

A Mystery Story For Boys

The
Red Lure

Roy J. Snell

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Mystery Stories for Boys

The Red Lure

By
ROY J. SNELL



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
<u>I THE WHITE GLEAM</u>	9
<u>II SUDDEN CATASTROPHE</u>	23
<u>III MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS</u>	38
<u>IV TREE HAY AND A JAGUAR</u>	47
<u>V NARROW ESCAPES</u>	58
<u>VI LOST IN THE JUNGLE</u>	65
<u>VII PERIL IN THE DARK</u>	77
<u>VIII DEATH AHEAD</u>	87
<u>IX “IT’S DEATH AN’ DESTRUCTION”</u>	100
<u>X JOHNNY’S GHOST WALKS</u>	114
<u>XI PROVISIONED FOR A LONG JOURNEY</u>	128
<u>XII A BRONZE BEAUTY</u>	135
<u>XIII PURRING SHADOWS</u>	151
<u>XIV FORGOTTEN TRIBES</u>	159
<u>XV THE HIDDEN CITY</u>	169
<u>XVI PANT SETS A TRAP</u>	177
<u>XVII THE SPANISH GIRL REAPPEARS</u>	185
<u>XVIII PANT SPRINGS THE TRAP</u>	191
<u>XIX CAPTURING A BLACK SHADOW</u>	199
<u>XX CENTURY OLD CAVERNS</u>	209
<u>XXI TRAPPED</u>	218
<u>XXII MAGIC POWER</u>	228
<u>XXIII THE PASSING OF THE GHOST</u>	237
<u>XXIV BLIND DRIFTING</u>	242
<u>XXV THE BATTLE OF RIO HONDO</u>	252

THE RED LURE

CHAPTER I

THE WHITE GLEAM

As Johnny Thompson bent over the black waters of the river he thought he heard a stealthy movement behind him. Before he could decide whether or not his eyes had deceived him he caught the reflection of a sudden white gleam on the dark surface of the water. At the same time something told him to dive, and dive he did. With the rocket-like speed that was his, he shot straight into the water, then away beneath the surface. He rose some ten yards downstream. After one deep, silent breath, he grasped a red mangrove branch for support, then paused to listen.

He did not listen long, for there came a sudden wild swirl of water close beside him.

“Alligator!” he breathed, as with a sudden and mighty tug at the mangrove branch he threw himself clear of the water and out upon the bank.

[10]

Here he paused to listen again. Catching no sound, he began creeping back toward his first position, the foot of the path that had been cut to the river.

All this time his mind was working on double-quick time. What had caused that sound behind him there on the bank—man or beast? What was the white gleam? Was it, after all, only a product of his overwrought mind? The whole day had

seemed full of brooding menace.

“No,” he told himself stoutly, “it was not all imagination. The sound might have been—but the white gleam? No. I saw that. After all, though, it might have been only the reflection of a white heron in silent flight.”

Night was coming on. It would soon be dark. He did not care for that. His flashlight was in his pocket. As he crept forward through the thick tangled brush he seemed to feel the swift power of the dark old river. Rio Hondo, they called it—Black River. And black it was. Johnny had never before seen water that could so perfectly reproduce the black gleam of polish ebony. And yet, somehow, he had come to think of the river as his friend. That was how he came to be there now. Pant, his pal, was away. The thirty black and brown faces about camp had seemed singularly strange and unfriendly, so he had come to the river for comfort. And now, how had it repaid him? Had it in that white gleam given him a friendly warning, or had it tricked him into a place of great peril, into danger of being eaten by an alligator?

[11]

Suddenly his thoughts came to an end. Sooner than he expected he broke through the “bush” into the path. Starting back, he stared for a second in silence.

“No one here,” he whispered. “But wait; some one has been here.”

In astonishment he picked up a long-bladed, gleaming knife. It was a machete, the tool and weapon of the bushman of Central America.

“Looks like Petillo’s machete,” he breathed. What could it mean?

Just then he caught a sudden sound from the water. It was like a startled cry for help. He thought he caught sight of a head

[12]

above the black waters. He might have been mistaken. It was growing dark. He drew his flashlight from his pocket. It was water-logged, short circuited, useless.

Again came the strange cry and at the same time a great swirl of water.

“The alligator!” he breathed.

For an instant he thought of throwing himself in the water to go to the rescue. This he knew was madness. There were other alligators. Grim, terrible, man-eating beasts were these sharp nosed alligators of British Honduras, Central America.

So, as he sat there, crowded well back in the bushes, silent, motionless, listening and thinking, darkness came and blotted out all, both good and bad, that might have been seen upon the surface of the Rio Hondo.

A deep feeling of foreboding and gloom settled down upon him as darkness hid the river.

Picking up the machete that lay at his feet, he felt of its edge.

“Keen as a razor,” he murmured. “Did some one try to kill me with it? If so, I wonder why? Well, he didn’t, and won’t. Providence took a hand. Must have lost his balance and fallen in. Bad swimmer. Current carried him out and a ’gator got him. That’s the way it looks. Can’t tell, though.”

[13]

He shuddered at the thought; the ’gator might have gotten him, too.

Johnny was in a strange land, the strangest he had ever seen. In other days, as you will know if you have read our other stories of the adventures of Johnny Thompson, fate had led him over the frozen trails of Alaska, down the timber roads of the Cascades and out over the sea. Now here he was far up a

tropical river, in the heart of the “bush,” alone.

It is not pleasant to be alone in a tropical jungle at night. Johnny rose to go. His flashlight gone, there was nothing left but to grope his way back over the machete-hewn trail to camp. It was some distance—all of a mile.

As he took his first step, off to the right a twig snapped. His heart skipped a beat and his face felt strangely cold. Had he been watched? Now the creature was going on before him. Was it a man, or a jaguar? (Natives called them tigers.) He preferred the word “tiger.”

Gripping the keen edged machete, he struck away straight down the trail.

[14]

There came no further sound. Slowly, steadily, he advanced. Half the distance was covered. He was breathing more easily when a sudden hoarse sound brought him to a stand.

Then he laughed. Off to the right he caught the gleam of two small red balls of fire. And again that hoarse bark broke the silence of the night.

“Gator,” he said with a chuckle. “Forgot there was one in a pool over there.”

He did not laugh five minutes later as he heard, off to the left, the pu-pu-pu of a jaguar. These great cats were dangerous. They had been known to kill a horse and swim a river with the carcass. The golden balls that now peered at him from the first branch of a great Santa Maria tree were not reassuring.

Redoubling his pace, he hurried on toward camp. Five minutes later, with a sigh of satisfaction, he broke through the brush into a clearing.

Here he paused in astonishment. The place was silent, more

[15]

silent than he had known it even in the dead of night. The gleam of coals on the cooking platform and the dim bulk of cabins looming in the dark were the only signs that men lived here.

“Hello there!” he shouted.

To his utter bewilderment there came no answer.

An hour before he had left thirty men here. Now there was not one. What could it mean? Again cold dread gripped his heart.

Turning, he hurried down a logging road to the edge of a broad creek. There the white bulk of a large flat-bottomed boat greeted him.

“They didn’t take the *Maria Theresa*, anyway.” There was a comfort in that. “Fellow’d sure be up against it a hundred miles from the coast without a boat.”

Even as he thought this, his ears caught the steady dip-dip of pit-pan paddles.

“Hello! Hello there!” he shouted.

Again there came no answer. Even the paddles, if paddles there had been, were silent.

“Huh!”

He turned and walked slowly back to camp. There he groped about until he had found a bench. This he leaned against the side of a cabin, and burying his back in the soft cohune nut thatch, pressed his brow with both hands in an endeavor to think sanely and clearly.

[16]

Time passed. The coals on the cooking platform growing dimmer and dimmer, at last blinked out. The darkness appeared to grow more intense, the night more silent.

“They said it couldn’t be done,” he muttered at last, “and perhaps it can’t. But there was the red lure. The red lure,” he repeated softly.

The red lure! He had heard of it first in a little cabinetmaker’s shop in Chicago. In that shop an old man wrought wonders with precious woods—rosewood and ebony and mahogany. Strange tales this old man had to tell, and he told them as he worked. Tales they were of tropical isles, of green rivers and dense forests.

One day as he put the last touch to a bit of wood that gleamed red as a western sunset, he had exclaimed:

“The red lure, Johnny! The red lure! That’s what’s beckoned men on, and times enough to their death!”

[17]

Then, after laying the bit of wood down as gently as if it had been a priceless porcelain top, he had added:

“And, Johnny, I know where the lure ends. Far up a tropical river, a big black river. It’s there, Johnny, and unscarred by the hand of man.”

“Why?” Awed by the old man’s tones, Johnny had whispered the word.

“That’s it, Johnny.” The old man had half closed his eyes. “That’s what the owner of that land would like to know. Three times he has sent men in boats up the Rio Hondo. Three times they came back empty handed; that is, the ones that came back at all. Why? Who knows. Who can solve all the mysteries of the tropics? Who can guess the trickery and intrigue that lies hidden in a Spaniard’s mind? The red lure is still there. Men have died for it; but there it stands. The red lure, Johnny. The red lure!”

He had turned once more to his work, but Johnny had not forgotten. Something within him had been stirred to the depths. He had heard the call of the wilderness, had felt the challenge of the impossible.

In time, having sought out his partner of many adventures, “Panther Eye,” or “Pant” as he was called, he had gone in search of the owner of the red lure. He had found him to be a rich business man.

At first this capitalist, Roderick Grayson, had merely laughed at the proposition which the two boys made—that they be given a try at the red lure. In time he had come to take them more seriously.

At last he had made them a proposition.

“I’m tired of having you about,” he growled good-naturedly. “I’ll give you a chance. You go to Belize, the Capitol of Honduras. That’s a city of twelve thousand. Plenty of men and boats there. I’ll instruct my agent there to furnish you with motor boats and pay for thirty men. You may have them a hundred days, not a day more. At the end of that time you must show me a profit from your expedition or you lose this concession. Is that plain? And satisfactory?”

“Quite.”

“Then good-bye.”

The rich man had bowed them out, and that is how it happened that on this particular night Johnny was far up the Rio Hondo.

“And now this!” Johnny said to himself. “A bolt out of the blue! An apparent attempt at my life. My men vanish. What is to be the end of it all?”

Suddenly he realized that he was alone in the dark; that perils lurked in every corner of the jungle.

“Well enough to have some sort of light,” he told himself.

There was a flashlight on a beam in the very cabin against which his bench rested. To secure that and to try it out by a flash on the floor was but the work of a moment.

Upon returning to the bench he felt a little more secure. As he sat down his foot struck something and sent it to the ground with a thud.

“The machete,” he thought.

Picking it up, he examined it curiously. On the horn handle of this bushman’s sword he discovered the initials, S. P.

“Seperino Petillo,” he said with a start. “So it was Petillo. I was not mistaken.”

His mind was in a whirl. Petillo, a half-caste Spaniard, had been his foreman. Surely, this was a strange land. The very man to whom he had given position and standing among his people had, apparently, tried to kill him.

[20]

For some time he sat there thinking and his thoughts were long, long thoughts.

The red lure was all about him. The smell of it was in his nostrils.

Yet, less than a third of their work was done. To establish a camp, to build cabins from the trunks and leaves of the cohune nut tree, to cut paths and roads, all this had taken time. A few weeks more and they would have been drifting silently downstream with their red treasure.

“And now this has happened!” he groaned.

And yet, what had happened? He could not tell—could only guess.

Hearing a sound to the right, he turned to listen. Catching it again, he threw his powerful flashlight on the spot.

To his astonishment the light fell full upon the face and figure of a girl.

She was a short, brown-eyed, bare-footed, Spanish girl, about sixteen years of age. Too startled to move, she stood there for an instant, blinking in the light. Then she turned and fled down the path.

[21]

Too much surprised to follow at once, Johnny sat in his place, wondering.

“There’s not such a girl within fifty miles. I am sure of that,” he told himself. “Must have come over from Quintanaroo.”

Beyond the Rio Hondo lay Quintanaroo, a land of many mysteries.

Rising, he followed down the path to the creek’s edge. There he sent the gleam of his flashlight shooting down the creek. He was just in time to see a slender canoe disappear round a clump of red mangrove.

“That’s where she came from,” he assured himself. “I wonder why?”

As he turned to retrace his steps he caught the long drawn, hoarse call of a jaguar. There were empty, palm thatched cottages up the river. Rumors were afloat of a man-eating “tiger” who had carried away the former owners of these cabins. Could it be that he had been mistaken about the plot? Had he misjudged the action of the unfortunate one at the

[22]

river bank? Had his men become frightened by tales of the man-eater, and fled? Who could tell?

“Oh, well,” he sighed, “morning will come, and with it the light.”

CHAPTER II

SUDDEN CATASTROPHE

As if loath to disturb the perfect silence of a night, dawn lingers in the tropical jungle. Off somewhere in the distance a wild parrot screams; nearer at hand a long tailed tropical black-bird begins for the thousandth time to practice the song he will never learn. Swinging from limb to limb, a monkey chatters at a snake. Faint and from far away, like a young puppy calling for his breakfast, an alligator barks. Trunks of trees, gray bulks of cabins, green clusters of ferns take shape and then, with a sudden burst of light, day arrives.

The sound that awakened Johnny Thompson to dull reality of a hapless yesterday was the braying of a burro. He had remained seated on his bench all night. At first he had not dared to sleep. At last, overcome by fatigue, he had fallen asleep.

At first, only half awake, he imagined himself in Belize. Burros were common enough there.

[24]

“No,” he declared, shaking himself, “I am not in Belize. This is the jungle. There are no burros. I was dreaming.”

Leaping to his feet, he shook himself free of the last vestige of sleep.

As if to deny his last assertion, there struck his ears, clear and

defiant, a loud, laughing “He-haw!”

“Well, I’ll be a donkey myself!” he exclaimed, turning and racing down the path that led to the creek. The sound appeared to come from there.

When he had covered two-thirds of the distance, he paused in astonishment. Before him in the path was the skinniest, boniest, most dilapidated and dejected specimen of animal kind it had ever been his privilege to meet. Yet, it was unmistakably a burro.

At that moment, as if to proclaim his species, the creature stuck his nose in the air and brayed once again.

In spite of his great dilemma, Johnny sat down on a fallen mahogany tree trunk and rocked with laughter.

“Well now,” he exclaimed, his fit of laughter over, “where did you come from, and how? Did you walk or swim, or both?”

[25]

Without an attempt at an answer, the creature paused in the path, hung his head and put on such a droll and mournful look as set the boy off into another fit of laughter.

Johnny was once more regaining control of himself when he caught a yellow gleam through the branches. The next moment a huge bunch of bananas appeared, and beneath them was Pant.

“Johnny, meet my new friend Rip Van Winkle,” smiled Pant. “Call him Rip for short. He’s just slept twenty years down there by a deserted cabin. I woke him up and brought him along.”

“What a pity! Why didn’t you let him sleep?” grinned Johnny.

“Why should I? He was bound to wake up sooner or later.

He'd been lonesome if there'd been no one around.

"But honest, Johnny," Pant's tone became serious, "what would you think of a native who would leave a poor old fellow like that to starve!"

"I'd think he was a pig or a dog. But how much better can we do? What'll we feed him on? Bananas?"

[26]

"Easy. There's a tree up here that raises grass on its branches instead of leaves—bread-nut tree, they call it. I saw one up the river two days ago. Burros and cattle get fat on it. We'll get a native to climb a few trees and gather a ton of this hay."

"Natives?" said Johnny slowly. "That reminds me—there aren't any."

"What!" exclaimed Pant, setting down his bananas so suddenly that many of them broke from the stem.

"Skipped. Vamoosed. All gone." Johnny threw out his arms in a wide gesture.

"No!"

"Yes, I tell you."

"Why?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. "You tell me. All I know is they're gone. They told us in New Orleans that this red lure was a hoodoo. They told us the same thing in Belize. Maybe it is. Who knows?"

"It isn't!" Pant sprang to his feet. "We'll go to Belize and get another crew!"

"And if they leave us?"

[27]

“There are a thousand men in Belize.”

“Pant,” said Johnny slowly, “I think one of them tried to kill me. I—I think it was Petillo.”

Johnny seated himself on a log and told of his night’s experiences, from his narrow escape on the bank and in the river to his discovery of the mysterious Spanish girl in the trail.

“What do you make of it?” he asked at the end.

“Don’t make much.”

“Of course, there’s that man-eating jaguar they’ve been talking about. They may have run away because they were afraid. They may have—”

“But what of that fellow down by the river!” exclaimed Pant. “No! I tell you what, Johnny, someone is plotting against us, someone with money and power. We’ll not spend a night here alone. We’ll get right back to Belize. And we must not come back unless we find a real, fearless crew.”

“I’m afraid that last is a big contract.”

“Maybe so. But let’s hope it’s not impossible.”

“What’ll we do with that?” said Johnny, pointing to the burro.

“Take him along in the power boat. I tell you what, Johnny, I always feel lucky when I’m saving some poor dumb creature from suffering. I shouldn’t wonder if Rip would do us a mighty good turn sometime.”

[28]

In this Pant was more nearly right than he knew. Also, this sad-looking quadruped was destined to be the cause of bringing him into great peril. But that was all in the future.

Pant had been down the river in a dory for bananas, cocoanuts and casabas. As soon as they had unloaded these stores and had eaten a hasty breakfast, they turned the prow of their motor-boat downstream and went pop-popping away.

* * * * *

Belize, the city to which the boys returned, is one of matchless beauty. Built on a point of land reaching out into the sea, with its red-roofed, white-walled houses, gnarled old mahogany trees by its governor's palace and stately royal palms at the back of the Bishop's house, bathed in the tropical sun, it is a city to dream of.

Johnny Thompson dreamed of it very little. His mind was occupied with but one thought—getting back to the red lure.

[29]

He was making his way up from the dock to the hotel when someone called his name. Turning, he saw Hardgrave. Hardgrave was an old man. He hailed from the States and had been twenty-five years in the tropics. A natural student, he had learned much in that time and had already been of service to this boy from the land of his birth.

“Back so soon!” he asked in surprise.

“We did get back rather soon,” said Johnny. “At least our crew did. But we’re going back.” He said this last in such a tone as Sheridan must have used when he said: “Turn, boys, turn; we’re going back.” He had been given a task to do, and like any red-blooded American boy, he meant to go through with it.

“Want to tell me about it?” said the old man.

“I’d like to.”

“Come over to the hotel yard. We’ll find shade there.”

So, beneath a low-spreading cocoanut palm, Johnny told his story.

“Johnny,” said the old man impressively, when the boy had finished his story, “get up from your chair and walk over to the cooler for a drink of water. As you come back, without appearing interested, look at the man over there in the far corner of the veranda.”

[30]

Three minutes later Johnny resumed his seat.

“See him?” the old man leaned forward eagerly.

“Saw two men; a tall, thin, dark-skinned one, and a heavy-set one.”

“The thin one, a half-caste Spaniard, is the one. That’s Daego.”

“Daego? Who is he?”

“Is it possible you have not heard of him?” Hardgrave asked. “He’s the richest, most unscrupulous man of our city. He bought you out.”

“Bought us out?”

“Hired your men to quit, and to attempt killing you, like as not. He’d do that.”

“But—but why?” Johnny licked his dry lips.

“He has his eye on that red lure of yours, has had for a long time. Strange you haven’t heard of him, haven’t seen his boats. But then, of course, they pass in the night. Black boats, they are. You don’t see much of them. You wouldn’t, I’d bet on that.”

[31]

Johnny wanted to ask about those boats, but he wanted still

more to learn of Daego's desire for his treasure.

"You see," said Hardgrave, "Daego's built up an immense fortune working the Rio Hondo territory. He's worked all the land up to your tract. There he was obliged to stop. It was owned by a man who would not sell; at least not at his beggar's price.

"As you know, British Honduras is one side of the Rio Hondo, and Quintanaroo, a state of Mexico, on the other. Daego went across the river and obtained concessions in Quintanaroo. He's working there now. His camp can't be a dozen miles from your own. I'm surprised that you haven't seen his boats but of course you wouldn't. They're black, and mostly pass by night."

The old man paused as if in thought. Then, of a sudden, he exclaimed:

"It's Caribs you want!"

"What's a Carib?" Johnny asked. "Some sort of native fruit?"

"No," smiled Hardgrave, "they're men. Real men, too. Indians. Columbus called them the sturdiest, most warlike men of America. They've been that ever since. They've mixed with the whites and the blacks, but they've never lost their language nor their courage, either. They are supposed to have been head-hunters at one time or another, though that can't be proven. They're the bravest sailors, the most daring hunters of our coast; the best workers, too, and if they enter into a contract they're mighty likely to go through with it. What's more, they hate Daego. He's cheated and underpaid them. There's not one that will work for him. Yes, you want Caribs.

[32]

"And son," the man leaned forward eagerly, "you're in luck for once! There's two boat loads of them over from Stann

Creek now. You'd better see them. They'll be down at the storeroom of the Tidewater Company."

"I'll go see them," said Johnny. "What's the best time?"

"Along about sunset."

"I'll be there."

"You should."

They parted at the gate. Johnny went to the market and bought the ham of a young peccary (wild pig) and took it to the hotel to be baked for a late supper. After that he sat for a full hour under the shade of a cohune-nut tree, thinking—thinking hard about many things, of the little brown girl who had appeared in the path by his camp in the night, and of Daego's dark boats that passed in the night.

[33]

Just at dusk Johnny met Hardgrave at the bridge, and together they walked in silence toward the Tidewater storeroom.

As they approached the door they caught the sound of laughter. To Johnny's well-trained ears there came old familiar sounds, a quick shuffle of feet, the slap-slap of leather.

"Boxing," he told himself. His pulse quickened at the thought.

Johnny Thompson, young and vigorous, belonged to that ever-increasing army of American boys who realize that no person can fight his best in the battle of life unless he is physically fit. A strong swimmer, fast on his feet and limber as a hickory limb, Johnny was not the least skillful of boxers. So his heart was made glad by the sound that greeted his ears.

[34]

Silently he and Hardgrave entered the long low room to join the little company of watchers.

The instant Johnny's eyes fell upon the dark, gleaming, strong and well-moulded forms of the Caribs, he felt himself admiring them.

"Black faces," he told himself, "but real men."

"See that big fellow over in the corner," whispered Hardgrave, "the one with the sprinkle of gray in his hair?"

Johnny nodded.

"That's Tivoli, the chief Carib of them all."

A half hour later Johnny Thompson found himself facing this chief and champion of the Caribs. How had it come about? Why ask? When two devotees of an art meet, how long a time passes before they begin displaying their skill?

That he was facing no mean boxer, Johnny realized quite well. He had seen Tivoli in a sparring match with one of his own men. Tivoli thought of this bout with a white boy, who could easily have walked under his arm, as something of a joke. This was shown quite plainly by the smile that overspread his face as he seized Johnny's hand in a friendly grasp.

[35]

As for Johnny, he had two purposes in entering the match. He wished to promote friendly relations with the Caribs and he wished to prove to Tivoli that, though still a boy, he was possessed of such physical prowess as even a grown man might respect.

So the match began. That the Caribs took more than a passing interest in the affair was shown by the hush that fell upon the place as the first swinging blows fanned the air. Even the river that swept by the wide open port-side door seemed strangely silent.

The shadows, cast by the single small lamp, were deceiving. Twice, in stepping back from the whirling arms of his giant opponent, Johnny barely missed a blow that, however well meant, would have sent him to a land of wild dreams.

Though much smaller than his opponent, Johnny was quick on his feet. This, combined with the clock-like working of his trained mind, made him quite a match for the Carib.

Across the shining mahogany floor, back again, criss-cross, to right, to left, they battled. The Carib drove the white boy into a corner. Johnny feinted with his left, dodged to the right, and was free.

[36]

Crouching low, Tivoli sprang square at him, but he was gone. Not so soon, however, but that he left a sting on the giant's ear.

Grinning still, Tivoli squared away for a second rush. This time he approached more cautiously and won applause by a neatly placed blow on Johnny's left cheek.

The contestants warmed to the sport. Caribs know nothing of rounds and breathing spells. The contest goes to the man of greatest skill and longest endurance.

They had battled royally for ten minutes. Johnny felt the warm ring of approval in the cheers of the Caribs as he scored a point.

Then, swift as the wind, came the end. Since his opponent was so much taller than he, Johnny was often obliged to leap off the floor to so much as score a light tap on Tivoli's chin. In the wild excitement of the contest he had perhaps grown a trifle reckless. Intent upon winning one more point, Johnny leaped a full foot from the floor and aimed a swift blow at his opponent's chin. The Carib, with a sudden quick movement, bent low for a blow at his chest.

[37]

The impact of Johnny's gloved fist with the giant's chin was startlingly quick and sure. The report was like a muffled explosion. Tivoli's hands shot out and up, then he crumpled down like an empty sack.

Johnny's head was in a whirl. An instant of time, one unfortunate move had undone all. At least, so he thought as, throwing his gloves from his hands, he bent over the prostrate Carib.

CHAPTER III

MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS

It was a down-hearted Johnny who bent over the fallen Carib champion and strove as best he could to bring him back to consciousness. He had hoped much. His interview with this man was to pave the way to certain success. With this fearless chief as the leader of his men, with a faithful Carib band behind him, he was to have gone triumphantly back up Rio Hondo and, in spite of perils that lurk in the jungle, in spite of unscrupulous Daego's trickery and cunning, was to have brought back the richest treasure that had ever floated upon the ebony waters of the Black River. And now it had come to this.

What would the man do, once he was brought back from the world of strange dreams where Johnny's unintended and unfortunate blow had sent him. Johnny's heart skipped a beat at the thought. He might be obliged to flee for his life. He had heard wild stories of these primitive people of Honduras; how, when slightly wounded in play with machetes, a man flew into a rage and at a single blow severed the offender's head from his body. These were simple people, men of the tropics, quick in love and sudden in hate.

[39]

Since there was no answer to this, Johnny could but fan his victim and await results.

He did not wait long. The man's eyes opened and he sat up

unsteadily, staring wildly.

“Who—who did that?” he demanded. “Who—hi—hit me?”

“Unc-a,” the men grunted, pointing at Johnny.

Johnny put on as brave and friendly a face as he could command. Though friendly enough, it was far from brave. His heart was in his toes.

“You—” the chief looked incredulous, “you hit me like that?”

Johnny nodded. He dared not trust his voice.

“Why! You—you little hammer!” exclaimed the chief.

At that there was a roaring burst of laughter. From that day on Johnny was known among the Caribs as “Little Hammer.”

[40]

Tivoli joined heartily in the laugh and as it subsided, to Johnny’s great surprise and joy, he exclaimed:

“You want men? I got men. All the men you want. How many men, you think? Sixty men? Half work, half watch and fight? What you think? All right?”

At this sudden turn of fortune’s wheel, Johnny’s head was too much in a whirl to permit of much clear thinking. He merely nodded. Then, seized by a sudden inspiration, he invited Tivoli to join him in his feast of roast peccary—an invitation which was promptly accepted.

“Hardgrave,” said Johnny, as the two sat in the hotel court after the feast and Tivoli’s departure, “do these creatures, these jaguars which the natives call ‘tigers,’ ever become man-eaters?”

“Once in a blue moon they do. I knew of one that did. That was on the island of Riotan. And, by the way, it was only a

[41]

month ago that an Englishman, a chicle buyer, told me of actually seeing one stalking a man—up the Rio Hondo, too. By all that's good! Right up in your country! It must have been!"

Johnny leaned forward in unconcealed interest.

"This 'man-eater' as they call him," Hardgrave continued, "has a bad reputation. You'll see little settlements, two or three palm thatched cabins along the river, deserted because of him. That's what the chicle buyer said."

"Dead? The people dead?" the words stuck in Johnny's throat.

"Probably not. The jaguar might have carried off a child, or even a man. Those cats can kill an ox. They're bad when they get old. And this tiger is old, fairly gray bearded, the chicle buyer said. Said it made his blood run cold to see him stalking that native. Of course he was armed; all those Englishmen go armed. Only a pistol, but enough to scare that spotted fury away.

"'Just as I shot,' that's what he told me, 'the creature turned its head and I saw its marking. I had heard of it before. There was a broad white stripe above the left eye. Someone had creased him with a bullet years before. Pity it hadn't killed him. Didn't, though.'"

Hardgrave paused to look away at the moon that was just rising above the cocoanut palms in the churchyard across the way. Wind stirred the branches noisily. Johnny started. The story of that "tiger" had affected his imagination strangely.

[42]

"So you'll know if you see him," Hardgrave concluded dryly. "A white strip above his left ear. Guess I'll turn in. You're leaving before dawn? Here's luck!" He pressed the boy's hand, and was gone.

It was a brave company that Johnny assembled at the postoffice dock next day—sixty Caribs, all from Stann Creek. There had been no need that these men go home for luggage. All that they had was on their boats. It was little enough, too. The two most important items were the great long-bladed machetes that hung at their belts and the cooking platforms on the decks of their sailing crafts.

To the mouth of the Rio Hondo they would sail. After that Johnny would give them a tow up the river.

Pant was in great spirits. He had lived much in the jungles of India. There he had met the great yellow tiger and the treacherous black leopard. He had heard of the “man-eater” up the river and was more than eager to hunt out his lair and do him battle. Of course his days belonged to Johnny, but nights were his own, and night is when the big cats prowl.

[43]

As for Johnny, as they went gliding up the dark river he thought of many things—of the red lure and of his hopes to win with this new and more trustworthy crew. He thought again of the mysterious brown girl who had appeared in the trail on that memorable night spent alone in camp.

“She may belong to the company of that rascal Daego,” he told himself. “I doubt it, though. Her face was too honest and frank for that. I wonder who she may be, and if she will return.”

He wondered if their camp had been destroyed by their enemies, and thought of Daego’s black boats which Hardgrave had spoken of, and the trouble Daego was in which made him want to move back across the river. He wondered if the trouble was in any way connected with the black boats. He even gave a passing thought to Rip, the burro, who under Pant’s care had learned to prick up his ears with an air of importance and had actually taken on a little flesh.

“Didn’t bring any feed for him,” he thought. “Pant will have to hunt out one of those bread-nut trees and gather some grass from it. Be an interesting experience, mowing grass from the top of the forest. Like cutting a giant’s hair,” he chuckled.

[44]

So they moved on up the river. Past the last banana plantation and cocoanut grove, through thin settlements of bushmen, between groves of cohune-nut trees, and on and on, up and up until night fell and the stars came out.

Coming to the mouth of a small stream, they decided to camp for the night. Boats were tied to overhanging mangrove branches, dry wood was gathered and soon fires gleamed out brightly. Mingled with the crackle of the blaze was the merry talk and laughter of these ever cheerful people.

While supper was being prepared, Pant shoved a dug-out from the deck of his power boat and went paddling away up the small stream. He was going on a little trip of exploration all his own. Not that he expected to find anything of real interest. It was too dark for that. He wanted to be alone for a time, and besides, there is a real thrill to be had from poking the nose of your canoe straight away in the night up a stream you have never seen.

[45]

As he moved slowly forward into the dark, the silent mystery of the night was now and then broken by the splash of an alligator as he took to the water. Nothing was to be feared from these so long as his canoe remained in upright position.

On and on he glided. The light of cooking fires faded. Laughter died away. Still he glided on. Then, of a sudden, he became conscious of a new sound—a throbbing that, beating faintly against his eardrums, seemed to come from nowhere. At first he thought it was the beating of his own heart and wondered at his increased power to hear in that silence. Soon enough he knew it was not that.

“But what is it?” he asked himself as he held his dripping paddle in mid-air to listen.

Getting no satisfactory answer, he drove his paddle into the water and sent his boat forward at renewed speed. This lasted for ten minutes. Perspiration ran down his cheeks as he paused to listen.

“Yes, yes, there it is, louder!” he murmured. “Much louder. It’s up the river. It’s a gasoline motor—a motor-boat. No, it can’t be.”

[46]

Dropping his paddle straight down, he touched bottom at eighteen inches. In such a stream there were sunken logs. No motor-boat could ascend to the spot where the motor was throbbing.

Swinging his boat about, he drove its prow against the shelving bank. Leaping ashore, he bent over, and putting his ear to the ground, listened.

“It can’t be,” he muttered, “and yet it is! It’s a stationary gasoline engine going full swing up that creek. And what’s more”—his thoughts were working rapidly now—“this creek runs up into our property. That engine is on our land. What can they be doing there?”

Creeping back into his canoe he allowed it to drift downstream. He wanted to go up and investigate, but it was too late. What that engine could be doing up there he could not so much as guess.

“But I’ll find out,” he told himself stoutly. “Leave it to me!”

[47]

CHAPTER IV

TREE HAY AND A JAGUAR

Aside from slight damage done by a band of wild pigs, who in their search for food had rooted their way into the cook shack, the camp up the Rio Hondo was just as the boys had left it.

“It’s quite evident,” said Pant with a grin, “that Daego, or whoever it was that brought our work here to an end, thought there was time enough to come over and take possession.”

“Didn’t expect us back, that’s sure,” said Johnny.

“But here we are.”

“And here we go to work.”

They went to work with a will. Two days’ time saw a bigger and better camp erected, new roads cut into the jungle and everything in readiness for operation.

It was early in the afternoon of this day that Johnny saw a small dugout, paddled by two Spaniards, moving up the creek.

[48]

Surprised at their appearing on these little frequented waters, he paused at the entrance of the trail to see them pass.

They did not pass, but, pulling up to the landing, tied their boat and got out.

Seeing this, Johnny stepped from the shadows.

“Pardon,” said the taller of the two. “We are looking for Johnny Thompson.”

“I am Johnny Thompson,” said Johnny, not a little surprised that any stranger should be looking for him at this lonely spot.

“A message for you.” The man bowed low as he held out a sealed envelope.

With fingers that trembled ever so slightly, Johnny tore this open and read:

To Johnny Thompson.

[49]

Sir:

It would give me the greatest of pleasure to have your most entertaining and entirely fascinating presence at a dinner to be served at my camp a few miles above your own, at six this evening. We have had the great good fortune to secure two wild turkeys and your assistance in eating them would be both a service and a pleasure to me.

Your Most Humble Servant and, I trust, Friend,

El Vincia Daego.

For a moment Johnny stared at the note. He wanted to laugh, but did not quite dare. He was tempted to use some very strong language, but refrained from that, too.

“So he came up here ahead of me and is now at his camp,” he thought to himself. “He invites me to a feed of wild turkey. I wonder why?”

A half hour later he was showing the note to Pant.

“You won’t go, of course,” said Pant.

“I shall go. Why not?”

“Why should you? He might get rough—or something.”

“That’s a good reason for going. Can’t afford to show a white feather, can I? If I excuse myself, it’s equivalent to saying: ‘No, I won’t come. I’m afraid.’”

“You’re going into a strange country, Mexico, without a passport,” Pant protested.

“What’s a passport in a wilderness? Why, if it wasn’t for this gloomy old river they wouldn’t know where the boundary runs. There are hundreds of miles of unsurveyed and unexplored boundary lines down here.”

[50]

“You’d better take a bodyguard.”

“I’ll take a dugout and a paddle. What do you think this is? Cannibal land?”

“Well,” said Pant, a trifle grimly, “good luck, and may you come back!”

“I’ll come back, right enough,” said Johnny.

Had he known what was to come from this turkey dinner, would he have gone? He might, and then again he might have stayed on his own side of Rio Hondo. Who knows?

“Since you’re going out to dinner,” said Pant, as Johnny prepared to take the trail to the river, “I think I’ll go on a hunt for a bread-nut tree that grows grass for leaves. That old burro, Rip, is showing signs of being hungry. I caught him trying to chew the picture from the side of an empty corn can

this morning.”

True to his word, just as dusk was falling, Pant found himself paddling slowly down the river. Suddenly, as his keen eyes followed the outline of the forest that crowded the river bank, he caught sight of a tree that towered above its fellows. From the tip of its branches hung great masses of green hay. Reaching down a yard, two yards, even three, it looked like long green streamers hung out for a St. Patrick’s Day celebration.

[51]

“Bread-nut tree,” he said to himself.

On reaching the tree he found himself presented with a serious problem. The trunk of the tree was immense; the first limb twenty feet up. At first sight he felt himself defeated. But on circling the tree he discovered a stout vine which reached far above the first branch.

Soon, with his machete still swinging at his side, he was going up hand over hand.

Scorning the first branch, where the grass clumps were small and ragged, he climbed to the second, then to the third, fully thirty feet above the ground.

“I must be careful,” he warned himself.

Many a man had been killed by a fall from these trees. To gather the grass one must climb far out on a slender limb and hack off the end which holds the heavy clump. Suddenly released from its load, the limb springs up and if the grass gatherer loses his hold he is unseated and down he plunges to injury or death.

[52]

“I will be cautious,” Pant told himself. Had he but known it, no amount of caution could save him from facing the peril just before him.

Carefully he climbed over the stouter part of the limb, then out and still out on a slender branch from whose tip there hung a clump of “grass” that seemed as large as a haycock.

“Three days’ feed for old Rip from a single clump,” he told himself as, gripping the branch firmly with one hand, he drew his machete from its sheath.

He had lifted the machete for the first hack when his action was arrested by a slight scratching sound coming from somewhere above him. Imagine his surprise and horror when, upon looking up, he caught the gleam of two yellow eyes and at the same time heard the thumping lash of a great cat’s tail. It was a jaguar about to spring!

Pant was so startled that he all but lost his hold upon the limb. Overpowered by something akin to fear, for the instant he was unable to move. He was not so far bereft of his senses as to fail to note that above the creature’s left eye was a broad white stripe.

[53]

“The—the killer!” he gasped.

* * * * *

To do two things at once; to listen and talk intelligently, and to employ one’s mind with planning safe escape requires a steady nerve and active mind. Johnny Thompson was doing that very thing. He was talking in an intelligent and connected manner to Daego, the Spanish half-caste millionaire of British Honduras. They had been talking for some time about many things that had to do with industries on the Rio Hondo, and all the time their discussion had become more animated.

Johnny was seated before a small table. Daego sat opposite him. On the table was a pile of bills. A gentle breeze, entering the hut through its lattice-like walls of cohune-nut stems, fluttered the corners of the bills. They were big bills—fifties

[54]

and hundreds. There was in that carelessly flung pile over twenty thousand dollars. Although one may not feel at liberty to refuse to attend a wild turkey dinner, he may refuse to accept other things, even at the hand of a millionaire. Johnny was refusing, refusing in the most vigorous language, and at the same time his keen eyes were taking in the construction of the hut and his mind plotting swift and sudden exit.

He smiled involuntarily at thought of it. The smile, without a meaning as far as the half-caste millionaire, Daego, was concerned, angered him.

“I offer you a fortune,” Daego burst forth in a sudden rage, “and what do I get? A laugh. What sort of people are these ones from the United States? They call you dollar men. I offer you dollars, many, many dollars—your own American dollars—and all you offer me for answer is a smile!”

Johnny did not smile again. The situation was grave enough. He had been foolhardy to cross the river without his men. Daego was flanked by six husky Spaniards and at the side of each was a gleaming machete. Johnny was backed only by a wall of cohune-nut tree stems. He hoped and prayed that they might prove fairly well rotted when his moment came.

The camp in which Johnny had enjoyed his wild turkey dinner was a chicle camp. Up until these last few minutes Daego had proven a most perfect host. The food he offered was the best the jungle could provide. He was politeness itself, with one and the same breath pressing food and compliments upon his guest.

[55]

One peculiarity of the man’s nature disgusted Johnny. He seemed at every turn to wish to impress Johnny with respect and awe for his wealth and power. Before dinner he had showed Johnny about.

“This,” he had explained, “is one of my many chicle camps. I

import into Honduras every year more than two million pounds of chicle. The price, as you know, is fifty cents a pound. The profit," he smiled out of one corner of his mouth, "the profit is, well, very large—perhaps half. These men work very cheaply; like slaves they are, almost; always in debt to me. I employ them by the thousands. You have no idea how many. For that matter, neither have I. This Rio Hondo, this Black River, has made me rich, rich and powerful. On the Rio Hondo I am, you might say, a king."

And now this "king" of the Black River, with a strong backing of his armed men, was attempting to bribe or brow-beat—he apparently did not care which—a red-blooded, honest American boy.

[56]

"On this Black River," he repeated now, as they sat at the table, "on this river I am king. It is I who have always developed its industries and I it shall be in the future, and none other! I have offered you money—money not that you should speak an untruth, but that you should return to the people who control your tract and say to them: 'There is no profit to be made in a quest for your red lure and your chicle.'

"And is it not so?" He showed all his white teeth in a half smile, half snarl. "I—will I not see that you make no profit, that no other person beside myself make a profit? More than twenty thousand dollars I offer you—for what? That you may tell the truth to a friend. What could be easier than that? Now I ask you for the last time—do you take that money or must I resort to harsher methods?

"Think well!" He held up a finger of warning, "I am a millionaire. Thousands serve me. They are all in debt to me. They are my slaves. The Rio Hondo is mine. All I need do is to stretch out a hand and take." He swung his arm in a dramatic gesture.

[57]

"But I," he went on, purring now like a cat, "I am not a man

who loves violence. See! Here is proof. Here is money, twenty thousand American dollars. And for what? For peace. What do you say now? Do you take it?”

“We Americans,” said Johnny with a ghost of a smile about the corners of his mouth, “do not talk. We act.”

With that he seized the small table before him, swung it above his head and sent it crashing through the frail side of the hut, then followed it through the hole it had made in the rotten walls of the cohune-nut stems.

CHAPTER V

NARROW ESCAPES

To say that Pant was surprised at sight of the jaguar, the well-known “killer” above him in the bread-nut tree, would poorly express it. For once in his young life he was without a solution to the problem that lay just before him. He knew that he must act, and act instantly. But what to do? Thirty feet below him was the solid earth, far too solid. Through the gathering shadows he thought he saw directly beneath him the wide spreading leaves of a young cohune-nut tree. Of this he could not be sure. In any event these soft yielding leaves would offer slight cushion at the end of a thirty foot fall.

Flight back over the limb, the way he had come, was not to be thought of. The instant he began creeping forward the great cat would be upon his back. To remain in his present position was equally perilous. There was his machete, to be sure, but what was this against the claws of a man-eater? It would doubtless be knocked from his hand at the first spring of the spotted beast.

[59]

The great cat’s tail ceased to lash the twigs. The boy’s heart beat wildly. Was the end at hand?

Time passed. Ten seconds seemed an hour, and yet no spring. And then, of a sudden, there flashed into his mind a desperate chance, yet it was a chance—at least something to do.

He was now sitting with his back to the tiger, looking over his shoulder. Slowly, with his eyes fixed steadily on the killer, he began to turn about on the limb. It was a hazardous undertaking. Should he slip, lose his balance, fall, it might mean death. But this was a moment for hazards.

Swinging a leg over the limb, he sat sidewise for an instant; then with a second swing the thing was accomplished. Still the killer lingered. The tail was lashing furiously now, sending dry twigs flying downward.

Pant began sliding back upon the limb. With eyes still fixed upon the tiger, with heart beating like a throbbing motor, he moved back a foot, two feet, three, four. Still the tiger waited. His eyes, in the gathering darkness, had turned to red balls of fire.

[60]

Suddenly the boy's hand went up. The machete was raised above his head. The great cat gave forth a blood-curdling snarl. But the big knife was not meant for him.

Once in his boyhood days on a farm Pant had climbed far out over the track that ran beneath the ridge of a tall hay-loft. He had gone out to adjust something that had gone wrong with the double harpoon fork. It would not trip. He had used every ounce of his strength climbing out there hand over hand. He had not dared attempt the trip back. The hay of the loft was twenty feet beneath him. There was a load on the fork. Choosing the least of three evils, he had taken the drop with the half-ton of hay when the fork was tripped. He would not soon forget that breath-taking drop, yet he had landed without a bump or bruise.

"This," he told himself as calmly as he could, "will be exactly like that—maybe."

He was now seated firmly on the great clump of "tree grass." Some three feet across, this clump hung down a distance of

[61]

two yards.

“Now,” he breathed, “Now!”

He said the last “now” out loud and at the same instant the machete came down upon the branch on which he sat.

It was a master stroke. Bent as it was by its double load, the branch snapped clean off and instantly the boy shot downward through space.

One breath-taking instant, then bump! He landed with a thud that made his teeth rattle, then pitched head foremost into the brush.

Hardly had he had time to realize that he was still conscious and probably unharmed, when there came, not four feet from him, a terrible thud.

Once more his mind was in a whirl. What had happened? Had the tiger, angered at loss of his prey, risked a thirty-foot leap to the ground? It seemed incredible, yet there he was.

For the answer to his problem regarding the jaguar who had dropped in the bush beside him, Pant did not have long to wait. For ten seconds, as if stunned, the great cat remained where he was, then with a sudden rush he dashed wildly away.

The boy laughed a low laugh.

[62]

“Pity it didn’t kill him,” he murmured.

He had guessed what had happened. Suddenly released, the limb on which he had been seated had shot upward and, striking the jaguar, had perhaps stunned him. At least it had unseated him and he had fallen.

“Well,” Pant grinned, “here is plenty of hay to last poor old

Rip for three days. I came down rather sooner than I expected and in a manner quite unusual. Wouldn't care to try it again, but it did work that time."

Searching out his machete, he hacked the grass from the limb, tied it in three bundles, then began making his way back to his boat with one of them.

"I must get after that beast," he told himself. "If the Caribs hear too much of him they may take fright and desert us."

He was not long in putting this resolve into execution.

[63]

* * * * *

Daego thought he had been quite shrewd in his choice of the spot to be occupied by his guest. There were no windows to the hut. Light entered between the palm walls. The rich half-caste and his six men sat before the door and that way lay the path to the river. Back of the place where Johnny had been seated was the jungle, an all but impenetrable mass of palms, great mahogany trees and creeping, twining vines.

As Johnny sent the table crashing through the flimsy, rotting walls of the hut he followed after it so closely that both he and the table made their exit at almost the same instant. He had but one thought—to get into the jungle as quickly as possible. It was his only chance. Daego and his natives, surprised into temporary inaction by this sudden turn of affairs, were delayed just long enough to permit Johnny to get into the jungle. After that, Johnny knew, it would be a game of "hide and seek" with at least a fair chance for escape.

A moment after Johnny had dived headlong into the dark, dank jungle, Daego's men came tumbling through the newly made hole in the wall of the hut, eager to win their master's praise by seizing this unarmed boy.

But so tardy and clumsy was their pursuit that Johnny had gained enough distance to cover up the sound of his movements. For the moment, at least, the advantage was his. But what if he did make good his escape? Where would he go? How could he hope to make his way back to his own camp?

[64]

Without thinking much of the outcome, more from instinct than reason, like a rabbit close pressed by the hounds, he leaped for the jungle.

By some good or evil chance he came at once upon one of those low, narrow trails made by the small short horned deer that abound in that wilderness. By stooping quite low, almost bent double, he was able to make rapid progress.

After covering a hundred yards he paused to listen.

Yes, he could hear the men shouting and beating the bush.

“There must be a hundred of them,” he murmured. “And dogs! Trapped here by dogs!”

He turned and fairly flew down the trail.

On and on and on, not knowing where, but ever on until at last with hands and face bleeding and clothes in rags, he fell flat in the trail and lay there motionless.

[65]

CHAPTER VI

LOST IN THE JUNGLE

Could Johnny have witnessed the dismay and confusion caused by his sudden escape he would have felt far less concerned over his present plight. The first eager pursuers crashed wildly about in the jungle, rushing forward at every sound only to discover that it was made by another hunter instead of the hunted. Their shouts brought other men pouring from the huts and a half score of dogs, who jumped about and added to the din with their senseless yelping.

Daego shouted directions, but his shouts were either unheard or not clearly understood. Then he made an attempt to set the dogs on Johnny's trail. There were dogs a-plenty to overtake Johnny and slay him but for one thing—dogs are never eager to enter a tropical jungle.

Unaccompanied by his master, the native dog seldom goes far into that tangled mass of vegetation. There are reasons enough for this. Poisonous snakes, ten feet long, lurk in the decay at the base of great trees. Jaguars, prepared to pounce upon a dog, lie flat along great branches, and the uncouth "mountain cow" (tapir) is all too ready to tear him to pieces with her sharp hoofs.

[66]

So, though urged on by their enraged masters, the dogs did not venture far and soon enough came crawling back, their defeat registered by drooping tails.

So Johnny Thompson was safe. And yet, was he safe? As the dull agony of exhaustion left him, he began, in a slow, numb sort of way, to remember where he was. He was in a tropical jungle. It was early dusk and the coming night would be made hideous by the barking of alligators, the scream of wild parrots and the hoarse call of jaguars. To move down the trail after darkness would be dangerous. Curled on that trail might be a great snake whose fangs offered sure death. Further movement might call a jaguar to leap upon him from the tree tops.

On the other hand, if he went forward on this trail he might come to water. Already his throat was parched, his tongue swollen. Then, too, a small stream meant a certain amount of protection and a possible fire. He had matches in his pocket, a small box of them. As he thought of these he wrapped them in his handkerchief for safer keeping.

[67]

Then of a sudden a more terrible realization came to him. Not only was he in a tropical jungle, but he was lost.

“Lost!” he whispered in an awed tone.

“Lost!” “Lost!” the strange rustle of palms seemed to answer back.

It was true, must be true. Hardgrave, who had spent years in the jungle, had warned him: “Don’t ever dare to enter that jungle without a guide, not to go even a few rods. If you do, you’re lost.”

“Rods,” Johnny repeated, “I’ve gone miles!”

As he thought of it now, he realized that he must have crossed scores of these low, criss-crossings paths. Should he will to attempt it, he could not in a thousand days find his way back to Daego’s clearing over that dry sponge-like patch.

“Nor any other place,” he told himself. “I’m lost! Lost!”

At first the thought left him so weak that he could not move. But in time strength and courage came flooding back. He was young, strong, resourceful. There was a way out. He would find it. Daego was doubtless at this moment sitting in his cabin smoking cigarets and contemplating the day when he would move across the river and take charge of Johnny’s deserted camp.

[68]

“That will never be!” Johnny told himself, setting his teeth hard.

To his surprise, as his hand went to his knee he found his clothing wet.

“Must have crossed some small stream and in my wild fear, never knew it. No more of that. I’ll be calm. I must be calm—and I must think clearly.”

“A stream,” he mused, “means water for drinking and a place of greater safety. What’s more,” he exclaimed, attempting to spring to his feet only to be tossed back by closely woven vines and branches, “that means a way out. A small stream flows into a large one; the larger one into one still larger, and in time one comes to Rio Hondo, the old Black River. There I might find a rotting native cabin and perhaps a dugout for floating down to my camp. But first I must find the beginning. There is a beginning to all things.”

He contemplated the gathering darkness. There was yet a little time. Which way should he go? He shuddered at the thought of going back. There seemed to be an equally good chance ahead. So, slowly, always with an eye out for those terrible snakes, he crept forward into the gathering gloom.

[69]

As time went on he struggled forward, and as the darkness deepened it seemed to him that he must, Tarzan-like, spend

the night in some great mahogany or Santa Maria tree. The thought was depressing. His throat ached from thirst. There were jaguars in the trees. Exhausted as he was, he might fall asleep and plunge from the tree to his death.

As this thought came near to a conviction and when hope had all but fled, he rounded a sudden turn in the trail and his eyes were half blinded by a light which was much brighter than the gloom to which his eyes had been accustomed. The light was at the spot where the bush and the trail appeared to end,—a distance of less than a hundred yards.

What could it mean? Had fate played a trick on him? Had he followed a circle in the jungle, only to return to Daego's camp? Was this some other clearing? If so, whose could it be?

[70]

For a moment he remained there motionless, staring. Then, with a speed born of sudden hope and maddening fear, he sprinted forward toward the light.

Even as he moved forward the light faded, and night, such night as only the jungle knows, settled down over all.

Driven half mad by this sudden fading of his dreams, throwing all caution aside, Johnny rushed straight on until, with a sudden gasp, he threw himself backward. One foot had plunged into water. In another second he would have pitched head-foremost into some stream; what stream he could not know. The thing he did know very soon was that out in the water some little distance away gleamed two red balls.

"The eyes of an alligator," he murmured. "Well, anyway, here is water." He drank greedily.

As he attempted to pierce the darkness about him, he was able to guess what it was that had caused the unusual light. The sky, dimly visible through overhanging branches, was filled with black clouds. There had come, without doubt, one of

[71]

those last sudden flashes of sunsets which gleam out, then are lost forever. This light shining upon the water had been dazzling in its intensity. Because of its very intensity the following darkness had appeared quite complete.

Once his eyes had become accustomed to the feeble light, Johnny was able to distinguish some of the black bulks about him. Downstream, hanging far over the water, was a palm. Upstream he caught the dim outline of some dull gray masses.

“Rocks, I hope,” he murmured as he moved slowly in that direction.

There was now reason enough for caution. Sharp-nosed alligators of these streams sometimes slept on the banks. To disturb one was to invite disaster. To break a twig or make any other unusual sound might be to call other wild creatures to attack him.

So, parting the branches with great care, he moved on cautiously until with a grateful heart he put a hand out to touch a huge rough boulder.

Mounted upon this heap of rough rocks, of which there were five, each as large as a sleeping elephant, he breathed more freely.

[72]

“Now for a little fire,” he thought. “All wild things fear fire.”

It was not long until the stream, which appeared to be some twenty feet wide at this point, was lighted by the blazing flames of quick burning palm leaves.

Sudden as was the blaze, even more sudden was its fading. Looking away from the red glow of coals, Johnny tried to peer into the dense darkness that followed. He could distinguish only the red gleam of eyes. They were all about him; upon the water, on the bank, in the tree tops.

Monkeys, fierce black little creatures, chattered from the tallest trees. From the ground sounded many odd grunts, which the boy could not interpret. Coming down the river, like a dimly lighted floating burial procession, were the silent alligators.

“It’s all very strange and—and somewhat spooky,” he told himself.

With a shudder he seized a dully glowing brand and, having fanned it into flame, went boldly forth in search of wood. This time he would gather more substantial material. His fire must last longer, much longer, for somehow he must snatch a little sleep.

[73]

Waving his firebrand before him in one hand, he gathered fuel with the other. Some dead ferns and palm branches, the fallen branch of a black tamarind, the half rotted stem of a yamra, some large branches of a tree quite unknown to him, all these would send the light of his fire gleaming out into the night for hours to come.

Soon, with his fire glowing cheerily, he settled down on a chair-like rock crevice and with head bent forward, hands hanging down before him, every muscle relaxed, he tried to induce sleep to come.

It did not come at once. His mind worked on. Across its silver screen there passed a long procession of pictures. The trip up the river, the wild forest, the dark Caribs all about him, the silent black river, Daego seated before the table, money, twenty thousand dollars fluttering before him, the surprised look of the Spaniards as the table tore through the wall, then the jungle, the terrible uncertain jungle with its wild perils and its noisesome nights.

Then, as will happen when half thoughts and half dreams come, the reel changed. He was sitting with old Hardgrave,

[74]

his friend who had seen sixty-eight summers, twenty-five of them in the tropics. In the cool shade of the hotel porch at Belize the old man was showing him a crudely drawn map and was pointing to a spot on that map.

“If you ever get to that spot,” he seemed to hear him say, “you’ll find Indian gods. I have seen them. Three of them, a black one, a blue one, and one of pure gold. I don’t say you’ll come back to tell anyone about it,” the old man smiled a queer smile. “They say it’s dangerous to go up there and I reckon it is. Truth is, no one knows the way there and back. It’s up in the bush somewhere. That’s all anyone knows. It’s all I know, and I’ve been there once.

“You may be sure I didn’t mean to go there,” he reminisced. “They found me sick with a fever, the Indians did, and carried me to their village in the bush and cured me up. Wanted me to stay on with them. Seemed to sort of take a liking to me. I told them I wouldn’t.

“At first they said I didn’t have any choice in the matter. Took me to see some bones, human bones. White man’s bones I’d say from the size of them. Then they took me back to the village.

[75]

“Something changed their minds, though. I don’t know what. One day they blindfolded me and took me through the bush and downstream for a whole day. When my eyes were uncovered I found myself in a dugout on a part of the Rio Hondo that I knew.

“So, Johnny,” he added with a rare smile, “if you really want some Maya gods, you just hunt that place up. They’ve got some black ones, and some that are green, and at least one of pure gold.”

Johnny did want one or two of these Maya Indian gods. A very good friend had asked him to bring back one or two for

his collection. He had promised to perform this commission.

“I had no notion they were so hard to get,” he told himself now. “It would be strange if I should stumble upon those Mayas up here somewhere,—strange and rather startling.

“Black gods and green ones, and at least one of pure gold,” he repeated, half asleep.

Then of a sudden he started up. His fire was burning low. After throwing on a fresh supply of fuel, he thought more clearly of the consequences if he should fall into the hands of these strange bush people. He was not at all sure that, once they had found him, they would allow him to return.

[76]

“And then,” he thought, “our camp would fall into the hands of Daego unless—unless Pant were strong enough and resourceful enough to hold his own against that wily half-caste rascal.

“Poor Pant,” he murmured, “what will he think when I don’t return? I hope he doesn’t start a big fight right off the bat. He must not. I must return. Somehow I must get back. I’ll do it, too! See if I don’t! I’ll make some sort of raft and float down this stream from nowhere to somewhere.”

At that he fell asleep and, as the fire burned low, the glow of eyes from the river, in the trees, on the ground, moved closer and ever closer.

[77]

CHAPTER VII

PERIL IN THE DARK

As for Pant, he was worried enough by Johnny's prolonged absence. It had been dark for fully three hours. Having returned from his gathering of tree hay and his brush with the jaguar, he had gone down to the creek landing to wait for Johnny.

Two anxious hours passed and still he did not come. For a half hour he paced the creek trail in deep and troubled thought. Over and over, as a squirrel turns his cage, questions revolved in his mind. What was keeping Johnny? Should he go for him? Had he been attacked, perhaps slain? Who could tell, if he went to Daego's camp, what would happen? Johnny had left him in charge of the camp. If something should happen to him, should he fail to return, the Caribs would pile into their boats and go drifting down the river.

"No!" he exclaimed, "Johnny left me here to carry on in his absence, and carry on it is. If he does not appear by morning I'll send a messenger to Daego's camp to find out what he has to say about it."

[78]

He did send a messenger in the morning. The millionaire half-caste received him with the greatest courtesy. Johnny, he said, had indeed had dinner with him and they had enjoyed quite a long chat when the meal was over. The boy had left his camp in quite a hurry on account of the gathering darkness. He had

not seen him since that time.

Daego assumed an attitude of greatest surprise upon being told that Johnny had not returned to his own camp and expressed the hope that he might soon learn of his safety. The Rio Hondo was a treacherous river, treacherous indeed.

All of which was more or less true, and at the same time a most diabolical lie.

“He’s a crook and a scoundrel!” Pant raged to himself when the messenger had made his report. “He’s done something to Johnny, locked him up, or sent him up some river, a prisoner. Depend on that. But he’ll not get his way on our side of the river!”

After laying out the day’s work for his men, Pant sat down on a red log and indulged in some long, long thoughts.

[79]

“The way to keep a man from making trouble for you,” he told himself, “is to make as much trouble for him as you can. A fight like this is just like a game of chess. If you can keep a man busy getting his knights, bishops and castles out of danger he isn’t like to make much trouble for your king.”

For a long time he sat blinking at the little patches of sunshine that filtered down through the tropical foliage.

“That was a capital ghost story Hardgrave told me when I was down at Belize,” he told himself at last with a little chuckle. “Happened on one of the islands, but I’ll bet it would work right up here. He promised to send me up the things I need for trying it if any sort of craft comes up this way. Don’t suppose there’s much chance, though.

“What’s that I hear?” he exclaimed, starting up suddenly.

Hurrying down the river trail, he was just in time to see four

[80]

pit-pans moving slowly up the river. The pit-pans, great dugouts sixty feet long, were loaded with Spaniards.

“Daego’s men,” he murmured. “Re-inforcements. He doesn’t need them for work. I wonder?”

Cold dread gripped his heart. Daego was assembling his men. This addition would give him a force double the number of their Caribs. Could it be that, in the absence of their leader, he meant to lead an attack at once? There would be a fight, a battle to the finish between Johnny’s forces and Daego’s. Caribs against Spaniards, but Pant hadn’t expected it for some time yet.

“Wish I had the stuff Hardgrave promised to send,” he murmured. “Might thin that force out a bit.”

The stuff Hardgrave had promised was on its way and much nearer to Johnny’s wild lumber camp than Pant guessed. Hardgrave was on his way, too; in fact, he was bringing the supplies up the river at that moment. It was a strange assortment of articles that he carried in a box beneath the seat in his little motor boat; a dozen or so of large blue toy balloons, a bottle of phosphorus, a number of yards of cheesecloth, some putty, three tubes of glue, two metal retorts and two packages of chemicals.

“Goin’ up the Hondo,” he had said to a friend before he set out. “Coupla boys up there a tryin’ to do a little stunt of bringing out some of the red lure. Jest boys, they are; no match for that crafty Daego. Reckon I’ll jest run up there and give ’em a little help for, after all, they’re from the United States and so am I, though I been down here quite a spell, and all us folks from up there has to sort of hang together. It—it’s sort of in the blood.”

[81]

So, Pant was soon to receive re-inforcements. The re-inforcements consisted of but one man, but there are times

when one is as good as a host.

* * * * *

Morning brought bitter disappointment to Johnny. He had hoped that the palm tree he had seen down the creek was a cocoanut tree. The milk even of a green cocoanut is sweet and refreshing. Since ripe nuts fall the year round, there was reason to hope too that some of these might be found on the ground. But early morning light revealed a cohune nut tree. True, there were great clusters of nuts hanging from this tree, but these Johnny had been told were composed mostly of a hard shell. The meat, such as there was of it, was dry and indigestible.

“Oh, well,” he sighed, “got to eat.”

[82]

At that he worked his way downstream to the tree. After spending a half hour cracking three nuts, and finding their meat meager and tough, he turned to other quarters for food.

A tropical wilderness abounds in fruit. The strangest, most unheard of trees in the world were at Johnny’s very elbow. The fruit of many of these was good to eat. Some might be eaten raw; others were delicious when cooked. But some, too, were deadly poison. Which might be eaten? Which not? This he could not tell. To his right was a tree laden with a green cucumber-like fruit, and over to his left one that hung heavy with long yellow muskmellons, or so they seemed to be.

“If I only knew!” he groaned. “If I only did!”

He recalled hours wasted that might have been put to good use roaming the jungle with one of his Caribs, learning the use and value of these plants.

“If I get back in safety I’ll never waste another hour!” he resolved.— “I’ll learn, and learn and learn until there is not an

[83]

important thing in this wilderness that I do not have some accurate knowledge of.”

In the meantime, however, his stomach was crying loudly for food. Food? Without doubt there was plenty at hand, but he dared not eat it.

There were fishes in the stream. He could see them calmly fanning the water in a pool beside the rocks. Fish were always good. His mouth watered at thought of the fry he would have on the hot rocks. But he had no hooks. He tried a snare of tie-tie vine, but the fish were too quick for him.

At last, despairing of his undertaking, he dropped on hands and knees to creep away into the bush. He had not gone far before his heart was gladdened by what he saw just before him. It was a hot, humid morning. A peccary, a little wild pig, with her half grown brood, having without doubt spent the cooler hours of night hunting grubs and roots, lay stretched out on a bed of dead ferns, fast asleep. One of the young porkers, lying with his two hind feet close together, was not twelve feet from where Johnny lay.

“A quick grab at those feet, a sudden get-away, and I have my breakfast,” he thought as he moved cautiously forward. “That fellow doesn’t weigh over ten pounds dressed, but that’s enough food for two days and by that time I’ll be back to camp.” Oh, vain hope!

[84]

Right hand out, right foot forward; left hand, left foot. So he moved ahead. Now half the distance was covered and still the little wild pigs slept. Now he was within arm’s length of his prey. Then, rising to his knees, he shot out a hand. There came a wild, piercing squeal, then all was commotion.

Quicker than he could think, the old peccary was after him.

“Insignificant little brute,” he thought. “I could brain you with

a single blow of a club.”

He had no club, had not thought of that.

A convenient tree offered protection. Clinging to his squealing prey, he leaped to the first branch.

“Go away in a moment,” he told himself as with his clasp-knife he silenced the squeals of the young porker.

To his immense surprise, as he looked down he saw that the ground was literally alive with angry, grunting peccary pigs.

[85]

“Where’d they all come from?” he asked an hour later, as for the twentieth time he adjusted his sore muscles to their cramped position.

This question no one could answer. The angry horde had apparently declared the tree to be in a state of siege. And, though they were small, they were terrible to look at. There were gnarled old fathers of that herd whose ugly yellow tusks, curled twice round, stood out at the end like spears.

“Rip a fellow to pieces before he’d gone ten steps,” groaned the boy.

As his position in this small mahogany tree with its smooth limbs became all but unbearable, he cast about for relief. Next to this tree was a larger one and beyond that a great, broad-spreading palm.

“If only I can reach the palm,” he told himself, “I will at least have a comfortable place to rest and maybe grab a few moments of sleep.”

Tying the dead peccary to his back, he climbed out as far as he dared upon his limb, then executed a sort of flying leap for the next tree. It was a daring venture, but a successful one.

[86]

Five minutes later, with the carefully dressed peccary meat hanging nearby, he sank into a cushioned depth of the palm tree and was soon fast asleep.

Some time later, much later, he awoke. At first, as he attempted to gaze about him, he could not believe his senses.

“It can’t be true,” he insisted. “There has been an eclipse. I have gone blind. It can’t be night!”

But it was. Overcome by exhaustion and the humid heat of the tropics, he had slept the day through and a short way into the night. So had passed the day that was to have seen his raft built and launched, to have seen him on his way back to camp.

“And here I am!” he exclaimed in disgust.

“Well, at any rate,” he sighed, “I now have some supper and may make my way back to the rock and cook it.”

“But can I?” he started. “What of that wild horde with their ugly yellow tusks? Are they still waiting down there?”

For a moment he hesitated. Then, with a sudden resolve born of necessity, he began to descend.

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH AHEAD

Peccary meat was Johnny's supper. A dry supper it was, and old Father Gloom sat across the fire from him while he ate. To have wasted a whole day; to face a second night of vigil; to recall those pairs of burning, greedy, red eyes; to know that with the passing of the hours the owners of those eyes must certainly grow bolder; all this was depressing in the extreme. To add to this set of depressing circumstances, a small thing happened; a very small thing indeed, but fraught with great consequences. There were not many mosquitos in this place at this time. The streams were swift, and at this time of year there were no water holes for breeding them.

For all this, a single mosquito, drifting in from nowhere, alighted on Johnny's hand and began to drill. He had half finished his task when, without thinking, Johnny crushed him at a blow.

Instantly the boy's mind was filled with foreboding. He had been bitten by a mosquito! One thing Hardgrave had said to him:

[88]

"Johnny, wherever you are, don't ever lie down to sleep, not even in the daytime, without a mosquito-bar net over you. Malaria. The mosquitos carry it. It's the only way you can get it."

In camp they always slept beneath canopies.

“But out here,” Johnny grinned a wry grin, “what’s the chance? Well, if that was a malaria mosquito he’s got me loaded up good and plenty, and there’s no use bothering my mind about it.”

He did not bother his mind, but it bothered him. In his imagination he saw himself delirious with fever, insensible to his surroundings, wandering down narrow trails, tripped by vines, torn at by brambles. Watched from every dark hole and tree top by wild beasts, he saw himself struggle on until burned out by fever, exhausted by aimless, senseless endeavor, he at last lay down to die.

Shaking himself free from the haunting spectre, he threw fresh wood upon the fire.

He slept little that night, and welcomed the dawn less eagerly than he had the day before. He felt a desire to be idle, a dreamy indifference creeping over him.

[89]

“It’s the tropics,” he told himself. “Everyone slows up down here. The heat and the humidity makes you want to drag your feet, to loaf, to sit and dream. But I must not! I must act! Act! Now!”

At that he went at the task of building a raft and before noon it was completed.

A crude affair it was, to be sure. Dry logs of different lengths; there was no axe for hewing them. All these, bound clumsily together with tough tie-tie vine, made up the raft that eventually carried Johnny away from the great rocks and swiftly down the river. As far as he could see ahead, branches formed a perfect arch over the water, and at places hung so low that it was necessary for him to lie flat down to avoid being dragged off into the water.

He bade farewell to his rocky home with no regrets, but with some misgivings after all. He was to drift off into the unknown. What awaited him there? Who could tell?

“It—why, it’s like death,” he thought.

With this mood there drifted into his mind a bit of verse:

[90]

“I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air,
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.”

He felt a strange tightening at the throat as the words escaped his lips, and he blessed the teacher who had given them to him for just such a time as this.

Many and strange were the sensations that came to him as he drifted silently, swiftly beneath this cathedral-like arch of trees. A green parrot screamed at him as it fluttered away; a black monkey with a white face, clinging to a limb by a foot and his tail, scolded at him as he passed. A slow-moving snake, hanging from a tree trunk, darted out a black tongue. The jagged corner of the clumsy raft, catching on a snag, hung there while the water, warm as soapsuds, washed over the raft.

Loosened, the raft whirled on. More swiftly now they moved. The current was gaining strength. Rocks appeared, one to the right, one to the left, and one amid stream. The arch of trees rose higher. A patch of blue appeared. Rising to his feet, Johnny struggled with all his might, darting his pole first one side and then the other, to keep the raft off the rocks. Then suddenly, without warning, he was seized by an overhanging vine and dragged clear of the raft.

[91]

That was a tragic moment. With his raft went his last bit of food; and with it, too, for a moment his last bit of hope. With

an eye out for drifting alligators, he swam strongly after the runaway raft.

Fortune favored him. For a moment the raft, caught in a corner between two rocks, hung motionless and in that moment, breathless, exhausted, he climbed aboard. At the same instant he sensed the presence of a wakened alligator nearby.

Quite motionless he lay for a full moment as the raft rushed on. This was no time for inaction. Faster, ever faster glided the raft; faster, faster the trees flew by.

And now a new catastrophe threatened. A sharp rock had cut one of the tie-tie vines that bound the raft. In another moment the raft might be torn in bits, leaving Johnny in the water, beyond hope. Seizing a fresh vine, he passed it over the ends of the logs and by exerting all his strength drew them to place and bound them there.

[92]

And now came a respite. Suddenly the river broadened. Blue sky appeared above him. He was floating slowly on the surface of a small lake.

Drawing his feet up under him, he gave himself over to much needed rest and enjoyment of the scene that lay before him. Surely here was beauty untouched by the hand of man. Had man's eyes ever looked upon it? Surely no eyes of civilized man. Yet what a gleaming of blue waters, what a blending of matchless green and faultless blue!

If he did not allow his mind to linger long on all this matchless beauty of spreading palms, clinging vines and reflecting water, it was because the more practical side of his nature sought two things—a native hut and a cocoanut palm tree. One of these would be a boon indeed.

And one appeared. A leaning cocoanut tree hung over the

[93]

water at the very spot where the lake ended and the current grew swift again. He saw it at the moment when his raft, caught by a stronger current, shot forward. At that same moment came a disturbing sound, a deep, low thunder that he did not wholly understand.

In his confusion of thought he all but lost his opportunity. Leaping to his feet, he struck at the palm with his long pole. Once, twice, three times he clubbed it, and with the third blow a ripe cocoanut came hurtling down to splash in the water beside his raft.

With a little cry of joy he dropped his pole and all but sprang in the water after it. Restraining this impulse, he dropped on hands and knees to reach for it. It was just beyond his grasp. The pole—yes, with the pole he could drag it to him. Sending the pole sweeping out over the water, he was about to bring the fugitive dinner to him when the raft, striking a submerged rock, whirled about and left him three full yards from the prize. At the same time there came to his ears again that dull thunder.

“Can’t be a storm,” he said, scanning the sky. “Clear as a bell.”

Sadly he watched the cocoanut as, abreast of his strange craft, but just out of reach of his pole, it drifted onward. Within that brown husk was delicious, refreshing drink and nourishing food.

Fate seemed to mock him. The current having carried the cocoanut within his reach, quickly whirled it away again. Then, tempting him, it whirled it close only to catch it and fling it at last into a backwater eddy where it was lost to him forever.

“That thundering sound is growing more distinct,” he told himself as, resigned to his loss, he settled down for a

moment's rest. "I wonder what it is."

Then of a sudden he knew and the realization stunned him.

"Falls!" he said, leaping excitedly to his feet. "Falls in this river. Falls straight ahead!" The next moment he lay stunned, half unconscious on the raft. He had been struck on the head by an overhanging limb.

How long he lay there he will never know. Enough to say that when at last he struggled back to a sitting position the thunder of the falls filled all the air, while the trees and bushes, as if borne on by a cyclone, sped by him at unbelievable speed.

"Gotta stop!" he groaned. "Gotta get offa here somehow! Death in the falls. Won't do! Gotta get off!"

With a mighty effort he dragged his scattered senses together. The next instant he found himself gripping the tough branches of a red mangrove tree, while his raft shot on to its doom.

[95]

With a sinking sensation about his heart and a dull pain in his head, Johnny saw his hope of an early return to camp disappear downstream. On that raft was tied a bit of peccary meat, the only morsel of food he had in the world. Yet where there is life there is hope, and after climbing carefully back over the limb that had saved him, he descended the tree to the ground.

An hour of struggling forward, sometimes through thickets, sometimes over rocks or through water to his waist, he ended at the top of a steep precipice that stood thirty feet above the side of a most beautiful waterfall.

"Beautiful things at times become terrible," he told himself. "My raft is gone; my dinner with it. These beautiful falls took them. No use to waste time in vain regrets. I've got to get down some way."

After exploring every corner he became convinced that there was no suggestion of a rugged stairway anywhere.

[96]

“Have to be some other way,” he thought wearily. Having glanced at a towering sapodilla tree, he noticed that a wild fig vine grew up its side.

“Make a rope of it. Let myself down,” he said, beginning to unlace his shoes.

Having climbed the tree for a distance of forty feet, he cut the vine and began stripping off a stem an inch in diameter. It was a long and dangerous task, for these vines, with a grip of death, in time hug the very life out of a tree. But in time he won and, attaching one end of the vine rope to the trunk of a tree, dropped it over the precipice. He then began nimbly following down.

“Looks like a cocoanut palm there by the pool at the foot of the falls. If it is, I know where I get my supper.”

It was indeed a cocoanut palm, a low one, standing not more than ten feet from the ground, but bearing cocoanuts all the same. He had not descended half way before he could count them. There were many green ones and three that were brown and ripe.

“Um-yum-yum!” he smacked his lips as he seemed to feel the rich white milk go gurgling down his throat.

[97]

He was still looking at that tree and trying to figure out how he could best reach it, when he suddenly discovered that he was all but at the bottom.

He had given no thought to what that landing might be like. He glanced downward, then with hands that trembled so he could scarcely open and close them he made desperate efforts to climb back.

Had he dropped another foot he must surely have fallen into the jaws of a mammoth alligator. The beast was asleep with his mouth wide open. Grinning terribly, his yellow tusks looking like rows of sharpened spikes, he lay there quite motionless. What would have been the consequences had the boy dropped that remaining foot? Would the alligator have tumbled in great fright into the water? Would his terrible jaws have closed like the iron gates of a prison? Who can tell? Who would care to perform the experiment that he might know?

[98]

* * * * *

In the meantime Pant had not been idle. Good old Hardgrave, a plain man from Arkansas with the courage of a knight and heart of a king, had arrived. He had anchored his motor-boat with its wheezy engine close to the creek landing, then had unloaded his cargo of chemicals, retorts, toy balloons and cheesecloth.

“Where’s Johnny?” he asked the moment he stepped on land.

“Just what I was going to tell you.”

“Tell it, then.”

Pant did tell—told all he knew.

“Huh!” the old man grunted. “He’ll come back. Daego’s got him hid out somewhere. Wouldn’t quite dare kill him outright. Leastwise, I don’t think so. Can’t tell about that half-caste strain in his blood, though.”

“He’ll come back,” echoed Pant, “but meantime we’ve got to carry on the work. ’Twouldn’t do to disappoint Johnny when he comes back. We got to get all this red lure down by the water ready for the trip down.”

“What’s worse,” said Hardgrave, “we’ve got to do just what you said a minute ago; keep old Daego guessing. Don’t like his taking up more men. Looks bad. May come over here like a young army any time, bent on driving us out. Got any place for this?” He pointed at his miscellaneous cargo stacked on the bank.

[99]

“Have to use Johnny’s office, I guess.”

The next morning, Gesippio, a Carib who bunked close to the office, said to his work mate, “There was devil doin’s in that office of Johnny’s last night.”

“Devil doin’s?”

“Devil doin’s! First the whole place was lit up like it was busting with flames. Seemed like every crack was shootin’ flames. Then all was dark again. Pretty soon there came a blue blaze, sort of low-like, and a hissin’ sound like the old Serpent, the Evil One, might o’ made. Then all of a sudden, sendin’ me all of a heap, there came a most terrible bang. After that I didn’t hear no more.”

From that time on the cabin that had been Johnny’s office was kept carefully locked day and night.

[100]

CHAPTER IX

“IT’S DEATH AN’ DESTRUCTION”

Having barely escaped dropping into the jaws of an alligator, Johnny Thompson wound his leg about his vine rope at a spot where a knotty projection would give him partial support, then proceeded to make a sad survey of the situation. There was the cocoanut tree, and there the alligator. There were two other 'gators floating silently on the surface of the pool. To land there was out of the question. There might be a landing place on the other side of that particular rocky formation. It was his only chance.

After climbing the vine, a slow and painful process, he made a hasty survey. Already it was growing dark. There was need of haste, but the dull stupor of the tropics was still upon him. He could not hasten. He found it necessary to make his way over the jagged rocks for some distance before finding a safe fastening for his vine.

When at last all was secure the sun had gone down and a dark bank of clouds again obscured the sky.

[101]

“Got’a hurry,” he told himself. “Got to get down fast.”

He did go down rapidly until he had all but reached the rocky ledge upon which he was to land. There, for a time, he lost his courage. His late experience had unnerved him. What sort of landing was this which he now approached? It is difficult to

distinguish a motionless alligator from a rocky surface even in broad daylight. How impossible in the dusk! So he clung there motionless, trying to stare into the half darkness.

“Can—can’t hang here forever,” he breathed at last. “Here goes, and here’s hoping!”

To his great joy he landed safely on a high and dry rock, quite free from danger.

But at once there arose the problem of finding his way to the cocoanut tree. After a half hour of groping about, he uttered a shout of joy:

“There! There it is!”

There indeed was the tree, and at the top of it were the cocoanuts—three ripe ones and many green ones. The problem of securing the food was still before him. At close sight of the tree his heart sank. It was taller and larger than he thought—fifteen feet high and a foot through at the base. What was worse, the circle of great fern-like leaves that grew between him and the nuts appeared to present a solid barrier through which it was going to be difficult to pass.

[102]

“I’m weak from hunger,” he told himself. “From hunger and something else. I’d rather lie down and sleep than climb that tree, but I must try.”

He did try. Three times he climbed to that green barrier; three times tried to break his way through the ring of branches to the fruit; fought there until cold perspiration stood out upon his brow and his knees shook so he could scarcely support himself; then each time slid slowly down.

The last time, with something very much like a sob, he threw himself upon the bare rocks and cried passionately:

“Oh, I can’t! I can’t! I can’t!”

That night, on the surface of the highest rock he could find, with no fire, with only the glittering stars above him, he slept the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. From time to time as he slept there came sounds of scratches on the rock above him, of grunts and other sounds in the darkness; but no wild thing dared approach too close to this strange smelling creature from another world.

[103]

The three days that followed that night on the rocks beside the falls were like a long drawn out evil dream. True, Fate dropped him a comforting morsel. One of the cocoanuts, a small one, had fallen during the night. With fingers that shook, Johnny bored a hole through one eye of it and drank the milk eagerly; drank to the last drop. Then he broke the nut on a rock and gnawed at the rich, white meat until not a shred was left.

Lacking strength and courage to build a second raft, he began making his way as best he could, now on hands and knees and now flat on his stomach, over the low, narrow game trail that followed the bank of the stream.

As the heat of the day beat its way through the tangled forest he began to feel faint. Now and again, as he paused to rest, he felt that he must be losing consciousness.

[104]

A great desire to sleep came over him. Nothing much mattered. A strange peace, the drowsy, drug-like peace of the tropics, lulled him to rest. Now he slept, defenseless in the open trail. And now he woke to journey on. When night came he could not rightly tell. In that gloom there was no day. In time he woke to find all dark about him. Still he struggled on.

The scream of parrots, the senseless chatter of monkeys, the roar of beasts of prey, all were the same to him, for all came faint and indistinct as in a dream.

Once he fought with a great spotted beast. A jaguar, perhaps. Or was that, too, only a dream? He could not tell. He seemed to wake from a horrible nightmare of claws and wild snarls to find his arms and chest torn and bleeding and his knife gone.

“Must have fought with my knife and lost it in the struggle,” was his mental comment.

He did not feel badly about that, nor did he search for it long. Nothing seemed to trouble him. Great waves of dreams swept over him.

His lips were dry and parched. “Fever. Malaria. That mosquito did it,” he told himself. That did not matter, either. Nothing mattered.

[105]

He dragged himself to the bank of the stream to cleanse his wounds. He drank long and deeply. A small fish, darting too close, was caught in his hand. This he devoured whole.

Other things of the jungle he ate—strange fruits, nuts and roots. Were they poison? It did not matter. Nothing mattered.

So, every day growing weaker, he came at the end of the third day to something very much like an abandoned clearing. Such it was, but he was too far lost in his drowsy sleep to know it. He had passed half through it when, of a sudden, he came upon a hut, a palm-thatched, forlorn and deserted hut. Yet, to him in his delirium of fever it was something far greater than an abandoned hut.

“Home!” he cried hoarsely. “Home!”

Throwing himself across the threshold, he fell prone in the dust of the floor.

A great lizard, sleeping in the corner, awoke and darted away; a small bird, whose nest was in the thatch, scolded shrilly. But

[106]

Johnny heard nothing, saw nothing.

When at last he summoned up strength enough to drag himself to a corner and upon a bed of rotting mats, he murmured again:

“Home! Home! How good to be home!”

In the deserted cabin was dampness, mold and desolation. Only one overwrought by peril and trouble, or made delirious by a burning fever, could have thought of it as home. Home? Here there was neither water, food nor friends.

Once, having come out of his delirium, he managed to grope about until he had found a mouldy gourd. With this in hand he dragged himself on hands and knees to the river. Here in his eagerness for water he all but pitched head-foremost into the stream. As it was, he left a print of his hand in the plastic ooze on the bank.

The gourd he filled with water. Having spilled most of it on the way back, in a fever of haste lest the rest escape, he drank it greedily, then sank back on his musty little bed to dream delirious dreams.

In his dreams, with Pant by his side, he pursued a red gleam that, while growing brighter, appeared always to elude them. “The red lure. The red lure!” he repeated over and over.

[107]

Next morning found him too weak to rise or to think. He had only strength to breathe. He could only stare helplessly at the dull brown roof of the hut and hope for things that never come.

But now the scene was changed. Instead of the smell of decay all about him, there was the perfume of apple blossoms. Over his head the white and pink glory of Springtime blended with white patches of sunshine. Beneath him was a soft bed of

grass; above him apple trees and sky. From far and near came the warble of thrushes, the chirp of robins, the shrill challenge of woodpeckers. He was once more in the orchard that witnessed his boyhood. Buried deep in clover, he was sensing the joy of Spring.

Then the hot light of a new day dragged him back to waking consciousness. Dreams vanished. Dull reality hung about him. He tried to lift himself upon an elbow. He failed. Could he lift a hand? He could not. His eyes closed from the mere force of this effort, and remained closed.

The hand of Johnny Thompson, that manly right hand that had scorned to strike one weaker than its owner; the hand that had so often inspired the dishonest, the unkind, mean and criminal to a wholesome fear; the hand that had never been employed in mere selfish ends, was powerless and still.

[108]

The stream rushing past that cabin seemed a funeral train, powerful and free, ready to carry that brave spirit away. Some strange bird sang a song from the tree tops. Its notes, measured and slow, were like a dirge.

A great snake, attracted by the dry warmth of the doorway, curled up there in the dust to sleep. The figure on the cot did not move. A great lizard crept in through a rotted corner to gaze blinking at him. The snake, sensing a dinner, slowly uncoiled, then with a motion surprisingly quick for a creature of its kind, darted, forked tongue flashing, at the lizard. There was a scurry of feet, a gliding scrape. Lizard and snake passed within a few inches of that prostrate head. The snake passed over the motionless hand, yet the hand did not stir, the eyes did not open.

The rush of waters, the distant mournful notes of birds, the sigh of the wind through the palms seemed to say:

[109]

“He is dead! Dead! Dead!”

* * * * *

Pant would not believe that Johnny was dead. "They can't have done him in," he said to Hardgrave. "It's a thing that really can't be done. Burly Russians; treacherous, slant-eyed Yellow men have tried it; yes, and daring white crooks, too. These didn't get Johnny, so why should a mere Spanish half-caste succeed?"

No, he would not admit that Johnny was dead; but as days passed and he did not return he grew more and more restless. Each morning strengthened his determination to discover what had happened to his good pal. Each evening found him with some more daring plan for discovering his whereabouts. When sending his men as spies among Daego's men at night failed, he took to paddling across the river and drifting in and out among them in the dark himself. This was exceedingly dangerous business. He might be discovered, and if he were he would doubtless go the way of his pal, whatever way that might be. He was careless of danger; any risk was not too great, could he but find Johnny.

It was during one of his secret visits to the enemy's camp that an exceedingly strange thing happened.

[110]

It was a hot, sultry night. Daego's men lay about on mats before the huts. The murmur of voices constantly hung upon the air. Now and again there came a shout of laughter from some black man. Half the workers were blacks from Belize. The others were Spaniards. These seldom laughed.

At times, when the hum of voices ceased and laughter died away, from out of the bush there came the hoarse call of a jaguar, and who could say it was not the "killer?"

Pant had dropped upon a mat at the edge of a group of black men. In the shadows no man could see his neighbor's face. No questions were asked. The moon, just rising over the edge

of the jungle, cast long shadows and sent ghost-like shimmers of light across the patches of mist that rose from the river.

The hum of voices was at its loudest. A black man, close to Pant, was in the midst of a loud guffaw when, of a sudden, the laugh appeared to freeze in his throat. This sound, or sudden cessation of sound, so unusual and so apparently without cause, spread silence like a blanket over the clearing.

[111]

Out of that silence there rose a hoarse, high-pitched voice:

“Oh! Look up a-yonder!”

The man who spoke was the one who had so suddenly ceased laughing. His outstretched arm, clad as it was in a white sleeve of cotton stuff, was like a white pointer with a black tip pointing toward the sky.

What Pant saw as he followed the line of that pointer made even his blood run cold and set the hair at the back of his head standing on end. The moonlight playing across the sky had caught something white and faintly luminous that floated on air well above the tree tops. Even as he watched, the thing seemed to assume the form of a white-robed figure. The head began to come out with glimmering brightness. Eyes appeared, and the semblance of a mouth. Then, as the whole company, far and near, lay wrapped in silence, there sounded such a rattling as one may sometimes fancy he hears in passing a graveyard at the dead of night.

“Oh! My Massa!” groaned the black man. “It’s a ghost, the ghost of that white boy Daego drove into the bush. He’s come back to ha’nt us. It’s death an’ destruction! Destruction for Daego; and death for all of us. Oh! My Massa!”

[112]

There came a murmuring “Uh-huh” from many voices. Then from a dark corner there rose the chant of the only Carib of the crew. He was singing the native song of his people—the

Devil Song that is supposed to drive out evil spirits. Weird and fantastic as his song was, the thing that floated above the tree tops was far more weird.

Over in another corner Pant heard a shuffling of feet. Someone was moving away, going toward the river. Fearing that they might find his dugout and so rob him of his means of returning to his own camp, he went skulking along after them. There were five or six black men in the group. Since they were not approaching his boat, he followed close enough to hear what they were saying. Arriving at the river bank, they pushed a long dugout into the water and with scarcely a sound leaped in and shoved away from the shore. A moment later, keeping to the shadows, the boy heard:

“Come daylight we’s far down this haunted river.”

[113]

“Yea-bo!” came back in answer.

“It’s death an’ destruction. I knowd twa’nt no sense afoolin’ with them thar white ha’nts,” gloomed another.

There was silence after that. The only sound was the dip-lip of paddles, but Pant had heard enough to make his heart glad.

“Johnny’s ghost,” he murmured. “Five men gone already, and more will follow; perhaps many more. Not so bad for a ghost,” and he laughed softly to himself.

[114]

CHAPTER X

JOHNNY'S GHOST WALKS

Palms that hung over the silent, swiftly flowing stream murmured and sighed. Their murmuring and sighing was as sad as the voice of pines and hemlocks in a graveyard on a winter's night. Sadder still was the strange wail of some tropical bird, piping always on the same minor key. On the bed of decaying mats in the abandoned cabin where little lizards ran in and out, Johnny Thompson lay white and motionless.

Came an hour when there fell upon all this gloom a shrill discordant note. The scream of a wild parrot broke the drowsy silence. This was answered by another, and yet another, until all up and down the stream the air was filled with harsh, discordant music.

The innocent cause of all this disturbance was a fantastically painted dugout, all striped and spotted with red, blue, green and white. Its prow and stern rose high out of the water like the ancient crafts of the Vikings.

[115]

Forward sat a girl, aft was a boy, and in the middle sat a large native Carib woman. So brown and rugged was the girl that she might easily have been taken for a Spaniard. A second look revealed deep-set freckles, a glow of color, a mass of curly hair, and an indefinable air of confidence and frankness that could belong only to an Anglo-Saxon. This girl, Jean

McQueen, was Scotch. The boy was her brother. Just over from England, where he had attended school for years, he had the attire, the manners and the color of a perfect young English gentleman. In his tweed nickers and his smart sport shirt, he seemed quite as much out of place in the wilderness as his sister in her patched and faded khaki suit seemed at home.

“This is not the creek,” the boy said. There was impatience in his tone, and something that suggested fear. “Let’s turn back.”

“It might be, Rod. We’ll go on a little farther.” Brushing aside a low-hanging palm leaf, the girl seized her paddle to send the light craft forward.

For a space of ten minutes nothing might be heard save the dip-dip of their paddles and the scream of parrots over their heads.

[116]

Suddenly the boat swerved to the right shore.

“Abandoned, I guess,” said the girl, sweeping the clearing with her eyes. “Might tell us something, though.”

“Some sort of old cabin over there.”

“Look!” exclaimed the girl. “Someone’s here—or has been in the last few days.” She pointed to a well-defined hand print in the half-dried mud of the bank.

“Who—who do you suppose?”

“Rubber hunters, perhaps, or a chiclero. Let’s go up.”

The boy hung back.

“Aren’t afraid, are you?” the girl laughed. It was a rich, free, melodious laugh. “Nobody’s goin’ to hurt you in this wilderness. C’mon!”

She led the way over the trail which Johnny on his journey to the creek for water had made. The boy followed, reluctantly, and the Carib woman waddled along behind. More than once the girl paused to examine with a practiced eye patches of grass that lay flat down as if some wild creature had slept there. These were the spots where Johnny had fallen and found himself too weak to rise at once.

[117]

A little cry of dismay escaped the girl's lips as her eyes fell upon the white-faced, prostrate form on the decaying mats.

"Dead!" her lips framed the word she did not speak. Death to this girl who knew so much of life, and loved it so, was a terrifying thing, thrice terrible in the heart of a wilderness. Yet here was a boy, a boy of her own race, who, to all appearances, had died here alone in this abandoned hut.

"Dead!" she whispered. "How—how awful!"

Some little lizards scampered over the dry palm leaves as her foot stirred the dust at the door. In another moment she was bending over the prostrate form.

"You—you can't always tell." There was a note of hope in her tone. "Rod, bring some water, quick."

During the dragging moments of her brother's absence she studied the prostrate boy's face. There are lines in one's face which to the keen observer tells the story of his life. Has he been kind and thoughtful of others? Has he lived brave and clean? It is written there. Has he been harsh, impatient, careless, dissipated even in small ways? This, too, is recorded there. As the girl read the story of Johnny's life she found herself hoping more and more that she might save him.

[118]

"Give it to me," she whispered as her brother appeared with the canteen.

With trembling fingers she placed the mouth of the canteen to the boy's lips.

A moment of silence followed. Then of a sudden the wrinkle of anxiety on the girl's brow disappeared. Johnny's lips moved in an inarticulate murmur.

With a little exclamation of joy the girl sprang to her feet.

"He lives! He lives!"

Then all was silent again on stream and jungle.

* * * * *

It was a strangely mixed dream through which Johnny was passing. It seemed night. He was hidden away in some deep forest. A storm had set the tree tops to twisting and writhing. The constant roll of thunder, mingled with the moaning of the trees, made the night hideous.

Like a flash the scene changed. It was day—Sunday in the little old church at home. Someone rose to sing; a beautiful white-gowned figure with a sweet melodious voice. She sang, but the words of the song had no meaning for him. It was as if they were sung in a foreign tongue.

[119]

And now he was gazing upon a sunrise. Such a sunrise as is never seen on land or sea, all red, orange and gold.

It was in the midst of this last broken dream that he opened his eyes and stared around him.

To his vast amazement he saw that the vision of orange and gold had not completely vanished. Neither had the singing nor the sound of thunder been hushed. They had merely taken on a more definite form, a truer meaning. The words of the song:

“Ne-ha aba ne ha aba muta,
Sagmuk labsa abona
Sag aba don,”

were not entirely strange to him, but they had no real meaning for him. He had heard his Caribs sing them around his camp fire. They were the words of a strange native song. As for the thunder, it was merely the wild beating of a barrel drum. And the flash of orange and gold was a girl, a very beautiful girl, swaying gracefully in a sort of rhythmic exercise to the beating of the drum.

[120]

He stared in unbelieving astonishment. The thing was not real. He was still dreaming. He tried to put up a hand to rub the illusion away, but finding this difficult because of weakness, contented himself with staring about the room where the golden vision continued to sway and whirl and the reverberating drum shook dust from the ceiling.

Slowly familiar objects came to view. The roof of the palm thatched cabin looked familiar. He had lain beneath it some time. That might have been long ago, or was it yesterday? He remembered the holes in the roof. The holes, one had been triangular, another round. The spots were still there, but instead of sunlight streaming through, the holes were covered by a fresh green palm leaf thatch.

He looked again at the swaying spot of gold that was the girl. The girl seemed almost real. Her face was flushed. It would be, if she swayed to music in such a clime. The black woman, like an ebony statue, sat beating the drum as she sang:

[121]

“Ne-ha aba ne ha aba muta.”

Then a sudden thought struck Johnny. The dancing girl was not black; she was not golden-brown like the Indian, not the brown of the Mexican, either. She was white like himself. A

very comely white girl she was, too; red cheeks, tossing curly hair, freckles, slightly turned-up nose—a real girl.

“It’s a dream,” he told himself. “A white girl in the heart of this wilderness? I’m dead. This is Heaven. She’s an angel.”

He wanted to laugh at this last, but did not dare. It might break the spell! The girl was too robust, too red-cheeked for an angel. Whoever heard of a freckle-faced angel? But whoever heard of a real white girl in such a spot?

The mats looked real, too. What of those on which he lay? He ran his fingers over them.

“New, too,” he told himself. “How strange!”

Things were coming back to him. He had walked a long way, crept farther, dragged himself to this cabin. Here, after one try at bringing water, he had lain himself down to die.

[122]

“Apparently I’m not dead,” he told himself. “These people must have arrived to save me.”

He closed his eyes and tried to think. In the process he fell asleep.

What had happened was this. Having found Johnny dying of fever there in the abandoned hut, the girl, Jean, had insisted upon abandoning all plans for their future except the business of bringing him back to life. To this end the native Carib woman had searched the jungle for such herbs as have long been used by her people for curing a fever. To this same end, brother and sister had searched that same forest for birds that would provide broth and for fruits to supply refreshing drink for the invalid.

The strange music and the rhythmic motion that accompanied it was the idea of the Carib woman. Did she attach some wild

native religious significance to it? Who can tell? The boy had made the drum from a deer's skin and a hollow log; the girl had joined in merely to please the Carib woman and satisfy her simple soul.

Native medicine, the jungle's nourishment, the black woman's wild music, the white girl's tender care, all these in their way had helped. When Johnny woke the second time he was well on his way to recovery.

[123]

It is one thing to lie alone, helpless and dying in a wretched cabin in the heart of a wilderness; quite another to find one's self surrounded by true friends, none the less real because they are new, and to feel strength and life coursing back into one's veins.

At first Johnny asked few questions. Asking questions had never been his way of discovering the truth. He looked on with astonishment at the things that went on around him. The wilderness which to him had been a land of famine was suddenly as if by magic turned into a Garden of Eden. Early in the morning he heard the pop of a light rifle somewhere in the brush. At night he drank such broth and ate such tender shreds of meat as had never passed his lips before. The strange, glorious girl vanished for an hour, to return with yellow melons, melons that grew on trees,—“pawpaw” she called it. She brought water that was sweet and fresh, not from the hot stream, but from a vine torn from a tree where it clung. A hundred other miracles were wrought for his comfort and healing. And all the time, as if by magic, strength came back to him. On the fourth day he walked a bit unsteadily, but quite confidently, out of the cabin to sit on a mahogany log with a cabbage tree for a back support. Here he sat and watched dreamily the golden girl who, at this moment dressed in her humblest garb of faded khaki, was bending over a native mahogany wash bowl, found somewhere in the cabin, washing clothes.

Engaged in this task, with her thick, curly hair drawn up in a tight knot at the top of her head, with her brown arms flaked with suds, she seemed real enough.

[124]

“No angel,” he murmured, “just a real girl; a whole lot better!” he told himself. “I wonder where they came from, and where they were going when they found me?”

Strangely enough, had he asked the girl this last question she would have been obliged to answer: “I don’t know.”

The truth was that the Scotch girl and her brother were quite as lost in this wilderness as he and quite as eager to find their way out.

[125]

* * * * *

In the meantime the strange doings, the flashes of phosphorescent light and strange noises, continued behind the locked door of Johnny’s office at the camp on Rio Hondo. In spite of this, however, the Caribs continued to work faithfully at their tasks and the work of getting out the red lure went on.

“You’re making fine progress,” said Hardgrave.

“Yes,” said Pant, “we’ll be able to show a fine profit. That is,” his brow wrinkled, “if we can take it out of here.”

“You’ll make it. Never fear.” said Hardgrave. “Daego’s getting worried. Another pit-pan load of his blacks went down the river last night. Wait and see.”

“It’s the ghost,” smiled Pant.

Strange as it may seem, though Johnny in his far away jungle hut was greatly improved in health, his ghost walked nightly upon the sky above the timber that faced Daego’s camp.

Every night, too, Pant slipped across the river to join the

enemy's camp and to catch the drift of events. He found that these Central Americans, black and brown alike, had a great fear of ghosts, particularly of white ghosts. Johnny's ghost hovering there near the clouds threw some into near hysteria and sent others hurrying down the river.

[126]

It was easy to see, they explained, why this white ghost hovered above the tree tops. The hot and humid air close to the earth in the jungle has always been hated and feared by the white man. Above the trees the air is fresh and crisp. Why, then, should any ghost descend to earth?

But despite the fact that he did not descend, his presence above them meant that in time pestilence, a death-dealing fever, a destructive storm or a flood would descend upon the camp and wipe it from the face of the earth.

One person did not believe in the ghost—Daego. He raved and stormed at his men. Day and night, as if searching for something, he haunted the banks of the river. More than once Pant barely escaped being discovered by him. In spite of all this, however, the ghost appeared promptly on schedule and Daego's ranks grew thinner and thinner.

"Keep it up, dear ghost," Pant whispered, "keep it up, and in time we'll have nothing to fear from Daego. Oh!" he sighed, "if only Johnny were here to enjoy it all!"

[127]

But Johnny was far away in the palm leaf thatched cabin on a stream that was as strange to those who had battled for his life as it was to him.

And then one night Johnny's ghost vanished into thin air.

Before that happened, however, there were many other strange doings on the upper stretches of Rio Hondo.

[128]

CHAPTER XI

PROVISIONED FOR A LONG JOURNEY

Ten days after his discovery there in the abandoned cabin, Johnny Thompson was ready to travel. He was ready to embark in the dugout of his new found friends.

“It will not be long,” he assured Jean, “before I will be able to do my bit with the paddle, to assist you in going wherever you wish to go.” Where that might be he had not the slightest notion.

One thing puzzled him. As they prepared to leave the cabin, the dugout was loaded fore and aft with food supplies. In the prow, carefully wrapped in green palm leaves, were the carcasses of two young peccaries, killed that very morning. Piled on top of these were three or four dozen ripe cocoanuts. In the stem were casabas (great potato-like vegetables), tree melons, breadfruit, and a basket filled with strange little red tomatoes.

“Rations for a week,” he mused. “How far from home are these people, anyway?”

[129]

He was soon enough to know. Hardly had the dugout, with Roderick in the stem as steersman, been pushed from the shore and allowed to take a downstream course, than the girl,

turning upon Johnny one of her most wonderful smiles, said:

“I suppose you think we know where we’re going; but we don’t. We only know we’re on our way.”

“Don—don’t know where you’re going!” Johnny gasped in astonishment. “Then you’re—”

“Lost!” The girl’s brow wrinkled for a second, then the smile came back.

“Shake,” said Johnny, solemnly stretching forth a hand. “We’ll go it together.”

For a second their hands met. Then, as a swirling eddy set the boat whirling, the girl seized a paddle.

“You see,” she said quietly as they reached more placid water, “we didn’t tell you while you were ill; afraid it would disturb you.”

“It would have,” said Johnny. Quite suddenly something had come to him. “The red lure!” he murmured, quite unconscious of the fact that he spoke out loud. “When will I ever get back to it?”

“What is the red lure?” the girl asked in surprise.

[130]

“The red lure? Why, that’s my pet name for mahogany, the prince of priceless woods. If you’ve ever seen the mirror-like gleam of its polished surface, if you’ve seen how like a fire on the hearth at sunset it is, you know what it means.”

“I have. I do,” she said simply.

“Well,” he went on, “I’ve been given an opportunity to bring down a sample, one boom full, a hundred thousand feet or so of that matchless wood from a forest the value of which can scarcely be estimated. I had made a fine start, too, when I was

suddenly driven into the bush. I promptly got myself lost, and here I am.”

Reading intense interest in her eyes, he told her the whole story of his adventure thus far.

“And now,” he ended with an uncertain smile, “it seems that we—you, your brother and I—are all babes in the woods, so to speak.”

“Perhaps it’s not quite as bad as that,” said Jean. “Bad enough, though. You see, I’ve always lived in the tropics with my father. He brought me here when I was five. My brother, who is three years older, was left behind in England.

“He’s done a lot of things, my father has,—bananas, cocoanuts, grapefruit. Just now he is gathering chicle up a lost river.

[131]

“Four months ago Rod came to us. The jungle is all new to him. He was quite wild about it. So we went on little exploring trips. I love it, don’t you?”

“Nothing like it,” said Johnny.

“It’s all new up in this country. If ever a white man set foot on it he’s forgot it long ago. You cut your way through a jungle, you find a stream, you launch your dugout, which you’ve dragged after you, and you drift on and on through a land that white men have never seen. It’s wonderful! Wonderful!” She closed her eyes as if in a dream.

“It’s dangerous, too,” she exclaimed, suddenly starting up. “You may get lost. We did. One night we slept in the bottom of our dugout—Rod, old Midge and I. When morning came we found ourselves drifting in the center of a great river. What do you think of that? Go to sleep in a stream you can all but reach across, and wake in a broad river. Magic, wouldn’t

you call it?”

“I might.”

“No magic about it, though. A thing had happened to our tie rope. Some creature had gnawed it square off. And there we were, drifting down a great black silent river we had never seen before. What were we to do? What would you have done?”

[132]

“Try to find my way back to the mouth of the little stream from which I had drifted.”

“That was just what we attempted. That’s how we found you. The mouth of every stream looked alike to us, so all we could do was to go up each one a short way until we knew it was the wrong stream. We had about decided that this was the wrong stream, too, when I discovered your hand print in the mud.”

“And you’ve spent all this time—”

“Getting you well.”

“That’s wonderfully kind. That’s—”

“Not so much in the tropics. Down here time doesn’t matter. We’ll find our way home sooner or later. When we do I’ll say: ‘Hello, Dad. I’m back,’ and Dad will say, ‘So I see, daughter, so I see.’”

So lightly did these words come tripping from her lips, so rippling was the laughter following, that for a moment Johnny was deceived.

“She means it, too,” he told himself. “So this is the way of the tropics.”

[133]

The deception lasted for but one moment. The wrinkle across her brow, the far away look in her eyes, the irregular dip of

her paddle, all told plainer than words that she had been playing a part; that she was concealing homesickness and hunger for friends; that they might be days, even weeks, finding their way back, and that in the meantime all her father's men would be searching the streams and bush for her and her brother.

In the midst of all this fresh revelation, their boat suddenly shot from the creek into a mighty stream of black and sullen waters.

"The Rio Hondo!" exclaimed Johnny.

"And down this river is your camp," the girl said quietly. "We will take you there at once."

For a moment Johnny was tempted. He had been away for more than two weeks. What had happened in that time? What of Pant? What of his Caribs? What of Daego and his men? Had there been a battle? If so, who had won? Whose camp fires gleamed there in the heart of that magic mahogany forest, his own or Daego's? He did so want to know the answer to all these questions.

But suddenly there flashed through his mind the worried face of the girl.

[134]

"Brave girl!" he breathed as a lump in his throat all but choked him. "She saved my life. It cost her many days. She must go home. She's a girl. I'm a boy. I can't let them take me first."

"No," he exclaimed, snatching the paddle from her hands, "there is time enough for me."

With the paddle he deftly turned the boat about. Then, nothing loath, Roderick and the black woman joined him in the stroke that sent it speeding upstream. So, once more, Johnny's back

was turned on the red lure.

That night Johnny dreamed once more of little golden brown women grinding and spinning, of hunters returning with deer and wild pigs slung across their backs, and of the three gods, —one black, one green and one of pure gold.

Strangely enough, when he awoke from this dream he felt nearer the fabled Indian village; the dream seemed more real than ever before.

CHAPTER XII

A BRONZE BEAUTY

Once more it was morning on the upper reaches of Rio Hondo. The dugout was tied to the bared roots of a gnarled old mangrove. The camp of Jean and Johnny, of Rod and the Carib woman, was on the crest of a high bank that overlooked the black waters.

The aged Carib woman was frying cakes made from casabas ground to powder and mixed with water. Jean was frying slices of meat from the ham of a peccary. Johnny was engaged in the business of making coffee. After his first demonstration this had been his allotted task.

While the coffee was now coming to a boil, he sat alternating gazing away at the swift flowing waters and looking dreamily at the golden girl whose hair was glorified by a touch of sunrise mingled with the glow of the fire.

“Fine chance she’s got of finding her way home,” he thought. They had searched all the previous day for the right creek. “There are a hundred creeks. They don’t know how long they drifted nor how far. Not a chance. Have to be some other way. Some of her father’s men may come upon us, or we might go back to camp. Someone there might know the way.”

[136]

He was meditating on the advisability of proposing this last course when there came a sudden excited shout from the

bush.

“Roderick!” exclaimed the girl. “Something has happened to him.” For a moment the camp was in commotion, then the Scotch boy came bounding out of the bush.

“Jean! Jean!” he shouted, seizing her by the shoulders and waltzing her about. “I’ve found a trail, a hard-beaten trail.”

“The Old Portage,” the girl cried breathlessly. “The trail that leads to home!”

Suddenly crumpling up in her tracks, she sank to the ground and hid her face in her hands. Unmoved as she had been through all this strange and trying adventure, now as the end appeared at hand she was for a moment just a girl with the heart of a girl and a girl’s way of shedding tears in times of great joy or deep sorrow. And who would not like her the better for it?

[137]

The Old Portage, the brother and sister informed Johnny, was a trail used alike by Mexicans and Indians. The trail led from Rio Hondo to the upper waters of their own river, the one on which their father’s camp was located. Neither had been over this trail, but their father had. He had told them of passing over it. It was an old, old trail, he had explained, which might have been in existence at the time of the Spanish conquest.

“There can’t be a bit of doubt about its being the trail,” said Roderick. “It’s so hard-packed and old that it seems made of cement.”

“It’s our trail!” the girl rejoiced. “By to-night, or to-morrow noon at most, we will be home. And you?” she said suddenly turning to Johnny.

The question startled him. It had not occurred to him that there was a possible parting of the ways.

“You’ll be going back to your camp, of course,” said Roderick. “You’re quite welcome to our dugout. You may have an opportunity to send it back. We may pass your way. It’s no matter. What’s a dugout? You’ll be in your camp by night.”

[138]

This time, to his own great stupefaction, Johnny did not pause to reason why, but simply said:

“No, since I’ve come this far, I believe I’ll see you home.” He looked straight at the golden girl as he spoke. Had he but known it, he was taking a rather large contract.

Roderick looked surprised. The girl looked Johnny frankly in the eye and said: “That will be very kind of you.”

It was not hard to see that she had greater faith in the skill and courage of this new found friend than she had in her brother who, though educated in the way of books, was ignorant enough when it came to river lore and the ways of the jungle.

A half hour later, after dragging the dugout to a safe place on the bank, they prepared packs for a land journey. Johnny tried to think what it had been that had caused him to make the decision which must take him deeper into the jungle and farther from his camp. Other than a vague feeling that the girl who had saved his life might yet need his protection, he could discover no motive whatsoever.

[139]

“No sense to it,” he told himself, “not a bit in the world. But what’s the fun of always having a reason for things, anyway?”

““A boy’s will is a wind’s will, and the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,”” he repeated as he strapped his pack to his shoulders and prepared to follow his companions through the brush to the hard beaten ancient trail.

It was strange, but the trail they followed that day did not

seem quite like a portage trail leading from one river to another. At least it did not seem so to Johnny, not from the very start. At first his feelings on this subject were based on nothing tangible. As the day passed and still they plodded onward, he could have given reasons. He did not give them. What was the use? Time would tell.

They crossed no streams, yet they were not following the backbone of a ridge. That in itself was strange. They carried two canteens. These were soon emptied. Had it not been for Jean's admirable knowledge of tropical vegetation they might have suffered from thirst. A vine growing close beside the trail, which Jean called Bejuco, filled their canteens while they rested.

[140]

At noon they paused for a light lunch. Mid-afternoon found them plodding upward; indeed, almost the whole day had showed them a slight up-grade trail.

"Should be coming to the divide," Johnny said.

"Yes, we should." The girl's brow was wrinkled in thought. "Father never spoke of the divide, but there must be one. That's the place where you stop going up, and start going down?"

"Yes."

"We must come to it soon."

But they did not.

Four o'clock found them resting beside a pool. A very strange pool it was. Circular, with moss and ferns growing to its very brink, its water clear as air, it seemed like a great funnel set in the earth.

"As if there had been a sudden cave-in," said Jean.

Stranger still, they found on the side next to the trail four crude stone steps leading down to the brink of the pool.

“Did you never hear your father speak of this pool?” asked Johnny.

[141]

Neither Jean nor her brother had heard of it before.

“This,” thought Johnny to himself, “is not the portage. It is some other trail. But what trail can it be?”

Darkness found them still plodding upward. Loath to spend the night without water, at Jean’s direction the boys sought out a tree known as the “kerosene tree.” A match applied to a piece of this wood transforms it into a torch.

They had not gone far before the light of their torch was reflected by water.

“Another pool,” said Roderick, settling down upon the mosses that grew beside it.

“Here we camp,” said Johnny, holding out his torch that they might get a more perfect view of the pool.

It was very much the same as the other, only larger. The stone steps were not lacking, and beside them was a pillar of stone on which Johnny’s sensitive fingers traced some very definite carvings of strange animals and men.

“A relic of old Maya days,” he said.

[142]

“What is?” asked Jean.

“See this pillar beside the steps; the pool itself? Ever read about them?”

“No.”

“Built by Mayas, I believe. Interesting people. Hardgrave loaned me a book about them; the report of some ethnological society. It reads like one of Dumas’ novels. Tell you about them later.”

They were soon busy preparing camp for the night.

Two hours later, with the still waters of the pool reflecting the red glow of a half burned out campfire, with Roderick stretched out on the mosses fast asleep and the Carib woman nodding beneath a nut palm, Johnny sat beside the girl and told of the wonders of this land in the long ago.

“Do you see the cocoanut palm in the shadows at the far side of the pool?” he asked.

The girl nodded.

“We think it grew there wild. So it did. But how did it come there? Scholars say that its great, great, great grandfather, centuries back, must have been planted there, and that it may have grown beside a palace.”

“Whose palace?” the girl’s voice was low.

[143]

“The palace of a Maya prince.”

“Were there princes?”

“Princes and great rulers; a mighty people once lived here. Where this jungle now rules were cornfields, cocoanut plantations, farms, homes, cities and great temples, temples of stone, fifteen hundred feet long, two hundred wide, two or three stories high. That is the land of long ago, and now here is only the jungle and this pool.”

“Do you suppose this pool was here then?” The girl’s hand was on his arm.

“Why not? There are pools in Palestine to-day that were there two thousands years ago.”

“Then, if it could talk, what tales it could tell!”

For some time they sat there in silence, each dreaming the magic story in the fire and the deep, dark pool.

Long after the girl and the Carib woman had gone to sleep in the shadows, Johnny sat there. In his mind was a problem. They were on the wrong trail, he was sure of that now. What trail? It was a secret trail of some wild people, perhaps Mayas. Whatever people they were, there was a city. Such a hard beaten trail told of many travelers. What should he do? All his life he had dreamed of discovering a city, a city of lost people in some hidden corner of the world. This, perhaps, was his chance. For once the call of the red lure seemed faint and far away.

[144]

“Three gods,” he whispered, “one black, one green and one of pure gold.”

But there was Jean and her brother. They had not guessed, at least Roderick had not. He was not sure about Jean. They would discover the truth; too late perhaps to turn back. Had he the right not to warn them?

Long he pondered the problem. To go on alone was out of the question. His recent experience had given him an unconquerable fear of being alone in the bush. Was it selfishness that in the end counceled silence? Who can tell? At any rate, this was his decision: they would go ahead until Jean or her brother called a halt; when that would be he could not guess.

Johnny spent that night beside the dying embers of the camp fire. With legs doubled up beneath him, arms stretched out before him, head hanging low, he slept and sleeping dreamed

[145]

again of golden brown natives, and of black, green and gold gods.

In the midst of this dream he awoke. Or did he awake? Did he but half awake? Was it reality or dream? Whatever it was, he saw by the light of the dying fire, on the opposite side of the pool where the palm leaves parted, the face of a little brown man, and above his head gleamed a spear. For an instant he saw, or at least seemed to see him, then the palm leaves silently swept together.

“Gone!” he whispered, starting up.

He was wide awake now. Had he been awake before? He dropped back into his place, but not to sleep again. Now the rustle of palm leaves or the snap of a twig aroused him, and now the long drawn call of some beast of the jungle sent a thrill through his being. But at last he slept, to dream no more that night.

Morning found him the first one stirring. Jean was his close second.

“Looks like a rocky ridge just up the trail,” he said. “Might be wild turkey up there.”

“Might.”

[146]

“Want to try it?”

Jean nodded.

The next moment, with Roderick’s light rifle, Johnny was leading the way. After ten minutes’ walking they came to a rocky ridge that led into the jungle. Here the vegetation was thin. By climbing a boulder, and creeping beneath a low-hanging palm, they were able to make their way forward.

They had just crept forward for some distance when, of a sudden, Johnny held up a finger of warning. From somewhere ahead of them came a drumming sound accompanied by a beating of wings.

“Turkey strut,” Johnny whispered. “C’mon.”

Together, scarcely breathing, they crept forward. Suddenly rounding a pile of moss-grown rocks, they saw the turkey.

It was a magnificent sight. Mounted upon a boulder that served as a pedestal, the sun turning the touch of bronze on his back to a plate of burnished gold and his red comb to a fiery torch, was the most magnificent wild gobbler Johnny had ever seen.

With a quick intake of breath, the girl touched Johnny’s arm. Without the slightest sound he moved the rifle toward her. A shake of the head, a finger pointed at the bird, told him to shoot.

[147]

His hand trembled slightly, but his aim was true. A crack of the rifle was followed for a moment by a mad beating of wings, then all was still.

“You—you got him,” the girl exulted.

Leaping to her feet she sprang over the rocks to at last find a seat upon the throne from which the winged monarch had so lately fallen.

“This,” she exclaimed, “is what I call life. I’ve always lived in the wilds. I will always want to. I’ve always wanted to go back, back, back into the wilderness, to discover something magnificent there. I never knew exactly what that would be until last night. When you told me last night of the Mayas and their wonderful cities, I knew; a city, a magnificent city filled with rare silks, jewels and gold.”

Johnny started. What was this? Did she know? Would she follow the trail even though she knew it to be the wrong one? Was she following a rainbow to find the pot of gold?

“All that happened long ago,” he said, speaking of the Mayas. “The riches, glory, beauty and power of their civilization perished centuries ago.”

[148]

“Oh,” she whispered as her head drooped with disappointment. “But then,” she exclaimed, “who knows what is back of this wilderness? On the map it is marked ‘unexplored.’ It is unexplored. No white man has ever been over—over—” she caught herself to stammer on, “has been—been across this great bush to the beyond. There may be—there must be just one city, one gorgeous city left.” Standing upon the rock, she threw her arms wide as she exclaimed: “There must be! There must!”

Would they go on over that trail to the great beyond? What call could be stronger? What fear could hinder? In vain Johnny told himself he must go back, back to Pant and the red lure, back to fight the treacherous Daego. All in vain. He owed it to this magnificent girl’s father to take her back. In vain he recalled old Hardgrave’s words: “They killed all white men who came to their camp except me.” They must go on. They would go on.

“Johnny,” said the girl suddenly, “we ought to have some sort of—of signal.”

“Signal?” Johnny was puzzled.

[149]

“Yes. Something one could shout or sing, if lost from the other.”

“I have it!” she exclaimed suddenly. “I read a story a short time ago. In that story the heroine taught the hero a strange sort of song. I believe it was called ‘An Indian Love Song.’

Anyhow, the first part, or prelude, went something like this:

‘Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo.’”

Her clear voice rose high as she sang the notes. A distant cliff caught them and threw them back to her.

“Sing it!” she commanded.

As best he could, Johnny repeated:

“Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo.”

Then they had a good laugh over the broken echoes that came back to them.

It all seemed very melodramatic and unreal to Johnny then, but the time was to come when he would cling to those notes as a drowning man to a spar.

By the light of the early morning sun they ate their breakfast; by that same light resumed the trail that led to the great unknown.

[150]

Roderick, who had lived his life on streets and in houses, suspected nothing. The black woman, like a slave, did not think. But the girl? She knew. Every glance she sent back to Johnny told him that she knew, and he gloried in her courage.

[151]

CHAPTER XIII

PURRING SHADOWS

As Johnny's interest in the red lure lost much of its intensity, Pant's seemed to grow stronger. He left no stone unturned if its turning would in any way hinder the treacherous Daego and his band.

"Johnny's ghost is doing much," he told himself, "but it's not enough. There must be other ways of annoying him."

He thought of Daego's black boats that moved by night and of the stationary engine he had heard pop-popping in the heart of the wilderness.

"I'll go down there and look into that engine business," he mused. "There may be something to it, something big. I'll go down to-night."

He left camp in his low, black dugout that night and paddled swiftly down the river. For some time he drove straight on; then of a sudden, as his keen eye caught a speck of light that flashed on and then blinked out like a match that is lighted and blown out, he swerved to the shore, threw a rope over the low limb of a mangrove, then sat there motionless, watching the river.

His thoughts were of that Spanish half-caste, Daego. "Isn't it strange," he mused. "There's a man worth millions. If he

never made another cent and lived a thousand years he'd never come to want. Yet he's so greedy that he does crooked things that he may gain more. If someone tries to break into the mahogany or chicle business, instead of helping them in a brotherly fashion as he could well afford to do, he tries to throttle them.

"I suppose," he said thoughtfully, "it's all in the start one gets. If he starts out crooked, it doesn't seem to matter much whether he succeeds or fails, he remains crooked to the end. One would think—"

Of a sudden his musings were cut short off. Something was moving out there in the water. Something like a shadow. Pant scarcely breathed as he watched that long shadow until it had disappeared up a bend in the river.

"That's no shadow," he muttered as he sat up. "It's a pit-pan, one of those dugouts the natives use for coming on long journeys up the river. Must have been sixty feet long. The most marvelous pit-pan that ever was. Those pit-pans they used in other days had at least a dozen men at the paddles. I didn't see a single man, and still it moved straight on upstream. Seems like I heard a purring sound. Surely here is mystery—a purring shadow."

[153]

"Hardgrave spoke of Daego's black boats," he said to himself. "That thing must be one of them. And there's nothing good about the thing they're up to. Men don't go creeping up the river in the silence of the night with an eel-like craft such as that for nothing. If I can find out what it's all about and can trap one of his pit-pans I'll be in a way to keep him so busy he won't so much as have time to find out when our raft starts down the river."

He arrived at the mouth of the creek, up which he had located the pop-popping of a stationary engine a half hour later. Taking a chance of being seen, he began skirting the bushes at

[154]

the edge of the creek. For this move he was thankful. He had not gone a mile when, upon rounding a cocoanut palm that overhung the water, he came in sight of two long, dark objects that lay close to shore, half concealed by foliage. Seen from a little distance they resembled nothing quite so much as great, black water snakes asleep by the bank.

“Pit-pans!” he murmured as he came closer.

Pit-pans indeed they were, slender boats cut from the trunk of a tree, sixty or more feet in length.

“Blockade runners! Black devils!” he muttered as he passed. He dared not stop to inspect them. There might be men on the bank, watching.

Soon he caught the pop-pop of that stationary engine which had once so mystified him. This time, instead of turning back, he paddled straight on. A mile, two, three miles of water passed beneath his craft. Still he moved steadily forward until, when it seemed he must be almost upon the engine, he suddenly discovered that the sound was behind and to the right of him.

“Back in the bush,” he told himself. “Passed the trail without seeing it.”

Turning his boat about, he drifted slowly.

“There it is. Drift down thirty yards and hide my boat.”

[155]

This done, he struggled back along the bank to the entrance of the path.

Following a winding trail, with the sound of the motor growing louder, ever louder, with his heart keeping tune to its throbbing, he made his way forward until caution bade him slink into the shadows of the great leaves of a cohune tree.

There, with only the ceaseless throb of the motor to disturb his reflection, he had time to think things through. How was this all to end? His men were making progress, but Tivoli had told him that many of the men were becoming frightened by the wild tales they were hearing of the doings of the man-eating jaguar. Would fright drive them back down the river before their task was completed? He wished Johnny was here. Then he would feel more free to hunt that beast down. Must do it, anyway, very soon.

And what was Daego plotting up the river? He could not bribe the Caribs. Would there be a fight in the end? Well, if so, Daego would not find them unprepared. He was training his men in a new form of warfare. They were handy with their long-bladed machetes, very handy indeed. Daego should see!

He glanced about him. It was strange that he should be in such a place at such a time. Yet he wanted to know, to be sure. If things were as he thought, he'd make Daego no end of trouble. He'd trap one of those black shadows of his, show him up.

[156]

"Trap one," he whispered, "but how?"

This was a puzzler. Moments of reflection, and then an inspiration.

"The very thing! Rivers have been blocked against war boats by chains. This is better than chains; it floats. It—"

His whisper broke short off. Someone was coming. They carried a lantern. He had not thought of a light. What if they should catch sight of him. Shuddering, he shrank farther into the bushes. Just then he caught sight of the foremost man's face.

"Daego!" he breathed. "Daego himself!"

As he listened he crowded farther and farther back among the palm leaves. He was hearing voices, many voices. They were talking in Spanish. He did not understand Spanish. It was not what they said that increased his fright, but the numbers of them.

“Must be twelve or fifteen of them,” he thought with a shudder. “What they won’t do to me if one of them chances to spy me!”

[157]

By great good fortune the leader, Daego, passed without looking to right or left. With him passed the bright light and much of the danger of detection. Pant watched the passing line with increasing interest. The men following Daego went in pairs, one before and one behind. Suspended on long poles between each pair was a square, black box which, from the bending of the poles and the labored tread of the men, would appear to be heavy.

For a moment the boy’s imagination played tricks on him. These men were ghosts of the pirates and buccaneers who inhabited these waters a century or more ago. The heavy black boxes were filled with doubloons and pieces of eight.

Then with a mental jerk he brought himself back to reality. These men were men of to-day. The boxes they carried were indeed treasure chests, but chests of power, not of gold.

“Batteries,” Pant murmured. “There is no need to go farther. I see it all.”

And so he did. The long, black pit-pans near the river’s mouth were only waiting these black boxes to give them the power to steal silently up the river. They were electrically driven. The stationary engine back there was connected to an electric generator. By day it was at work charging batteries. By night these batteries were busy driving the long black shadows with their burdens up the river. What sort of freight did they carry?

[158]

That he could not tell.

“Have to trap them to find out,” he told himself.

As it happened, he found out before he trapped them.

CHAPTER XIV

FORGOTTEN TRIBES

Johnny Thompson and Jean found it strangely fascinating to be marching straight on over the beaten trail that led to the great unknown. It was exciting, entrancing, this sharing a secret which had not been so much as whispered by either of them, yet the glances and curious smiles which the girl bestowed upon him told Johnny plainer than words that she knew; moreover, that she knew he knew.

“But pshaw!” he told himself with a sudden shake as if to waken himself from a dream. “There may be nothing to it, probably isn’t. There probably are many hard-beaten trails leading away into this wilderness. Why should this particular one lead to the home of a wild Maya? Probably end in scattered settlements of Mexicans in some camp. It may end —” he caught his breath, “we may have gone in a circle. It may end in Daego’s camp. Pretty mess if it does! Have to be careful!”

So, beneath the flickering lights and drifting shadows of palms, over ridges, through low depressions where there were no streams, now frightening droves of small wild pigs from their sleep and now sending flocks of brilliant colored cockatoos fluttering away into the bush, they traveled on. There were more pools now. By noon they had passed three. The air was cooler. They were ascending to higher altitudes. Johnny took long, deep breaths and thought how like it was to

the air of the Cumberlands in Kentucky. Now and again, through the palm leaves, he caught glimpses of distant scenes.

“Mountains over there to the left,” he said to Jean. “Looks two or three thousand feet high.”

“Johnny,” the girl stopped suddenly in the trail (the others had gone on before), “where are we going?”

“I don’t know. Do you?” Johnny’s face was sober.

“No, I don’t.”

“Want to go back?”

“No—o. But I feel sort of shivery. It’s so strange!”

[161]

“Yes, it is. But then, all life is strange, and death is strangest of all. Besides, I guess we’re doing the logical thing. We’re lost in the wilderness. What do men do when they’re lost? Find the nearest human being and ask the way home. That’s what we’re doing. And from the signs, I’d say we were almost there. I saw fresh prints of bare feet beside the last pool.”

“So did I. And Johnny, look!” she held up a short string of small, round beads.

“Green,” he said with a low exclamation. “Green jade!”

Again he seemed to hear Hardgrave running on in a low, melodious tone so suggestive of great secrets: “Three gods; a black one, a green one and one of pure gold.”

“Green—green jade,” he thought to himself. “That’s it, to be sure. The green god would be carved from jade.”

To the girl he said, “That’s a rare find. Ever see any like it before?”

“No, never.”

[162]

“We’d better go on. Ought not to get separated from the rest.”

As they hurried on, Johnny heard a slight movement among the palms to the right of him and for a second, above the tallest leaf, there flashed a gleaming blade.

“Did—did you see it?” the girl asked, gripping his arm.

Johnny nodded.

“Wha—what was it?”

“A spear point, I’d say.” He spoke as calmly as he could.

“Now, I am beginning to be afraid,” she said.

“No use being afraid now. We’ve gone too far. Walk straight on as if you had seen nothing. We’ll see more.”

They did. It was uncanny, unnerving in the extreme. There came a gleam from a bush and a brown face appeared, to vanish instantly. Then there came a rustle and a low call.

“It—it’s spooky,” whispered the girl, keeping close to Johnny’s side.

He wondered how the affair would end. Who were these people? Were they really wild Mayas? He thought of their own weapons. Few enough they were. He was carrying Roderick’s light rifle and there was some extra ammunition strapped in his pack. A good machete hung at his side.

[163]

“But what are we against so many? There must be no fight.”

Yet there was to be a fight, such a strange one as he could not have dreamed of, and that right soon.

As they rounded a turn in the trail, a sudden, piercing scream rent the air. The next moment a beautiful Indian girl dressed in a strange garment of scarlet, with her hair streaming behind her, came racing wildly down the trail and behind her, in mad pursuit, came the strangest creature it had ever been Johnny's lot to behold.

As heavy as an ox, but shorter of leg and broader of back, the creature had such a face as an elephant might present had he been robbed of half his trunk. Rage gleamed from his small, black eyes. From his side there protruded the shaft of a spear and this, no doubt, was the cause of his sudden anger.

To be snatched from the silence of the jungle to the sudden strain of action is like being dragged from the deep dark of midnight to the glaring light of day. For a second Johnny stood petrified. Then, born as he was for action, and trained for it, too, he sprang forward. The shoulder straps of his pack were thrown off and the pack struck the trail with a thump. Then, like an ancient warrior, Johnny lifted the light rifle and prepared to stand his ground.

[164]

"Look out!" screamed Jean. "It's a mountain cow, a tapir. He's mad with pain. He—he'll trample you to death."

With one hand Johnny pushed her into the brush; with the other he steadied his rifle. Down the trail came Indian girl and tapir.

The tapir was gaining, and so in line with the girl that Johnny could not fire. Now he was four yards behind, now three, now two. And now, with a terrifying scream, the Indian girl tripped and fell.

For a second it seemed that nothing could save her. By great good fortune she rolled over once. This brought her to the side of the beaten path. The tapir, too near to halt or swerve, flew on by.

Not to be thwarted, as if realizing that here at his feet lay the darling of the tribesmen who had sent the spear into his side, he stopped short with a mad snort to whirl about and renew his attack.

[165]

This was Johnny's chance. He now had a broadside shot and could reach the heart. The rifle was a light one, far too light to be used on such game unless the bullet found a vulnerable spot.

The end of the Indian girl must soon have come, had not Johnny, taking quick, but sure aim, pressed the trigger and sent a small but paralyzing bullet into the heart of the maddened beast.

It was a dramatic moment. For a moment the tapir stood swaying backward and forward, then plunged headlong into the bush, twitched convulsively for a few seconds and then lay quite still. He was stone dead.

Hardly had the tapir fallen when Johnny was treated to a sudden surprise. He was gripped tightly about the knees. Looking down, he met a pair of dark eyes looking into his. It was the Indian girl, stammering words in her own tongue. Johnny understood not one word of it, but knew well enough that he was being called a brave one, a hero, a young god. And, having read all this in her eyes, he did not know whether to laugh or smile. He ended by doing nothing at all until, finding himself surrounded by a half hundred little brown men all armed with bows and spears, and having become conscious of Jean close beside him, he stooped, and lifting the brown girl to her feet, placed her hand in the white girl's as he murmured that word which everyone of whatever land or tongue must understand by knowledge or instinct:

[166]

"Sister," he said, simply and quietly.

There were tears in the brown girl's eyes, tears in Jean's as

well; yet they smiled through their tears. Who can tell how strong was the bond of friendship welded at that moment?

It would have been difficult for either Jean or Johnny to tell how the movement started, but before they realized what was happening, a line of march formed along the trail. Before them were many brown hunters with their weapons; in long procession others followed, while close beside them was the Indian girl. Just as the procession started, awe-struck and silent, Roderick and the Carib woman materialized from somewhere to join them.

A wild, weird chant was struck up, then all moved slowly forward.

[167]

“How strange! How—how fascinating!” whispered Jean.

“Like a march of triumph,” Johnny whispered back.

In and out among the palms the procession wound. There appeared to be no end to that trail. Whence had come these people? Whither were they bound?

“Now where are we?” Johnny asked, an air of mystery in his voice.

As if in answer to his query, a great brown shaft, elaborately carved and gray with the moss of centuries, reared itself up before them. Beyond this they came at once into cleared spaces where were cornfields and pastures with goats grazing in them. Beside the trail were stone cottages with thatched roofs. Beside these dwellings women sat weaving cloth on narrow looms while others working over strange stone bowls beat soaked corn into batter.

“The wild Mayas,” the girl whispered with a thrill in her tone. “We have found them! At last we have found them!”

[168]

“And they have found us,” Johnny’s tone was solemn. “We are in their hands. This is their land. When shall we leave it? Ever?”

“Ev—ever?”

“Perhaps never. Who knows?”

CHAPTER XV

THE HIDDEN CITY

It was strange, weird, fascinating, this march of the Mayas. The rhythmic chant, the all but inaudible pat-pat of their bare feet, the sighing wind in the palms that waved like plumes above their heads, all this stamped deep into the minds of the boy and the girl impressions that time will never erase.

It was a march, a grand processional, but where to? What was to be the end of it? Armed to the teeth, these men had but a short half hour before been following, surrounding them, perhaps planning to kill them as intruders in their secret land. What of the present? Was this a march done in their honor? Was Johnny being thought of as a hero because of having saved the life of that beautiful Indian girl, and was this march given in his honor? Or was it a ceremonial march which would end with their being sacrificed to some gods, black, green or gold?

As he pondered these questions, Johnny remembered something he had read in Hardgrave's book, something that had made his blood run cold. The Mayas did offer sacrifices to their gods, or at least they had in olden times. And now, as he recalled it, he understood the presence of those pools along the trail. The Maya country was a land without streams. It was a limestone country. All the water ran in underground grottos. From time to time one of these grottos caved in, forming a pool. That was the secret of the pools they had seen. Some of

these pools held more terrible secrets. Some of them were thousands of years old. A party of scientists, coming upon one of these in a territory that had been abandoned by the Mayas, had found not only rich treasure in ornaments of gold, silver, onyx and jade, but human skulls as well. The lives of those whose skulls lay hidden for so many years beneath the water had been sacrificed to some god. What god? The god of the rising sun? of the noon-day sun? of the setting sun? of fire? of water? Who could tell. There lay their skulls, mute testimony of the death they had died.

“So we, too, may die?” Johnny whispered to himself. “Who knows?”

[171]

As for Jean, knowing nothing of this, she was enjoying the experience to its full. And why not? Why dream of tragedy in the sunlight of a glorious day?

The march came to a halt before a long, low building, and at once an elderly man, dressed in an embroidered cape which, with his dignified bearing, gave him quite an air of distinction, came out to greet them.

At once the beautiful Indian girl broke away from the ranks of the warriors and began a long and excited speech. Accompanied by many gestures and many a nod of her head in the direction of the white trio, this speech was impressive indeed.

“What’s it all about?” asked Roderick.

“Don’t understand Maya,” smiled Johnny, “but as far as I can tell, she is Pocahontas and I’m John Smith. She is pleading for my life before the great chief. If I’m not mistaken there’s a strong family resemblance. She’s his daughter.”

“Pleading for your life?” exclaimed Jean.

“My life and yours perhaps,” Johnny smiled. “These Mayas have a way of sacrificing folks to their gods. Also I’ve heard that white people are not at all welcome.

[172]

“Roderick,” he said suddenly, “what sort of god would you prefer to be sacrificed to—a black one, a green one or one of pure gold?”

Roderick shuddered, but did not reply.

“Surely you are romancing!” exclaimed Jean.

“Indeed I’m not. Never was more in earnest in my life. Men have disappeared into the jungle. Many have never come back. Do you think all have perished of hunger and fever? Not much. I read it all in a book. Besides, Hardgrave has told me.”

It was the girl’s turn to shudder.

“I’ll put the question more picturesquely,” Johnny said, turning to Jean. “Would you prefer to be sacrificed to the god of the rising sun, the noon-day sun, or the setting sun?”

“The rising sun,” she answered quickly. “The morning is so full of promise. Surely that would be the god to choose if there really were such gods, and one were to be sacrificed.”

All this talk came to a sudden end as the chief, stepping forward, took first the hand of the white girl, then that of her companion. After that, nodding to Roderick and the Mayas, he led them into his house.

[173]

There, seated on mats, with a cool breeze floating in from open windows, they were soon being served to a refreshing drink and to food that was familiar, but that seemed passing strange in these weird surroundings.

“Hot tamales!” Johnny exclaimed as a great mahogany tray of

tamales was set before them.

“Mm-m!” murmured Jean as she tasted hers. “Wild turkey tamale. How delicious!”

“They should understand the making of them,” said Johnny as he took a generous mouthful. “Unless I am mistaken the Mayas invented them. They probably served them on plates of gold before Columbus discovered America; yes, or even Solomon found his mines.”

“How—how picturesque! How romantic!” murmured the girl.

Johnny agreed with her, but in his mind many questions were constantly bobbing up demanding an answer.

[174]

That night as he lay alone on a comfortable bed of mats with a heavy home woven blanket for protection from the night chill of this higher altitude, he thought of many things.

As he heard the steady pat-pat of a sentry’s feet as he paced before the door of that long, low house, he realized that they were virtually prisoners. They were being treated very well, and would be in the future, he hoped. But would the Mayas allow them to return home? He doubted it. The trails to this hidden city of the wild Mayas—it was truly a city and already Johnny had seen thousands of the little brown people—were secret trails. How Roderick had come to stumble upon the trail they had followed, he could not tell. Well enough the native chief knew that to allow these uninvited guests to depart was to throw away the key to his castle and city.

What, then, would happen? Would they be detained there indefinitely, be given the privilege of becoming members of the tribe, of learning the secrets of their ceremonies and initiated into hidden mysteries?

“And in the end perhaps marry the princess,” Johnny

[175]

chuckled. "Grand little old fairy story, this."

Strangely enough, at this moment he felt the call of the red lure as never before. As he closed his eyes he could see great trees come crashing down, see little tractors dragging massive logs through the bush, see those logs splash into the water to form a raft to at last go drifting silently down the river. This was to have been his great venture. He was to have tapped a primeval forest of priceless wood. That wood was to have been brought to enrich the world. The richest lady of the land might not disdain to have her boudoir furnished with rich appointments made from this wood. A king or president might be proud to lay his most important documents upon its shiny surface. There was to have come from this success, riches, and a consciousness of fine achievement.

"And I gave it up for what?" he asked himself soberly. "For adventure, for the joy of discovery. And for a pal, a golden-haired girl. The girl; I owe all to her. She gave me back life when it was all but gone. But I was not the only one who chose. She chose as well. Together we chose adventure, discovery. The lure of the unknown beckoned and we came. If we escape will we win renown? Will they say we have added a chapter to the world's golden store of knowledge? Hardly. We are not great scholars. We cannot bring back a detailed report; don't know how. We can only say, 'we have been, we have seen,' and that is all. And yet, what adventure, what lure of discovery!"

[176]

With that he fell asleep.

[177]

CHAPTER XVI

PANT SETS A TRAP

The evening following his trip down the river to Daego's stationary engine, during the twilight hour Pant might have been found in the largest bunk house of the camp. A tropical wilderness seemed a queer place for one to be teaching bayonet practice, yet that was exactly what he was doing. He had learned these tactics in a summer military camp. Now, with five-foot mahogany clubs in lieu of guns and bayonets, his Caribs were being taught to stab and fend, to dodge and swing, and to perform all those tricks that saved many a Yankee boy at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood.

Why was he doing this? Had you asked him why, he would perhaps have told you that Johnny had asked him to do it before he went away. Johnny would be coming back. He would expect to have it done. Besides, the big battle was coming some of these days, the fight to a finish with Daego's men. It was well to be prepared in every way for that fight. Daego's band still outnumbered them. He might get further reinforcements.

[178]

"If only we could reduce their number somehow," the boy sighed as, stepping from the bunk room into the gathering darkness, he left his men to finish their practice alone.

"We may do it, too," he chuckled, throwing a glance toward the little shack which had been Johnny's office, and from

which at this moment there came strange noises and a mysterious glow of light.

Hardgrave's laboratory, however, was not Pant's destination. He was going much farther that night.

Recent reports of fresh ravages committed by the man-eating jaguar had thrown his men into a panic. One man had left camp. Others were threatening to do so. Something must be done about it, and that at once.

Lowering a mysterious burden into the bottom of the dugout, and leaning a heavy rifle across it, Pant paddled away down the creek.

Having located the end of the rough trail which Johnny had cut to the foot of the bread-nut tree, he bent down and began creeping cat-like through the brush. Half way to the tree he stumbled and all but fell. Like a flash he was on his feet and three yards from the spot. Something moving beneath his feet had caused him to stumble. His breath came quick. Had he stepped on one of those great, poisonous snakes that infest the tropical jungle? He would hazard a flash of his pocket light.

[179]

For a second an oblong circle of light appeared on the back trail, then the boy laughed a low laugh. An armadillo, one of those strange, harmless, turtle-like creatures, had lain asleep in the trail. It was this he had stepped on, and not a snake.

Greatly relieved, he resumed his stealthy journey down the trail. Some forty feet from the bread-nut tree he paused to peer about him in the darkness. Having found one of those low palms whose leaves, three or four feet across, are quite solid save for their ragged edges, he began silently slashing off leaves until he had quite a pile. Some of these he spread three or four deep on the damp earth. Then, lying flat down, he drew others over him until he was almost covered.

“Wouldn’t want an elephant to come down this trail,” he chuckled to himself.

[180]

A few moments later there sounded from that mass of green palm leaves such a long-drawn-out whistle as the little deer of these forests uses to call his mate.

Pant was not hunting deer, but jaguars. In fact, he was hunting one jaguar, the killer. Once in the jungles of India he had used an exceedingly powerful red light to frighten a tiger. Now, with the aid of dry batteries from the power boat, he had arranged a bright red light. He hoped with his deer call to entice the killer to enter the trail, then to hold him at bay with the red light until he had a fair shot at him.

It was, he knew right well, a hazardous undertaking. Jaguars might not fear a red light. Who could tell about that? The killer might scent him and, turning hunter, leap upon him from the low boughs of the black tamarind trees that grew near. This he must risk. Pant had an interest in Johnny’s quest for the red lure. He had an interest in the Caribs. He had a still wider interest in all humanity. If all reports were true, if this great cat with the mark above his eye had done the killing he was credited with, he should be killed. Pant felt it his duty to attempt this hard and dangerous task.

[181]

So his whistle sounded on through the night. Now there was a movement off to the left. At once Pant was all attention. At last he discovered that this noise was caused by a large lizard hunting among decaying vegetation for bugs.

Again the whistle. Again a movement, this time among the branches of a tamarind tree. Pant’s heart beat loudly. Was the great cat above him? Was he at this moment preparing for a spring? Could the cat know that under those palm leaves was a tempting supper?

But no, Pant caught the flap-flap of wings. “An owl or a

parrot,” he breathed in disgust.

But what was this? Before him in the path there had come a sudden thump. Ah, this was it, the very thing he had hoped for. The jaguar, in answer to his call, had leaped to the ground in the very center of the trail.

Now was the time to act. With trembling fingers he adjusted his light, drew his rifle into position, then threw on the catch.

[182]

At once a glare of red light, streaming down the trail, brought out every leaf and twig with startling clearness.

Imagine the boy’s surprise at seeing not a crouching jaguar with fiery eyes gleaming, but a small, timid, short-horned deer, who blinked blindly at the light.

“Huh!” Pant breathed. “Call worked too well.”

But wait; what was this? There came a movement from farther down the trail. Pant looked. One look froze him cold. Behind the deer, tail lashing madly, ready for a spring, was the killer.

As Pant saw, the deer saw, too. For ten seconds the frightened creature hesitated. Beside him, to right and left, was impenetrable bush; behind him a jaguar, his mortal enemy; before him the great unknown, the glare of red light. Ten seconds, and then with a bound he was away; dashing straight at the red light. And after him, in great swinging leaps, came the terrible cat.

There are times when the drama of life moves so rapidly that we can do little more than get out of the way and let things pass. When Pant saw the jaguar and the deer there was not even time for that. The best he could do was to flatten himself against his couch of leaves.

[183]

On they came. The deer decided to brave the terrifying light. On came the deer and on came the jaguar. Pant dared not breathe. Now they were upon him. Then came the cutting dig of hoofs in the boy's back, followed by a whirl of air.

What of the killer? Was that breath of air the sign of his passing? Had he cleared the green heap that was Pant, at a leap? Pant could not tell. For a long time he dared not move. Even after he had caught a distant splash which told that the deer had taken to the water, he did not move at once.

At last, cautiously snapping off his light and gripping his rifle, he sprang to his feet.

He listened intently. There was no sound. He tried to pierce the darkness but could see nothing.

At last, after throwing his lighting apparatus over his shoulder and adjusting his rifle for a quick shot, he made his way back over the trail to the boat. Even here nothing moved. What had happened? Had the killer followed the deer into the river? Had he given up the trail to go prowling back into the forest? One thing was certain; the hunt was ended for that night. Pant's nerves were too unsteady to give the red flash a second trial. Besides, he was not at all sure it would work; in fact, he felt reasonably certain it wouldn't.

[184]

"I'll get you yet," he said stoutly with the shake of a clenched fist in the general direction of the jungle. With that he took to his dugout and paddled home.

[185]

CHAPTER XVII

THE SPANISH GIRL REAPPEARS

For three nights Pant had not visited Daego's camp. Nor had he in all this time seen Johnny's ghost walking out upon the air. That it had walked, he felt quite sure. The night before, a large dugout, loaded with the half-caste's men, had been seen to go slipping down the river.

"Just go gliding about up there in my dugout," Pant told himself an hour after darkness set in.

He pushed his boat some distance up the river, then, lying flat down in it, allowed it to drift downstream.

"Might see that ghost again to-night," he said, chuckling.

In this position it was impossible for him to see perils ahead. A slanting snag caught his drifting boat and set it tilting. Before he could realize what was happening he found himself struggling in the black waters.

[186]

Striking out with both hands, he made a grab for the overturned boat. To his dismay he heard it give forth a sucking sound, then saw it sink, prow first, in ten feet of water.

"Darn!" he muttered. "Old dugout. Waterlogged. What now?"

There was only one answer to this: shore as quickly as possible. What if it were the enemy's shore? There were alligators in these waters, great scaly creatures ten feet long. He had heard one barking not three rods from him but a moment before.

"Here for the night," he groaned, as he reached a leaning tree trunk and climbed upon it.

This seemed true enough. The tree grew at the edge of a marsh. There were alligators in the marsh. To travel that marsh in the dark was to court death.

Imagine his relief when, just as he had resigned himself to this hard fate, he saw the dark form of a canoe drift into the shadows.

So surprised and overjoyed was he that, casting caution to the winds, he hailed the solitary boatman.

To his surprise, the answer that came back was in the high-pitched notes of a girl.

[187]

"Who—who are you?" came in the same girlish voice as the canoe halted, twice its length from the tree.

"Pant—Panther Eye," replied the boy, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh!"

To the boy's immense surprise, there was something in the girl's tone that told plainer than words that to her his name was not strange. More surprising still was the manner in which, at sound of this name, she threw all reserve aside and paddled quickly to the tree and invited him to drop into the stern.

Once he was aboard, she sent her boat shooting away across the river. Ignoring the entrance to the river trail, she drove on down the river and entered the creek, at last bringing her canoe up with a bump at the entrance of the creek trail.

Pant remembered Johnny's story of the strange Spanish girl who had visited their camp. Something seemed to tell him that this was the same girl. He did not have long to wait.

During all their journey the girl had remained silent. Now she spoke:

[188]

"I was here before."

"I—I thought so," said Pant. "Why?"

"I wanted to speak to you, or your friend. You had been deserted by your crew. We knew why. We—we might have helped you."

"Who are 'we'?"

"Father and I. What brought you up to the Rio Hondo?" the girl asked quickly.

"The red lure."

"The red——"

"Mahogany."

"And is that all?" There was a searching note in her words.

"Quite all. Believe me, it is quite enough. Perhaps you've never felt the charm of it. Precious, priceless, perfect wood—mahogany, the red lure. That's Johnny's name for it."

"I know," said the girl, "I, too, have felt it. I told father that was all. He was not sure. My friend," the girl's voice dropped

to a whisper, "I have helped you a little to-night."

"A lot."

"A little. You may be able to help us a great deal, father and me. We're in trouble, not our trouble, but our country's trouble.

[189]

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you," she hesitated, "but I guess it's right I should. My father is deputy for this territory. It is his duty to see that the laws are obeyed. Someone is breaking our laws and we cannot catch them. Not little things that do not matter much, but big things that mean certain death to many." She paused for a moment. To their ears came the silent rush of water. There is something dreadfully solemn about the rush of black waters through the dark.

"These laws-breakers," the girl continued, "are smuggling two things to our people—rifles and rum. You know what that means in Mexico. Rifles and rum mean revolution; cruel, senseless revolution! The Governor of the state of Quintanaroo is a good, kind man. Revolution could never bring a better government. But the people are simple-minded. Rum maddens their hearts. Rifles make them want to fight. Someone is selling them both at a great price, and we cannot catch them. One man is suspected, and that one is——"

"Daego?"

[190]

"Daego. But we can prove nothing. Every motor boat is searched, but each one brings only food, clothing and tools for his camp."

All at once, as Pant sat there listening to this girl, so earnest, yet so young, so eager to help her people, he realized that a Divine will, higher than his own, had sent him here and that his greatest mission, a moral mission, was just before him.

“I—I think I can help you,” he whispered. “I know I can.”

Before his mind’s eye a black shadow crept up the river and in his memory there echoed still the pop-pop of that stationary engine away in the bush.

“Give me a day, two days,” he said. “Come back here day after to-morrow, two hours after dark.”

“All right, my friend, and may God prosper you! We are your friends. Good-bye!”

Pant stepped upon the shore and the canoe shot silently away in the night.

“We are your friends.” How sweet were those words spoken to a lonely boy in the heart of a wilderness!

CHAPTER XVIII

PANT SPRINGS THE TRAP

Pant's conference with the girl at the creek landing on the appointed night was short and to the point. The girl's father was to station a company of his men in a cluster of cocoanut palms at a certain point on the river's brink an hour after dark on the following night.

"Daego's pit-pans may not come that night," said Pant. "We have no means of telling. But we will watch, one night, two, three if necessary."

"Yes, a month," said the girl.

"And your father's men will be there?"

"Yes."

"Depend upon it, the trap will be set."

"Thank you, so much. And my father thanks you. The best and truest of our people thank you."

Once more the girl vanished into the night.

Next evening, just after nightfall, three strange dories might have been seen stealing from the mouth of the creek. Behind them, wriggling and twisting with the ripple and flow of the

water, came a serpent-like affair hundreds of feet in length. The dories came from the Carib sail boats. They were strongly manned by Carib crews.

Leaving the creek, they moved slowly up the river. When they had reached a point a mile above the mouth of the creek, they turned their prows toward shore. Once there, they tied the long trailer to a Yamra tree.

This accomplished, they paddled rapidly back to the spot where the other end of the trailer was bumping the shore. Having attached this end solidly to a group of overhanging trees, they returned again to the other end. After unfastening this end, aided by the current and their own sturdy rowing, they brought this end to the opposite bank. There they anchored it.

“The trap is set.” Pant said this with a sigh of relief. “The night is ideal. No moon. Clouds drifting over the stars. It will be very dark. If they come, their very fear of light will be their undoing.” At that he ordered his men to row him back to the other shore. There for some time he busied himself with the fastenings of that end of the “trap.”

[193]

“There!” he breathed. “A single stroke of the axe, and it is done.”

“They will come very late at night if they come at all,” he told his men. “Time for another thing. Doesn’t really matter whether I’m here or not. The trap will spring.”

He was eager to be away after the big cat whose tracks, freshly made the night before, had been seen in the mud of a small stream that crossed the trail to the river. At realization that he was so near, the Caribs had been thrown into panic. Some of them had been for manning their crafts and drifting down stream at once. But upon receiving Pant’s promise that within forty-eight hours the skin of the killer should be drying

against the wall of the cook shack, they had gone back to work.

It was a rash promise, but Pant resolved that he would make good. So this night, armed only with his rifle and a common flashlight, he made his way over the river trail to a place of hiding he had prepared.

He had covered half the distance, when on pausing to listen, he caught the faint sound of footsteps on the moss covered trail.

[194]

His heart skipped a beat. Someone was following! Who could it be? Was it a curious Carib? Hardly. They were too much afraid of the killer. Was it an enemy from across the river? Such a thing was possible.

Stepping noiselessly to one side, Pant waited. Straight on came the one who followed.

“Sounds like two,” Pant said to himself.

“Sounds——” he hesitated a moment. “It don’t sound like—it sounds—yes, it is! It’s old Rip himself!”

And so it was. Rip, the burro, once a bag of bones, now well fed on bread-nut hay, sleek and fat, had chosen to follow his young master on his hunt for a killer.

“Now, why did you follow?” Pant said with a chuckle. “What am I to do with you? If I tie you up here the killer may get you. I can’t spare time to take you back. I know what I’ll do; I’ll take you along. We’ll fight it out together with the big cat.”

[195]

For this resolve Pant will always have cause to be grateful; and yet, in a way, the affair was to end rather sadly.

With the burro standing patiently beside him, he had remained in hiding for a full half hour when, without warning, there had appeared in the trail not five yards before him the very creature he had come to seek. There stood the killer!

So sudden was his appearance that Pant had little time to prepare for the attack. He had only seized his rifle and had no time to aim and fire, when, with a scream that was blood-curdling, the big cat launched himself through the air.

Expecting nothing so much as to be torn to bits by the claws and fangs of the beast, the boy dropped his rifle and threw himself back into the bushes. As he did this, unconsciously his right hand reached for his machete and drew it from its scabbard.

Surprise followed. The death dealing compact of the flying cat did not come. For an instant Pant's senses reeled. Then, like a flash, it came to him. The tiger had launched himself against the burro. Feeling the machete in his grasp, without reasoning as to the outcome, Pant sprang to battle.

[196]

It was well that he did. A strange thing had occurred. As the tiger sprang, the burro had reared upon his hind feet. In this way he had struck the great cat squarely in the head with his sharp hoofs. The blow had been a stunning one and as Pant entered the battle he found the jaguar just returning to consciousness. This task he never quite completed, for Pant's machete, coming down with savage force, all but severed his head from his body.

"That settles you," he muttered. "I've kept my promise."

Then, overcome by nervous exhaustion, he settled down upon the damp earth.

As strength slowly returned he thought of his companion, the burro.

Creeping over to where he lay, he put a hand upon him. Then he lifted the animal's head, to allow it to drop limply back.

"Neck broken," he sighed. "Poor old fellow! You could save my life, but in that fleeting second you could not save your own."

[197]

Rising, he gathered green leaves and covered the faithful creature's body. Then, seizing the jaguar by its hind legs, he prepared to drag it to camp.

"Show 'em!" he muttered. "Guess this will satisfy 'em!"

Since the spot on the bank at which he had set his strange river trap was not far away, he dragged his burden in that direction.

Arrived at the spot, he turned the carcass of the "killer" over to one of his Caribs. Having told him to drag it into camp, he sat down beneath a cocoanut tree that hung over the river.

"Wait here and see what happens," he said.

There is no time so still as night on a tropical river. Shut off by dense virgin forests from every breath of air, damp, oppressive tropical heat seems to place a blanket of silence over all. The great river, with its sweep of waters, is as silent as the stars in the heavens. The whole universe appears to sleep.

Pant felt all this as he sat there listening and watching by the river. This was an eventful night. Would they come? Would the trap serve the purpose for which it was intended? So he questioned as the silence hung over all.

[198]

Now that vast silence was broken by the bark of an alligator. Did that mean that they were coming?

Of a sudden, as he waited, there rose out of the silence a strange sound. Pant was all action at once.

With a look of mingled joy, determination and anxiety on his face, Pant seized his axe and lifting it high, severed at one blow the rope which held that end of the long trailer that now spanned the river. Instantly, caught by the current, the whole long streak of brown swung toward midstream. Even as it did so, between it and the other shore there appeared a long black shadow.

“They come! It will work!” whispered Pant, dropping on his knees to watch.

CHAPTER XIX

CAPTURING A BLACK SHADOW

The black shadow which Pant had seen making its way up the river under cover of night, was a pit-pan, electrically driven. In his conclusions regarding this he had not been mistaken.

The thing which Pant had launched against the black shadow was a log boom. It was in this very boom that he hoped later to carry his 50,000 feet of mahogany down the river to the sea. Now he had set it to an unusual task. A log boom consists of a hundred or more logs, ten inches in diameter and twelve to twenty feet long, joined at the ends by steel chains until the whole affair is several hundred feet in length.

So dark was the night that the crew of the pit-pan did not see the approaching string of logs until it was right upon them.

Of the five men on board, two, by the sudden compact, were thrown into the river. It was with the utmost difficulty that the remaining three were able to prevent their unwieldy craft from capsizing. In the end it swung about until it lay full length against the log boom which, tugged at by the current, was rapidly swinging toward the Mexican shore, where waited ten officers of the law.

[200]

After giving way to wild burst of anger, the men began tumbling chests of goods into the river.

Before this task was half completed, they were interrupted by the occupants of a dugout, who, swinging alongside, commanded them in the name of the law to desist.

Pant was now sure that he had not been mistaken in the mission of the black shadow.

“If they were on some lawful business why should they pitch their goods into the river?” he asked himself.

“Yes, we have them now. We are giving Daego some of the trouble he so richly deserves. This night’s work will do much for Quintanaroo. But what won’t Daego do to us!” he said, wrinkling his brow as he pushed his dory from its place of hiding. “He knows well enough whose log boom that is. There is not another on the river save his own.”

[201]

For some time as he drove his dory across the stream toward the spot where his boom was fastened, the boy reflected upon the cost of doing the right thing, the thing that in the end would result in the most good to the greatest number. Surely one does not engage in the battle for right without placing himself in a place of great peril.

“Ah, well!” he exclaimed, strong-hearted at last, “as someone has said, one may trust God for the outcome. The only question we need to ask, moment by moment, is: ‘This thing I do, is it right?’”

Arrived at the end of the boom, he cut it away and allowed it to drift toward the mouth of the creek where his Caribs awaited it.

At the camp he found great excitement. The same words were on every lip: “The killer has been taken! Pant is a great hunter. He has killed the man-eater with a machete! Surely there was never such a boy before!”

As for Pant, he divided his time between good-naturedly disclaiming any bravery or skill on his part, and mourning for his burro.

[202]

An hour passed. The Caribs settled down for the night. Then Pant and his Carib captain sat beneath their mosquito bar netting, with a candle between them, talking low and earnestly.

“The killer is dead,” said Pant.

“He is.”

“Open warfare has been declared.”

“It has.”

“Will there be a fight?”

“There will.”

“When?”

The Carib shrugged his shoulders. “Who can tell?”

“From now on,” said Pant slowly, “our men will be divided into two companies; those who work and those who watch, ready to fight.”

“That will be wise,” said the Carib.

At that they blew out the candle and went to sleep.

Next evening the Spanish girl’s dugout was again bumping the shore at the mouth of the creek trail. Her father was with her this time. Pant showed them down the trail to a palm-thatched cabin. There, seated around a table of roughly hewn mahogany slabs, they talked of the previous night’s doings.

[203]

The deputy, a short, solid looking man, with small, twinkling eyes, assured Pant that he was profoundly grateful for the part he had played in the affair.

“They were Daego’s men,” he went on. “When we had fished the two who went overboard out of the water, we identified them, every one.

“That is not all,” he smiled. “Someone was careless. On a case of ammunition we found the shipping tag assigning it to Daego. So, the case is quite complete.”

“Has Daego been arrested?” asked Pant.

“No. Truth is, no one seems to know where he is gone.”

“But he will be arrested?”

“Probably not,” the deputy spoke slowly.

“What! Not arrested!”

“He is a British subject. The relations between Mexico and Honduras have not always been the best. It would be a hazard. To arrest and try him would be a danger.”

For a moment Pant felt like repenting the action he had thought of as being done for the good of all. To risk one’s happiness, perhaps one’s very life, and then to have nothing come of it, that was bitterness indeed.

[204]

The deputy, having read the look on Pant’s face, was speaking again: “Do not worry; your work was not in vain. He shall be punished. And for one so greedy as he, his punishment will be severe indeed. His concessions shall be taken from him. Within thirty days he must remove his wagons, his tractors, his chicle kettles, everything that belongs to him. His mahogany, which is at the river’s bank, will be held in bond

by the Government.”

Pant’s chair, which had been tilted back, came down with a thump. Concessions revoked! He had not thought of that. Those concessions were so vast in extent that his mind could scarcely take them in. Someone had told him that Daego had made a quarter of a million dollars the previous year on chicle.

“And that is the price he pays for his paltry gains from illicit traffic. Surely one pays heavily for the steps that make him a law-breaker.”

“My friend,” said the deputy, “you are alone here with this boy, Johnny Thompson, and your Caribs?”

[205]

“Yes, sir. Johnny’s been away for some time. But, trust me, he’ll be back! He always comes back.”

“Have you much money?”

“Very little.” Pant wondered what the deputy was driving at now. “But we represent a man who is rich,” he added as an afterthought.

“Ah!” the man breathed. “And he is interested, perhaps, in industrial development?”

“He wishes to develop his mahogany interests here. We came here to prove it can be done.”

“You are right. It can be done,” the other said decidedly. “Much more can be done than that. His tract, though very fine,—the very best,—is small. Across the river, far up as you can go, we are rich in forests, mahogany that has scarcely been touched; sapodillas that will yield a million, two million pounds of chicle a year. With chicle at fifty cents a pound at the dock, that should yield a profit.

“Our province needs developing. Our people need the work and the pay that it brings. We have not the capital. We have the forests.

“In a word,”—the man leaned forward, his eyes sparkling eagerly, “in a word, if you two boys can find us a man with money who is as honest as you, and who has at heart the good of all people, as you have, it will be possible for him to secure in Quintanaroo concessions which in time will bring him as much gold as Cortez hoped to win when he invaded Mexico. The question is: have you the man?”

[206]

For a moment Pant sat there silent, like one in a trance. So sudden was this proposal, so vast the possibilities, that his mind refused to grasp it.

“I—I think we can find the man,” he stammered at last. “You—you will give us time?”

“If only Johnny were here!” he said to himself.

“How much time?”

“Sixty days.”

“Ninety, if you need it. Quintanaroo can wait long; any land can afford to wait a long time for an honest man.

“And now,” he said, rising, “I think we must go.”

He shook hands solemnly with the boy. His daughter gave Pant a friendly smile. Then they were away over the trail to their boat.

Two hours later Pant might have been found still sitting before his rough slab table, and still he appeared to be in a trance.

[207]

He was fighting, fighting an impulse to run away, to dash

down the river in his motor boat and away to the Belize radio to flash the tremendous news to a man who had financed their little enterprise up Rio Hondo.

Then, into his mind there came a picture in an old book of fables; a picture of a dog standing on a bridge over a river. In his mouth was a piece of meat. In the river was a reflection of the meat much larger than the meat itself.

“The dog dropped the meat to snap at its reflection, and lost all,” Pant mused. “I hope these concessions are not mere reflections of possible wealth; but I know that our fifty thousand feet of red mahogany logs are not. To-morrow we must get out another five thousand feet.”

Even at that, while he made his way to his bunk, his heart all but failed him. He dreaded the fight he was sure would come, the fight to a finish with Daego’s men.

“If only Johnny were here!” he again repeated. “Where can he be? That black man over in Daego’s camp said Daego had driven him into the jungle. Surely no jungle can hold Johnny Thompson!”

[208]

Of this last he could not be sure. A Central American jungle is an awesome and terrible place.

“If he were here,” he went on, “I could tell him the good news of Daego’s undoing and of those wonderful concessions that are all but within our grasp.

“And if only he could lead in the fight that’s sure to come! Daego will fight. It will be a battle to the bitter end. Some have gone down the river, but there are plenty still.

“Oh, well!” he sighed at last. “Johnny may not be here, but his ghost is. He’ll throw terror into the hearts of those blacks yet.”

That night the ghost of the air did strange things; very strange indeed.

CHAPTER XX

CENTURY OLD CAVERNS

Johnny was still in the land of the lost Mayas. The city he and Jean had discovered was not the city of Jean's dreams, the golden metropolis of long ago, yet there were signs of past glory all about them. Massive ruins that had once been a pyramid, elaborately carved shafts reaching toward the sky, great squares and slabs of stone, all told of the glory that had departed.

"Think what it must have been!" said Jean as, on their third day among the Mayas, she sat high upon a carved rock and allowed her eyes to roam over the ruins of what must have been a majestic temple. "Just think what it was! Such a labyrinth of corridors! Such chambers! Such secret recesses. One might have been lost among them for hours!"

There was a rocky wall running along one side of the city. This merely suggested a prison. But for all that, it might as well have been a prison wall. They were prisoners. They had learned this on the second day. With the vision of the red lure burning brightly in his eyes, Johnny had proposed that they find the way over which they had come, and try following it back. They had experienced little difficulty in finding the trail, but once they came to the spot where it entered the jungle, they had found it completely blocked by grim little brown men. These offered no violence, but neither would they move aside and allow them to pass. They blocked the way and

shook their heads.

“Orders of the Chief,” Roderick had said. “I expected that.”

So their first attempt at escape had failed.

Prisoners though they were, they had been given the range of the city and the surrounding open spaces where corn waved in the bright sun, where banana plants reared themselves to the sky and cocoanut palms waved long plumes in air.

No guests could have been treated more royally. The best of food, wild turkey, deer, armadillo, the best of meats, the finest of corn cakes, the most delicious of fruits were served to them. At night they lay upon beds that rivaled the couches of kings. For all this, they were made to know that they were not to leave the land of the Mayas.

[211]

“Not ever?” said Jean with a wrinkled brow.

“Perhaps never,” Johnny said solemnly.

“Johnny, we were mad.”

“You are right. We were quite out of our heads when we came here. But what’s the fun of living if you can’t have some adventure?”

“Yes, there is joy in it!” exclaimed the girl, springing down from her perch on the carved rock. “And to-day, since we can’t leave, we will discover something wonderful in the midst of these ruins.”

They did. Something came of it, too, I assure you.

It was in the midst of an all but impenetrable growth of palms and vines which, spreading over a crumbling heap of ruins seemed to wish to hide a secret, that they made the discovery, and having made it, entered upon one of the strangest and

weirdest adventures any of them had ever known.

As they crawled on hands and knees, here forcing their way between the spreading leaves of a nut palm, there tearing away a wild fig vine, they came at last upon an opening. Before this opening sagged an old, decayed door. There was scarcely room to crawl between the heaps of rocks that blocked the way, but once one was inside he found that he had entered a damp, dark hallway that, extending far as his electric torch would reach, suggested mystery and romance.

[212]

Johnny was the first to enter. Jean and Roderick followed. There was a moment of hushed silence as they stood there breathing silently as if listening for voices that had long been stilled forever.

“I’ll wager the place hasn’t been visited except by bats since the year one,” said Johnny.

As if to prove that at least part of his prophecy was true, there came a whirring of wings and one of those great vampire bats, terror to all living things in Central America, flew by so close that the current of damp air stirred by his flight lifted their hair.

“The secret corridor,” Johnny said. There was a solemn note of mystery in his voice. “To what chambers of treasure does it lead? We may yet be the richest Mayas in all this little hidden kingdom.”

“Yes, and I’d take a broken sixpence for my share, could I but return to my father’s camp,” said Roderick, disconsolately.

[213]

However downcast her brother might be, Jean was still game. “Come on!” she exclaimed. “We will find the god of the rising sun, the god of the noonday sun and all the other gods with the gold and jewels that enrich their chambers. We’ll find the chamber of the ancient princess. What shall we not

find. Come on. C'mon! C'mon!" Seizing her brother by the arm, she fairly dragged him down the corridor which, to those who came from the hot dryness of tropical day, seemed to possess the chill dampness of perpetual night.

On tip-toe, lest perchance they might waken the spirits of other centuries, they began their march down the wide corridor. Only the diffident snap-snap of great bats disturbed the silence of the place. Walking in deep, age-old dust, they made no sound. So, awed into silence, gripping one another by the arm, they marched on until, having covered some two hundred feet, they came to a sudden halt before what appeared to be a solid stone wall. Certainly it was stone, and it looked as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Well!" Jean exclaimed.

[214]

"The end," muttered Johnny.

"Now," said Roderick in a relieved tone, "I hope we may go back to the sunlight. I don't like these beastly vampire bats. I've been told they can kill an ox by sucking his blood. They've been known to drive the entire population of a village from their homes. What would you do if one of the bally rascals made a grab at your throat?"

"Take him by the ear and give a good sound scolding," said Johnny.

"Hold on a bit," he said as Roderick started back, "let's have a look."

He began flashing his torch from floor to ceiling, from corner to corner of the dungeon-like place.

"Not an opening," he sighed. "Not a suggestion of an—wait! How does it happen that this stone at the end is fully a yard square, while all the rest of the wall is made up of small

rocks?”

Taking a heavy cane which Roderick had insisted upon bringing into the place, he struck the broad stone a resounding blow. At once the place was alive with echoes and whirring wings.

“Sounds hollow,” he muttered.

[215]

He pressed the end of the stick against the top of the stone and gave it a shove. To their surprise the stone, which to all appearances was a door, dropped slowly and noiselessly downward until it formed a sort of threshold over which they who dared might walk.

“Oh! Ah!” Jean murmured.

As if expecting a million vampires to spring at him from the dark, Roderick started back.

As soon as she could recover from her surprise Jean set one small foot on the stone threshold.

“No,” said Johnny, placing a restraining hand upon her shoulder, “let me go in and look about a little. Not that I wish to be first, but it might—might not be quite—quite safe. You are a girl. In a way, I’m your protector.”

“I—I understand,” said the girl as she favored him with a smile that was altogether new to him.

In spite of all his efforts at self-control, Johnny’s knees trembled a little as he stepped upon the rock. It was strange to be moving forward alone into a subterranean chamber which, to all appearances, had not been visited for centuries. What would he discover there? Was this the secret hiding place of princes, a temple of worship or a dungeon prison? What would he discover there; rare old furniture, moulding to

[216]

decay; gold, jewels, or only skeletons?

“Probably nothing,” he told himself as he moved forward.

After he had taken three steps he halted for a second. There was something strange about the rock upon which he stood. It appeared to have a greenish cast, but being eager to discover the contents of the chamber, he pressed on without investigating further.

The electric torch which he carried had an adjustment which enabled one to throw about him a dim light or a bright one. At the present time it shone but dimly. As he attempted to flash it to full brilliancy the catch stuck and the lamp continued to shine but dimly.

Still impatient, he pressed forward down this more deeply mysterious corridor, which appeared somewhat broader and shorter, almost to its end before he discovered anything of interest. Then of a sudden he found himself all but upon some object which, sending forth a dull yellow lustre, appeared to hang in air. Most mysterious of all, from the center of this there came a tiny but peculiarly brilliant light.

[217]

“It can’t be,” he told himself, starting back. “A light burning through all these centuries! That would be to discover the origin of light itself. That—”

He broke short off. His hand trembled so he could scarcely hold the torch; his knees shook violently. The room had suddenly blazed forth with an intense green light. At the same time there came to his startled ears a piercing scream.

[218]

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED

The thing that had happened to Johnny Thompson was absurdly simple; at least part of it was. Unconsciously, as he moved forward in the dimly lighted room, he had continued to fumble with the catch of his flashlight. Suddenly, as he stood before the mysterious thing of yellow glow and a tiny light, his torch had flashed on in all its strength.

So much was very simple. The explanation of the green glow was simple, too, once he read the secret of it. But who had screamed, and why? That was not so easy to answer.

The reason for the peculiar green glow was to be found in the composition of the walls and ceiling of the room. They were of a peculiar green which had great reflective power.

“Jade!” Johnny exclaimed after his first surprise was over.
“Solid green jade. At least the walls are set with jade.”

[219]

Who had screamed? This was the problem which concerned him most. To his utter astonishment, as he flashed the light about he failed to at once discover the entrance through which he had come.

“Turned around a bit,” he told himself as coolly as he could.
“Take a point and circle about until I am looking at that point again. In that way I’ll see all the walls.”

In choosing his starting point his eye fell upon the thing of the yellow glow. He discovered at a glance that this was not suspended in air as he had thought, nor was there a miniature light burning in it. It was a statue or an image of a god; a rather hideous god with a hooked nose, a large stomach and hands on which were fingers like an eagle's talons. In one of these hands rested a stone of some sort that reflected light in a peculiarly brilliant manner.

"Gold, and perhaps a huge diamond," Johnny speculated in spite of his anxiety.

Then he began to make the circle of the walls with his light. First the wall to the right of him was slowly and carefully surveyed, then the wall which had been to his back. No opening. His breath came short and quick. A third side was covered. In his agitation he set the light zig-zagging up and down. Was he somehow trapped? Who had screamed?

[220]

Half the last wall was covered, two-thirds. The suspense seemed unbearable. Then, with a sudden sigh of relief, he started forward.

Before him was an opening. It did not seem quite the same, but it must be the one. In his eagerness and anxiety he fairly ran.

Now he was half way across the room, and now at the wall. He was about to step forward and out to freedom and friends when, to his astonishment, his foot splashed down into water. It was with the utmost difficulty that he avoided plunging head foremost into a deep pool that lay just before him.

Once he had recovered from this shock he cast his light over the pool only to discover that the back side of the pool, which was some ten feet across, was solidly walled in, as was the room itself.

Obeying some unknown instinct, he dropped upon his knees and directed his powerful light straight down into the pool. For a moment he gazed intently downward, then started back in horror.

[221]

The thing he had seen almost made him faint. At the bottom of that pool he had caught the gleam of gold and the green light of jade ornaments, and in the midst of these a horrible, grinning human skull.

“This,” he told himself after he had control of himself again, “is a sacrificial pool. The gold and jade were a sacrifice. When? Who can tell? And the owner of that head? The door is closed. I am trapped. When will my time come?”

At that very moment there came, faint and indistinct, but unmistakable, the notes of a call:

“Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo.”

As in a dream he recalled the day they had practiced that call, he and Jean, back there in the jungle.

Alert, straining his ears for the next note, telling himself that when it came he would locate the singer and thus begin the task of finding a way out, he waited.

A moment passed; another and yet another. The silence became unbearable. He stamped his feet to break the awful spell. Then he became conscious of another sound—a slow tap-tap-tap-tap. Always a second apart, never any louder, never coming more softly, this mysterious tap-tap-tap in time became more maddening than the silence. Still at strained attention he waited for Jean’s call which did not come.

[222]

“What can have happened?” he murmured at last. “Can other

ears than mine have heard that call and silenced it, perhaps forever?”

He found himself filled with sudden anger, a raging hate of the Mayas.

“What manner of treatment is this,” he asked himself, “after I saved their princess from a terrible death?”

This anger lasted but for a moment. He next found his mind filled with wonderings. In the deep dust of the outer corridor there had been not a single footprint. How could the living Mayas have set such a trap as this without leaving traces of their coming and going?

“They couldn’t,” he reasoned. “I have been trapped by that ancient god, or at least by those who, centuries ago, set him there.”

Again he listened, and again he caught that endless tap-tap-tap.

[223]

“Water falling,” he said. “But where?”

He began a careful search of the chambers. He examined every nook and corner with elaborate care, but aside from the pool, found not so much as a spot of dampness.

“And yet,” he told himself, “the sound is unmistakable. There is dripping water somewhere. Must be within the walls.”

Once more he set himself listening for Jean’s call. A quarter of an hour, a half hour he waited and listened, but it did not come.

“What can have happened?” he muttered at last. Then he thought of the flashlight. The battery was good for just so long, then would come complete darkness. When would that

be? He could not tell. Shuddering, he muttered:

“Might better be now.”

With that he threw off the catch. Sudden darkness followed, but the after image remained. Sitting on the damp floor, staring into the dark, he seemed still to catch the greenish glow of the walls, the yellow gleam of the god and the white flash of jewels.

Have you never attempted to fall asleep while from some distant spot there came with maddening regularity the drip-drip-drip of water? If you have, then perhaps you can share in a degree at least the feeling of Johnny Thompson as he sat there alone, a prisoner of other centuries, listening to that baffling sound within the walls.

[224]

Yet, impossible as it may seem, he was able for whole moments to forget the entire situation. In those moments he saw again his camp on the Rio Hondo. He talked with Pant and laughed with him at his ridiculous donkey. He urged his Caribs on to more splendid efforts, saw the piles of magnificent timber, mahogany, the red lure, piling up, and counted the days that must pass before they would send these logs plunging in the river, fill their boom and go drifting silently away.

Yes, there were blessed moments of relief; but always the haunting darkness, the nerve-racking drip-drip came pressing its way once more into his consciousness.

[225]

* * * * *

What was happening during all this time outside the door that had so mysteriously closed? The scream which Johnny had heard was Jean's. Anxious for his safety, she had watched that hole in the wall from the time he disappeared. The green flash

of light which appeared at the moment when his torch flashed on had alarmed her; but this was nothing to the thing she saw a moment later. Slowly, silently, as if impelled by a powerful invisible force, the stone, which for centuries had closed the opening, was slowly rising. The opening was half closed before she could recall her scattered senses. Then, without a thought for her own safety, she sprang for the entrance. It was Roderick who, with cooler judgment, had pulled her back. Then it was that she gave forth that piercing scream.

After the scream, white-faced and silent, she had stood watching until with an almost inaudible thud the massive rock dropped into place.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Roderick said reassuringly. “I’ll push it open as Johnny did.”

Seizing the heavy walking stick, he pushed it against the door just as Johnny had done. But, though he heaved away at it with all his might, he did not move it so much as a fraction of an inch. Nor did the girl’s slight, but frantic strength, added to his, avail. The door was closed, closed and sealed for all eternity so far as they could tell.

[226]

After many futile efforts they sank weakly down upon a great flat rock, Roderick to sulk and to remind Jean, as is a brother’s right, that this whole affair from the time they found Johnny in the hut was a piece of foolishness. Jean sat in sad silence. This silence did not last.

The picture of that morning in the jungle, the rocks, the wild turkey, came back to her and she suddenly remembered the call.

“We—we agreed on a call we’d use in case we were lost from one another,” she said to Roderick. “I—I guess that was meant for now. If he hears it and locates us by the sound he may find a way to open the door from the inside.”

Standing to her full height and directing her voice against the unfeeling walls, she sang their call:

“Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo.”

The echoes of that call had died away and she was parting her lips for another when, of a sudden, her brother seized her arm. [227]

“Hist! Listen!” he whispered.

Faint, indistinct, but unmistakable, there came the silent pit-pat of footsteps on the dust-padded corridor. Jean’s call had brought someone. But who?

[228]

CHAPTER XXII

MAGIC POWER

In strained silence the brother and sister stood listening, waiting in the dark. Roderick had snapped off the small pocket light which he carried.

The sounding footsteps in the distance became hesitant, uncertain.

“Sounds as if the person, whoever he may be, were a stranger to the place,” whispered Jean.

“Why shouldn’t he be? Place hasn’t been visited for hundreds of years. Look at the dust.”

“But he followed us.”

“Yes. I wonder why.”

For a long time after that they waited in breathless silence. All the time the person, who now halted, now moved a few steps forward, was coming closer and closer. Who could it be? What did he want? Did he know the secrets of this mysterious place, of the magic door? He might. There was hope in that.

“Oh, switch on your light,” Jean whispered impatiently. “What’s the use? He’s bound to find us in the end.”

Realizing the truth of this, Roderick snapped on his light and sent its rays gleaming straight down the corridor. As it fell full upon the face of the one who had followed them there came a half-suppressed, shrill cry of a child. It was none other than the daughter of the great chief, the one whose life Johnny had saved.

“Wianda!” exclaimed Jean, calling the girl’s name as she started forward to embrace her.

Unfortunately, this name was the only word they had in common.

For a moment the Indian girl’s eyes roamed from one to the other, then with a sudden gesture she held up first three fingers, then only two, as much as to say:

“There were three of you. Now there are but two. Where is the other?”

For answer, Jean took up the heavy walking stick, and after pointing at the stone door, made as if to push it back.

[230]

The girl’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Then as her face became thoughtful she backed away to sit down upon the flat rock. There, for five minutes, with head bent low, hands pressing her temples, she sat perfectly still.

“Thinking it out,” whispered Roderick. “I wonder what she will do.”

In spite of her fears for Johnny’s safety, Jean felt a certain great confidence in this child’s ability to solve the puzzle and set her hero free. Why not? Was she not a native of the place? Did she not know the secrets of the land?

“And yet,” she thought with a sinking heart, “why should she? She is little more than a child, while the secrets of this place,

if one is to judge by the dust and crumbling decay of rocks, are old as time itself.”

Suddenly the Indian girl leaped to her feet. With a swift movement she crossed the corridor and pressed her ear against the stone door.

As she stood there listening, across her face there spread such a smile of joy as it had seldom been Jean’s privilege to see. [231]

Then the Indian girl motioned for Jean to put her ear against the stone door as she had done.

What she heard was a faint tick-tick-tick, or the drip-drip-drip of water. She could not tell what it was, the sound was so very faint.

Her heart beat wildly. What could it mean? Why had the Indian girl become so suddenly joyous? Was it a token, this ticking or dripping? Was it a sign that all would be well? It was all very strange, all so unreal that she found herself all but overcome.

On her wrist Jean wore a small watch. In her idle hours she had amused herself by teaching the Indian girl to tell the time of morning, noon or evening by it. Now, to her astonishment, she found the girl alternately pointing to the three o’clock mark on the dial, then away at the stone door.

“It’s one o’clock,” said Jean. “What can she mean?”

“Probably means that at three the door will open of its own free will,” said Roderick, who with his usual skepticism placed little faith in the native girl.

“I’m starved,” he grumbled. “Let’s get out of this vile place and find something to eat. Thompson’ll get out of that hole some way. Leave it to him. Any way, we can’t help any.” [232]

“We can’t be sure of that,” said Jean soberly.

“You may leave if you wish. As for me, I will stay here as long as this native girl does. I’m not going to be shamed by such a little brown one as she.”

Roderick sauntered sulkily up and down the corridor for a moment, then sank down upon a rock with a sigh.

As for the Indian girl, after listening once more at the door, with the look of joyous satisfaction on her face she sat down in composure to wait. Wait for what? What was to happen in two hours? Jean could not so much as guess. So, without trying, she sat down beside the native girl.

To her surprise she found after a time that by listening intently she could catch the faint tap-tap-tap. It was weird, mysterious, fascinating, that steady continuous sound that was so much like the ticking of a clock, yet somehow so different.

“What can it mean?” she asked herself. “Can it be that those ancient people held some secrets of motion and power of which we know nothing? Does that door, like the door to a bank vault, open and close to a time schedule? And could it be working after all these years?”

[233]

“How—how impossible!” she breathed.

The Indian girl heard the sound of her whisper and, as if understanding the meaning of it, put a hand upon her knee as much as to say:

“All things are possible.”

“And yet,” Jean went on to assure herself, “it is impossible. Even were it all true, how could this child know the secret of it all?”

At that moment there flashed through her mind things Johnny had told her about the ancient Maya civilization, of their culture, their sculpture, their architecture, their art expressed in the working of precious metals and polishing of jewels.

“They had mastered the art of writing, too,” she told herself, “and had great libraries. Many of these were destroyed, but some remain. Who knows but these, their descendants, have read from these scrolls the secrets of this strange underground cavern?”

So she reasoned, hoped and waited. A half hour passed, an hour, an hour and a half. As the hour of three approached even the skeptical Roderick grew restless. He rose and paced the floor. Jean pulled him down.

[234]

“I can’t hear the tap-tap when you are walking,” she said.

“Listen!” she exclaimed in an awed whisper. “It—it’s stopped!”

That was a dramatic moment. The Indian girl knew, too, for her face had suddenly become animated with some great emotion. Gliding swiftly to the white girl’s side, she placed her fingers on her lips.

Instantly Jean read her meaning. She sprang to her feet, and at once there came from her throat the clear notes of their call:

“Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo,
Whoo-hoo-hoo.”

Johnny Thompson, sitting alone in the dark, heard and sprang to his feet. The next moment as the call was repeated again and again, he found himself feeling his way by following the sound closer and closer to the singer.

Jean had kept up the call for three minutes when, after holding up a hand for silence, the Indian girl lifted the stout stick as if it were a fairy's wand and pressed it against the top of the stone door.

[235]

Amazed, stupified, the brother and sister stared in silence as the great rock began to fall back.

Back, back, back it moved until it lay flat upon the floor. At that dramatic moment, smiling like a fairy prince released from an enchanted prison, Johnny stepped over the threshold, free.

Could Johnny be pardoned if he embraced his fair deliverers? Well, he must be, for that is exactly what he did, both of them, and the action seemed to him a part of a beautiful ending to a horrible dream.

As they turned once more toward the rock that was a door, they saw it was again rising slowly, and with a silence that suggested great power.

"Come on," said Johnny with a shudder. "Let's get out of here."

"Yes. We must," said Jean, leading the way.

As she glanced back from time to time, Jean saw that Johnny walked as one who is lame, or who carries a heavy burden on his hip. Being a person of unusual judgment, she asked no questions. As they left the outer opening and made their way through the bush to the outer air, Johnny was rather longer than the others in emerging. When he did appear he had lost his limp. Again Jean read the signs, but asked no questions.

[236]

[237]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PASSING OF THE GHOST

The night following the capture of Daego's pit-pans, Johnny's ghost behaved very strangely. On this night, as on many other nights, Pant crossed the river to discover, if possible, some further details regarding Daego's plans and to ascertain more accurately the strength of his forces. Their quota of logs would soon be filled. They must then make up their raft within the boom. This must be towed down the river. Would Daego, with his depleted forces, dare attempt to take over the camp before that time came? Once the logs were afloat, would he manage in some way to break the boom? These were vital questions.

On this particular night Pant did not join Daego's men. Instead, he hid in a low clump of palms; close enough to catch the conversation of one small group.

"Reckon ole ghost walks agin to-night?" said one.

“Yea, bo! He’ll walk.”

“’Tain’t no harm come to us, not yet.”

“You all hain’t sayin’ ’t’ain’t goin’ t’ happen?”

“Hain’t sayin’ nothin’.”

“Oh, look ayonder. There it are.”

Sure enough, there was the ghost. With his waving gown all gleaming yellow with light, his shining red eyes, his dark face and his lugubrious rattle accompanied now and then by a piercing wail, Johnny’s ghost seemed more fearsome than before.

The chicleros grew suddenly silent. Even the sighing palms ceased to sigh and the last scream of a parrot died a sudden death.

It was an awesome moment. In that moment a strange thing happened. Instead of hovering there above the palms, the ghost began to rise. As he rose the dull rattle, as of bones in a coffin, increased in volume, and the wail, high-pitched and terrifying, rose to a piercing scream.

Then, more terrible than all, as he rose higher and higher, his red eyes grew dimmer, his glowing robes melted into the floating clouds, his scream sounded fainter and fainter.

“Oh, my Massa!” groaned the black man who but a moment before had professed little fear of the ghost. “Oh, my Massa!” he wailed, rolling on the ground in his agony of fear. “Oh, my Massa, he’s gone! It’s his last warnin’. He’s gone up. Now death and disaster sure do come!”

As if in proof of this, there came from far in the distance the dull roll of thunder.

As for Pant, he hastened to his dugout and paddled rapidly across the river. His mind was in a whirl. What had happened? He wanted to know, needed to know, badly indeed. Not so badly, however, but that he had time to pause and listen as the dip-dip of paddles sounded over the hushed waters of Rio Hondo. As he waited and watched black streaks passed down the river.

“Three of them,” he exulted. “That last trick was best of all. Three boat loads. Must have carried ten men each.”

As he came near the cabin that had been Johnny’s office, and in which so many strange doings had come off of late, he spied a dim light there.

On looking in he saw a single candle burning on a work bench. Slumped down in a rude chair made of packing boxes, was old Hardgrave.

[240]

At first the boy thought him asleep, but upon hearing footsteps the old man stirred, then looked up.

“It’s you, Pant,” he said slowly. “So it’s only you.”

Then of a sudden, sitting straight up, as if recalling bad news, he groaned:

“Pant, he’s gone!”

“Who’s gone?”

“The ghost—Johnny’s ghost is gone. Left us tonight. Left us cold.”

Pant stared at the old man for a moment. “Can it be,” he thought to himself, “that the mere mechanical creation can seem to its creator to take on real life and a personality?”

To Hardgrave he said quietly: "I saw him go. It was weird, I can tell you. And I shouldn't take his going too much to heart. Fully thirty of Daego's men went down the river just now. This last was too much for their superstitious minds."

"Thirty! Did you say thirty?"

"Fully that many."

"Then, Pant," the old man sprang to his feet. "We'll beat 'em yet, Pant. We'll fight! We'll fight!" [241]

"Of course we will," said Pant.

[242]

CHAPTER XXIV

BLIND DRIFTING

Late in the evening following his startling adventure in the ancient Maya temple, Johnny tapped at Jean's door.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Go get Rod and come to my room. Got something to show you."

A few moments later, in the privacy of Johnny's room, lighted only by a flickering taper, the brother and sister stood before a mysterious something which stood upon a stool and was covered by a cloth.

"See!" Johnny exclaimed as he lifted the cloth.

They started back in surprise and wonder. Made of pure gold, with a jewel gleaming from his hand, the Maya god, an awesome creation, stood before them.

Determined that his adventure in the temple, which had come so near being a tragedy, should not be without its reward, Johnny had dared to take the god from the place of its long concealment. He had succeeded in bringing it from the corridor to the bush where he had hidden it until he could smuggle it safely through the darkness.

[243]

"That," he said in an awed whisper, "is the only ancient Maya god ever discovered; he is the god of the rising sun. There are

no such gods in the museums of the world. This one, aside from the gold and the jewel which seems to be a roughly cut diamond, is priceless as a curio and as an example of ancient art. And that," he exclaimed as he wrapped the cloth about it and hid it in a dark corner, "makes me all the more anxious to get away from this hidden city of wild people."

"You're not thinking of taking the thing with you!" exclaimed Roderick in dismay.

"Of course we shall!" Jean looked at her brother in utter disgust. "What do you think?"

"Think!" exclaimed Roderick. "I think it will get us into a great deal of trouble."

"Trouble? Who cares for trouble?"

"I am going to the chief the first thing in the morning," said Johnny. "I'll try to tell him or his daughter, by maps and signs, all about my camp on Rio Hondo and the urgent need of my getting back there. The princess likes us. She'll do anything she can for us. Somehow we must escape."

[244]

* * * * *

To be drifting down a strange tropical stream at night is enchanting, haunting, and mysterious enough; but to be drifting down that same stream with your eyes so completely blindfolded that you only know it is night because you have been told so, surely this is the most mysterious of all.

Johnny Thompson, Jean and Roderick were passing through just such an experience. For hours, many hours, seeing nothing, now led by the hand, now drifting in a dugout, they had traveled. Where were they going? Home? Going to some more remote corner of the Central American jungle where there was no danger of their being discovered?

Not one of the three could so much as guess. They only knew they were going somewhere and were on their way. Such a strange way, too; over paths that were so overhung with vines and palm leaves that they must be constantly dodging [245] to avoid them; now on a small stream where the danger of being caught by vines and dragged overboard was still greater, and now out upon a wider stream where from time to time a sudden burst of sunlight warmed their faces, they traveled on and on. For Johnny especially, the short portages made on foot were extremely difficult, for always he carried his pack on his back. He dared not trust it to another. In its very center was the golden god of the rising sun.

It had turned out strangely, his resolve to have it out with the old chief about allowing them to return to the Rio Hondo. First, by the aid of many small sticks and stones and a tiny artificial stream, he pictured to the young princess his coming up Rio Hondo in search of mahogany, his early success, defeat, a second venture, the treachery of Daego, the probable condition of his camp at the present moment and the need for his speedy return.

He had watched with much concern the face of the chief as his daughter presented the cause to him. That she was telling much, perhaps a great deal too much, he guessed from the changing expression on the old man's face. A frown was replaced by a smile. This was followed by a look of surprise, if not of consternation.

"She's not telling about Rio Hondo," Johnny had whispered. [246]
"What do you think?"

"Yesterday. The hidden corridor," Jean had whispered back.

"That's exactly it!" Johnny exclaimed.

At once he regretted having entrusted the girl with his mission. "If she tells too much she may get us into greater

trouble,” he whispered to Jean, and at that moment he thought of the golden god.

“Of course,” he whispered to Jean, “it’s mine by right of finding. These people did not build this ruined temple, nor did they make or inherit the god. It’s been lost for centuries. Can’t tell about their queer ideas and customs, though.”

Had that plea of the princess gotten them into trouble, or was it getting them out? This was the question which Johnny asked himself over and over as they drifted, blindfolded, down that river in the night.

It was strange, fascinating, weird, this eternal drifting, drifting, drifting on into the night. Now the sudden brush of a palm leaf told him they were traveling close to the bank; now a mad forward plunge followed by low exclamations, told of rapids; and now the distant bark of a dog somewhere on land suggested a cabin and some few scattered inhabitants.

[247]

They were quite a goodly company, this Maya band which escorted him from their city to some unknown destination. Johnny, with his white companions, rode in a large pit-pan. There were other crafts. From time to time he caught the sound of their dipping paddles, heard their low cries of warning as one boat came perilously near another. Twice they had made camp. At such times as this, blindfolded though he was, Johnny was able to estimate the number of men.

“About a hundred,” he had said to Jean.

“Quite a band,” she had agreed. “Wonder why so many?”

“Who can tell?”

The princess was with them. He heard her voice from time to time. The old chief, too, perhaps. He could not be sure of that.

Wondering dreamily how it all would end, and wishing with all his heart that Jean at least was out of it all, he fell into a doze.

From this he was awakened by a sudden movement of the boat. It was as if the hand of a giant had seized the prow and suddenly turned it through a quarter of a circle, then had given it a powerful shove.

For a second the boy's head whirled.

"Wha—what has happened?" Jean whispered.

Johnny chuckled. "We're in a larger river, much larger. In fact, it is a great river, and something tells me——," his words came swift and eager now, "that it is the good old Rio Hondo!"

"Johnny, it can't be!"

"It could be, and is!" said Johnny emphatically. "I haven't ridden that old river for nothing. She has a way of teasing and tossing your dugout while she whirls it forward that no other river ever had.

"Besides," he added with another chuckle, "I can smell the water. It actually *smells* black."

"What's that?" the girl exclaimed suddenly.

"Sounds like thunder," said Johnny.

* * * * *

It was thunder, the forerunner of a storm. It was not a local storm, either, but one of those wide sweeping storms that tear at the timber on all the headwaters of a great river. Pant, at the

edge of his camp, where he was assisting in shooting the last of the mahogany logs into their boom, heard it and his face grew thoughtful.

The hour of great suspense came at last. Their boom was loaded. They were ready to go down the river. Daego had not yet led his men to the attack.

“We’ll get away in the darkness,” Pant said to his Carib foreman, fairly dancing about in his eagerness to be away. “We’ll give old Daego the slip.”

Tivoli’s only reply was a sweep of the hand toward the blackening sky. As if in answer to his signal, there came crashing down upon them one of those sudden storms that are known only in the tropics.

“We’ll get away under cover of the storm,” said Pant. “That will be better still.”

“You don’t now these tropical storms,” said Tivoli. “All night in the rain fifteen men must work; fifteen men must rest, sleep beneath canvas in hammocks. Even with fifteen men we may not save the raft, tied up right here. You do not know the tropics. There will be water in the river, water in the sky. Which is river? Which is sky? You cannot tell. The river will rise like a tide. There will come down snags, great trees, palm trees, mahogany, yamra, black tamarind, santa maria, many, many snags. All night long, at the edge of the raft, we must fight these snags away. There will be no sleep for Tivoli tonight, and perhaps no logs for Mr. Johnny Thompson after that, either.”

[250]

Tivoli was right. Such a storm as this was! Nothing of the kind had ever been witnessed by the boys before. Flash after flash of lightning, water in sheets, in streams, great avalanches of water that one could all but swim through. Rolling thunder vied with the increasing roar of black waters.

And after that came the snags! And how those Caribs did work!

All night, till the clock hand stood at three, they labored. Then the water began to subside.

Then, exhausted, they threw themselves upon the bare logs and slept.

“At dawn we are away,” muttered Tivoli.

[251]

* * * * *

All that night, regardless of the lightning that set the water all agleam, in spite of the deluge of rain that fell, the Mayas and their blindfolded captives drifted silently down that broad river which indeed was Rio Hondo.

Awnings of cloth, cunningly treated with the juice from the bark of the wild rubber tree, protected them from the rain. They were safe and dry. The river carried them onward. What more need they ask?

* * * * *

At dawn, as a matchless sunrise painted the east red and gold, there appeared above Pant’s raft on the broad river a black line, a line not of drift logs, but dugouts, dories and pit-pans. Each craft was loaded with men, and as the sun sent its rays shooting across them they waved their hands and let forth a bloodcurdling shout. In each uplifted hand there gleamed a long bladed machete.

“They come!” said Tivoli in response to Pant’s call. “Let them come. See that all the men are wakened quickly.”

[252]

CHAPTER XXV

THE BATTLE OF RIO HONDO

The battle of Rio Hondo will probably never be recorded on the printed pages of the history of Honduras or Mexico, but to the last day of his life it will remain indelibly stamped on Pant's memory.

As he caught the white gleam of machetes against the morning sky, many searching questions invaded his mind. He was about to engage in a battle that might mean the death of some faithful Carib. Was there yet an opportunity for parley, for compromise? No! It was too late. Yet, in their previous actions had there been blunders? Had he been too hasty? Could the fight have been avoided? These questions he could not fully answer; all he could say was that he had believed himself to be acting for the good of all.

"As for compromise," he told himself stoutly, "there can be no compromise with evil. This man Daego hesitates at nothing that he may gain a little more wealth, wealth for which he has no need. The men we must fight have sold their souls to him." Having thus put himself at peace with his own mind, he set calmly about the task of posting his men.

[253]

The purpose of the raiders was to break up his raft. If they could but sever the encircling boom, his logs would be set free, each to find its separate way to the ocean. They would then be lost to him forever.

One anxious glance he cast toward the approaching boats. One thing he feared most of all,—firearms.

“He wouldn’t dare,” Pant told himself, as no rifle or pistol appeared in the uplifted hands. “A fight between crews is one thing; wholesale slaughter quite another. The laws of Great Britain are strict, her officers tireless.”

His eyes gleamed with a touch of pride as he surveyed his small army of defense. What stalwart fellows they were! How their dark arms gleamed in the sun! From the belt of each hung a machete. These they had been ordered to use only as a last resort. By the side of each, grounded like a rifle, was a stout six-foot mahogany pike-pole. He had taught them the last trick of offense and defense with these weapons.

[254]

So they waited as on came the invading host. In the hands of some he saw the white gleam of sapodilla axe handles. With these axes they would attempt to loosen a chain of the boom or chop a log of it in two. Others balanced heavy sledges on the edge of their boats. With these they hoped to sever the chains. Their machetes were for defense. They waved them to intimidate the Caribs.

“Not so easily done,” Pant smiled grimly as his Caribs sent back a ringing cry of defiance.

“Don’t let a man of them board us,” was the last word Pant passed along the line. “If they gain a footing on the raft we’re lost. If one gets aboard, double on him and pitch him overboard.”

As the dark line advanced it spread out fan-shape; then, with every wild-eyed Spaniard of them all splitting his lungs in a savage yell, they shot their crafts alongside.

With drawn machetes they leaped for the first mahogany logs that lay against the boom. But what was this? As they swung

[255]

their machetes threateningly, they received a rain of blows that sent many a machete whirling through space to find its watery grave beneath the black waters.

Against such an offensive they were not able to stand. Seizing their paddles, they backed away to a respectful distance, there to hold a council of war.

The result of this council Pant read as if it were an open book. With machetes sheathed, but with axes and sledges at hand, the enemy spread out to advance upon the raft from every side. By this Pant judged that they hoped to scatter his men and to effect a break in the boom that would not only set his logs free, but throw his Caribs into the river, there to fight for their lives against pitching, grinding logs and lurking alligators.

One move he had not anticipated became apparent soon enough. The instant their boats touched, as the Caribs rushed at them with their mahogany pikes, the Spaniards who were not armed with sledges and axes did their best to seize the pikes and wrest them from the Caribs. In this, here and there, they were successful, and always in the corner where this occurred, the tide began to turn. It was one thing to prod and beat a Spaniard; quite another to be prodded and beaten by him. In the meantime, keen oars flashed here and there. There came the disheartening chop-chop of axes and the thud of sledges that told that at any moment the boom might be broken, the battle lost.

[256]

Heroic work was going on at every point. Outnumbered almost two to one, the Caribs fought valiantly. With their wild shouts forever on their lips, they seized fresh pikes when one was lost and fought with renewed vigor.

Tivoli, their chief, seemed everywhere at once. His great strength served him well. Here, where a sledge was battering dangerously at a chain, he made a mighty thrust, swinging his

pike sidewise at a Spaniard's head. The sledge splashed into the water. Danger at this point was at an end. Here an axe swung in air to meet with Tivoli's well aimed pike and go spinning through air to join the sledge.

But for all this, the battle was going badly. Here and there a chain was badly battered and in several places a log of the boom was half cut through. Seeing his men outnumbered where ten Spaniards crowded a single dugout, Pant, whose slight strength had lost him his pike at the very onset, seized a pike aimed at his head and, gripping hard, executed a flying pole vault right over the heads of the enemy and into the booming waters.

[257]

The result was all that could be hoped for. The Spaniard, who still clung to the pike, was dragged half out of the dugout, whereupon that unstable craft promptly capsized, pitching ten lusty attackers, axes, sledges and all, into the river.

Tivoli, too, lost his pike. Angered at this victory on the part of an enemy, he watched his chance and when the Spaniard swung his pike to one side, with bare hands and unarmed, Tivoli rushed at him and rained such blows on his head as drove him to drop his pike and leap into the river.

This much for scattered conflicts. Victory here and there along the line; more than one Spaniard in the river; but for all that, here and there the boom was being dangerously weakened. The battle was going badly.

"Only a matter of time," thought Pant, as he struggled back to the raft. "A half hour; perhaps less. Then our work is all undone!"

[258]

* * * * *

Just as the storm came to an end and morning broke, Johnny Thompson, still blindfolded and riding among the Mayas, felt

his boat swerve sharply to the right and enter a small creek where overhanging branches swept the awnings over the boats.

They had not gone far up this stream before their boat bumped the bank and they were helped to disembark.

Imagine their surprise and joy when someone, very short, very laughingly tugged away the cloths that blinded them and permitted them for the first time in two days to see.

“See!” exclaimed the princess, for it was she who had unbound their eyes. “See what a beautiful world we have brought you to!”

It was indeed a beautiful world. All a-glitter with raindrops flashing in the sun, palms and giant tropical ferns had never seemed so lovely as now.

Birds sang their best. Even the screaming parrots, that they might not be entirely out of harmony, appeared to soften their discordant notes.

[259]

But into this symphony there crept a wildly disturbing sound. Dim, indistinct, yet unmistakable, there came the noise of battle.

At the first sound of it, Johnny Thompson glanced wildly about him. Then, having sighted down the creek a familiar bend in the river, he exclaimed:

“It’s Daego. The battle is on! They are not a mile from here. I must go!”

Seizing the prow of a boat, he pushed it into the stream, sprang in, seized a paddle, and would have been away, single-handed, to enter the conflict.

They dragged him back. The old chief tried to learn, from Johnny's wild flinging arms, what it was all about. In the end he appeared to understand, for, after instructing his men to look to their weapons, he ordered them into their boats. Once more the Mayas, a hundred strong, swept down the river, grim, silent, determined.

So it happened that a second time that day Pant saw the river above his raft lined with boats.

"Friends or enemies?" he thought. "Let them come. Without aid we lose. More of the enemy cannot matter."

[260]

As for Daego's men, they watched the on-coming fleet with consternation. Daego had no men up the river. They knew that. Who, then, were these?

As the fleet came closer, a figure standing in the prow of the foremost boat became plainly visible. He was waving his arms and shouting wildly. It was Johnny.

One of Daego's keen-eyed Spaniards was the first to recognize him. With a wild cry of fear he dashed for his pit-pan.

"There is the man who has died," he shouted. "His ghost has been seen many times above the treetops. Now he comes back. He is a ghost. Who are these with him? They have gleaming spears. They, too, are ghosts." So he thought, and prepared to flee.

So thought they all. To a man they dropped oar, maul, pike, pole or machete, and turned to flee.

When Johnny's boat bumped the raft there was not a Spaniard within gunshot.

But what was this? As he turned about to look at his

[261]

companions in the boat he saw only Roderick and Jean. By some skillful trick of boatmanship or swimming, the Maya paddlers had left the boat. Now, some distance away, the Maya princess was waving them farewell as the remaining boats went speeding back up the river.

“That’s funny,” said Johnny.

“How—how strange and ghost-like!” murmured Jean.

“Nothing ghost-like about this,” said Johnny, as he patted his pack which held the rare Maya god.

The joyful reunion that followed was cut short by the pressing business of getting the log boom started down the river. The motor boat was brought around, the Carib sail boats hitched on behind, and they were away.

Hardgrave, who knew Jean’s father and the location of his camp, advised her and Roderick to go with them down the river. This advice was not unwelcome, especially to Johnny, who felt that he could never see too much of the bonny Scotch girl.

They had made their slow way down two-thirds of the distance when a strange procession caught up with and passed them. Motor boats, launches, flatboats, and pit-pans moved by. Each was loaded to capacity with the strangest cargoes. Here were four tractors on a flat-boat; there many wheels that might have belonged to cannons, but did belong to logging wagons; here a pit-pan loaded high with great vats and kettles that had once held the boiling sap of the sapodilla tree. So they drifted by. It was like the passing of a defeated army. And so it was. The defeated king of the Black River was leaving the Rio Hondo forever.

[262]

Two weeks later, with his treasure of red lure safely piled at the waterfront in Belize, Johnny met his millionaire friend,

Roderick Grayson, at the dock as a United Fruit steamer's launch came in. Three days later, in Johnny's room at the hotel, Grayson met the Governor of Quintanaroo and together they drew up contracts which were to mean much, not only to Quintanaroo and Grayson, but to Johnny and Pant as well. In each contract it was agreed that Grayson's company was to pay the boys a royalty, a wee bit of a royalty on their entire output and, though the percentage is small, the output is destined to be large, and there is no reason to believe that the two boys will lack for funds for travel and adventure in the future.

The rare Maya god found its way to a museum in London. The proceeds from its sale Johnny insisted upon dividing with Jean. There was talk of spending the whole of it in a visit to London and the Old World by Jean and her family, accompanied by Johnny and Pant.

[263]

At about this time, however, Johnny chanced to wander down to the breakwater, where little boats anchor, and there he met a strange seafaring man who had a strange tale to tell. And right there began one of the most unusual adventures that ever befell Johnny Thompson. You will find it all written down in our next book, "Forbidden Cargoes".

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Table of Contents

The Red Lure

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I THE WHITE GLEAM

CHAPTER II SUDDEN CATASTROPHE

CHAPTER III MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS

CHAPTER IV TREE HAY AND A JAGUAR

CHAPTER V NARROW ESCAPES

CHAPTER VI LOST IN THE JUNGLE

CHAPTER VII PERIL IN THE DARK

CHAPTER VIII DEATH AHEAD

CHAPTER IX "IT'S DEATH AN' DESTRUCTION"

CHAPTER X JOHNNY'S GHOST WALKS

CHAPTER XI PROVISIONED FOR A LONG JOURNEY

CHAPTER XII A BRONZE BEAUTY

CHAPTER XIII PURRING SHADOWS

CHAPTER XIV FORGOTTEN TRIBES

CHAPTER XV THE HIDDEN CITY

CHAPTER XVI PANT SETS A TRAP

CHAPTER XVII THE SPANISH GIRL REAPPEARS

CHAPTER XVIII PANT SPRINGS THE TRAP

CHAPTER XIX CAPTURING A BLACK SHADOW

CHAPTER XX CENTURY OLD CAVERNS

CHAPTER XXI TRAPPED

CHAPTER XXII MAGIC POWER

CHAPTER XXIII THE PASSING OF THE GHOST

CHAPTER XXIV BLIND DRIFTING

CHAPTER XXV THE BATTLE OF RIO HONDO

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