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RUNAWAY JUNE

By George Randolph Chester and Lillian Chester

ELEVENTH EPISODE.

In the Clutch of the River Thieves.

CHAPTER I.

HERE was a wild clanging of bells on the yacht Hilarity. June Warner had cast off the swift little motor tender. Blye shouted against his impatient commands to the officer on the quarter deck. Sleepy sailors were on deck now fumbling with the davits on each side.

In midstream streaked the speedy little motorboat Flash, which had been stolen from that dock while the overcoat and cap peacefully slumbered. In the boat at the wheel sat a natty little figure with a chauffeur's cap and a tiny mustache. "Voila, Mlle. Marie!"

"Voila!" she hoarsely uttered. For only a moment the well known and justly famous private detective, Bill Wolf, looked after her swiftly swishing Henri; then he turned and pounded up the dock, racing for the nearest telephone. "Well, I got him!" came the hoarse voice of Bill Wolf. He's on board the yacht Hilarity, and, say, with the girl. Immediately Honoria moved very swiftly.

"Lower those boats!" shouted Gilbert Blye. The escaping beauty was rounding the point. In the pretty apartments which Ned and June Warner had fitted up to be their nest Ned rose from the couch where he had fallen asleep with the miniature of June in his hand and recognized the rasping voice of Honoria. "Well, we've located your darling!" And there was a shrill cackle. "She's on board the Hilarity with my husband."

Ned wasted no time. Bobbie Bletherton had a staunch little boat, and Bobbie was fluted out of bed immediately. As the beautiful girl sped toward the marshy shore a low, gray skiff with a portable motor attached to its stern slipped in and out of the dimness among the black bulks at the river's edge. In the skiff were three rough looking men and a roughly dressed woman, who sat huddled in the bow. Suddenly the woman leaned forward and touched the nearest man on the knee. The woman pointed, and the man turned his evil eyes in that direction. Surrounded by black coal barges was a shining houseboat with brass rails, mahogany car and all the fittings and appointments which extravagance could devise.

The man at the stern slowed down the engine until it was noiseless. They completely circled the two adjoining docks before they came back to the slip where the coal barges lay; then the skiff glided in beneath the overhang of the barges, and the big man with the scar on his chin knuckled on the hull. No noise from within. The man picked up a club and pounded. No stirring. The woman looked up at the houseboat as if she were estimating for herself its plan, arrangement and all the mysteries which it might contain. She shrugged her shoulders and put her roughly shod foot into the big man's outstretched palm. He raised slowly and lifted the woman straight up so that she could draw herself on board. She disappeared. The three men sat silent. "All right, Ben," the woman's face peered over the rail. The lean Jake stepped forward promptly and climbed up over the big man's back. The third man took the rudder; then the huge Ben jumped up, caught the deck rail and drew himself upward. June was at that moment skirting the marshy shore and hunting a place, no matter how desolate, in which to hide. A small boat rounded the point, and for a moment June's eyes distended. Involuntarily she crouched.

CHAPTER II.

The three river thieves in the exquisitely furnished houseboat worked with deft rapidity. Within an incredibly short space of time they had the skiff piled high with the richest and the best which the houseboat had contained; then they spread the tarpaulin over their plunder and disposed their bunches of celery so that the green leaves protruded in a fringe from under the edge of the tarpaulin; then the heavily laden skiff, with its four passengers and its loot, wormed its way clumsily from amid the barges, looking like an innocent farmer boat.

The sun, now a golden ball in the eastern mist, looked down upon a harbor busy with the pursuers of the little runaway bride. Henri and Marie were swishing swiftly; Ned and Bobbie and Iris were leaving the dock in Bobbie's speedy little cruiser; Honoria Blye and Bill Wolf were putting out into the river in the Eagle Eye Detective Agency's steam yawl. Gilbert Blye and the heavy lidded Edwards were just leaving the Hilarity in the keen little racer; Cunningham had been slow and below decks when they put off, but he followed now in the cutter. The racer and the cutter speeded straight for the point around which June had disappeared. Tommy Thomas waved a scarf after them and shouted abstruse instructions to them, but Mrs. Villard stood quietly by the rail, her eyes fixed somberly on that distant point.

Slowly June raised from her crouching position. Once more she breathed a sigh of relief, but even as she did so she heard a familiar sound—the siren whistle of the Hilarity's cutter! And it was near! Frantically now she scanned the shore. There was another inlet just ahead of her, and in desperation she steered into it. It was a narrow but distinct channel, winding about amid a tangle of shrubbery and marsh grass and stunted trees. There were high banks presently and then a tiny island, in the center of which was a decrepit hut. June was about to step ashore when she heard the low purring of a motor. She was away in a flash, circling the island. From the other side she saw that the channel led away into the marshes, probably to another inlet, and she had started to dart down this lonely waterway when suddenly she spied a rope trailing out into the water from under some bushes matted with marsh weeds. The whir of the motor was rapidly advancing. She could scarcely hope to escape unseen. Her wits sharpened by her peril, she steered

with swift decision toward the overhanging bushes. They parted as her prow ran into them, and, bending low, she found herself shot into entire concealment. The whir of the approaching motor grew loud. Quite as a flash June reached for the telltale rope which had betrayed this hiding place and drew it under cover of the matted bushes.

Louder and louder grew the whir. It was just upon her. With her heart beating so that her ears were full of the sound of it, June peered out through her leafy screen. Orrin Cunningham! He circled the island in his swift little cutter, his keen eyes searching everywhere. He passed within ten feet of her. He passed on, however, and, running his light little boat ashore, stepped out and went up to the hut, the only possible place of concealment on the island. June had a swift debate with herself. Should she leave her concealment and, running her motor at its quietest speed, slip away down that other channel while Cunningham was in the hut? That debate was settled in an instant, for up the other channel slipped the swift little speed boat carrying Edwards and Gilbert Blye! It seemed ages before they came away, and they apparently made a thorough search. When they had gone away June remained for a long time in her hiding place, but finally she stepped from her boat and crept from her concealment.

There was a cask of water in the hut, brackish and stale, but it was water, and she drank of it from an old tin cup which hung to it. She had just set down the cup when her quick ears detected a low, steady hum. She stepped to the door, ready to make a dash for her boat, but as she set her foot upon the threshold she saw the dark gray prow of a skiff protruding its point around the bend of the lower channel! She darted back out of sight and, looking through a crack in the board wall, saw in the skiff three rough looking men and a roughly looking woman. June laughed in relief. It was good to see human beings who were not in pursuit of her, and she had almost run down to meet them when suddenly loud, angry voices came from the frail little craft. June ran wildly around the little hut, looking vainly for some place of concealment. In the ceiling June's frantically roving eyes found a trap door, one of its boards loose. She crossed swiftly to it, and with a series of cross sticks, and without hesitation June ran up this rude ladder, shoved the trap door aside and scrambled into the attic.

There were voices below. The quarrel, whatever it had been about, had evidently been settled, for the woman was laughing. June peered down through a crack in the ceiling boards. These two and the lean fellow with the hook nose were lost with all they could carry. June clapped her hand over her mouth to prevent a hysterical outcry, while her senses swam. She was seeing phases of life that she little dreamed existed.

The men gulped their food, and then, tired and sleepy, they lay down on straw pallets for a few minutes of honest rest, while the cold and starved little runaway bride in the attic looked down with ravenous eyes on what she had left. The odor of the hot coffee made her feel faint. Only terror kept her on the alert.

CHAPTER III.

The woman below was acting strangely as she cleared away the remains of the breakfast and washed the dishes. From time to time she passed near her husband, bending over slightly, and finally she stopped beside him. With deft fingers she reached into his vest pocket and extracted a little chamois bag. So that was how one woman solved her money problem, and her burning eyes told with what bitterness she had resorted to this bold step.

She was putting away the last of the dishes when suddenly she stopped, turned, and a slow smile spread upon her lips. Her eyes burned with a somber fire. She went over to Big Ben and deftly secured a long, slender cigarette holder. She crossed swiftly to her husband and inserted the holder in his top vest pocket, so that its shining tip protruded. The water cask stood by Big Ben's head. With a gleam in her eye the woman went over, filled the rusty tin cup and deliberately poured a fourth of its contents over Big Ben's face.

"Excuse me," she laughed as he jumped up and with the same motion jerked a revolver from his pocket. He grimaced at her ominously as he saw the sparkle of mischief in her eye, and he wiped his face with his sleeve. "You done it 'o' purpose," he speculated, chuckling. "Think so?" she dimpled. There was a softening in Big Ben's eyes as she walked away, and then he glanced at the sleeping Flub. He strolled to the door and came back. Suddenly he stopped. The gleam of something yellow had caught his gaze. He walked close and bent low. He pulled the cigarette holder out far enough to identify it and pushed it back; then he gave the sleeper a kick. "Get up, you thief!" he roared. Flub sprang up, dazed.

"What's that?" "I said get up, you thief!" roared Big Ben as lean Jake abruptly stopped snoring and jumped up. He was halfway to the ladder before he realized that this was not a raid, and June, divining his intention, rose swiftly and put her hands on the loose clapboards of the roof. Ben jerked the cigarette holder from Flub's pocket. "You stole it!"

Flub seemed dazed by the accusation, but suddenly he let out a yell. Mechanically he had reached in his vest pocket, as was his habit when the chamois bag was there, and had discovered his loss. "My diamond!" he yelled. "It's gone!" And his face turned white as he looked around the tense group. Slowly comprehension came to him. "You framed me!" he suddenly shouted, pointing a trembling finger at Big Ben. "You copped my diamond; then you planted this cigarette holder so you could—" "You're a liar!" bellowed Big Ben and sprang for his accuser. A knife gleamed in Flub's hand, and

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