

CHAPTER IX

IN A STORM-HAUNTED WOOD

“**T**HE storm is coming!” exclaimed Diane with shining eyes. “Button the flaps by the horses, Johnny. We’re in for it to-night. Hear the wind!”

Overhead the gale tore ragged gaps among the fire-shadowed trees, unshrouding a storm-black sky. Fearlessly—the old wild love of storm and wind singing powerfully in her heart—the girl rose from the fire and faced the tempest.

Rex pressed fearfully beside her, whining. Off there somewhere in the wind and darkness a dog had barked. It came now again, high above the noise of the wind, a furious, frightened barking.

“Johnny!” exclaimed Diane suddenly. “There must be something wrong over there. Better go see. No, not that way. More to the east.” And Johnny, whose soul for thirty years had thirsted for adventure, briskly seized an ancient pistol and charged off through the forest.

But Aunt Agatha had talked long and tearfully to Johnny. Wherefore, reluctant to leave his charge alone in the rain and dark, he turned back.

“Go!” said Diane with a flash of impatience.

Johnny went. Looking back over his shoulder he saw the girl outlined vividly against the fire, skirts and hair flying stormily about her in the wind. So might the primal woman stand ere the march of civilization had over-sexed her.

The wind was growing fiercer now, driving the rain about in angry gusts. Thunder cannonaded noisily overhead.

Veering suddenly in a new direction—for in the roar of the storm the bark of the dog seemed curiously to shift—Johnny collided violently with a dark figure running wildly through the forest. Both men fell. Finding his invisible assailant disposed viciously to contest detention, Johnny fell in with his mood and buried his long, lean fingers cruelly in the other's throat.

The fortunes of war turned speedily. Johnny's victim squirmed desperately to his feet and bounded away through the forest.

Now as they ran, stumbling and finding their way as best they might in the glitter of lightning, there came from the region of the camp the unmistakable crack of a pistol. Two shots in rapid succession followed—an interval of five seconds or so—and then another. The final trio was the shot signal of the old buffalo hunters which Diane had taught to Johnny.

“Where are you?” barked the signal.

Drawing his ancient pistol as he ran, Johnny,

in vain, essayed the answer. The veteran missed fire. After all, reflected Johnny uncomfortably, one signal was merely to locate him. If another came—

The lightning, flaming in a vivid sheet, revealed a lonely road ahead and on the road by the farther hedge, a man desperately cranking a long, dark car. The lamps of the car were unlighted.

With a yell of startled anger, the man who bore the bleeding marks of Johnny's fingers redoubled his speed and darted crazily for the roadway. Before he had reached it the man by the car had leaped swiftly to the wheel and rolled away.

From the forest came again the signal: "Where are you?"

Johnny groaned. Frantically he tried the rebel again. It readily spat its answer this time, an instantaneous duplicate of shots.

"I'm here. What do you want?"

In the lightning glare the man ahead made off wildly across the fields.

Running, Johnny cocked his ears for the familiar assurance of one shot.

"All right," it would mean; "I only wanted to know where you are," but it did not come.

Instead—two shots again in rapid succession—an interval—and then another.

"I am in serious trouble," barked the signal in the forest. "Come as fast as you can."

With a groan Johnny abandoned the chase and retraced his steps. Thus a perverse Fate ever snipped the thread of an embryo adventure.

A light flickered dully among the trees to the east. Johnny cupped his hands and yodeled. The light moved. A little later as he crashed hurriedly through the underbrush, Diane called to him. She was holding a lantern high above something on the ground, her face quite colorless.

"I'm glad you're here!" she said. "It's the aviator, Johnny. He's hurt—"

The aviator stirred.

"He's comin' 'round," said Johnny peering down into the white face in the aureole of lantern-light. "The rain in his face likely. . . . Well, young fellow, what do you think of yourself, eh?"

"Not much," said Philip blankly and stared about him.

"Can you follow us to the camp fire yonder?" asked Diane compassionately.

Philip, though evidently very dizzy, thought likely he could, and he did. That his shoulder was wet and very painful, he was well aware, though somehow he had forgotten why. Moreover, his head throbbed queerly.

There came a tent and a bed and a blur of incidents.

Mr. Poynter dazedly resigned himself to a general atmosphere of unreality.