a rabbit he at last came out on the other side. There he paused for a second to listen.

His heart was thumping violently. So unexpectedly had the affair arisen, so rudely had it shaken him out of his dream of peace, that he was hardly yet prepared for action.

Hearing nothing, he glanced about him. The growth of underbrush extended for several rods along the hill. He decided to move over to the other end of it. With stealthy footsteps he glided along until near the far end. Here, by glancing through a screen of branches, he could see a distance of some two hundred yards up the side of the mountain. **[178]**

What he saw brought a smile to his lips.

Gene, the little girl who had been accustomed to bring food to them, was walking back and forth along the hill.

"Sanging," Johnny said to himself. "I wonder if she knows where we are staying. I wonder—"

His wonderings were brought to an abrupt end by a distinctly metallic click. The sound of it sent a chill up his spine. Had the enemy got the drop on him after all?

Like a flash, and with finger on the trigger of his rifle, Johnny wheeled about. To his astonishment he saw no one below, neither to the right nor the left of him.

Thus reassured, he allowed his glance to again wander up the hill. What he saw there paralyzed him for the instant. Directly before him Gene still wandered happily about. To the right, and a little higher up, was Squirrel Head's scout. He had dropped on one knee and with hammer up and finger on the trigger, was sighting down the barrel of his rifle. His aim was not at Johnny, but at Gene. **[179]**

"What!" Johnny whispered to himself in a boiling rage. "Would they kill an innocent child because she gave us food?"

The next instant he, too, was kneeling. His finger was on the trigger. In that instant the truth flashed upon him. This man who was looking for him had heard the snap of twigs as Gene, in her care-free manner, walked along looking for ginseng. Not being able to see her plainly he had taken her for Johnny. He

was only waiting for a glimpse of her through the bushes, then his rifle would crack.

"It must not be!" Johnny's lips became straight lines. "There is not a second to lose."

His eye followed down the barrel. His finger moved ever so slightly. There was a report, followed by a scream. He had got his man; broken his right arm. [180]

At sound of the shot Gene went bounding away like a frightened deer.

After waiting to see that the disabled foe was able to leave the field of action without assistance, Johnny resumed his search for the surveying instruments. However, he moved with greater caution. His dream of peace had been shattered. The enemies' blood had been shed and this mountainside would not long be a healthy place for him.

[181]

CHAPTER XV
CLOSE QUARTERS

During the first twenty minutes of his struggle in the water, Pant now and then gave a sidewise glance to the bushes where his audience was concealed. He was busy keeping the splendid bass away from shoals and rocky banks where he might tear himself free from the hook. He did not doubt that some of the mountaineers were expert fishermen. It would be difficult to select a group of eight mountain men without including at least one experienced angler. These men of broad fishing experience would know the instant he had lost or landed his fish.

"Of course," Pant reasoned, "it may be that they do not suspect me. They may be watching me from a mere sporting angle, but the chances are against it. I'd feel a lot safer out of this pool and a quarter mile up the mountainside." [182]

As the fish began to tire Pant offered it encouragement for renewed effort. Slipping it a yard of slack, he would pretend to have lost interest in the fight. When the fish, having sensed the looseness of line, shot away, Pant was quick to follow the lead.

All this was dangerous business. Dangerous from two angles; the fish might snag himself off; the watchers on the bank might guess that the battle was really over. In either case they might end the play by a well aimed shot.

"Got to do something," he determined, "and I've got to do it quick."

At that instant he made a discovery which gave him new hope. To his surprise he saw that the rock nearest the center of the shore line, and on the opposite side from that occupied by the mountaineers, on falling into the water had left a dark pool some three feet wide behind it. The boulder stood eight feet or more above the water and the rocky wall behind was still higher. Just how the dark pool came to an end he could not know. It might be flanked by a jagged pile of splintered rock which would be easy to climb. It might, however, end in a perpendicular wall. In that case the crevice and pool would resemble an oblong box with two sides and an end more than eight feet high, with one end gone and with water for a bottom. In that case it would be impossible to leave it save by the open end. [183]

A bold plan entered the boy's mind. Being expert in the water he could swim quite well under its surface. Somehow he must escape from the range of those eight rifles. Even as he thought this he saw three more men coming down the road. The enemy

forces now totaled eleven.

To disappear from their view he had but to sink beneath the water and to swim round the rock and into the crevice behind. He would then be completely out of their sight. What would happen after that he could not even guess. Would they, suspecting his ruse, cross the stream and hunt him down like a muskrat? Or would they allow him to escape? The latter seemed doubtful but it was his only chance. [184]

At this instant a new thought occurred to him. Why not stage an apparent drowning? He could easily act like a person who is suddenly seized with cramps; appear to struggle madly for a moment and then sink beneath the surface. If well played, it would look altogether probable, and he decided to try it.

Letting out a piercing scream and throwing his hands in the air, he began beating the water into foam. In the midst of terrific splashing, he sank from sight.

Still clinging to his line, which by a sudden effort he had torn from his pole, he swam strongly beneath the water.

Once he barely escaped dashing his head against a jagged rock, and once came to dangerously shallow water. With extraordinary good luck he succeeded in entering the hidden niche where, with much noiseless puffing, he once more filled his lungs with good, clean air.

His next move was to work his way to a footing that would leave his head and shoulders above water. Then, with admirable deliberation, he drew the exhausted fish toward him, lifted it from the water and passing a line through its gills fastened it to a jagged point of rock. [185]

“Oh, I got you!” he boasted as the fish, once more in the water, made a vain break for freedom.

The next instant his face sobered. He had caught his fish, but what about his own position. Had his ruse deceived the enemy? Did they believe him drowned? Perhaps not, but he was safe for the moment.

A glance about gave him little hope. The stone hiding place was closed on three sides. The only exception to this was at the upper end where it had a jagged break from top to bottom. This crack, which averaged some six inches in width, faced the opposite shore.

“There’s hope in that,” he said as he moved stealthily toward it in the water, anxious to get acquainted with his hiding place. [186]

At the same time he heard a sound that made his heart stand still. Heavy hob-nailed shoes were crunching on the pebbled beach at the other side of the pool.

Pant hastily struggled back through the water until he found himself on the narrow ledge of rock where the water was scarcely ankle deep. Flattening his face against the crack in the rock he proceeded to make a calm survey of the opposite shore. Two of the mountaineers had left the cover of the bushes and were walking up and down the shore, looking with expectant eye at the surface of the water.

"Don't know whether they think I've been down there all that time and will finally come to life, or that I might have disabled the fish before I sank," Pant whispered to himself.

Just then, as one of the men turned about, Pant started back in surprise and consternation. He knew that man and the man must know him. It was the fellow who had taken him on his horse the night Squirrel Head had tried to kidnap him and Johnny. Being a peculiarly rough and brutal man, he had treated Pant badly enough. With his low brow and protruding jaws, with a week's crop of whiskers, he looked at this moment like a bloodhound who has lost the scent. "So that's the way of it," Pant said to himself. "So they did know who I was! So they *did* intend shooting as soon as my little fishing act was done? Well!" **[187]**

Breathing deeply, he waited. What would be their next move? Did they really believe him drowned, and would they go away; or did they suspect him of trickery, and would they surround and capture him?

"Wish I had my automatic. I'd show them a fight yet! Wish—"

He smiled when he glanced at the flat surface of the rock beyond the crack. His wish had been answered. Lying there within easy reach was the very thing he sought.

One glance he bestowed upon the two men. Their backs were turned. With the noiseless deftness of which he alone was capable he thrust a hand through the crack, gripped the handle of his gun and drew it to him. **[188]**

"Now come on," he breathed, "I'll get two or three of you anyway."

In this he was slightly mistaken, but only as to numbers. He *was* destined to get one of them, though it was without malice or premeditation. Time was to elapse before this strange incident was to occur.

After a brief consultation, during which the man who knew him glanced all too often in his direction, the two men left the river bank and walked back to the bushes.

A moment later Pant heaved a sigh of relief as he saw the eleven men emerge from the far end of the bushes and go trudging away up the creek road.

"Whew!" Pant whistled in relief. "That's all of that."

In this, too, he was again mistaken.

CHAPTER XVI
INTO THE HORNETS' NEST

Johnny realized that his position on the mountain was none too safe, but he had come here to perform a task and he did not intend to leave until it was completed. After making sure that the man he had crippled was a lone scout who had no companions lurking near, he hurriedly sought out his surveying instruments and quite as speedily made his way to the entrance of the old coal mine.

The instruments would be safe here and the place offered him a retreat where he might plan his next move. Undecided what his next course should be, he sat down upon a ledge of rock, the better to compose his thoughts. If he only knew where Squirrel Head's men were gathering he would know what next to do. For some time he wavered between two plans of action. Should he leave the mine at once and make a break for Bud Thurman's camp?

"Only trouble with that," he argued, "is that my shot may have stirred up a hornets' nest. If Squirrel Head's band is near here and that fellow I crippled gets back to camp he's likely to send them swarming up this way." [190]

His safest course seemed to be that of remaining in the cave until nightfall and then, under cover of darkness, make his way back to the mouth of Ages Creek.

There were times when Johnny disliked prudence and caution. This was such a time. There was a great battle impending, perhaps the greatest battle these mountains had ever seen. If he lingered here too long that battle might occur while he was away. He wanted to be in on that. Every nerve tingled at the thought of it. There were many reasons why he should take part in the coming conflict. He considered himself a member of Bud Thurman's clan and of Hallie's clan. Being a member, he knew his place of duty to be at the side of Bud Thurman. He carried the rifle of Hallie's fallen father. She would expect him to do his duty. His pulse quickened at this thought.

Then, too, he and Pant were not altogether unconcerned in this battle. It had been a quarrel over them that had started it. Perhaps the very title to valuable land depended on its outcome. [191]

As this thought entered his mind a new perplexity came with it. Pant had said that Squirrel Head held a deed to that same land. He had assumed that this deed had been forged. But had it? Was it not quite as possible that the deed which Pant's uncle had bought and had passed on to his nephew had been forged?

The thought gave Johnny a sudden set-back. It lasted but a moment. He realized almost at once that the settling of old mountain scores, the avenging of the death of Hallie's father, the defending of the rights of these simple mountain people, were far more important than the mere establishment of Pant's title to land, however valuable it might be. And yet, Johnny wanted Pant to have that land, knowing that he would use every penny-worth of it in making the world happier. Squirrel Head would use it only to strengthen his power as a czar of the mountains. [192]

"And that," Johnny said, clinching his fists, "must never be!"

Stirred up by these thoughts, he decided to leave the mine at once and make his way through the scout-haunted forest down to Bud Thurman's store.

With rifle gripped tight and ready for instant use, he scooted low beneath overhanging trees, darted from clump to clump, taking advantage of every possible cover. He was headed for the Hidden Trail, or thought he was. Once there he would be safe. All too late he discovered that he had lost his bearing. It was the rugged steepness of the hill that finally warned him of his mistake.

"Lost on the mountain!" His heart skipped a beat at the thought. "Surrounded by enemies, and lost!"

At that instant misfortune was followed by catastrophe. Some loose rock slipped from beneath his feet and he went down sprawling. His rifle clattered to earth. Grasping at a low shrub, he missed it. Twice he rolled over. In wild consternation he gripped at a pine branch, held it for an instant, then felt it give way. He saw his rifle lodge against a clump of bushes and lay there. [193]

"Hallie's rifle," he groaned. With ever increasing speed he went slipping, sliding, rolling, gliding downward—toward what? He could not tell. Perhaps swift and sudden death.

As he bumped helplessly down the steep incline a thousand thoughts flashed through his mind; thoughts of home and friends near and far, of Pant, of Hallie, and of the coming battle. No one, however, has ever measured the speed of thought. Certainly all these consumed but a moment. Then, with a suddenness that took his breath, Johnny found himself hurtling through space. He had fallen over a cliff.

By great good fortune he landed in the limber branches of a low, broad spreading pine. These, checking his fall, let him down so gradually that he reached the earth with a thump that did nothing more terrible to him than to bring his knees up under his chin and set all his teeth rattling. [194]

He was sitting up, rubbing his shins and congratulating himself

on his escape when to his surprised and startled ears there came a low chuckle.

Looking up and straight before him he saw at least twenty men lounging on the rocks and grass beneath the cliff. With them was Squirrel Head. He had fallen into the hornet's nest.

Consternation seized him. He was unarmed. His rifle was on the hill above. His automatic lay where it had fallen, having slipped from its holster as he fell from the tree. It was about three paces from where he now sat. To make a move in that direction meant certain death. Every man of the circle was heavily armed. He had discovered one of Squirrel Head's places of rendezvous, but in a way he had not planned.

"Little good it will do," he thought to himself. "They'll kill me if I attempt to escape; probably will anyway." [195]

Just as he had come to this conclusion a stoop-shouldered, hairy, ape-like man with large feet and hands, jumped up, shouting:

"Hit's him! Hit are! Hit are! I got him, Squirrel Head, I got him!" At the same instant, with his long arms extended, he rushed toward the boy. It was he who, having been told to kill Johnny as he slept by the spring, had failed, and he had been roundly berated by his chief. He was now doing his best to win back his laurels.

Not so easy won, however. Just as he put out his arms to encircle Johnny a strange thing happened. Something with the hardness of a sledge hammer and the force of a mule's hind foot struck him squarely on the chin and sent him pawing the air. He landed squarely on his back and lay there blubbering like an overgrown boy. Johnny's well trained right hand had landed on the ape-man's chin.

Having delivered the stroke, Johnny stood waiting. He did not hope for admiring cheers or mercy from these ruffians. He stood there because he knew that it would be certain death to attempt to leave the spot, and, though he felt sure that they had no other intentions in the end than to kill him, he still held some little hope of escape. [196]

"Serves you right," said Squirrel Head, turning his round face and beady eyes toward the discomfited ape-man. "You're always bustin' in whar you don't noways belong."

"Why, look-it!" he grinned as he spat tobacco juice at a stump, "here's our friend the little furiner. Johnny, they call you, don't they?"

Johnny nodded.

"Now here comes Johnny," Squirrel Head continued, "comes droppin' in to make us a little friendly visit, and to join us, I

make no doubt, and here you make out to ketch him as if he wuz a rabbit er a fox. You ought to be mighty ashamed of yerself.

"Johnny," he said, nodding to a place beside him on the rock, "you jest come up and sit by me. Needn't be nary bit afraid of none of these men. They mostly does exactly what I says. [197]

"Sit down there, Black Crider," he exclaimed, as a white-faced man half rose on his knees and gripped his revolver with his left hand. "You ain't got no cause to interfere in my doin's, even ef this 'ere boy done busted yer right arm. An' it mightn't a been him. You can't never tell."

These words, emphasized as they were by the point of a blue-barrelled revolver, proved effective, and with an animal-like snarl Black Crider settled back in his place.

With a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, Johnny saw that Black Crider was none other than the man who had aimed at little Gene, and whom he had crippled by a fortunate shot.

"Johnny's going to do some things," said Squirrel Head with a grimace that was more leer than smile. "He's going to do me a lot of good. Mostly he's goin' to sign some papers fer me. Ain't you, Johnny?"

Not having the slightest notion what he meant, Johnny did not answer. [198]

His mind was in a whirl. What would his friends think of him. Knowing that there was a big battle impending, he had gone off to take care of some bits of personal property, his surveying instruments. This accomplished, he had blunderingly lost his way and had fallen into the enemies' hands. What would Bud Thurman and Hallie think of him? Hallie had entrusted to him her most precious treasure, her father's rifle; the rifle with which in the plain course of duty he had brought to an end the careers of two evil men. Now it lay useless at the foot of a clump of brush. Johnny felt that he was useless to his clan; worse than useless, for the crafty Squirrel Head meant to use him in some way to hinder Bud Thurman and his band, else why should he speak of signing papers?

"Hit's this away," smiled Squirrel Head. "Johnny jest dropped in for a sort of private conversation with me. 'Sposin you all jest sort of move back into the bresh a bit and let us talk some. [199]

"An' Black Crider," he threatened, noting the dark looks cast by the crippled man, "none of your dirty work from under cover, er by jumpin' Jupiter I'll hang yer hide to a hickory tree afore sun-down."

As if by magic the men disappeared.

"Now," said Squirrel Head, "let's get down to what you might

call business. You got a sort of deed to some of this here rough, no-count land."

Johnny did not answer. He was too surprised and elated to do so. The whole truth had suddenly dawned upon him. Since it had been he that had appeared to lead and give directions in the matter of land surveying, Squirrel Head had quite naturally concluded that it was he and not Pant who owned the blanket survey. He proposed now—under penalty of death if need be—to force him to sign over his rights in the land. All this proved something that made Johnny jubilant. Pant's title to the land was valid. Squirrel Head's title was fraudulent, else why his great desire to get those papers signed; a desire that was manifestly so great that he was willing to pretend at least that there was a truce between them.

"As long as I can keep this going," Johnny told himself with a thrill of hope, "I will be under Squirrel Head's protection and I will be safe." **[200]**

"Of course you got the deed," said Squirrel Head, impatient at the delay, "an' jest by way of showin' how much you like me and how much you appreciate my not lettin' Black Crider kill you, you're goin' to sign over all your rights to worthless rough land on Turkey Creek."

Johnny's mind was working fast. "Why, I might," he said slowly, as if in deliberation. "Don't look as if the land was worth much. But you see my signature wouldn't stand in court unless it was witnessed by a notary, and I might not always be around to swear to it."

"Why so you mightn't," said Squirrel Head with mock cordiality. "We'll fix that, fix it fine. There's old Stubby Bill Blevins, my uncle. He ain't no good fer fightin' account of his bein' lame, but he's a not'ry. I'll send one of the boys to fetch him. 'Twon't take no more'n an hour er so, an' I reckon you won't be in a hurry to leave us, Johnny," he leered at the boy. To this question Johnny made no answer; did not even notice the leer. He was too busy trying to think out a way of escape. **[201]**

"Well, anyway," he comforted himself, "there's still an hour or two of safety."

At this he heard the sound of voices as of some sentry halting a newcomer. Then he heard a clear, girlish voice asking for Squirrel Head.

Instantly Johnny recognized the voice as Hallie's, and his heart grew very heavy. **[202]**

CHAPTER XVII
THE FACE IN THE POOL

Pant felt quite secure in his watery hiding place as he gripped his automatic and kept a sharp lookout through the crack in the rock. Only one thought disturbed him; the man who had stood by the river bank and looked across at the rocks behind which he was hiding had on his face a certain look of cunning that said plainer than words: "I have a secret which I will not share with my companions."

"Yet what secret could he hold in that head of his?" Pant asked himself. "Surely he couldn't have known that I was hiding; otherwise he would have lead the men across the stream down where it is shallow and would have come up here to capture me."

This reasoning somewhat reassured him, yet there lurked in his mind a feeling of uneasiness. [203]

He found a rock the size of a man's hat that stood above the water and on this he seated himself. With his feet still ankle-deep in water, he watched through the crack as if it were a loop hole of a fort.

To sit with one's feet in water until they are as white as a side of fresh pork is not the happiest experience that may come to one; yet an hour passed, another and another, and still Pant sat there watching. There were two reasons for this. He had been sent to this point to watch the passing of men and to report their number and the direction they had taken. He must remain in this vicinity until this mission was accomplished. No better lookout could be found. Perhaps even more important than this was the fact that men were passing down the road. There was no way to escape from his hiding place except to swim out of it, or by using the ragged edges of the crack in the rock as a ladder to climb over the top. Should he do either of these some one of the men or group of men passing down the road might see him and he would at once be an object of suspicion, if not the target for a well-aimed bullet.

So, watching the passing of men, some on foot, some on horseback, he sat dreamily waiting the time when he might safely leave the spot to embark upon the second half of his mission which was perhaps more dangerous than the first—the task of spying out the gathering place of Squirrel Head's men. [204]

The day was warm and sultry. A thunder storm was brewing at the top of Big Black Mountain where it towered over the headwaters of the Cumberland. Small, dark clouds were playing hide and seek behind the many timbered peaks. As Pant

dreamily watched them he became conscious of a great drowsiness. He had slept not at all that night, had eaten no breakfast.

At first he resisted this desire for sleep. But at last, when he had watched twenty or more men pass and had made sure that their rendezvous was somewhere at the head of the creek, he decided that he might safely trust himself to a short sleep. [205]

"A half hour. No more," he said, as if setting a mental alarm clock. Then, still gripping his automatic, he leaned back against the rock. Even in his last second of wakefulness he seemed to see the look of cunning on that mountaineer's face.

It was in the midst of a troubled dream that he fancied he saw a gigantic fish above the surface of the water. With mouth wide open, great eyes staring, this creature was moving directly toward him. He had entered the far end of the rock-walled trap. With a feeling of horror Pant saw the look of cunning and triumph on the hideous face.

"You thought you fooled me. You did fool others, but not me," that look seemed to say.

Even in the dream Pant recalled the look of cunning on that mountaineer's face, and as one who sleeps uneasily he shook himself and tried to move. It was impossible. Had he turned to stone? His muscles would not respond to a half dazed mind.

Then, as if dissolving from one thing to another, the fish's head changed to the face of a man; an ugly, leering face. In his teeth the man held a long, blue-barrelled revolver. Evidently he knew the pool well, for already he was stepping upon the rock beneath; even now he put up a hand for his gun. [206]

With a mighty effort Pant gained the power of motion. In a hazy half-dream he lifted his automatic and gripped the handle. A shot rang out. The ugly ghost of man, fish or beast, reared backward and with a look on his face horrible to behold he plunged backward into the pool.

Pant, now wide awake, stared at his automatic and at the thin wisp of smoke that curled upward from the barrel.

"Must have fired it," he said, "that's what woke me. Some wild dream. Some—"

Suddenly he started back in horror. Had he caught, through the translucent water, the white image of a face at the bottom of the pool? [207]

He thought so, yet it seemed impossible. There had been no face there before. Leaning forward and shading his eyes, he stared intently. Yes, there it was; a face and the form of a man. Then he started afresh as the whole truth dawned upon him. There was a man at the bottom of the pool; the same

mountaineer who had stood but two hours before on the bank of the stream gazing at Pant's hiding place.

Now he lay down there dead. There was no need to attempt to rescue him from drowning. An ugly hole in his temple told what had killed him.

"And I fired the shot," breathed Pant, "fired it in a dream. I killed that man. And yet," he mused, "he deserved well enough to die. He meant to kill me in my sleep."

Like a puzzle long thought out, the man's actions now lay out in their proper place. That look of cunning had meant that he had guessed that Pant had not drowned; that he was in hiding and that he knew the spot. No doubt the man, having fished there many times, knew the formation of rock perfectly and its possibilities as a hiding-place. Knowing all this, and hoping to receive all the praise for Pant's death, he had kept his secret. Only after his companions had reached the meeting place had he come sneaking back. Then, having found the boy asleep, he had resolved to make assurance doubly sure by swimming close up for the shot. Only two things he had not reckoned with: Pant's automatic, and a wild, half-waking dream. **[208]**

"And there you are—dead!" Pant shuddered.

As if in answer to his challenge the dead man appeared to move, and the boy shrank back against the rock. Surely this was a ghostly place.

At that instant his keen eyes told him what had caused the dead man's apparent motion. A big, black fish, darting across the surface of the water, had set it rippling. To Pant the fish seemed quite as ghost-like as the man until he remembered that it was his own fish, his great black bass. **[209]**

"No place for a live boy here," he muttered.

After a hasty glance through the crack he wound the line about his hand, drew the fish from the water, and looking at him for a second, cut the line and allowed him to go free.

Again, as the fish darted for shelter, the corpse appeared to move and in a twinkling Pant was half way up the jagged wall. A moment later he had lost himself in the underbrush that grew above the pool.

For ten minutes he climbed steadily upward, following a small stream. Then, pausing, he sat down on a moss-covered log to rest. Being ravenously hungry he began to wonder why he had freed the fish.

"Humph!" he grunted after a moment's thought, "fish from such a death pool wouldn't taste right."

As he studied the vegetation about him he spied a blackberry **[210]**

bush whose branches hung out over a small pool in the brook. It was heavy and black with berries. With a joyous exclamation he fell upon the ripened fruit.

"And now," he murmured, "it's something else again. Gotta get up the creek and spot the enemies' rendezvous. Pretty business if they see me first!"

CHAPTER XVIII
OUTWITTING THE ENEMY

Johnny was both surprised and disturbed by the sound of a girl's voice asking for Squirrel Head. He was surprised that any girl should be here on the mountainside at the edge of Squirrel Head's camp, which, for all he knew, might at any moment become the center of an attack by Bud Thurman's men. Surely a perilous position for a girl. He was disturbed by the thought that the voice sounded much like Hallie's.

Imagine his consternation upon seeing that very person, led by a burly mountaineer, enter the circular clearing.

"Hallie!"

The word was on his lips, but he did not utter it. Why was she here? He must know that. Why was *he* here? She would wonder about that. How could he tell her? There was no way. Would she think him a traitor; he to whom she had entrusted the rifle which he looked upon with almost sacred reverence as once having been her father's? Surely here was trouble enough. [212]

Looking Squirrel Head squarely in the eye the girl walked straight toward him. Johnny, who had moved a little away from this enemy chieftain, was not sure that she saw him at first. But when a sudden burst of color appeared on her cheek, to disappear and leave it ashy white, he knew that she had.

Walking forward with the stiff dignity of an aid-de-camp, she placed a letter in Squirrel Head's hand.

"Bud sent that," she said.

So that was it. Hallie was a messenger for Bud. Somehow Bud had found out Squirrel Head's hiding-place and had sent Hallie with some message. With rare bravery the mountain girl had dared to come. Johnny thrilled at the thought of her courage. As he saw the men moving close to Squirrel Head he resolved that should any harm threaten Hallie he would give his life in her defense. [213]

"What must she think of me," he wondered. "Here she finds me, not bound as a prisoner in the enemies' camp, but sitting quite free upon a rock. What can she think but that I have taken the rifle she gave me and have come to join the enemies of her clan?"

In his desperation he had some thought of making a dash for his freedom. The ever-watchful, lowering look of Black Crider told him that this course would only result in death.

"And Hallie," he told himself, "may need my aid, though it's little enough I could do."

He was surprised at the action of the enemy chieftain. Before reading the note he very courteously removed his hat, and moving aside, offered Hallie a seat on the smooth rock. He even took time to rebuke one of his associates who had failed to lift his hat.

"Something of a gentleman if he is a bloodthirsty and greedy rogue," was Johnny's mental comment. [214]

"Here you, Jim Crews," said Squirrel Head, handing the note to one of his men, "read what's writ thar. I never was much on larnin' nohow."

Wrinkling his brow, Jim studied it out word by word.

Bud Thurman had written to the effect that if Squirrel Head and two of his men, Black Crider and Red Dobson, would surrender to a deputy and stand trial for the death of the boy 'Pole, and for other crimes charged to them, the rest of their men might go to their homes in peace and there would be no fight. He, Bud Thurman, was a man of peace and wished to avoid a feud-fight, but high-handed doings must stop and justice must be done.

Johnny thought it a well worded and just note, written by a man who loved justice and feared no man.

How it impressed Squirrel Head could not be told. Once more Johnny was moved to some admiration for the man. Not only was he courteous to women, but he was a man who could draw a mask over his face to conceal his thoughts. [215]

For a time the outlaw chieftain stood looking about him as if to read the thoughts of his men.

"Well," he said in a tone of quiet meaning, "what say? Shall we do what hit says in that thar note?"

There came an instant rumble that grew into a loud "No!"

"You see, Hallie," Squirrel Head's voice carried a note that was near to an apology, "hit can nowise be done."

"I—I'll tell them."

Johnny, as he listened, thought there was almost a note of joy in the girl's voice. The child of a fighter who had come foully by his death, she wanted but one thing—to see her father's death avenged. She turned to go.

"Hold on thar," Squirrel Head placed a detaining hand on her shoulder, "you can't go back down thar alone. Hit air powerful onsafe." [216]

Glancing about him for a fitting escort, his eyes fell on Johnny. Why he did it will always remain one of the insolvable mysteries. Turning suddenly, he said:

"The not'ry's here. My friend Johnny's jest going to sign some papers for me; then he'll guard you down the hill."

The girl's cheeks paled. She bit her lips, then stood aside to wait.

A guilty feeling swept over Johnny as he signed the paper which deeded to Squirrel Head all his rights to land on Turkey Creek. He had no rights to any land anywhere. He hated deceit, hated it so much that he disliked deceiving an enemy who was willing enough to deceive him and kill him as well. But his own freedom, and what was more important, Hallie's safety, depended upon it.

A moment after he had signed the deed he and Hallie walked slowly down the hill, to disappear in the bushes.

Johnny led the way. Three times he spoke to her. The color came and went upon her cheek, but she did not reply. **[217]**

"Thinks I'm a traitor," he told himself bitterly.

Then he remembered the rifle, the rifle that had been her father's. It still lay at the foot of the bushes above Squirrel Head's camp.

Hurriedly he took his bearings. They were but a short way from the top of the Hidden Trail. That was the safest way down. When they had reached the shelter of the overhanging rhododendrons, he said:

"You wait here. I'll be back."

In her face he read doubt. She did not believe that he would come back; probably thought he was afraid to return to Bud Thurman's camp.

Why she waited he could not tell, but when he returned with the rifle she was still there.

At sight of the rifle her eyes opened wide. She did not understand. Reading the look in her eyes, Johnny was greatly encouraged.

"I—I—" he stammered, "I've been a blunderbuss, but not a traitor. I fell into that camp and lost my rifle in the bargain. They treated me better than an enemy because they thought I had something they wanted. There—there isn't time to explain here. You believe me, don't you? Here—here's your rifle if you want it back." **[218]**

For a second the girl wavered; then with a flood of color

rushing across her cheek she pressed the rifle back into his hand. Nimble as a gray squirrel, she ran ahead, leading the way down the Hidden Trail.

CHAPTER XIX
PANT'S GREAT ADVENTURE

Having appeased his hunger with blackberries, Pant was ready for some fresh adventure. In truth, he was eager for it. Anything to forget that face at the bottom of the pool.

Pant knew that four things must be kept from his mind if he were to be successful and happy. Hate, fear, jealousy and gloom must never be allowed to remain long in his mind. All these were destructive, not of one's foes, but of one's self. The face in the pool had left him gloomy. There are many ways of dispelling gloom. Only two of them were at his disposal. He might climb the mountain, and seating himself at the foot of some monarch of the forest, dispel his gloom in joyous contemplation of the beauteous panorama that lay before him. He might plunge himself into some new adventure. Since his nature compelled him, and loyalty to his clan called him in that direction, he chose adventure.

Keeping well up the ridge, now and then stepping out in a clear space that he might get a better view of the creek and those who chanced to be passing there, he worked his way along the mountainside until he had reached a spot where the valley narrowed to the width of an ordinary highway and the quiet creek became a noisy little brook. Here he paused to reconnoiter. **[220]**

One thing on the narrow valley bottom puzzled him. Two parallel lines, now passing through a meadow, now crossing the creek on a rude bridge, and now losing themselves behind a clump of bushes, ran on and on up the creek.

"Looks like a railway track," he said, "but there are no railroads back here in these mountains."

Turning his gaze up the river he discovered the solution of this mystery. A miniature train stood on the track. The engine was very small, apparently run by gasoline, since it carried no tender. The three cars, which were larger, were loaded with huge poplar logs. **[221]**

"I see," Pant smiled. "A dummy railroad for hauling logs down to Clover Fork."

It was all clear to him now. The creek was not large enough to float logs even in the season of heavy rains. The mountains were heavily timbered. This railroad with its diminutive engine and its wooden track had been built for carrying logs down the six miles of the little stream to the point where it flowed into Clover Fork. At the junction of the two streams

these logs would be dumped from the cars. When there was a "tide," as the mountain people call a freshet that swells the river to a young torrent, the logs would be rolled in and go floating down to the distant mills on the banks of the Cumberland River.

"Shouldn't wonder if there would be a tide this very afternoon," Pant said to himself. Cocking his head on one side he studied the ink-black clouds that hung over the top of Big Black Mountain and the head-waters of Clover Fork. [222]

"Bet it's pouring down rain up there right now. Take it an hour or two to get down to the mouth of the creek. Awful careless of those fellows to leave their train and go off somewhere to talk about a feud-fight. Ought to be getting that load of logs down.

"Let's see," he mused, "I used to know a little about engines. I might want to get away pretty fast; might do 'em a favor by getting those logs down to the river in time for the tide. Huh! Sounds all right. Nobody in sight. Guess I'll slip down and have a look."

Just then his eye caught sight of a white spot farther up the creek. After a study of it he concluded that it was a white horse beneath a beech tree. There appeared to be several horses tied there.

"I'd better go mighty careful," he said. "Squirrel Head's men are up there somewhere. Be worse'n stirring up a yellowjacket's nest to let 'em see me." [223]

Dodging behind bushes, clinging now to the trunk of a tree and now to a laurel branch, he made his way through hidden passages to the creek bed. Then, with a sudden dash, he reached the engine cab and a moment later was busily studying the levers and switches he found there.

"Yes," he murmured, "you switch this one on and throw that one over; then you lift that, and she's off. Once she gets going on the grade it doesn't matter much whether there's gas in her tank or not."

After a final inspection he darted back to the brush and continued his journey up the creek by way of the mountainside.

Opposite the point where the horses stood stamping away the flies he paused to stretch his slim length behind a spreading dog-wood. There was a narrow opening among the leaves. Through this he studied the lay of the land beyond. A little up from the spot where the horses were tied was a mill; a low, squat building, made entirely of logs. The door was small; the glassless windows were loop-holes.

"What a fort!" Pant exclaimed. "If that's where they are and where they mean to take their stand, then may kind Providence [224]

have mercy on Bud Thurman's men."

Even as he thought this a man appeared at the door, followed by two others.

"That's the place," Pant whispered. "Well, guess I know now about all I was sent to find out; better be going back while the going's good.

"I did want to try you out," he bestowed a wistful look on the dummy engine, "but a fellow don't get all he wants in this life, not near all."

He was about to scramble to his feet when something in the action of the three men attracted his attention. One of them, pointing up the hill, cupped his hand and shouted:

"Hi-oo! Thar!"

"Hi-oo! Thar!" came back like an echo.

The man who had pointed and shouted went back to the mill. **[225]**
His two companions started directly up the opposite mountainside. After passing through a sloping corn-field they disappeared in the forest above.

"Looks like they might be hiding out up there on the hill," Pant mused. "I'll bet there's a moonshine still up there somewhere. Now I wonder how I'm going to find out how many men there are in the mill."

At this moment a pebble came bounding down the hill and Pant's heart skipped a beat.

He looked up just in time to see a startle-eyed girl go bounding up the mountain. At the same time his ear-drums were struck by a piercing scream.

With his brain doing double-quick time, he jumped to his feet. Here was a pretty mess. In less time than it took to tell it they would be out and upon him. Which way should he turn?

Above him was the girl. Should he choose to go that way she **[226]**
would point him out. Before him was the creek, and across the creek the enemy. He thought of the dummy engine and its load of logs. Once aboard her he believed he could out-run the swiftest horse.

"Might ditch her," he thought, "but who cares? Such is war."

Back across the mountain side he ran, keeping to cover as best he could. Now and again he glanced back. Men had come racing from the mill and from the hill. Man! Oh, man! They swarmed out like ants.

"Got their number," he breathed. "Make—make a correct

report to Bud Thurman if they don't get me."

Still hidden from view, he had a good quarter mile the lead of them. No doubt the girl had pointed out the way he had taken.

"Don't care for that if only that dinkey engine will start."

Suddenly his heart stood still. He was staking all on his ability [227]
to start an engine which he had seen but once and which he had never touched. Yet there was no other way of escape. He was passing through a narrow fringe of forest. Above him was a wide belt of open corn-field. If he attempted to cross that they would shoot him like a woodchuck.

"She—she's got to go," he said, as with a deep breath he prepared to dash across the open space which lay between him and the engine.

Like a streak he crossed that clearing. Someone saw him. There was a shout followed by a shot. A bullet whistled over his head.

Now, with a leap he was in the cab. Three carloads of logs were between him and his pursuers and for the moment he felt safe.

"This," he breathed, "and this; then this."

As he touched the last lever the engine gave forth a short pop-pop-pop, shuddered, then stood still.

Frantically he looked at the engine. There was another switch. He threw it on. There followed a thundering, popping, roaring sound, and the engine moved.

"Whoopee!" he fairly shouted, "now, speed! Show some speed!"

The thing moved slowly, little more than a crawl. He turned to [228]
look back. At that instant a bullet cut a hole in the cab six inches above his head.

Leaving the engine to its own devices, he leaped across the intervening space between it and the nearest car. Flattening himself between two logs, he whipped out his automatic.

Peering through a crack between the logs, he saw three horsemen bearing swiftly down upon him. These men had come from the mill. Some of the others who had swarmed down the hill were mounting while others were following on foot.

Pant trained his automatic on the foremost horse. "Sorry to do this," he said, "but such is war!"

The truck gave a sudden lurch. It was getting under way. After coolly waiting for it to steady, he took second aim and fired.

Horseman and rider plunged into the creek.

"One," he counted.

An answering volley of bullets rattled harmlessly on the logs. [229]
As if stung into action with a sudden burst of power, the engine appeared to double its speed. The truck by this time was swaying from side to side.

"Makes it hard to shoot," he said, "but I gotta do it. They're gaining."

Aiming as best he could, he fired three times. The third shot dismounted a second horseman. The third reined in for re-inforcements.

"So far, so good," Pant boasted. "Guess—"

A bullet spat on the log beside him. Coming from somewhere on the hill above, it had cut a hole in his coat sleeve.

With a cold shudder he flattened himself against the logs. Three other shots came in quick succession, but all these went over him.

In the meantime the train gained momentum. Down the wooden track the dinkey engine raced like mad. Swaying from side to side, the cars threatened to leave the track.

Gripping the rough bark of a log, and praying that the log [230]
before him might not roll over and crush him, the boy held to his position. Now and again he caught the sound of shots but they all went wild. A sudden lurch told him the train had successfully rounded a curve.

Realizing that the lone rifleman on the mountain must have been left behind, he crept back to his loop-hole for another look. Coming down the road in a cloud of dust were some twenty armed horsemen.

"Leavin' 'em behind," he said exultantly, "leavin' 'em foot by foot."

With one danger left behind, Pant realized that he faced a new one. The engine appeared to have gone wild and with every moment it gained speed. Leaping, lurching, screeching around sharp curves, it raced down the valley like a thing gone mad.

[231]

CHAPTER XX
SPEED MAD

As the trees and bushes sped past him, Pant lost interest in the pursuing horsemen. Thrusting his automatic in its holster he gave his whole attention to the train, which by this time was speed mad and far beyond control.

Through his mind there rushed many wild questions. Would she jump the tracks? If not, what would happen when she reached the river? Was he safer here, or on the engine?

"Ought to be some brakes," he murmured, and creeping to the back end of his car he found a round-topped brake wheel. Giving this a quick turn and a vigorous wrench, he heard something down below suddenly snap. Then the whole train went whirling on.

"Rotten chains," he muttered.

He could see a cloud of dust flying behind the train. This was composed for the most part of slivers torn from the wooden tracks. Gazing at the rough boulders that lined the track on either side, he tried to imagine what would happen if the train jumped the track. The thought spurred him to action, and he determined to try the brakes on the other cars. **[232]**

He was half way across the second car when a dash of rain struck his face. Looking up, he saw that just before him lay a dense black cloud. He was racing into a storm. All ready it was pouring down upon Clover Fork. Having come from the head of the Fork, it must have filled its banks to overflowing and whipped its surface into a torrent. Here was added terror.

Plunging for the brake, he tightened this one more carefully. It set the wheels screaming, but so far as checking the train's mad flight it might as well have been a screaming parrot in a cage.

The next moment the storm broke. In sheets of water that were like waves of the sea, it came down to engulf all. The engine was blotted from sight. Only the pitching car upon which he rode and the logs that fretted their chains were visible to the boy. Like a drowned rat he clung to his car and hoping against hope, felt himself being whirled forward. **[233]**

"Can't—can't be much farther to the river," he sputtered, as a gust of wind filling his mouth fairly took his breath. "Not far; and then—"

He hardly knew whether to hope that the train would hold to the track until they came to the river, or that it wouldn't. He could see nothing. The track, the ground beside the track, all

that lay before him was blotted out by the black fury of the storm.

If the storm was a fearful thing to see, it was ten times more terrific to hear. Thunder echoing from peak to peak appeared to be tearing out the very hearts of the mountains. Such roaring and crashing, such rumbling and tumbling, such a turmoil of sound was never heard before. Gigantic, nerve racking and totally unthinkable, it filled the boy's stout heart with such terror as drove thoughts of all other perils from him.

One second, during a blinding flash, he saw a giant chestnut tree enthroned against the sky before and to the right of him; the next that tree seemed a thing of blue-white flashes of fire. A third flash revealed the tree a torn and ragged ruin. [234]

"Lightning struck it," Pant mumbled; "makes me numb all over."

He wondered whether he were to lose consciousness, and if so, whether that meant death.

This soon passed. The next moment he was the same keen witted, resourceful boy, trying in vain to think of a way out of this maelstrom of speed, power, water and fire; this place where the very inventions of man and the power of the elements appeared to be vieing with one another in their deeds of frightfulness.

If the train was carrying him to a terrible death, nature seemed bent on rendering that death doubly sure by tearing him limb from limb, or drowning him in a sea of water.

At a moment when he was quite at his wits' end, a strange and unaccountable thing happened. For a second the speed of the mad train appeared to slacken; the next he found himself in the midst of rushing water. [235]

So violent had been the storm that for a few seconds he thought he must still be riding through drenching sheets of rain, that the very sky had turned into a sea. This passed. He realized that he was swimming. It was a flood, a real flood, and he was in the midst of it.

Something bumped him. He put out a hand to feel it, and finding it a log, he steadied himself by clinging to it. It buoyed him up. So he drifted on, going somewhere, yet he could not know where.

In vain he attempted to look about him. A little later the air began to clear. He saw a log to his right; then a great mass of them to the left. Beyond the log to his right was an uprooted tree, farther over a jagged shore line.

He was drifting with the logs in a broad, clay-colored stream [236]

of muddy water. Slowly all that had happened came back to him. Reaching Clover Fork—that had been made a river of great depth by the torrents of rain—the train had plunged straight into it. When the cars had gone beyond their depths he had floated free. And here he was drifting with logs and trees down a troubled, seething stream. What had become of the train; what had happened to his pursuers? He could only guess.

The storm passed as suddenly as it had come. When the sun came out ten minutes later it looked down upon a very wet boy who rode astride a log in the center of a muddy river which for the moment would have floated a Great Lakes steamer.

Glancing anxiously from shore to shore for possible sight of enemies, Pant rode his log as a king might ride his charger.

"Let's see," he reflected, "the mouth of Turkey Creek is about four miles below that of Sorgum Creek. That's where I disembark and go ashore. If luck stays with me I should reach Bud Thurman's store in less than an hour. This tide in Clover Fork has helped me out of a peck of trouble and saved me a lot of rough walking. Question is, is Lady Luck still riding with me?" **[237]**

Thoughts of what had happened and was to happen passed in steady procession through his mind. War had been declared between the clans and he was a member of one of these warring clans. He had been chased as a spy. There was to be a great battle, and it could not now be far off; perhaps tonight; or in the morning.

He thought of the face in the pool. The torrents of rain must have carried it into the river. It might at this very moment be drifting beside him. Suddenly he felt an overwhelming desire to leave the water.

Shaking the water from his automatic, he drew out the shells and snapped the gun twice.

"Working all right," he said, and placing the automatic in his teeth he dropped from the log and swam with strong sure strokes toward shore.

[238]

CHAPTER XXI
PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK

Pant was not the only person caught in that terrific thunderstorm. Johnny and Hallie had just reached the foot of the Hidden Trail when it broke upon them in all its fury. Only a few rods from the point where the brook of the Hidden Trail came out into the open there was a narrow shelving rock that offered shelter. To this they raced. Beneath it, on a broken slab of limestone, they sat down to await the passing of the storm.

The end was slow in coming. Such an amazing display of lightning, such deafening crashes of thunder, Johnny had never before experienced. If this had been terrifying to Pant, what must it be to little Hallie? She was brave, it is true. The mountains had never known a braver heart, but what heart does not quail when the elements unleash their frenzied furies.

Johnny had guessed that the sight of her rifle had reassured Hallie and that she had forgiven him. He knew it now, for as a glaring flash seemed to set the whole forest on fire she pressed close to him, and with a little shivering "Oh!" hid her eyes on his sturdy young breast. **[239]**

As for Johnny, he had met many perils. For him lightning held little terror. There were tall trees all around that would draw the lightning. Beneath the rock he felt secure enough. For all that, he was not wholly sorry that his companion was frightened. It filled him with a sense of power. As he felt the wild beating of her heart he made a high resolve that as long as her needs demanded he would be her protector. She had trusted him in more ways than one. He would never fail her.

It was with a distinct sense of regret that he heard the low rumble of distant thunder and knew that the storm was passing.

Five minutes later they walked out upon a bejeweled and sparkling world. No rankest woodland weed but was rich enough to support a thousand flashing pearls. As Johnny looked at Hallie he saw a new light in her eyes. **[240]**

"Her eyes," he thought to himself, "they outshine all."

There was little time for sentiment. They were not yet out of danger, nor would they be until Hallie was safe on her own doorstep. What was more, a battle was pending; a great battle of the clans. Who could tell when the first shot would be fired? Who knew but that under the protection of the storm one side had already sprung a surprise attack.

"Come on," he urged, seizing her hand, "we've got to get off

the mountain." Together they went racing down the rain-drenched trail.

They reached Bud Thurman's store without misadventure. A [241]
trifle short of breath, but quite pleased with himself and all the world, Johnny helped Hallie to a seat on the counter. There she nimbly sprang to her feet, and with the counter for a platform, declaimed the very words spoken by Squirrel Head in refusing to accept Bud's terms.

"Such a girl!" Johnny murmured in appreciation. A perfect mimic, she played her part well, and in spite of the seriousness of the moment, the grimmest of Bud Thurman's mountaineers smiled at her drollery.

Bud Thurman's face darkened as his smile faded. He meant business.

"All right, boys," he said in a firm, even tone, "I reckon that means a gun fight. Do we go after them, or wait fer them to start it?"

"Go arter 'em's my religion," said a tall, lanky man whose gray locks protruded through the holes in his battered hat. "Never caught no skunks by a baitin' of traps on my own porch."

"What do *you* think?"

Much to Johnny's surprise, Bud Thurman turned to him as he asked this question. Evidently these mountaineers were coming to look on him as something of a leader.

"Why I—" he began slowly, "that depends. How soon could [242]
we spring a surprise attack?"

"Jest before sun-up to-morror."

"Then I'd say we ought to better our position here. If they took a notion to attack us they'd make this shell of a place look like a sand screen in less than no time at all."

"The boy's right," said the tall gray-haired man. "What do you suggest, son?"

Johnny thought a moment. "Why," he finally answered, "there are a lot of saw logs back over there on the creek bank. Why not make a barricade? We could roll the logs over here and pile them against this building. That would make the place bullet proof."

"Good idee!" exclaimed the mountaineer.

The task was begun at once. Two hours later the store looked more like a gigantic pile of poplar logs than a building.

"That boy's a wonder!" exclaimed the tall one, much pleased with the work. "Them thar logs'll hold a power of lead."

"Hit makes us safe," agreed Bud Thurman. "Now how about our side of the fight?" [243]

"Jest afore sun-up's the time."

"Wait," said Bud, "here comes Pant. Let's see what he's got to tell."

It became very evident, as Pant told of his startling adventures, that Squirrel Head's men were gathering in two groups; one on Stone Mountain; the other on Sorgum Creek.

"Question is," said Bud Thurman, scratching his head, "where'll they join up? I'd say most likely on Sorgum Creek. That's where Pellege Field's mill is, and that's a mighty good place to fight from. I never fit a man in a log mill but once, an' I tell you hit were tough. Had to set hit on fire."

Leaving the mountaineers to settle these questions, Johnny took Pant over to Hallie's cabin for supper. It was a wonderful meal that Hallie and her aged aunt, Sallie Ann Setser, prepared for them. Corn bread and sweet potatoes baked in a little round oven on the hearth; coffee that was first roasted to a turn over the fire, then ground in a mill no bigger than a mouse-trap; bacon broiled over the coals. All this, topped by a thick wedge of apple pie, made a meal that the hungry boys would not soon forget.

Pant, feeling the need of sleep, excused himself as soon as the meal was over. Johnny lingered. There was something snug and comfortable and altogether satisfying about this little cabin on the side of the hill. He had placed Hallie's rifle on its accustomed hooks above the fire-place. Now, as he sat in a splint-bottomed chair on the porch, he heard the glad clatter of dishes accompanied by a low-hummed tune which came from Hallie's lips. He seemed to feel somehow that he was the man of this household. It was a snug, comfortable feeling, and as he looked away to the purple hills where night was fast falling, he wished with all his heart that all wars would cease and that he might play for a time at being the head of a mountain home. [244]

"Man! Oh, man!" he exclaimed, "that would be grand. There's corn to be gathered on the hills above; corn that Hallie and her aunt have raised. There's the winter's wood to be brought down from the mountain, and I suppose a new tract of land to clean for next spring's planting. Just to do that work for them, then to sit here with Hallie and watch the night come down. Oh, Boy! [245]

"There'd be play times, too. There are fish hidden in every dark pool on Turkey Creek, and larger ones in Clover Fork. There are squirrels and raccoons in the mountain forest, and

perhaps a wild turkey for Thanksgiving, and maybe a bear when the frost is on the mountain. What a life!"

A cloud sweeping across the sky left the valley in sudden darkness. With this quick transformation his thoughts changed. He thought of the past and of the immediate tomorrow. He mourned again the loss of his friend 'Pole, and vowed softly to himself that the cowardly shot from the dark should not go unpunished. He wondered for a moment about the coal mine on Pant's land, and about the mysterious smoking tree that did not burn.

"When the fight's over we'll go back and solve all those mysteries. We'll win the fight," he added hopefully. Then, recalling a hope confided to him by Pant not an hour before, he repeated with great emphasis: "We must win!" [246]

He remembered Pant's words as distinctly as if he were now listening to him. "Johnny," he had said, squinting his eyes in a peculiar way, "they tell me there's a sand-stone ledge about two miles above here, where the stone after you have broken into it a short way is so soft you can almost cut it with a knife. But after it's been exposed to the air for a few days it's as hard as any building stone need be.

"Johnny," he had leaned forward eagerly, "did you ever notice these mountain children going to school? I have. I've looked into their dinner buckets. They were filled with cornbread soaking in butter milk. Did you ever notice their faces, how pinched they look? I tell you a lot of them are half starved. They come from way up the creek where the land is so rough and steep you can't raise much of anything.

"But say—they're bright, keen, and eager to learn, and now their school is burned. It's one of my ambitions to rebuild that school house; make it big and modern and permanent; build it out of that soft sand-stone. And, Johnny, if we get our claims established to this land on Turkey Creek we can do it. We can get out the lumber on our own land. The mountain men will help. We'll sell enough timber to the man that owns that tramway to pay the rest. It'll be a wonderful school. At noon there'll be a steaming hot lunch for every child. Won't that be grand? Can't you just see their eyes? Those poor little half starved tots, coming barefoot over the frosts of November; can't you see their eyes when their dinner comes steaming in? [247]

"Johnny," Pant's voice in his earnestness had dropped to a whisper, "this town will be a city in less than five years. The railroad will come. There will be a coal mining camp on every half mile of the creek, and this will be the center. We've got to build for the future. If we don't; if schools and things that make for the best are not here for those thousands of miners and their children when they come, Ages Creek will be the most wretched spot on earth. But if we get our land we'll make it a little mountain Heaven." [248]

Johnny had caught something of Pant's enthusiasm. The outcome of the impending battle meant far more than riches or poverty for them; it meant all that was best or all that is worst for thousands of little ones. Surely here was something worth living for. Yes, worth dying for, if need be.

Johnny's reflections were broken by a soft foot-step on the porch. Hallie had finished her evening's work and had come to join him.

CHAPTER XXII
THE WAR CHANT

By this time the darkness of night was complete. The moon had not yet risen. A thousand fireflies flashing their magic torches drifted about in aimless flight.

Hallie said nothing as she dropped noiselessly into her chair. Perhaps she knew Johnny was thinking. It may have been that she thought him asleep. For some moments they sat there, silent.

A small dark object, dimly visible, moved in the path that led to the cottage. A firefly lighted near it. To Johnny's surprise he saw the bug light up for a fraction of a second, then dart forward with an incredible rapidity. As he watched in astonishment, he saw what appeared to be a tiny cavern dimly lighted by a still smaller light.

Suddenly he realized what had happened. The dark object moving in the path was a toad, and as the firefly dropped down near he had thrust out his long tongue and had snapped him in. Later he had opened his mouth and the firefly had lighted it up. [250]

Johnny laughed. Hallie, understanding at once, joined him. The next instant a firefly, sailing dangerously near Johnny's face, was caught in his hand.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Look at the lights. Come on, let's see if we can catch them."

A moment later they were romping through the grass, chasing fireflies and laughing like children. To see them, no one would have guessed that tragedy had ever entered the life of either, or that they faced events of the morrow which were of the most tremendous importance, promising to result in either triumph or disaster.

Tiring at last, they walked slowly back to the porch and sat down. Johnny was in no hurry to get back to the store. The air there would be heavy with rank tobacco smoke. Here it was cool and sweet. He liked his companion, too. It was a treat to be with a girl who did not talk too much. [251]

"What was that?" Hallie suddenly whispered.

"Where?"

"Up on the mountain. I heard a strange sound."

Johnny had heard nothing, but he did not doubt the girl's word. These mountain people, like wild creatures of the forest, were

endowed with an extraordinary sense of hearing.

"There it is again," she gripped his arm, "do you suppose we ought—"

Her sentence was broken by the sharp crack of a rifle. This was quickly followed by another and yet another.

"The beginning!" Johnny exclaimed, springing to his feet.

The shots had come from the mountainside above the town, and were doubtless directed at Bud Thurman's store. [252]

Stepping quickly into the room, Johnny snatched Hallie's rifle from above the mantle. Quite as quickly he came again to the door. Hallie, as if for protection, came close to him to grasp his arm and half lean upon him.

Again rifles rang out; a fusillade of bullets sang through the air. Johnny shuddered. Then, after a moment's study of the flashes and reports, he let out a low chuckle.

"Think they're just riddling Bud Thurman's store and scattering his men like quails," he said. "All they're doing is filling a lot of logs with lead. Let them waste their ammunition. There'll be that much less for to-morrow."

Hallie gripped his arm the more tightly. She was thinking of what might happen if a powerful light were thrown upon them as they stood there in the dark. Every flash of a firefly made her shrink back. All the playfulness of the hour before had gone from them, and they stood there like older people, ready to face any danger.

"Do—do you think they will come down for a fight?" she whispered. [253]

"I don't think so. You can't tell, though. I don't believe all of Squirrel Head's men are up there; probably just those we saw this afternoon."

"And what will Bud do?"

"He'll wait until morning, then carry out his plan for a surprise attack. I am glad we thought of the logs for fortifying the store. We'd have lost some men, and that's what we can't afford."

Again they were silent. He could feel the beat of her heart slowing up as the firing ceased, and silence again settled over the village.

"Just a bluff," he said after a time.

"Johnny, I—I think I'll go along to-morrow morning." Her voice was full of determination.

"With—with the men?" Johnny was startled. "Oh, no, you mustn't do that!"

"Why not? I'm not afraid, and I can shoot. Why not, Johnny?"

He had no answer for this question except that she was a girl, and that answer he knew would be an insult to this brave little girl. So he did not attempt to answer it. [254]

"Well," he said a trifle huskily, "I'm going down to see if they did any damage, and find out what's going to happen. Good night."

Drawing her hand into his, he pressed it tight; then as she whispered "Good night," he gently released it to go striding down the path with Hallie's rifle under his arm.

Johnny found the log-walled barricade filled with excited men. At the first shot they had crowded into this secure retreat. One man had been wounded in the arm by a glancing bullet. Other than this, there were no casualties.

An excited discussion was being carried on. What should their method of procedure be? Many were in favor of striking back at once, of storming the mountain and driving the enemy from the woods. Bud Thurman and a few calmer ones were against this move. There was too much danger of heavy losses. If they went in a mass they would make an easy target for the enemy. If they scattered they might get lost from one another. Bud was firm for a morning surprise attack.

"Boys," he argued, "hit's plain that the thing to do is to cross over and attack that bunch Pant saw on Sorgum Crick. Hit's the biggest bunch of them. I know the place where they are. Hit's a little pocket of land with a shelving rock above hit. Thar's a moonshine still thar. The drunker they git the worse hit'll be for them and the better hit'll be fer us. Like as not Squirrel Head'll cross over afore us. He likes his dram. If he does, we'll get 'em all at once. If he don't and we only break up that one nest, that'll discourage 'em mightily. What do you say?" he asked, turning to Johnny. "Don't that sound like sense? You've got a head on yer shoulders. That idea of loggin' up this here store saved us a heap of grief and some men." [255]

"I think the morning surprise is the best plan," Johnny soberly replied.

"That settles hit," said Bud quietly. "All of you git what rest you can. At one o'clock sharp we'll start over the mounting." [256]

What army ever slept soundly before going over the top? There was no sleep. The place was constantly astir. Low muttered conversations came from every corner.

Suddenly upon the corner near the door there fell a hush. Someone had entered.

“Hit’s Hallie,” whispered a voice close to Johnny.

“Hallie with her banjo,” said another.

“Hallie!” Johnny thought, a little startled, “what’s she doing here?”

He was soon to know. Mounting a chair placed for her on a counter beside a smoky kerosene lamp, she began to pat the counter with a dainty foot and to strum her banjo with flying fingers.

It was a wonderful instrument. Hallie had shown it to Johnny in her home. Her father had made it for her. Searching out the finest curly maple of the forest, he had cut it down, and from its trunk had fashioned the beautifully colored handle. It was skillfully made and care had been taken in its making.

Now as its strange, weird tones began to vibrate through the room, Johnny fancied that the banjo had stolen from its early mountain home all the sweet and mysterious sounds of the forest. **[257]**

Rare indeed were those melodies. Belonging to the mountains alone; never written on musical scales, but handed down by ear from generation to generation, they carried with them some of the wild witchery of the primeval forest when white men first roved there. Now it was a soft melody like a love song, and now it was a wild, fantastic war dance that could have come only from some long forgotten Indian camp.

Finding these wild war melodies more in keeping with the temper of the men, the girl played them over and over. Leaning forward, keeping time to her music by the constant swaying of her lithe little body, she seemed to be some sprite of the forest come here to urge these half-wild men to fight, and die, if need be, for the things they cherished.

Then, seized by sudden inspiration, Hallie straightened up, and a new light came into her eyes as she tossed back her head and began to sing: **[258]**

“Dar’s buckwheat cakes an’ Injun batter,
Makes you fat, or a little fatter—
Look away, look away, look away Dixie Land.
Den hoe it down and scratch your grabble,
To Dixie Land I’m bound to trabble,
Look away, look away, look away Dixie Land.”

A shout went up from the men at the first notes of the stirring song; a shout like that heard on many a Civil War battle field, high-pitched, defiant, exultant. Then the low rafters shook with the mighty volume of the chorus as the men joined in the song.

A moment later the room was again vibrant with the moving

strains of our National anthem:

"Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light—" [259]

Johnny's heart swelled as he caught the first note. Never had the song seemed more appropriate. Within the hour these brave men would march forth to face death in order to preserve the peace of their homes and firesides.

The song finished, Hallie slipped down from her place and darted out of the door. A solemn hush hung over the room for a moment, then Bud Thurman spoke in a quiet tone:

"Boys, hit's a half hour afore we start up the mounting. Providin' thar's any of you that lives close enough an' has got ary thing to say to yore missus or the young un's, hit's better you light out an' do hit now."

A score of men rose and shuffled out. After that the place was more quiet than before, like the calm that comes before a storm.

Johnny fell to thinking of Hallie's last words to him. She had [260] expressed a determination to go over the mountain with the men. He hoped that she would not, but was afraid that she would keep her word. If she insisted on going, he wished that she might go with him; yet to suggest this was to encourage her and this he was not willing to do. It was a puzzling situation and in the end he did nothing about it.

[261]

CHAPTER XXIII
THE SILENT NIGHT MARCH

The contrast between the wild witchery of Hallie's music and the manner in which the forty-two men of Bud Thurman's clan filed out of the barricaded store was startling. Not a word was spoken. The shuffle of feet, the gleam of a rifle in the moonlight, these were the only signs that the march was on.

They walked in single file. Bud Thurman was in the lead. Johnny and Pant came next. After them moved the whole grim line.

Crossing the creek, they struck up a tortuous path that led over the mountain. Moments passed, a quarter of an hour, a half hour. They were nearing the crest of the ridge. Silence still reigned. Here a bird, startled from his sleeping-place, went fluttering away; there a glowworm gleamed in the dark. These were the only signs of life on the mountain. To the excited minds of the two boys the bird's flutter was for a second an enemy rushing to attack and scatter them, and the glowworm became the fire in the pipe of a spying scout. Nothing happened, so on through the night they marched. **[262]**

At the crest Bud Thurman paused. All gathered about him.

"Men," he spoke quietly, "we are about to go down. Their camp is yonder, half way down the mounting. They'll not forget Squirrel Head's defeat years ago. There'll be a guard. Somebody'll have to tend to him."

"That's me," whispered Pant.

"He's right," agreed Johnny, "Pant's more a cat than a man; used to play with tigers and leopards in India. If anyone can get that guard, he can."

"All right, boys, hit's agreed," said Bud soberly. "That means you go ahead, Pant. The rest of us'll wait right here fer ten minutes. Then we'll move forward until we're in ten minutes walk of their camp. Thar we'll rest ten minutes again. If we don't hear from you, we'll harf to wait some more. Kin you make a noise like one of them thar screech owls?" **[263]**

"Pretty well, I guess."

"Well, then, if you get that thar guard fixed nice and perty you jest make a noise like that an' leave the rest to us."

Pant disappeared into the dark. The others, easing themselves to the ground, sat in deep silence.

Pant knew that he had accepted a hard task. Bud had explained to him where the guard was likely to be found. If the man was moving, locating him would be easy. If he was seated and quiet, it was going to be exceedingly hard.

As he came close to the spot each tree stump, each broad young sapling became the guard. Crouching low, Pant moved from tree to tree. Now he crept upon a dark object to find it a brush pile, and now all but seized a broken stub of a tree.

Then, just as he was giving up hope, there came the sudden snap of a twig, and Pant knew it had been broken underfoot. [264]

"Ah!" he whispered.

The sound had come from the right. Crouching low, he waited.

"Yes, yes," he breathed excitedly, "that's the guard. There he is."

The man was walking in a circle. Had he sighted him? Was he stalking him?

"Well, if you are," Pant breathed, "you're barking up the wrong tree. Tigers couldn't get me. Neither can you."

In one hand he carried his automatic and in the other a stout piece of rope.

The man walked a few steps farther, then paused to listen. Plainly he was nervous. Had he caught some sound made by Pant?

Suddenly Pant decided upon a ruse. While the man was looking the other way he took three heavy steps which, in the stillness of the forest, might be heard distinctly. Then, before the other could turn, like a great cat he leaped to the lower branches of a pine tree, and swung himself up. There, lying along the limb, he waited like a tiger, grim, motionless.

[265]

In the meantime Bud Thurman had given Johnny a special task. There were, he told Johnny, two dry ravines that had their start close to Squirrel Head's camp. The one to the left led to a spot low down on the creek; the one to the right led to the log mill. It seemed probable that all of Squirrel Head's men, once they were routed, would head directly for the mill, which was as safe as an old time block-house. A few, however, might try the left hand run. That they might not escape, Bud proposed sending one man to guard that pass. He asked Johnny, who, having both rifle and automatic was better armed than most of the men, if he cared to undertake the task.

"Why yes," Johnny said cheerfully, "anything to help along."

In fact, he was greatly disappointed. He had hoped to be in at

the moment when the grand attack was made.

Now, having been given his directions, he began making his way down the mountain. [266]

Alone in the forest, he found the silence more impressive than ever. As he rounded a clump of bushes and paused to listen, he caught the snap of a twig. His heart missed a beat. Was he being hunted in the dark?

After a moment, having heard no more, he moved on, passing stealthily from shadow to shadow. He was on the very bank of the ravine when again he caught a sound. This time it was like the swish of a branch suddenly released.

In a little panic he dropped behind a dead tree trunk that lay across the ravine, and gripping his rifle, lay there waiting.

A full five minutes passed; then, to his vast astonishment, he caught a hoarse whisper. The whisperer was calling his name:

"Johnny! Johnny Thompson!"

"Who—who can it be?" he asked himself. "It may be an enemy. They know my name. I dare not answer."

Again it came, this time more distinctly: [267]

"Johnny! Johnny Thompson!"

Once more he was silent.

"Johnny! Johnny Thompson!" came more insistently, "where are you? It's me, Hallie."

"Hallie," he whispered the name involuntarily.

The next moment she was crouching beside him. The ravine was narrow. He felt her warm shoulder against him, heard the rapid beating of her heart.

"You didn't think I'd come," she murmured.

He knew he should scold her, send her away; but Bud Thurman had said the post was not likely to be a dangerous one. Probably it was the safest place she could find. Then, too, he could not help feeling a little glad that she was here. The place would not seem quite so lonely. When he heard the crash of rifles and knew the real fight was on he would not feel quite so disappointed at not being in on it. Then, too, he rejoiced that Hallie was here where he could protect her.

"I guess Squirrel Head's men won't come this way," he told himself as he arranged a comfortable place for her by his side, "I guess they won't." [268]

It was a bad guess, and the time came when he was both sorry and thankful that Hallie was by his side.

CHAPTER XXIV
THE BATTLE OF THE CLANS

To Pant's great joy, the lone man who guarded Squirrel Head's camp walked straight toward the tree where he hung suspended like a bat. Now he was five rods away, now three, now two. Now, as the guard moved into a patch of pale moonlight, Pant saw that his rifle was loosely slung under his arm.

He was a little appalled at the size of the rugged mountaineer. Beside the boy he would seem a giant.

He moved closer. Not a rod from Pant he paused to listen. Pant held his breath. Then the man came forward again. A step, two, three, five, six. He was now directly beneath the tree.

With a hiss like that of wild-cat, Pant dropped. The guard's rifle crashed to the ground. Crumpling under the sudden compact, he went sprawling. Before he could cry out Pant had thrust a handkerchief in his mouth. [270]

He was down, but not through. Striking out with both hands, kicking with his feet, he struggled to free himself. For a moment they fought desperately; then, locked in one another's embrace, they began to roll down the hill.

The hill here was very steep. In the fraction of a second they had gained momentum. Bumping a tree here, careening over a stone there, they went crashing down the hillside.

There came a second of breathless suspense as, having pitched over a rock, they shot through space. The next instant there was a splash and a gurgle. They had landed in a pool of a little brook.

Still locked in the giant's embrace, Pant felt himself sinking. The pool, though narrow, was very deep.

Realizing that the mountaineer probably could not swim, and that his mad embrace would drown both of them, Pant began striking out frantically. It was a tight place. Thrashing about in the water, he at last secured a grip on the man's right arm. Tearing this away, he slipped from the grip of his left and struck for the surface. [271]

There he remained long enough for one breath. Then with a "No you don't; I've seen one face like yours in a pool," he made a quick dive for the bottom.

A moment later he was administering first aid to the half drowned man.

When he saw signs of life he bound him hand and foot, then waited for full recovery. This was not long in coming. Though somewhat weakened, the man had lost none of his hatred.

"You'll have time to cool off," said Pant. "I'm going to leave you here. I've some friends waiting for me."

Then, suddenly remembering his signal, he sent the wild, haunting tremolo of a screech owl echoing through the forest.

With a bound he was away up the side of the mountain. Once he paused to pick up the guard's rifle. Finding it a good one, he took it along and a moment later joined his companions. [272]

"Hit's right over there beneath yan cliff," Bud Thurman was saying to his men. "When I give the word, you who I numbered one, fire. After that the rest of you count five, then you fire."

They were ready to march on the enemy. Pant joined them and in silence they moved forward. For some distance they marched straight ahead. Then, turning to the right, they skirted the hill.

"Here hit are!" Bud suddenly whispered.

Every man stopped.

"Ready!"

Half the men dropped to their knees.

"Now!"

A score of rifles blazed out. So thrilled was Pant that his own rifle stood motionless by his side. Five seconds later there came another crash of rifles as the second squad of Bud's men opened fire.

This was followed almost instantly by a scattering fire from the enemy. One man at Pant's right cried out in pain. [273]

"Down! Every man of you!"

A hush followed. Then came the sound of feet. They were coming. Pant adjusted his rifle for action.

"Fire as you are."

Again there came the crash of arms. Then again silence.

After that they heard the sound of rapid footsteps. The enemy was on the run.

"Got 'em boys," Bud Thurman shouted. "No use to follow, they'll go straight to the mill. We'll go down and cover it directly."

Two of the fleeing men decided on another course and they started down the dry run where Johnny and Hallie were waiting in ambush.

With wildly beating hearts, the boy and girl had listened to the crash of rifles. Then, as sounds of running footsteps came faintly to their ears, they guessed how the affair had ended. Their wild excitement had subsided when, of a sudden, Hallie gripped Johnny's arm. [274]

"Coming this way," she whispered.

The next instant a man stepped out into the moonlight. It was Black Crider, and Johnny recognized him at once, realizing at the same moment that he, too, was in the moonlight. They saw one another at the same instant. It was an even break. Their rifles cracked as one. Johnny felt a sudden twinge in his shoulder. At the same instant Black Crider pitched headlong to the ground. Realizing that Johnny was powerless, the girl pushed him behind the log, at the same time seizing his rifle.

She was not a second too soon. A figure, lurking in the shadow, was lifting a rifle. He was one second too late. Hallie's rifle cracked, and he pitched forward beside his companion.

"Squirrel Head," the girl calmly said; "he would have killed me!"

For a moment she crouched there in silence. Johnny could hear the wild throb of her straining heart. Then, rising slowly, she made her way up the ravine. There she stooped twice. After that she walked steadily back to where Johnny lay, and drawing a small clasp knife from her pocket, she sang: [275]

"Buck horn handle and a barlow blade,
Bestest knife that ever was made."

She had taken up the rifle, and to Johnny's vast astonishment was cutting two fresh notches in the stock by the side of the two her father had made.

"Oh! I forgot!" she exclaimed in sudden consternation, "you—you are hit!"

Dropping both rifle and knife, she tore away his coat and a corner of his shirt. With deft care she bound up the wound with strips of white cloth taken from her own garments.

"It's high up," she said. "Won't be very bad. Can you walk?"

Johnny struggled to his feet and found that by leaning on her strong young shoulders he could walk very well. Slowly they started up the hill.

"Doctor'll be up there," she explained. [276]

“Are they dead?” asked Johnny as they passed the fallen men.

“Dead as a door-nail,” she said, and there was an exultant note in her voice. “I reckon pap would be right glad.”

CHAPTER XXV
SOME MYSTERIES SOLVED

The battle was quickly ended. Several of the outlaw band had been wounded in the surprise attack. Two had been killed. Of those who had fled from the mountain, more than half went scurrying down hidden by-paths toward their homes. They had tasted Bud Thurman's medicine and a taste was enough. So it happened that despite the fact that Squirrel Head's band had in the beginning outnumbered Bud's almost two to one, when they reached the log mill there were less than thirty of them left, and of these three were badly wounded.

Bud did not attempt to force the situation. Placing his men behind logs and rock along the side of the mountain, he gave orders to watch and not to shoot unless it appeared that there was to be an attack led from the mill. So the morning dragged wearily on.

Johnny had found the doctor and his wound had been dressed. Now, with Hallie by his side, he sat in a quiet spot watching developments. **[278]**

Nothing happened until near noon. Then, at one of the windows of the mill, there appeared a small white flag. A moment later a man came to the door. Bud Thurman called to inform him that he was in no danger. After that the two men met at the foot of the hill and the fearless young doctor of Bud's band went to the enemy's camp to attend to the needs of the wounded.

It was only a short time later that Bud, cupping his hands, shouted glad news to his men. They were to disband and go home. The fight was over.

Bud allowed the greater number of the outlaws' band to return to their homes. Many of them, owing to the fact that they lived on land claimed by Squirrel Head but never owned by him, would lose their rights to cabins and clearings. Four men, because of their reputation for fighting and stirring up trouble, were ordered to leave the country. So peace again ruled on Turkey Creek. **[279]**

Satisfied with a task well done, and eager to again be about their business, the members of Bud Thurman's clan scattered, following different trails that each man knew to be the shortest way home. But not all. Thurman kept three of them with him for a grim duty that must yet be performed.

Johnny had told Bud of the death of Squirrel Head and Black Crider. There was no boast in the telling, rather was it a simple, hesitating recital, broken here and there by eager

words that Hallie added.

Bud sent one of his men to the mill for a shovel, and a few minutes later these silent men wended their way down a little trail that led to the point where Black Crider and Squirrel Head, seeking to take the lives of Johnny and Hallie, had lost their own. Simple and unaffected were the rites there under the trees. An hour passed, and two fresh mounds of earth marked the place where the mountains would forever shelter two of their own.

Johnny's wound was slow in healing and he was given the delightful task of sitting on Hallie's porch during the long evenings, and in the daytime he assisted her with her work. **[280]**

As for Pant, he was not long in finishing the survey of his land. As soon as his right to the land was proven, he sold the timber on it to the man who owned the tramway and at once began the construction of his sandstone school house. In his room at Bud Thurman's was a cherished thing of pink silk—'Pole's parachute.

"When the building is done," he told Johnny one day, "I aim to have that silk made into a flag and to fly it from the belfry tower. I am going to call it 'The Napoleon School'."

"That's bully," said Johnny. "Pant," he asked boldly, "where do you suppose 'Pole got that parachute?"

"I don't know. He never told me and somehow I didn't want to ask him. You remember he told us that he was the 'Living Skeleton' in a country carnival. Of course all carnivals have balloons, and somehow I just figured that that's where 'Pole got the pink parachute. At least that's where he got the climbers, and I have an idea that's where he got the parachute, thinking some day he would use it." **[281]**

"And you remember," he smiled at Johnny, "that he did use it, too. That's how he got over the cliff and we never knew what had become of him."

"Well, I'll be blowed," said Johnny. "That's it, I reckon."

Satisfied with Pant's explanation of the parachute, Johnny felt moved to question him about the strange light that had appeared the night Squirrel Head and his men had sought to kidnap them, as well as the time it had suddenly appeared in the hidden mine when that same worthy was about to fire upon them. But he had learned in days past that Pant usually offered such explanations as he cared to give, and so the question died on his lips and to Johnny is yet a mystery.

Johnny's shoulder finally healed, and the last of Hallie's corn was in the crib when one day there came a letter for Johnny from Chicago. After reading this letter he hurried over to a **[282]**

room that Pant had fixed up as an office.

"Of course you'll go with me," he said when he had read the letter to his pal.

"Of course I won't," Pant stormed. "What do you think! Here I am with my school house only a story and a half done. Think I can leave it?"

"But Pant," Johnny argued, "think what an adventure—living with Chicago's fire department, hunting down fire-bugs! Getting after that mysterious fellow up there who is doing so much damage by setting fires and leaving no track behind. Think what thrills there'll be in it!"

"It's all right," said Pant, "and I may join you later, but for the present here's my work and here I stay."

That same afternoon Johnny and Hallie took a half day's vacation. Climbing the side of the mountain where now all was peace and quiet, they visited the spot where Johnny had fallen over the cliff and Hallie had delivered Bud's message. Then rounding the mountain, they entered 'Pole's coal mine. This place had already lost half its mystery. Hallie had told him that it was a mine used at one time by the mountain people for getting the coal they needed for their own grates. **[283]**

There was, however, one mystery still unsolved. How had 'Pole made his stove draw? This question they were not long in answering. They discovered that the stove was directly beneath the tree which Pant had once seen to smoke, but not to burn. Some ground squirrels had made holes from the trunk of the hollow tree through the ground to the mine below. When he had enlarged these holes the ingenious boy had found himself in possession of a chimney made of rock, earth and a hollow tree.

"And that," smiled Johnny, "is the explanation of the smoking tree. Not so mysterious, after all." **[284]**

When twilight began to fall they went racing away down the mountain, and for the sake of other days, entered the Hidden Trail to follow it to the road far below.

When, quite out of breath, they sat down by the road to rest, Johnny told Hallie that in a few days he would be leaving the mountains.

She sat there in silence for a long time.

"But you'll come back," she said, putting her hand on his knee.

"Yes," smiled Johnny, "I'll be back on the opening day of Pant's school."

Johnny kept his promise. He did come back, but before that happened he experienced many thrilling adventures hunting

down firebugs in a great city. That, however, is another story which will be found in our next book:

"The Fire Bug."

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original printed text—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *The Hidden Trail* by Roy J. Snell]