

THE WHISPERING BOX MYSTERY

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY, No. 5

By JOHN BLAINE

CHAPTER I

Mystery on Spindrift

Rick Brant could see every detail of the mysterious cabin cruiser. From the corridor window in the north wing of the big Brant house on Spindrift Island he looked down into the cove and watched the cruiser maneuver for a landing at the pier.

A pair of powerful binoculars showed him the faces of the two passengers and the figure of the man in the pilothouse. As the boat swung around for a landing he read the inscription on her stern. She was the *Eleanor II*, and her home port was New York .

To all appearances, she was just a private motor yacht, a cabin cruiser about thirty feet long, painted white. He watched her tie up and saw the two passengers step to the pier, and he saw his father go down the wooden stairs to the boat landing to meet them.

The glasses picked them out clearly. The older man was of middle age, dressed in an ordinary gray business suit. The second man was younger, perhaps twenty-five. He wore a soft hat and a brown gabardine suit. He might have been anything from a chemist to a professional athlete.

Hartson Brant greeted the men cordially, and for a moment they stood on the pier chatting. Rick would have given a great deal for the ability to read lips. He was burning with curiosity, and he was irritated. For more than two weeks he had tried to penetrate the veil of secrecy that hung over Spindrift Island, and he hadn't even made a beginning. He knew only that the white cruiser had called several times recently and that its passengers had spent hours talking with Hartson Brant behind locked doors. For the first time within memory, his father had not only failed to take Rick into his confidence but had told him curtly not to ask questions!

Rick watched until the trio vanished around the corner of the house, then he put the glasses in their case and headed for his own room. He walked quietly, because he didn't want anyone to know he had been spying. He was ashamed but not so ashamed as he was curious.

He was a tall boy of high school age with brown hair and eyes. There was a springiness in his gait that told of speed when he wanted to stretch his long legs. He moved easily, with the natural rhythm of an athlete, and he appeared to be relaxed. The appearance was deceptive, however. People who knew Rick: well often noticed that he was never completely still, except when sleeping. Even when sitting quietly his hands were usually busy, frequently with a bit of electrical gear or perhaps a piece of wire. He sometimes explained that he could think better that way.

As he passed the head of the stairs that led down to the library, he heard his father's voice and stopped hopefully.

"I'm positive there have been no information leaks on the island," the scientist was telling the two strangers. "We've been most careful. Only Weiss, Gordon, and Zircon know. We'll go over to the lab in a few minutes and you'll--"

The library door slammed and put a period to the words.

"Careful is right," Rick thought bitterly. Always before, he had been more than Hartson Brant's son. He had been his helper and trusted confidant. Now he was left completely out of things, and it hurt.

As he opened the door to his room and went in, a husky boy with black hair and dark eyes glanced up. The quick glance took in the binocular case slung over Rick's shoulder and the sulky expression on his usually pleasant face. Don Scott, called "Scotty," grinned.

"Deduction: Brother Brant has been playing I Spy again, and he hasn't found out a thing."

Rick put the glasses on a table and flopped down on his bed. "A lot of help I get from you," he said to his friend sourly. "Why don't you give me a hand instead of spending your life in that chair reading horse novels?"

Scotty put down his book, a lurid bit of fiction called *GaUoping Guns*. "Horse novels? You mean Western literature, old son. Better read one yourself. The beat of hoofs will quiet your nerves."

Rick stared at the ceiling and didn't reply.

Scotty's tone became serious. "Why don't you stop beating your head against the wall? When Dad wants you to know what's going on, he'll tell you."

Rick realized the sense of that, but being treated as an outsider rankled. "He might at least give us a hint," he grumbled.

"He can't," Scotty said positively.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because he wouldn't keep anything from us if he could help it. I'll bet those men, whoever they are, have sworn him to secrecy. What's more, I'll bet they're government men."

"I figured that," Rick said. "But what kind of government men? FBI? Secret Service? Or what?"

"Search me."

Scotty pushed a button on the arm of his chair and the back flopped down to semireclining position. A footrest shot into position. He stretched luxuriously and started to read again, then, seeing that the light wasn't strong enough, he pushed another button and the reading lamp brightened visibly.

The intricately wired, leather armchair, like everything else in the room, was a product of Rick's fertile imagination coupled with his ability to handle electronic equipment. Along one wall ran a workbench topped by cabinets containing parts, wire, tools, soldering irons, and jars of electrical apparatus. Next to the bed was a table with a bank of control buttons that turned on the radio, selected stations, controlled the volume, turned any selection of lights off or on, and opened and closed the windows.

Various gadgets around the room included an induction cooker that heated anything placed between its coils, an assortment of radios, including a television set, a short-wave receiver for the amateur frequencies, and a compact transmitter. The newest device was a popcorn popper that utilized ultrahigh radio waves. Rick was never satisfied. He spent much time making changes and building new equipment.

People seeing the room for the first time were invariably awed. They regarded Rick with respect, as a budding genius. Actually, the devices were all simple if one knew the fundamentals of electronics. They were the type of things that almost any competent amateur radio operator-like Rick-could produce with a little ingenuity, a lot of hard work, and frequent reference to diagrams and texts.

Rick's interest in electronics was natural enough, for Hartson Brant and the other Spindrift Island scientists were acknowledged leaders in the field of the electronic sciences. Rick's ambition was to follow in his famous father's footsteps and, as a result, much of his time was spent in study and experiment, and most of his spending money went for equipment.

Scotty, whose abilities ran along other lines, was properly appreciative of Rick's devices. He spent more time in his friend's room than in his own, which was right next door.

"I still can't see why Dad is leaving us out of things," Rick said unhappily. "We've always been included before."

"I don't like it any better than you do," Scotty replied. "But there's nothing we can do, so stop brooding about it."

A new voice spoke from the doorway. "Who's brooding?"

Rick smiled up at his sister Barby, a pretty blonde girl a year his junior. "I am," he said. "And you know why."

"I know," Barby nodded. "It's awful. Mother caught me hanging around the library just now and chased me upstairs."

"Have you found out anything?" Scotty asked.

"No. And Dad can keep his old secrets!"

"Don't worry," Scotty said dryly. "He will."

Barby sat down on a chair next to Scotty. "Anyway, that wasn't what I wanted to see you about. What I want to know is, what are you going to do about Dismal and that woodchuck?"

"Golly," Rick exclaimed, "I'd completely forgotten about Diz!"

"You'd better remember," Barby told him, "or Diz will starve to death. He won't leave that woodchuck hole long enough to eat."

The entire family was amused by the private war between Dismal, the Brant pup, and a large woodchuck that had taken up residence on the island. Mr. Hug-gins, who ran the Brant farm on the north side of Spindrift, had called on the boys for help, thinking that Scotty would probably dispose of the chuck with his rifle.

The boys had taken Dismal with them. The shaggy little dog surprised the woodchuck away from his hole, and the feud began. The chuck completely outwitted the pup, running him in circles, getting him tangled in a bramble patch, and finally leaving him panting at the edge of a burrow.

Since then, Dismal had maintained a constant vigil, hoping to catch the woodchuck away from his hole. The problem was complicated by the fact that the burrow had several entrances, many yards apart. Dismal would keep watch on one entrance, only to have the chuck come out another.

"He would come home at mealtime, only he never thinks of it," Barby said. "If I go down and whistle to him, he'll come. But it's a long walk."

Rick asked, "Did you try that noiseless dog whistle?"

Barby nodded. "He can't hear it. It's too far. Wouldn't it be easier for everyone if you just shot the woodchuck?"

"That wouldn't be right," Scotty said.

Back agreed. "Think what a blow it would be to Diz's pride. It would be like saying right out that he wasn't dog enough to handle a mere woodchuck."

Barby considered. "I never thought of that," she said finally. "I guess it wouldn't be right to shoot the

wood-chuck. But we have to do something, or Dismal will be nothing but skin and bones. I think he would come to eat if he remembered.”

“Think of something,” Scotty told Rick. “You’re the scientific mastermind.”

“How about that noiseless whistle?” Rick asked. “If we could make it louder, Diz would hear it and come home at mealtime.”

“Illgetit,” Barby said. She ran down the hall to her own room and in a moment returned with the whistle, a small metal thing shaped like a tube. It was the kind of patent whistle that could be bought in almost any pet shop. The sound it emitted was above the range that a human ear can hear but perfectly audible to a dog.

Rick studied it for a moment. “Trouble is, we can’t blow it loud enough. Suppose we used compressed air?”

“How?” Scotty asked.

“Remember those small oxygen tanks we used in the Submobile ? I could fill one with compressed air, then tap the mouthpiece of the whistle so it can be screwed onto the outlet. Then, turn the valve and the whistle blows.”

“Sounds good,” Scotty admitted. “Want to try it?”

“Let’s!” Barby exclaimed.

“Might as well,” Rick agreed. He swung to the floor and stood up. “Come on over to the lab.”

“I’m coming, too,” Barby said. “If I stay in the house, someone always thinks I’m spying.”

Scotty grinned. “Well, aren’t you?”

“Certainly not,” Barby retorted indignantly. “Just because I happened to hear a little bit of conversation on the telephone . . .”

Both boys laughed. Barby’s principal duty was acting as switchboard operator for the island telephones. When she was on the job, which was not frequently, she loved to listen in on conversations. Once it had been a good thing for Rick and Scotty that she had listened. During the moon-rocket experiment the boys had been captured by a gang that was trying to wreck the Spindrift Island plans. Barby’s quick action after overhearing a phone conversation had helped extricate them from a dangerous situation, as described in *The Rocket’s Shadow*.

Rick led the way down the back stairs and across the orchard to the low, gray bulk of the laboratory. Through the trees he could see the slim shape of his yellow Cub airplane. He flew almost every day, because he was the island messenger service, charged with most of the shopping, both for Mrs. Brant and the scientists.

Barby took his arm. “Look!” She pointed to where Hartson Brant and his two mysterious visitors were walking across the path on the outer edge of the orchard. Evidently they had been at the lab and were returning to the house.

Hartson Brant looked like an older edition of Rick. He was tall and athletic, his brown hair sprinkled with gray. Like Rick, he preferred comfortable clothing and when on the island always wore slacks and a sweater.

He saw Barby, Rick, and Scotty and waved. His two companions nodded politely.

Rick waved back, but not very cordially. “Wonder what they were doing at the lab?”

“Tour of inspection,” Scotty guessed. “Visitors always want to see the lab.”

That was true enough. People were always interested in seeing the laboratory where so many important advancements in the electronic sciences had been made. But Rick didn’t think that was the reason for this particular visit. The strangers could have seen the lab on any of their previous trips to Spindrift.

They reached the building and went to the main door. Oddly, it was closed. Rick turned the knob and pushed, but nothing happened.

“It’s stuck,” he said, but even as he spoke he knew it wasn’t. It was locked!

“Better knock,” Scotty said. His forehead wrinkled thoughtfully as he stared at the closed door.

Rick rapped sharply. In a moment the door opened, but only partially. Hobart Zircon looked out. The scientist, whose reputation was almost as great as that of Hartson Brant’s, was a huge man with a barrel chest and a low, booming voice. He and Rick and Scotty were the best of friends, old comrades of many far trails and dangerous situations.

“Afraid of burglars?” Rick asked jokingly. He started to enter, but, amazingly, Zircon blocked the way.

“Sorry, Rick,” he rumbled. He seemed embarrassed.

Rick couldn’t believe it. He was as much a part of the lab as Zircon, or Hartson Brant himself. All of it was open to him. He was free to use even the most delicate equipment. He had practically grown up in the lab!

He asked incredulously, “You mean you’re not going to let us in?”

Hobart Zircon’s voice boomed out from behind the gradually closing door.

“I’m sorry, kids, but those are orders. You can’t come in. None of you!”

CHAPTER II

The Deadly Whistle

Rick was literally stunned. He turned to Barby and Scotty and he just couldn’t say anything. Neither could they. Scotty’s mouth was open with surprise and Barby’s blue eyes were wide.

The unexpected had struck Rick Brant forcefully a number of times before. However, the unexpected was a part of adventuring. There was once, in *The Lost City*, when Ghengis Khan, a Mongol ruler who had been dead for centuries, had miraculously appeared. His strange appearance had been unexpected, but none the less welcome, because it had saved Rick and his friends from certain death in faraway Tibet.

And Rick would never forget the time, as related in *Sea Gold*, when he had been forced to run for his life through the maze of the New York subways. The sudden discovery of his pursuer's identity had been the most shocking thing he had ever experienced.

One came to realize that strange places always brought the unusual. Similarly, however, one had the right to expect serenity and a certain consistency in the sequence of events at home. That is why the shock of realizing the familiar rooms of the laboratory were barred to him was much greater to Rick than anything that might have happened on an expedition.

Barby found her voice first. She sounded very subdued. "Golly, I never thought anything like this could happen."

"None of us did," Scotty said. "But it's happened. Now what do we do?"

"Nothing." Rick was getting angry now. The least that was due them was some word of explanation.

"Take it easy," Scotty said. "Don't do or say something you'll be sorry for later."

Barby nodded agreement, her eyes on Rick.

"Okay." He agreed reluctantly. "I won't fly off the handle. But when the explanation comes, it had better be good."

"It will be," Barby said hurriedly. "Rick, what are we going to do about Dismal?"

That was Barby's way of changing the subject, Rick knew. He grinned at his sister. "We'll do just what we planned." He rapped on the laboratory door again.

When the door opened this time, it revealed a short, stocky man with close-cropped gray hair. He was Professor John Gordon, who had been with the boys on the recent expedition to Kwangara Island in the Western Pacific.

He smiled at Rick. "Didn't Zircon tell you the orders?"

"Yes, sir," Rick said. "I don't want to come in. I just wondered if you'd do something for me."

Gordon consulted his watch. "Glad to, if it doesn't take more than fifteen minutes. I have something cooking in the annealer that will take just that long."

Rick was sorely tempted to ask questions, but he choked them back. "It won't take more than five." He handed the dog whistle to the scientist.

"Will you thread the inside of this so it will fit on an oxygen-bottle nozzle? Then charge the bottle with compressed air."

Gordon examined the whistle. "An ultrasonic dog whistle, eh? All right, Rick. Wait here and I'll bring it out to you."

"What's ultrasonic?" Barby asked as the door closed.

"It's sound that is beyond the range of the human ear," Rick explained. "Birds and dogs, and lots of things can hear sounds that people can't. That's how the whistle works. It makes a sound just above our hearing range."

"I don't know why they couldn't make one we could hear as well as a dog," Barby said.

"It's mostly for people who have dogs in the city," Scotty told her. "They don't want to annoy their neighbors by blowing a loud whistle when they want to call their dogs, so they get these silent ones."

Rick's thoughts were far away. "I wonder," he mused absently. "Fifteen minutes in the annealing furnace, he said. What would he be working on?"

"Something made of glass," Scotty guessed. "That's what the annealing furnace is for."

"Maybe not. Maybe it's plastic," Rick hazarded. "Or maybe a special condenser for something. Dad originally got the furnace for making his own electronic condensers."

"Someday we'll know," Scotty said. "They'll get around to telling us."

"Yes, but by then all the excitement will be over."

Barby laughed gaily. "Now I know what's bothering you. It isn't the idea that Dad is keeping secrets. You're just afraid you're missing something!"

Rick grinned sheepishly. There was a lot to what Barby said. He hadn't had much excitement since the scientists had returned from the Pacific after exploring the sea bottom off Kwangara, one hundred fathoms down.

"Listen!" Scotty exclaimed suddenly.

From the other side of the island there was the sound of an engine turning over. Rick listened critically. It wasn't one of the Spindrift motorboats; he knew both of their engines. It must be the white cruiser.

"Dad's company has left," he said. "They didn't stay long this time."

"Long enough to get us locked out of the lab," Scotty said. "I'd give a pretty penny to find out who they are."

"And you're the boy who wasn't curious," Rick scoffed.

"I never said that, chum. I just said there wasn't any use trying to find out things until someone was ready to talk. I'm plenty curious."

"So am I," Barby agreed. "What if we went to see Dad now? We could ask him why we can't go into the lab."

“Nothing doing,” Rick said flatly. “I tried to ask him about this business once, and he just said not to ask questions. He didn’t even tell me why I wasn’t supposed to ask ‘em.”

“Check,” Scotty said. “Well concentrate on helping Diz until they decide to let us in on whatever it is.”

At that moment Professor Gordon opened the lab door and handed Rick the oxygen bottle with the whistle attached. “Here it is. Don’t turn it on too loud, or you’ll have every dog on the mainland heading this way-unless the thing explodes on you.”

Rick accepted it with thanks, then tucked it under his arm. “Let’s go back to the house and try it.”

“If we can’t hear it,” Scotty asked, “how will we know if it’s working?”

“That’s easy,” Barby said. “If Diz hears it, he’ll come. If he doesn’t hear it, he won’t come.”

“Even you should have been able to figure that out,” Rick jibed.

“It takes a simple mind to figure out such simple things,” Scotty said loftily. “I’m used to figuring out things that are hard.”

They had reached the back door of the house. “Go ahead and try it, Rick,” Barby said. “If it doesn’t work, I’m going to go get Diz. He didn’t show up at lunchtime and he didn’t eat a thing this morning.”

“All right.” Rick examined the device to make sure the whistle was on tight. The oxygen bottle, charged now with compressed air, was a small metal container that terminated in a valve and nozzle. The dog whistle was screwed tightly to the nozzle. “Here goes,” he said, and turned the valve.

At first there was only the sound of escaping air, then, with a loud *pop* the dog whistle split. Rick hastily shut off the air and regarded the cracked metal ruefully. “Too much pressure,” he said. “The thing couldn’t take it.”

“Now what do we do?” Barby asked, disappointed.

“Take turns going to get Diz at mealtime,” Scotty said. “When science fails, we have to go back to the old-fashioned way. We’ll get Diz by ankle express.”

“Science hasn’t failed yet,” Rick said. “I’ll think of something.”

“While you’re thinking, I’ll go get Diz.” Barby started off down the path that led to the farm.

“Wait a minute,” Scotty called. “I’ll go with you. Coming, Rick?”

“Go ahead,” Rick said. “I’ll hang around here. Maybe I can dream up something.”

He went back to his room while Barby and Scotty headed for the garden plot on the far side of the farm. There must be some way of making an ultrasonic whistle that Diz could hear.

If he only had another whistle-but maybe that wasn’t necessary. Air forced through a hole made a noise. If the pressure were powerful enough, it would be a loud noise. Also, if the aperture were tiny, the sound would be high. He let the remaining air out of the oxygen bottle and examined it. The thing wasn’t built for too high pressure. It wouldn’t do. But how else could he get pressure?

He went to a closet and dragged out a box of odds and ends, prowling through it in search of an idea. He discarded an old transformer and similar junk. A regular police whistle turned up, but he discarded that, too. Little by little he emptied the box until only small things, like bits of wire and an accumulation of buttons, were left. Then, almost hidden under the rest, he saw a bright-red bit of fluff. He took it out and looked at it, and an idea began to take form.

The fluff was the feathered tip of a tiny dart, designed to be shot from an air pistol. He couldn't remember how much pressure was built up in the pistol, but he knew it was a lot. He pushed the accumulated junk back in the box, then went to his dresser and found the pistol in the bottom drawer.

It was a simple device, built in the shape of an ordinary pistol. A lever pumped air into a false barrel directly under the barrel through which the dart traveled. By squeezing the trigger, the air was released and the dart shot out with terrific force.

Rick had stopped using the pistol for target practice because it wasn't accurate. First, though, he had tried to revamp it, threading the tip of the barrel to take an extension, on the theory that the longer the barrel, the greater the accuracy. It hadn't worked out.

He juggled the pistol in his hand and thought it over. Here was his compressed air supply. Now, if he could attach a whistle . . . His forehead wrinkled as he wrestled with the problem.

"I've got it," he said aloud. He could take a round piece of ordinary, rolled steel, drill it out and tap it so it would screw over the barrel, making a solid plug. Then, if he drilled a tiny hole, pin-point size, through the plug, it would be the only way for air to escape. If the pinhole were small enough, he ought to get an ultrasonic sound, and a good loud one!

He was halfway down the stairs, carrying the pistol, when he remembered that the lab machine shop was barred to him. Besides, more than fifteen minutes had elapsed, and Gordon would be busy.

Rick went back into the house. He called the lab from the switchboard and asked for Gordon.

"Yes, Rick?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir. Could you do something else for me?"

"What is it?"

Rick outlined his needs. In a moment Gordon answered. "I haven't time, Rick, but Julius Weiss says he can do it for you if you hurry right over."

"Coming," Rick said, and hung up.

Professor Julius Weiss, a small, thin scientist who looked more like a bookkeeper than the astute mathematician that he was, stood in the doorway waiting. He examined the pistol, and his eyes twinkled at Rick from behind his glasses.

"Still inventing, eh? All right, I'll plug the opening for you. How big do you want the hole in the plug?"

"I don't know," Rick said. "How small can you make it?"

“Would a thousandth of an inch diameter do?”

Rick grinned. “It should.”

“All right. It will take me about twenty minutes.”

Rick watched the door close, then sat down on the lab steps. It was a funny feeling, being locked out. Plenty of secret experiments had gone on behind locked doors in the laboratory, but always before he had been in on them.

The gray stone building had been built by the government during the war, as an experimental laboratory under Hartson Brant’s direction. The Spindrift scientists had conducted research into radar and other electronic fields. Then, with the war’s end, the government had planned to tear down the lab buildings, but Hart-son Brant and his fellow scientists had teamed up and won the Stoneridge prize for electronic development with the moon-rocket experiment, thus enabling the Spindrift group to buy the lab from the government and continue their research as an independent scientific foundation.

From the very beginning, Rick had worked in the lab, doing odd jobs and gradually acquiring the skill of a trained technician. Now, for reasons he could not fathom, he had to wait on the steps while one of his friends did a small machining job for him.

He would have liked to try pumping Zircon, Weiss, or Gordon, but his pride prevented him. They had excluded him. All right, he would stay excluded until they decided to tell him what it was all about.

In something less than twenty minutes, the door opened again. Julius Weiss sat down on the steps next to Rick, turning the air pistol over in his hands. The end of the barrel was now tightly plugged with shining steel, only an opening the size of a pin point providing a vent for the air.

“Interesting arrangement,” Weiss said. “What are you going to do with it?”

Rick explained briefly about Dismal and his feud with the woodchuck. “I hope he’ll be able to hear this,” he finished.

Weiss polished his glasses thoughtfully. “I wonder. You’ll get an ultrasonic sound, yes. But I’m afraid it will be well above Dismal’s hearing range. It’s true that dogs can hear higher sounds than humans, but even their range doesn’t go very much beyond 25,000 cycles, if that far.”

“How high do you think the sound from this will be, sir?” Rick asked.

Weiss shrugged. “There’s no way of telling without measuring the wave length of the sound. I suggest that you try it. However, I’ll be surprised if Dismal can hear it.”

“I’ll let you know how it works,” Rick promised. “Thank you, sir.”

He took the pistol and walked along the path that led to the farm. Barby and Scotty hadn’t returned with Diz; he would have seen them from the lab steps if they had. He skirted the orchard, then hiked along the edge of the woods that covered most of the southern side of the island. The garden patch where the woodchuck had taken over was on the back side of the island.

He was almost there before he saw Barby and Scotty. They were hiding behind a large oak tree, peering out at something in the field.

Rick went into the woods and circled so that he came up behind them. He didn't know what they were watching, but he didn't want to upset their plans.

Scotty heard him and turned, a wide grin on his face. "Watch this," he whispered. "But don't make any noise."

Rick looked out from behind the tree and took in the situation at a glance. Then he grinned, too. The woodchuck, a large, sleek specimen, was sitting upright in the very center of the lettuce patch. A mound of dirt told Rick that he was on the edge of an entrance to his burrow.

A few yards away, behind the woodchuck, a shaggy little dog was crouched, and he was worming his way toward the chuck, his belly close to the ground. Dismal was evidently planning to get within charging range before making a quick dash that would catch the woodchuck unawares-he hoped.

Rick, Barby, and Scotty watched, amused at Dismal's careful-but quite useless-strategy. What Dismal didn't realize was that the woodchuck's eyes, set toward the sides of his head like a rabbit's, could see perfectly well what was going on.

The shaggy pup finally reached a point only half a dozen yards from the chuck and Rick saw his legs gather under him. "He's going to charge," he whispered, just as Diz rushed.

The pup flew across the patch, all four legs driving like pistons. The woodchuck sat perfectly still, head turned just the slightest bit. Then, just when it seemed the pup had him, he tumbled headlong into his hole. Dismal's teeth closed on air with an audible click. He let out a growl of frustrated anger, stumbled over the mound of dirt, and skidded nose first to a stop. The three watchers could restrain their laughter no longer. Diz sat up and listened, then ran toward them, his tail wagging sheepishly.

"Tough luck, old fellow," Rick greeted him. "You almost had that chuck for a minute, didn't you?"

"Almost is right." Scotty grinned. "Did you see that woodchuck dive?"

For the first time, Barby noticed the pistol in Rick's hand. "Are you going to shoot the woodchuck?" she asked.

Rick shook his head. "It's a new system I want to try." He explained the theory of its operation.

"Let's see if it works," Scotty suggested. "But don't get it too close to Diz. The sound might deafen him."

"Good idea," Rick agreed. He bent down and patted the shaggy pup. Dismal, pleased at the attention, rolled over and played dead, all four legs in the air. It was his only trick, and he performed it at the slightest nod from anyone.

"Wait here," Rick instructed him. "Sit down, pup."

Dismal obediently sat down, panting expectantly.

Rick, Scotty, and Barby walked away from him to a distance of about fifty feet, Rick meanwhile pumping the lever that charged the gun with compressed air.

“Far enough,” Rick said. He aimed the air pistol at a point well over Dismal’s head and pulled the trigger.

There was the faint hiss of escaping air, then Barby let out a sudden scream.

Dismal was shuddering as though from a physical impact. His head drooped and a quiver ran through him. Then he collapsed in a little furry heap on the ground and lay still!

CHAPTER III

The Stranger

The entire Spindrift Island family, like any well-knit unit, seemed to sense a crisis. By the time Rick arrived, carrying the stiff little body of Dismal in his arms, the word had spread and the Brants, the scientists, and the Huggins family were gathering at the big house.

Rick was paper-white as he laid Dismal on the kitchen table. Barby was sobbing quietly and Scotty was having trouble swallowing.

“He’s not dead,” Rick said shakily. “His heart is beating. We listened, first thing.”

Mrs. Brant, a slim, motherly woman, put an arm around Rick’s shoulders. “What happened, son?”

Rick shook his head. He couldn’t make words come. To think that his experiment, designed to help Dismal, had hurt the pup ... he couldn’t understand what had happened.

Hartson Brant pushed through the group around the table and bent over the dog. The buzz of conversation slowed and stopped. He put his hand over Dismal’s heart, then stooped and put his ear on the shaggy fur.

“Good, strong pulse,” he said. “Get a flashlight, Rick.”

Rick ran to obey, getting the flashlight his father kept in the library. He hurried back and handed it to the scientist.

Hartson Brant flashed the light in Dismal’s fixed, open eyes, then shook his head. He tried to flex the pup’s leg, bending it back. The leg was very stiff.

Barby’s quiet sobs were the only sound in the room. Hartson Brant straightened up and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“He’s alive, all right. But something has paralyzed him. Every muscle has stiffened.”

Mrs. Brant asked anxiously, “Is he in pain, Hartson?”

“No, I’m sure he isn’t. Julius, what do you think?”

The little scientist frowned. "It's almost like a cataleptic trance, isn't it? Rick, suppose you tell us exactly what happened."

Rick swallowed hard. He felt terrible, but he knew he had to remember everything, so that perhaps the scientists could help Dismal.

"It was the air pistol," he began unsteadily. All eyes in the room were on him. He felt as though they were accusing him, because the pup was a favorite with everyone. "I wanted to make an ultrasonic whistle out of it, to call Dismal. Professor Weiss helped me. He plugged the muzzle, then bored a tiny hole in it. I went down to the field, and Diz . . . well, he was trying to catch the woodchuck . . ."

He wished they wouldn't look at him like that. "Anyway, we walked about fifty feet away from him and I pointed the pistol over his head and pulled the trigger, and . . ."

Dismal sneezed.

With a yell Rick jumped to the table. Dismal, a little unsteady, was getting to his feet! He shook himself, as though he had just come out of the water, then sneezed again, a loud, resounding sneeze!

Rick reached out and patted him. The pup promptly rolled over to play dead, but he hadn't realized he was on a table. Rick caught him as he was clawing at the smooth top, trying to keep from slipping to the floor.

"Nothing wrong with him," Scotty said with evident relief.

Hartson Brant watched the pup as Rick set him on his feet. The scientist was obviously puzzled. "Very strange," he murmured.

Barby glared at Rick, then hurried to where Dismal's food was kept. In a moment the shaggy pup was eating as though nothing had happened. The Spindrift group watched him, the scientists conversing in low tones. Rick caught fragments of what they were saying.

"Induced paralysis . . . auditory impact . . . approximate vibration . . . temporary catalepsis . . . ultrasonic . . ."

Dismal finished wolfing his food, took a few quick laps of water, then hurried out the kitchen door. In a moment they saw him trotting down the path that led toward the farm.

"Gone back to his woodchuck," Scotty said in wonderment. "What ever happened to him?"

"That is what we are going to determine," Hartson Brant said. "Rick, where is the pistol?"

For a moment Rick couldn't remember. "I must have dropped it down at the garden," he said. He wouldn't forget that awful moment when Diz had dropped as though a real bullet had been fired from the pistol. He never wanted to see the thing again!

"Will you get it for us, son?"

"Tilgo," Scotty offered.

Rick nodded his thanks. It would take him a little while to recover from the shock of what had happened. Golly, if he had really hurt Dismal! The pup was an important member of the family.

“Let’s go into the library,” Hartson Brant said. He motioned to Rick, Weiss, Zircon, and Gordon, then led the way.

The library, a huge room that served Hartson Brant as an office, was filled with books written in several languages, most of them on scientific subjects. On one wall were framed degrees and certificates stating that Hartson William Brant was an engineer, a doctor of science in physics, a member of numerous scientific societies, and a Fellow of the American Institute of Atomic Scientists.

In the center of the room was a massive, oaken desk, surrounded by chairs, most of which were comfortable and upholstered in leather.

The group sat down, and Hartson Brant said, “All right, Rick. Let’s have the story from the very beginning. Don’t leave out any details.”

Rick didn’t. Now that his fright was over, he was as anxious as any of them to find out what had happened. He described the day’s events from the moment Barby brought up the subject until they had seen Dismal with their own eyes, stiff and unresponding on the kitchen table.

When he had finished, he watched his father’s face anxiously. Hartson Brant looked at Professor Gordon and his eyebrows lifted in an unspoken question.

Gordon nodded. “It could very well be, Hartson.”

Julius Weiss spoke up. “At least it’s worth an intensive investigation.”

“Yes,” Zircon boomed. “Do you all realize that would explain why the clerk’s hearing aid exploded?”

Rick stared. They were talking gibberish! They weren’t talking about Dismal at all!

Scotty, the air pistol in his hand, knocked at the door.

“Come in,” Hartson Brant said. He took the pistol from Scotty, then smiled at Rick. “That’s all, son. Why don’t you and Scotty go keep an eye on Dismal?”

At any other time, Rick might have asked questions, but now he permitted himself to be ushered into the hall without the slightest protest. He was too confused by all that had happened, by the accident to Dismal, by the strange conversation he had just heard, by being barred from the lab.

“What goes on?” Scotty asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Honest, I haven’t the glimmer of an idea. Is Dismal okay?”

Scotty grinned. “By the time I got down there, he was on his stomach trying to sneak up on the wood-chuck again. He’s all right, Rick. Don’t worry about him any more.”

“That’s easy to say.” Rick shuddered. “For a while I thought I had . . .”

“Skip it,” Scotty said roughly. “I thought so, too. Come on, let’s go on down and keep an eye on him.”

“That was an excuse,” Rick said. “Dad just wanted to get us out of the library. I’d rather go get a glass of milk. My throat feels like the tail end of a sandstorm.”

In the kitchen, they found Mrs. Brant just pouring three tall, cold glasses of milk while Barby was putting fresh doughnuts on a plate.

“I thought you might be thirsty,” Mrs. Brant said as the boys entered.

Scotty grinned as Rick gave his mother a hug. “Talk about woman’s intuition,” he said. “The Brant kitchen is full of it.”

Barby handed Rick the doughnut platter. “I’ve decided,” she said firmly. “From now on, I’m going to get Dismal myself when it’s time for him to eat.”

“You and us,” Scotty said past a mouthful. “If the boy genius tries any more tricks like that, I’ll bean him personally.”

“You and how many other Marines?” Rick demanded. “You talk to me like that and I won’t invent any more armchairs for you to sleep in.”

“Armchair or cement floor, it’s all the same to me,” Scotty said airily. “I’m the rugged type. I can sleep anywhere.”

Rick finished his glass of milk, then walked out to the big porch that faced the sea. The excitement had made him restless. He wondered again what the scientists were discussing, what was so secret that even he and Scotty couldn’t be let in on it. But most of all, he wondered what had happened to Dismal.

Scotty came out to the porch and gauged his mood accurately. “No use hanging around and making bum guesses about what’s going on. What say we take a ride?”

“Boat or plane?”

“Plane. I need a little flying time. I’m getting rusty.”

Scotty had got his flying license a short while before, and like Rick, had fallen in love with flying.

“Okay,” Rick agreed. “We can take a swing over Whiteside and see what the town looks like. Do you realize you haven’t been off the island more than half a dozen times since we got back from Kwangara?”

“After that particular island,” Scotty said fervently, “I don’t care if we ever leave Spindrift again.” He led the way from the porch to where the Cub waited on the grassy landing strip. “Incidentally, I wonder how Chahda is making out?”

Chahda, the little Hindu boy who had been their companion on the trip to Tibet and later to the island of Kwangara, had remained in Hawaii at the invitation of Dr. Warren of the Pacific Ethnographic Institute. They corresponded, but irregularly, after the fashion of boys their age. Besides, Chahda was very busy studying. He had a positive passion for learning, probably because his schooling in India had been so haphazard. His only textbook, until his informal adoption by the Brants, had been an ancient copy of *The World Almanac*.

“He’ll do all right wherever he is,” Rick said. “His last letter said he had made a lot of friends, but he missed us.” He motioned to the plane. “Get in. I’ll crank the prop for you.”

As Scotty climbed into the little yellow Cub, Rick untied the ropes that protected it against sudden winds, then pulled the prop through to prime it.

“Switch on,” Scotty called.

Rick snapped the prop down and the engine caught at once. He went around and climbed into the passenger’s seat and fastened his belt as Scotty warmed the engine. “All set?”

“Any time.”

Scotty pushed the throttle forward and the plane moved into take-off position. Then, with a final quick testing of the controls, Scotty took off.

Rick looked down as Spindrift fell away under them. As Scotty banked and headed toward the New Jersey coast, he could see the island in its entirety. It was shaped, as Scotty sometimes said, “like a T-bone steak without the bone.” At the back side of the island were tidal flats connecting it to the mainland. The flats were under water when the tide was in, so that communication with the mainland had to be by boat, or by Rick’s Cub.

“Let’s take a look at Whiteside,” he suggested. “Just fly over so we can see what’s up.”

Scotty obligingly turned toward the town, a small community where the Brants did most of their shopping and where the younger members of the Spindrift family went to school. In a few moments Rick saw the outline of the airport, a single strip with a small hangar run by his friend Gus who made a living doing repairs and teaching flying to the members of White-side High School’s flying club.

On the edge of Whiteside was the boat dock where the Spindrift Island boats tied up. Rick looked down at it idly, then did a double-take.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “Let’s go down and take a look at that!”

Scotty had been gazing off toward the New Jersey flatlands. “At what?”

“The dock! I think that cabin cruiser is there.”

Scotty flipped the plane on its side and banked around. “By golly, I think you’re right!” He straightened out and let the plane slip down, losing altitude rapidly.

“It is,” Rick said. “Do you suppose it stays there all the time?”

“I doubt it,” Scotty remarked. “It must be the business at the island that’s keeping it around. Sure it’s the same one?”

“I’m sure,” Rick nodded. “Look, it’s just getting under way, too! Shall we follow it?”

“Okay. You don’t think it’s going to Spindrift, do you?”

“It was there earlier. They wouldn’t be going back so soon. Let’s keep their trail and see where they do

go.”

Scotty kept the Cub in a lazy circle as the white cabin cruiser left the dock and started south along the coast. Rick watched it, wondering. There wasn't anything to the south until Spindrift. But maybe they were going right on by, heading for a point on the coast farther down. He began to feel guilty about trailing the boat when his father obviously wanted him to know nothing about it. He was even on the point of calling the whole thing off when he realized the boat was on a course that could only take it to Spindrift. If it had been continuing on past the island, the course would have lain more to sea.

“No luck,” Scotty said. “It’s heading for home. Well, what now?”

Rick shrugged. “Got any ideas?”

“Yes,” Scotty said wryly. “Let’s put a microphone in the library. It looks like that’s the only way we’ll find out anything.”

He put the plane in a shallow dive, pointing it toward the back of the island. Rick sat still and said nothing as the sea came up. About thirty feet over the water, Scotty leveled off, holding the plane on a course that would take them behind the farmhouse.

“Watch for Dismal,” he said.

Rick dropped the side window so he could lean out a little as the edge of the island loomed in front of them. Scotty climbed a few feet, just enough to clear the trees, then they flashed over the garden. Rick got a glimpse of the pup, a dark blot of fur against the green grass. He couldn't see the woodchuck, but it was a relief to know that Diz was well enough to stay on the job. Then the garden was past and they were over the woods. He looked out to the east, toward Pirate’s Field, the clearing on the south side of the island. The moon-rocket launcher had been there once, but now it was gone-dismantled and turned over to the Army for further rocket experiment at White Sands Proving Ground. Only a patch of barren soil, fused sand from the terrible heat of the launching, remained to show where the first rocket to the moon had rested.

Scotty flew south along the coast for a short distance, then turned back to Spindrift. Rick smiled to himself. Scotty, in spite of his more casual attitude toward the mysterious visitors to the island, was burning with curiosity. He wanted to be around, just in case any information turned up.

Approaching the landing strip from the south, Scotty let down gradually, then cut the throttle just before they reached the lab. The plane settled into a glide, dropping down over the radar antenna on the lab roof, and rolled to a smooth landing on the strip.

The strange cruiser was already tied up at the pier. Rick looked at it thoughtfully before they went into the house through the kitchen. The boat’s captain, if he could be called such, was leaning against the cabin, patiently waiting. The men must be inside with Hart-son Brant.

Rick’s mother greeted him. “Where have you been? Dad wants to see you in the library!”

Rick and Scotty stared at each other for a moment, then Rick dashed for the library and knocked at the door.

“Come in,” Hartson Brant called.

Rick opened the door and went in. His father was seated at the desk. The room's only other occupant was the younger of the two strangers. He had the air pistol and he was idly rubbing the barrel while he looked at Rick.

The boy returned the glance with interest. The stranger was young, not more than twenty-five, and there was a look of hardness about him, like that of a trained athlete. His hair was brown, but of a shade lighter than Rick's. His blue eyes had a penetrating quality that Rick found uncomfortable. He felt as though in the moment it took him to walk to the desk the stranger had analyzed his opinions, his likes and dislikes, his most secret thoughts. He wouldn't have been at all surprised to have the man say casually, "You were the one who wired Barby's chair so that every time she tried to sit down a siren went off."

"Sit down, Rick," Hartson Brant said.

He obeyed eagerly, and his pulse speeded. Could it be that the moment had come when he would actually learn something of the Spindrift Island mystery?

CHAPTER IV

Report-and Ask No Questions!

The stranger held up the pistol. "This thing was your idea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your father tells me you're a handy man in a laboratory."

Rick didn't know what to say to that. He looked at his father. The scientist smiled and nodded.

"Can you keep your mouth shut?" the stranger demanded.

Rick stiffened. "I always have, sir."

"Good. Now, tell me all you know about Scotty."

The interview wasn't going at all as he had expected. Instead of getting information, he was giving it. "What do you want to know about him?"

"Everything. The way you met him, where he came from, why he is living with you when he isn't a member of the family."

"He is a member of the family," Rick said. "Anyway, we think of him as one."

"Start at the beginning," Hartson Brant said.

"Yes, sir. It was during the moon-rocket experiment. I got caught by the gang that was trying to wreck our rocket, and they were just about to beat me up when Scotty sailed in. He was in uniform then. He

was a sergeant in the Marines. After he rescued me, I brought him home and Dad hired him as a guard to keep people away from the rocket launcher.”

“Did you examine his papers?” the stranger asked.

“Yes, sir. He had an honorable discharge that said he had served at Tarawa, Saipan, and Okinawa. He told us he had talked a recruiting sergeant into enlisting him, even if he was away underage. He’s only a year older than I am. Anyway, he served as a guard for a while, and he went with us to Tibet. But by that time he wasn’t a guard any more. He was just sort of one of the family. I mean, he’s like a brother to Barby and me, and Dad and Mom treat him just the way they do us.”

“Does he know anything about lab work?” The question was addressed to Hartson Brant.

“Yes. Since we took him into the family he has become an unofficial lab assistant, just as Rick is. He’s very handy with tools, especially machine tools. We pay both of them a salary for helping around the lab, and they earn it.”

“You wouldn’t question his loyalty?”

“We’ve trusted him with our lives,” Hartson Brant said simply. “We wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

Rick couldn’t see where the conversation was leading, but he didn’t dare ask questions. His father and the stranger would come to the point in due time. He sat quietly and waited. Presently the stranger laid the air pistol on the desk.

“You’re so curious you’re ready to pop like a balloon,” he said, and grinned suddenly. It was a warm, friendly grin. Rick couldn’t help returning it.

“I wish I could answer all of your questions,” he said, “but that is not possible. In the interests of security, I had to ask your father not to tell you anything, or even to explain why he couldn’t tell you what was going on. For the same reason, I asked him to restrict the laboratory to only the scientists who were actually at work on this particular project.”

Rick stopped grinning. So he wasn’t actually to learn anything after all.

Hartson Brant laughed. “Don’t look so unhappy, Rick. You look as though the world was coming to an end. As it happens, the air pistol you developed, and its effect on Dismal, interested Mr. Ames enough so that he has asked me to lend you to him.”

“Lend me? Scotty too?” Rick looked at the stranger anxiously. “What for?”

“The first thing you must learn is not to ask questions,” the stranger said. “Incidentally, my name is Steve Ames. If you just call me Steve, it will make things a little more informal. Are you and Scotty willing to take a trip?”

Rick jumped out of his chair. “Are we! Where to?”

Steve chuckled. “Remember what I said about not asking questions? I’ll supply all the answers you’ll need. Your father is lending us Zircon and Weiss, too. You and Scotty will act as their assistants. Now, listen carefully. At no time must you tell anyone what you are doing, or give them the slightest hint of what is going on. And that means absolutely no one, not even the pup that got you into this. Do you

understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Rick was listening attentively now.

“By helping Weiss and Zircon you will be serving the government in a very important project. If you talk, it will be comparable to treason. That’s how serious this thing is. Now, you and Scotty are to go to Washington as soon as possible. I don’t care how you get there-you can fly your plane, take a train, or drive. That’s up to you. But I want you there on Friday. This is Tuesday, so you have two full days. Can you do it?”

“You bet we can!”

Steve Ames smiled. “An eager beaver, I see. Well, don’t be too eager. At no time will you try to do more than you are specifically ordered to do. Got that?”

“Got it,” Rick said happily.

“Okay. When you get to Washington, go to the Elliston Hotel. Take a double room. Then just wait there until such time as you get further instructions.”

“Elliston,” Rick repeated. “I won’t forget. But how about Weiss and Zircon? Will they be there too?”

Steve sighed deeply.

“I take it back,” Rick said quickly. “I didn’t ask anything.”

Steve laughed, then rose and held out his hand. “Okay, Rick. You’ll see me again before long.” He turned to Hartson Brant. “I must be getting back. It’s lucky your phone call caught me. I was on my way out the hotel door when the bellhop shouted.” He shook hands with the scientist. “I won’t be seeing you again until we’ve made sure we’re on the right track. Meanwhile, you and Gordon can keep working on that other angle.”

“Good luck,” Hartson Brant said. “You can be sure we’re doing our best.”

He and Rick escorted Steve to the door and out on the porch. Scotty, curiosity written in every line, looked up at them from where he had been sitting.

“This is Scotty,” Rick said.

Scotty got up so fast that the chair almost fell over.

“My name is Steve Ames,” the stranger said, shaking hands. “Rick will tell you what’s happening.” His eyes twinkled. “As much as he knows.”

The two boys fell in step as Hartson Brant walked with Steve to the pier. He got aboard and Rick cast off the lines for them. The cruiser backed out of the cove, then swung in the direction of Whiteside. Steve Ames waved, then went into the cabin.

Scotty grabbed Rick’s arm. “Come on, give! What’s up?”

“I don’t know anything,” Rick told him. “Except you and I are going to Washington on a special job as

assistants to Weiss and Zircon.”

“Washington!” Scotty let out a whoop. “District of Columbia or State of Washington?”

“Golly,” Rick exclaimed, “I forgot to ask!”

“Washington, D. C.,” Hartson Brant supplied, smiling. “You’re to report there-and you are to ask no questions!”

CHAPTER V

The Scientists Vanish

The Hotel Elliston was a small apartment hotel on G Street a few blocks from the United States Department of State. Rick and Scotty wondered why Ames had chosen it for a rendezvous, then decided it was probably because it was so inconspicuous. It was neither shabby nor fancy, but something halfway between.

Rick was seated in the room’s only armchair, putting a precise crease in the crown of a new gray felt hat. He was very self-conscious about the hat, since it was the first one he had ever owned. Up to now he had resisted wearing a hat of any kind, compromising on a battered cap in bad weather.

“Go easy on that new sky piece,” Scotty said. “You’ll wear it out.” He was sprawled on one of the twin beds, reading a copy of the *Washington Post*.

Rick held up the hat and examined the crease critically. “Not bad. Makes me look distinguished, don’t you think?” He put it on and adjusted it at a slight angle.

“Extinguished is the word,” Scotty told him. “Whatever made Barby decide to buy you a hat is beyond me. Unless she was afraid the Washington sun would make you crazier than usual.”

Rick’s sister had got him the hat as a going-away present. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought the hat had been inspired by her seeing one of her favorite movie stars wearing one just like it.

It felt funny to be wearing the hat. Rick stood up, adjusted his brown gabardine suit, straightened his tie, and admired the effect in the mirror.

“You know whom you look like?” Scotty exclaimed suddenly. “You look like Dad! The hat makes you look older and it covers up your hair. No kidding, I wouldn’t be able to tell you apart at a hundred yards.”

“Fine thing,” Rick said. He took off the hat and tossed it on the bureau. “I get a new hat and you tell me it makes me look like my own father.” Secretly, though, he was flattered. He could do a whole lot worse than look like Hartson Brant.

Scotty folded the newspaper with meticulous care, then heaved the neat roll into the wastebasket. “I’m

sick of waiting,” he announced. “What do you suppose happened to Steve Ames? Do you think he’s forgotten all about us?”

“Not a chance.” Rick frowned. “But I’m getting worried. It must be something serious to keep him away this long.”

Steve Ames had specified Friday as their arrival date. Friday had come and gone without a word from him. So had Saturday and Sunday. It was now Mondaynoon and there had been no sign of Ames or anyone else who seemed interested in them.

“I’m hungry,” Scotty said.

“I’ve been hungry for two days,” Rick told him. “I wish we could go out and get a good meal. The food here is terrible.”

They had been afraid to leave the vicinity of the hotel without permission from Ames, and there were no other restaurants for several blocks. They had taken turns going down to the drugstore on the corner and returning with sandwiches and milk shakes.

Rick was worried. He couldn’t imagine anything that would keep Ames from contacting them, unless some mysterious enemy had caught up with him. But there had been no evidence of an enemy. The scientists could very well have been asked to help on some mysterious research problem that didn’t involve anyone but government personnel.

“Where does that air pistol fit into this?” Rick wondered aloud.

Scotty grunted. “Never mind the pistol. Where do we fit? And there’s something else. We’re supposed to be assistants to Weiss and Zircon. Where are they?”

“In some other hotel,” Rick guessed. “For all we know, they might be in this one.”

“Not a chance. We’d have heard Zircon bellowing like a wounded bull at being kept waiting for so long.” Scotty sat up. “Let’s get another couple of sandwiches.”

Rick’s stomach turned over at the thought. “Sandwiches? Don’t flatter those padded slabs of blotting paper. I don’t know whether I can eat another one or not.

“Okay, how about a milk shake?”

Rick sighed. “I suppose we have to eat something.

It’s your turn to go to the store. I’ll go down and wait for you on the steps. I need air.”

They locked the room door behind them and went down the hall to the ancient elevator. It was the type that passengers operate by pushing buttons.

“Get in,” Scotty said. “I’ll pilot this trip.”

“You have more flying hours in this box than you have in the Cub,” Rick jibed.

Scotty pushed the button for the lobby and the elevator shuddered into action. “Two miles an hour

straight down,” he said. “Jet propelled.”

“It’s better than walking,” Rick said. “But not much better.”

Scotty swung the door open as they reached the lobby. “Main floor,” he announced. “The entrance to the drugstore lunch counter is right up the street. Ptomaine Willie will serve you with used sponges, library paste, and other delicacies.”

“Bring your own indigestion pills,” Rick added.

They crossed the lobby and went through the front door, pausing on the steps. “I’ll wait here,” Rick said. “Want to take my order now, waiter?”

“I know it already. Peanut butter sandwich and chocolate milk shake. Me, I’ll have cheese. With a vanilla milk shake. I’m a rebel.”

“When it comes to choosing between sawdust extract and library paste, it doesn’t pay to be different,” Rick said.

“Confucius Brant, the sage of Spindrift Island. Well, here I go. If they had any bacon, I’d bring it home, but the short-order boys can’t cope with anything as complex as frying bacon.”

Scotty went down the steps and started up the street toward the drugstore, but as he passed the taxi stand next to the hotel, the door of a yellow cab flew open and the driver jumped out to face him.

Rick started down the steps in fright at the sudden move, then stopped short. The driver and Scotty were shaking hands and grinning from ear to ear.

“Sarge!” the driver exclaimed. “I wasn’t sure it was you! Boy, you sure don’t look like the same character I watched them carry away on Oky !”

“That’s because my face is clean,” Scotty said. “Gizmo, it’s swell to see you. I’ve wondered a million times where you were and how you were making out.”

“Not bad,” the driver said. “How is it with you?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Scotty said. He beckoned to Rick. “Gizmo, meet Rick Brant. We’ve been buddies ever since I got paid off. Rick, this character is Gizmo McLean, the worst shot in the Marine Corps.”

Gizmo was short and stocky, with a thatch of tousled blond hair. He wasn’t very old, perhaps twenty. He had the kind of grin that made you want to grin back. He and Rick shook hands.

“I wasn’t even sure the sarge was still kicking,” Gizmo said. “The last I saw of him, corpsmen were lugging him away on a stretcher. That was on Okinawa.”

“And the last I saw of Gizmo,” Scotty added, “he was firing a light machine gun with one hand and eating K-rations with the other.”

“What are you doing in Washington?” the driver asked. “You live here?”

Rick gave Scotty a glance of warning.

“Just visiting,” Scotty said. “Look, Giz, give me your address, will you? Just as soon as I can, I’ll look you up. I can’t stop to talk right now.”

Gizmo wrote down his address and phone number in a notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to Scotty. “If you’re staying at this hotel, I’ll be seeing you often. This is my regular stand. But don’t let me keep you, sarge . You were goin ’ somewhere, weren’t you?”

“After food,” Scotty said. “See you later, Gizmo.”

“See you later, chow-hound,” Gizmo called after Scotty’s departing figure. He turned to Rick. “Greatest guy in the world.”

Rick nodded. “I think so, too.”

“I could tell you a hundred stories about him,” Gizmo said. “Some of ‘em you wouldn’t believe. Why, I remember once-this was on Tarawa-he scared me silly. We were flat on our faces in the sand, and a Jap Nambu gun was peckin ’ away at us, and I could feel the slugs fanning across the seat of my pants like bees, and-“

“Taxi”

Gizmo stopped short and ran for the door of his cab. “See you later,” he called, then opened the door for a man who was waiting impatiently.

Rick grinned and took a seat on the hotel steps. He liked Gizmo McLean, but he wasn’t sure meeting him right in front of the hotel was good. If the ex-marine started asking questions that Scotty couldn’t answer, it might be embarrassing. He wondered what the name “Gizmo” meant. But he had spent most of his time wondering these past few weeks. It was getting so that he couldn’t be sure of anything.

The hotel porter came out with dustpan and broom and started sweeping the steps. Rick got out of his way and stood watching him for a moment, then he asked, “Is this really Washington, D. C.?”

The porter stared, then he grinned. “See between the cracks there? I mean between those two buildings.” He pointed across the street. Partially visible through the narrow opening was the tall shaft of the Washington Monument .

“Oh, that,” Rick said. “That’s an Egyptian obelisk. A little bigger than most, sure, but still an obelisk. How do I know I’m not in Egypt ?”

“If you don’t know,” the porter returned, “I sure don’t know how to convince you. Whyn’t you try staying out of the sun for a couple of days? This sun will addle you like milk curdling.”

“Maybe that’s my trouble,” Rick agreed. He noticed Scotty coming down the street and went to meet him.

Scotty held up two paper bags. “The clerk said we should throw away the contents and eat the bags. They have more flavor .”

"I believe it," Rick said. "Where do we eat the stuff? Here or in our room?"

"Let's go up. The mice are apt to tear the place down if we don't share our food with them."

As the creaky elevator took them slowly upward, Rick asked, "What kind of a name is Gizmo?"

"Marine talk. A gizmo is anything you can't remember the right name for. Or maybe something you never heard the name of. You can use it as a synonym for 'gadget.' It's a common nickname in the Marines."

"And what were you doing face down in the sand while slugs were fanning your pants?"

Scotty chuckled. "Sounds like Gizmo has been giving you the word. He has more imagination than Barby." He produced the room key and opened the door. "Anyway, that particular time—"

He stopped short. Steve Ames was sitting in the room's only chair, reading one of their magazines.

"Come in," Steve invited. "Make yourselves at home."

"Thanks," Rick said with relief. "How did you get in here?"

Steve tossed the magazine to the table. "Easy enough. I crawled out of the woodwork." His glance switched to Scotty. "So you met an old friend of yours, eh? What did you tell him?"

"Nothing," Scotty said. "Only that I was visiting in the city and would look him up whenever I could."

"George John McLean, otherwise known as Gizmo," Steve recited. "Ex-marine, served with the Second Division. He was awarded the Bronze Star for the same action that got you the Silver Star. Right?"

Scotty's jaw was on his chest. Rick swallowed. Steve Ames didn't miss a thing!

"Right." Scotty scratched his head. "But how did you have time to find that out?"

Steve smiled. "I'm disappointed to have you ask that. Isn't he driving a cab? Can't I read the number? Isn't there a telephone in this room?"

All that was true, Rick thought, but the cab company wouldn't have all that information. Steve must have called Marine Headquarters after he found out Gizmo's name. It frightened him a little to think how fast the Marines must have checked Gizmo's record. Only someone important could get service like that.

"We expected you on Friday," Scotty said.

"I expected to be here. Something came up. I'll tell you about it in a minute, but first memorize this name and address: Colonel James Blythe, Room 121 Connors Building. Got it?"

Both boys repeated the name and address aloud, then Rick repeated it to himself several times. Colonel? He wondered if the mystery had anything to do with the Army.

"You're to go see him within half an hour," Steve said. "He'll tell you something of what we're working on."

"Will Weiss and Zircon be there?" Rick asked.

Steve frowned. "Weiss and Zircon were to have arrived here by Pullman early Friday morning. I sent a man to meet them. He came back and reported they were not on the train. I thought perhaps he had failed to recognize them from the pictures I gave him and went to find out for myself. I wasted half the morning hunting Washington hotels. There wasn't a sign of them."

"Maybe they missed the train," Scotty guessed.

Rick thought not. Weiss and Zircon didn't miss trains. He felt a tingle of worry.

"They made the train," Steve said. "I phoned Spindrift. Your father saw them to the station. I checked with the train crew and they knew nothing. The porter remembers that they went to bed just before the train reached New York. He didn't see them after that. I put a crew to work checking all the places the train stopped on the way down. It took a while, but I found out where they got off."

He stared out of the window, his face thoughtful. "They had instructions to come direct to Washington."

They didn't. Now, why? What could have caused them to leave the train? Or, more important, who?"

Rick stopped breathing.

"They got off at Baltimore," Steve said. "A brake-man saw them. Strange, isn't it? They are certainly distinctive enough in appearance. Almost anyone who saw them would remember them, yet apparently only a single brakeman saw them. They got off the train at Baltimore, and they left by the wrong side. They opened a door on the opposite side of the platform. The brakeman saw them get down and cross the tracks, and he saw them disappear into the darkness. This was early morning, remember. The last he saw of them they were climbing up the embankment a few hundred feet behind the station."

Steve paused, then finished quietly: "That is the last anyone has seen or heard of them."

CHAPTER VI

Janig

It was Rick who broke the silence following Steve's last words.

"And I was thinking just a little while ago that perhaps there wasn't an enemy to watch out for!"

Steve glanced up sharply. "What makes you think there is?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? You don't know where Weiss and Zircon went, and none of your men do. Dad doesn't. They just vanished. They wouldn't vanish of their own free will. I know them better than that."

"Yes," Scotty agreed. "If they haven't got in touch with anyone, it's because they couldn't. The only reason they couldn't phone or write or something would be because they were being held."

"My thoughts exactly." Steve rose and picked up his hat. "However, I have the advantage in my

reasoning. You see, *I know* we have an enemy. Your father and the scientists are helping us to combat that enemy. It's warfare in the dark, because we haven't the faintest idea of who he-or they-might be."

A question trembled on Rick's lips, but Steve shook his head.

"That's enough chatter. I'm going back to my office and start over again. There must be some clue. Meanwhile, you two hop into a cab and get over to see the colonel. He expects you. And don't take your friend's cab, Scotty. Walk out to Pennsylvania Avenue and pick up a cruising hack. It's safer that way."

Steve went out the door, Scotty right on his heels. Rick reached for his new hat and followed.

At the elevator, Steve motioned for them to get in. "I won't ride down with you," he said. "Now, for *ih* i luva Mike, be careful. Keep your eyes open. I don't want you to show up missing too."

He said it half jokingly, but Rick sensed that he was deadly serious. As the elevator made its slow way down, he pondered on the strange disappearance of Wetes and Zircon. What could have lured them from the train? And were they all right?

Scotty was thinking along the same lines, because he said, "If anyone has hurt Weiss or Zircon . . ."

"Let's hope they're just being held," Rick said. He crossed his fingers. The scientists were his good friends. It made him feel funny to think they were in the hands of an unknown enemy. "We'd better step on it," he told Scotty.

Out on the street, they hiked rapidly in the direction of Pennsylvania Avenue . A cruising cab passed and they hailed it. Rick knew the reason behind Steve's suggestion. A cruising taxi was less likely to be a "plant" than one parked in front of the hotel. He gave the driver the name of the Connors Building and they settled back in their seats, not talking. It wouldn't do to discuss things in a taxi.

The building was in the shadow of the White House, a very unimpressive, temporary structure. They went up the steps, looking around curiously. There were no guards. A receptionist smiled and asked their business.

"Room 121," Rick said.

"Colonel Blythe? One flight up, and turn to your right."

Rick gave Scotty a sideways glance as they hiked up the stairs. There was nothing secret about this place! Anyone could walk in. He began to feel a little let down, because he had pictured a stalwart guard, maybe a soldier, who would bar the door while asking their names.

They went down the second-floor corridor until they found Room 121. Rick knocked, and a voice said, "Come in."

Inside a girl smiled at them. "Yes?"

"We've come to see Colonel James Blythe," Rick said.

She nodded toward an inner door. "Go right in, Mr. Brant. He is expecting you." She smiled at Scotty. "Mr. Scott, too."

“Thank you,” Rick said, a little dazed. How had she known which was which? He was sure he had never seen her before. His respect for this unknown organization skyrocketed.

In the inner room, a man in a civilian suit came to meet them. “I’m Blythe,” he said. “Come in and sit down.” He led the way to his desk and pointed out comfortable chairs.

He was about forty years of age, his hair graying. Even in civilian clothes, Rick thought he could identify him as a soldier. He had the straight shoulders, the erect carriage, and the poised assurance of a career Army man.

“You’re curious,” Blythe said. “Naturally. Well, I’m going to answer some of your questions, the nontechnical ones. Then I’m going to send you to the laboratory where you are to work.”

“But Weiss and Zircon . . .” Scotty stopped.

“True. Weiss and Zircon have disappeared. Still, there is work to be done. You can assist someone else until they show up. Now, let’s get down to cases.”

Rick and Scotty sat bolt upright on the edges of their chairs.

“About two months ago,” Colonel Blythe began, “three men walked into a secret government laboratory in Arizona. They were not stopped, because the lab was well concealed within a private hospital. It was underground, and even the majority of the hospital staff did not know of its presence. It could only be reached through the hospital library, by passing the librarian, who is one of our people.

“These three men walked in, went down the corridor without molesting anyone, and went into the library. It happened that two of the staff physicians were in there, as well as the librarian. One of the men carried what at first glance appeared to be a box camera. He held it before him, as one would to take a picture, and clicked the shutter.”

The colonel paused to light a cigarette while Rick fidgeted.

“It was not a camera,” Blythe said. “The librarian and the doctors heard a high, shrill whisper, then they collapsed, writhing on the floor. They felt no pain. They did not lose consciousness. But when they tried to get up they had no control over their muscles. They were completely paralyzed.”

A memory flashed into Rick’s mind. Dismal!

“The men walked to the library desk, reached underneath and correctly pressed the combination of buttons that opened the secret door to the lab—a hinged bookcase. They went into the lab, used their weapon to knock down those at work, helped themselves to the lab records and several specimens, and walked out again, entirely without resistance or trouble from anyone.”

Colonel Blythe was very grave. “I can’t tell you the nature of the records or specimens, but I assure you they knew exactly what to look for.”

“An inside job,” Scotty guessed.

“Yes. The person who tipped them off was discovered and is now in prison. He knows nothing, except that he was paid for information.”

The girl from the outer office interrupted. She carried a tube of white paste, a fingerprint outfit, and two white cards.

Rick and Scotty submitted to fingerprinting, but of a very unusual kind. She wanted only their thumb imprints, and she took them in white, on a white card!

“Queer,” Scotty muttered.

“Not very.” Colonel Blythe smiled. “You’ll see. But to go on. A month ago, three men, presumably the same ones, walked into an office in Washington, in a building near by. It was the same story. Only a fortunate accident kept them from helping themselves to top-secret material. The officer in charge of the security vault was delayed by a traffic accident and the vault was not open. They had no means of opening it.

Oh, yes, there was one odd thing. Under the effects of this box weapon of theirs, a clerk’s hearing aid exploded.”

He looked at Rick. “Does all this mean anything to you?”

“It wouldn’t have, sir,” Rick said, “except for what happened to my dog . . .”

Colonel Blythe smiled. “How is Dismal? Back to normal, I hope. I’m very fond of dogs. I have three, as a matter of fact.” He became serious again. “I won’t insult your intelligence by telling you what a weapon of this kind means. We were forced to go outside the service for aid. Naturally, we went to the best authorities. They happened to be the Spindrift scientists. We knew you were working in ultrasonics because your father, Rick, supplied the central scientific authority here with complete details of the Sonoscope he developed for use under the sea at Kwangara .”

The colonel rose. “That is all. You can see why the utmost secrecy is essential if we are to prevent panic. We can fight this thing as long as it is underground. Once all the facts are known, the confusion, the newspaper reports, and the furore it would create would only help the criminals to cover their trail more effectively.”

He reached for his phone and said cryptically, “Ten.”

In a moment a voice buzzed in the receiver. “Yes?”

“This is Janig,” Blythe said. “I’m sending them over to you. They’ll arrive in ten minutes.” He replaced the phone and addressed Rick and Scotty. “On K Street, just two blocks up, you’ll find a drugstore. Go in the door to the right of the drugstore and go up the stairs. That’s all. Thank you for coming.”

He shook hands and ushered the boys out so smoothly there was no time for questions. In the outer room, the girl waited. “You’ll need these,” she said, and handed each of them a brown, oblong card of what looked like leather.

In the hall, Rick and Scotty examined them. On one side were their pictures, with their full names and a serial number. Right above their names letters were imprinted. JANIG! On the other side were two thumb-prints, embossed into the material!

“Well, I’m beat!” Scotty exclaimed.

“Same here.” Rick looked at the likeness of himself. (You know when they took these? While we were walking up the stairs. There was a hidden camera at the landing, somewhere! And what is this stuff?”

“Looks like leather,” Scotty said, flexing his. “But I think it’s plastic.”

Rick held his up to the light and agreed. It was a thin, very flexible plastic that could be easily rolled up or folded into a tiny square.

Colonel Blythe’s secretary came through the door and saw them examining the cards. She smiled. “They’re edible, too. If you swallow them, they’ll dissolve.” She went down the corridor and into another office.

Rick felt as though butterflies had taken refuge in his stomach. This thing was big! Look at the way the organization functioned. Steve had picked up a phone and presto! Full information on Gizmo McLean. They had been with Colonel Blythe ten minutes, and on the way out they had received these!

“JANIG,” Scotty said aloud. “What is it?”

“Don’t talk any more,” Rick cautioned. “Let’s get out of here.”

They went down the stairs, past the receptionist, and out into the street. Not until he was sure no one could overhear did Rick speak.

“Scotty, I’m scared.”

“Same here.”

“This is big.”

“You’re telling me? Listen, Rick, with a weapon like that, nothing is closed to those people. They could walk right into the most secret places in the country. They could hike casually into Oak Ridge itself and maybe walk off with an atom bomb!”

“And they have Zircon and Weiss,” Rick groaned.

“But how does it work?”

“I have an idea,” Rick said. “I think that it’s an ultrasonic weapon, because the ultrasonic pistol knocked Dismal down and paralyzed him. Do you remember how he shook before he fell?”

“I got that,” Scotty agreed. “It sounds like the description of what happened to the people in the library.”

They had been walking toward the drugstore Blythe had mentioned. As they reached the corner of K Street, Rick saw it diagonally across from them. It was the only one in sight, so it had to be the right one.

The boys examined the building. It was ordinary looking, with apartments and offices over a row of stores. They crossed the street and found the door to the right of the drugstore. It was set back in a shallow entryway. A brass name plate said *Dr. Miles Keppner*.

Rick looked for a doorbell, but there was none. Evidently they were to go right up. He opened the door

and walked up the narrow stairs, Scotty beside him. As he went, Rick thought he heard a buzzer sound from somewhere above. Evidently there was a warning device, perhaps a button under one of the stair treads.

A door opened and a slender, scholarly man of middle age looked out. He motioned to the boys, and spoke quietly. "Come in, please."

They went into a room that looked like a doctor's office. Rick noted the name on the window: Miles Keppner, M.D. He had to read it backwards, of course, because it was placed so that people on the street could read it. He wondered if the doctor had many patients.

"You have your cards?"

The boys produced them. The slender man examined them closely. "Very well, boys, come with me." He opened a door and led them into a completely equipped laboratory.

"Our shop," their guide said, smiling. "Yours, too, now. I'm Dr. Keppner, by the way."

Rick shook hands. "I'm glad to meet you, sir." He looked around at the equipment. "But I'm a little puzzled. I can't understand why Mr. A- that is, why anyone wanted Scotty and me down here when you could have had trained people. Golly, I don't know what we could do."

Dr. Keppner chuckled. "On the surface, I suppose it does seem odd. However, you and Scotty have worked with Weiss and Zircon for a long while. You realize, I'm sure, that an assistant is at his best when he has worked with the same man or men for some time. Besides, we knew of your . . . uh, ability with equipment."

He went to a drawer and drew out a familiar object. "Surely you haven't forgotten this?"

Rick took the air pistol that had caused so much anguish. He looked at it in wonder. "No, sir. But how did it get here?"

"Steve Ames brought it to me. It has helped immeasurably. We realized at once, you see, that the new weapon was an ultrasonic one. All the evidence pointed to it. The explosion of the clerk's hearing aid, the way the victims behaved. That was due to temporary damage to the inner ear, which is the seat of equilibrium. The damage caused a complete loss of balance. There were other factors, of course, but that rDenied the most significant. We began experimenting with frequencies, to determine which particular sounds could bring about the effect of the whispering weapon. It was a difficult job, because we could not be sure whether it was volume that did most of the damage or a single frequency. When you knocked Dismal over and paralyzed him, you gave us an important clue. Weiss and Zircon were to come here to continue their research, but they have vanished, as you know."

"But what can we do now?" Rick asked.

"You can help me and two experts who are due to arrive at any moment. I may say that we have discovered the exact method. The frequencies were measured at Spindrift on your equipment there. An experiment was conducted that proved the theory. Professor Gordon was the victim. He volunteered, I might add. Very dangerous. We are working in a new field. The wrong frequency might have caused permanent crippling or even death. However, it turned out as expected. We can now reproduce the whispering weapon."

“Then that does it,” Scotty said. “Except for finding out who is behind this.”

“Not a bit of it,” Dr. Keppner said flatly. “Our task has just begun. We must find a counterweapon, one so efficient that it can be installed as a security measure in every government building. It must be fully automatic, so that the whispering weapon will set it off, nullifying the paralysis effect.”

“You said ‘we,’” Rick put in. “Do you mean you and us?”

“Partially,” Dr. Keppner said. “But we are not alone. We have the full backing and all of the facilities of JANIG!”

CHAPTER VII

The Whispering Box

Janig.

That was the name Colonel Blythe had given, the name on their identity cards. Rick asked: “Sir, what is JANIG?”

“It is one of the organizations, perhaps the chief one, engaged in protecting the security of the United States. I use the word ‘security’ in its government sense, which means the protection of secret documents and processes. The name derives from the first letters of the full title. Joint Army-Navy Intelligence Group.”

Rick repeated the title aloud. It had a strange sound. He had the sudden feeling that he and Scotty had been projected into the middle of a novel, a thriller about spies.

Dr. Keppner divined his thoughts. “It sounds romantic, I suppose. It isn’t. Not the slightest. It is mostly very dull detail work. Only in times like this, when the unexpected threatens to break down security precautions, does the entire force go into action. And I assure you that they do not fail.”

It was a comforting thought. Rick remembered the way Steve Ames had impressed him.

“Do we go to work right away?” Scotty asked.

Dr. Keppner consulted his watch. “I think not. Suppose you report at eight in the morning? The persons you are actually to assist will be here then. Meanwhile, I have a problem that I can tackle better alone.”

Scotty and Rick looked at each other, the same thought in their minds. Return to that hotel room for another day?

“Do we have to hang around the hotel?” Rick queried anxiously.

“No. Go back and check to be sure there are no further instructions for you, then you may do as you please. However, don’t be out of touch with the hotel for more than two hours at a time. Phone in. The

desk clerks can be trusted. They're Steve's men."

"I hope we can help," Rick said doubtfully. He wasn't at all sure of himself when it came to working with strangers. He had worked with the Spindrift scientists for so long that he could anticipate their requests for equipment or materials. He knew the Spindrift equipment thoroughly. But new scientists in a new lab . . .

The doctor ushered them to the door and waved as they went down the stairs.

On the sidewalk, Rick put his hat on and looked at Scotty.

"I'm really snowed," Scotty said. "We've stepped into something this time."

"No wonder Dad couldn't tell us anything," Rick agreed. "Scotty, do you suppose Weiss and Zircon are all right?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. You can see why they were kidnaped, can't you?"

"Because the other side, whoever they are, doesn't want to give the government a chance to build a counterweapon. But that can't be all the answer. If they wanted to stop the work entirely, they'd have to get rid of all the other scientists."

Scotty nodded. "But by kidnaping Weiss and Zircon they gain time. They're the two best men in the field on this kind of thing. Remember, your dad turned all the ultrasonic work over to Weiss."

They had walked slowly in the direction of the hotel as they talked.

"But if they're stalling for time, that must mean they're planning a really big job and they can't afford interference," Rick said thoughtfully. "Maybe one more strike at some secret lab or something and they'll quit."

"No use making guesses," Scotty said. "We might as well wait until there are some answers."

At the hotel, the clerk greeted them with an envelope. Rick took it, his hands suddenly unsteady. It might be more instructions. It might even be news of Weiss and Zircon. Then he saw the return address.

"It's from Barby," he said.

He sat down on a couch in the lobby, Scotty next to him, and tore the envelope open. It was in Barby's distinctive handwriting. She always made her letters large, with flourishes, and it usually took a sheet for half a dozen sentences.

"Read it with me," Rick invited, and held the letter so Scotty could see.

Dear Rick and Scotty:

By now you are enjoying the sights of the Capital, and I wish I were with you. Have you met any congressmen? If you see the President, tell him to pass a law so that girls have to go with their brothers on all long trips.

What I'm writing about especially is that Dismal almost caught the woodchuck. He came home,

and he had some fur in his mouth. I think he must have caught him just as he went into his hole, but didn't get a firm grip. When he came home he was as proud as anything. He ate a big meal and then went right back. It was the first time he came home without being called, so I guess he thought he had done a pretty good day's work.

Mr. Huggins was here yesterday, though, and he said unless we get rid of that woodchuck, there won't be enough lettuce left in the garden to garnish a salad for a churchmouse, which certainly isn't much lettuce. He said he would get a gun and shoot the woodchuck, but mother came to the rescue and said not to, it was Dismal's woodchuck and no one was going to get it but him. Mr. Huggins shrugged and said, if you want to buy lettuce and feed what we grow to a woodchuck, that's all right with me. I'm just a farmer. I guess I don't know anything about dog sicology. (Is that how you spell it? I can't find my dictionary.)

Everything else is very quiet, and the island is lonesome with everyone away. I went on a picnic yesterday and got sunburned, so now my nose is peeling.

Oh, yes. There is one thing more. The other day the phone rang and I answered. It was for Dad. He told whoever it was to hold the line, then came into the switchboard and made me go into the kitchen so I couldn't listen. I think that was mean. Anyway, right after that, Professor Gordon took your Cub, Rick, and flew Dad somewhere. When he came back (Professor Gordon, I mean) he was all alone. I don't know where Dad went. I don't think Mom does, either. Anyway, we haven't heard a word from him. That was on Friday afternoon. I think it's very funny he should go off like that, but I guess it's all right. Send me some postcards, and please try to get me some good autographs. Mom sends her love, and so does

Your loving sister,

Barby

Rick let the letter fall to his lap and looked at Scotty, his face pale.

"Dad has vanished, too!"

"Take it easy," Scotty said quickly. "Don't go jumping to conclusions. It must have been a legitimate phone call, because Professor Gordon flew him to the mainland. He's probably working on the case somewhere else."

"I wish I knew that for sure," Rick said. He stared at the letter. "That's Barby for you. She puts it at the end of the letter."

"She can't know what's going on," Scotty reminded him. "To her, I guess it's more important about Dismal and the woodchuck. It wouldn't even occur to her that Dad might be in any danger."

"I suppose not," Rick agreed. "I hope it never does."

Scotty stood up. "Where do we go? We can't hang around here. We'll go crazy. How about a movie?"

Rick knew that Scotty was right. Staying at the hotel, with nothing to think about but the mysterious enemy who had taken Weiss and Zircon, and possibly his father, would be worse than foolish. It would leave them in such a state of mind that they wouldn't be able to work efficiently when the time came.

"I suppose you want to see an Oat Opera," he said.

"Fine way to describe the sweeping panorama of an historical, Western motion picture," Scotty retorted.

"Historical or hysterical?"

"Take your pick. Anyway, I don't care about seeing a Western. A nice horror picture would suit me fine."

"Entertainment to suit the mood," Rick agreed. "Let's hike downtown and look at the shows."

"Okay. Better stop at the desk first."

Rick nodded and walked to where the sleepy clerk was reading the sports section of the *Washington Star*.

"Anything for Room 408?"

Drowsy eyes scanned them briefly. "Not a thing. Going out?"

"To a movie," Scotty said.

"Call back in a couple of hours."

"We will."

They left the hotel and walked down G Street. Rick was turning this latest news over in his mind. Had his father's disappearance been deliberate? Or had he fallen into the enemy's hands, too?

"Mr. Brant!"

Rick and Scotty turned. The hotel clerk was standing on the steps waving at them.

Rick's first thought was that some word had suddenly come from Steve Ames, then he saw that the clerk held a hat in his hands. His hat. The sudden excitement died. He walked back and took the hat. Thanking the clerk, he put the hat on and rejoined Scotty and they continued on their way. Neither of them noticed the dark-blue sedan parked across the street from the hotel. At the sound of Rick's name, the two men in it had showed quick interest. Now, as the boys continued toward the center of the city, the sedan pulled away from the curb, heading in the opposite direction, and started around the block.

"I'm plenty worried about Dad," Rick told Scotty. "You know the kind of people we're working against. Anyone with brass enough to walk right into a guarded government building wouldn't have any qualms about removing people who stood in their way."

"Do you think I don't realize that?"

A few cars had been drifting past, but Rick paid no attention. As they approached the corner of Nineteenth Street, though, a sedan drew up, an ordinary-looking model. There were two men in the front seat.

Rick glanced up, not particularly curious. He noticed that the man sitting beside the driver was past

middle age and wore sunglasses. Then, unexpectedly, the driver of the car, a younger man with a flattened nose like an unsuccessful prize fighter, leaned past the older man and called:

“You’re Mr. Brant. Right?”

“Yes,” Rick said.

“Steve Ames sent us to pick you up. Get in.” The back door of the sedan swung open.

Rick started to obey. He walked to the open door with Scotty behind him. Then, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. To get into the back seat, he half-turned, and the steps of the hotel, half a block down the street, came into his line of vision.

He saw the clerk, still on the hotel steps. He saw him start toward the sedan, then abruptly change his mind and run into the hotel!

Rick’s mind clicked at lightning speed. The clerk was Steve’s man. Dr. Keppner had said so! Then why had the clerk acted so strangely?

“Run, Scotty!” Rick turned and sprinted.

He was ten paces from the car when the thing hit.

There was a high, shrill whispering, then total silence. His mind commanded his legs to continue running, but there was suddenly no feeling anywhere in his body. He fought to keep his balance, but he could no longer exercise control. He fell sideways, and as he half turned in mid-air, he saw the driver getting out of the sedan.

Rick knew when he struck the sidewalk, because rough cement was suddenly close to his eyes. But he felt nothing! He must have rolled when he hit, because blue sky, filtered by green leaves, was in his eyes. The thing had happened so suddenly there was no time to be afraid. He couldn’t believe that he was paralyzed. He tried to move and saw the sky shake and knew he was moving, but he couldn’t feel his muscles respond!

He tried to yell, and in his own mind he did yell, but his lips didn’t move and he could hear nothing!

Then the sky was blotted out as the driver leaned over him, reaching for him. They were pulling him into the car!

It was like a scene in a silent movie, as though it were happening to someone else. He tried to fight and his muscles refused to obey. He saw the car door loom up as he was propelled toward it, then the scene gyrated. Black macadam road came up with frightening speed and got blacker and blacker.

Then there was nothing at all.

Rick struggled up through syrupy blackness. Once he thought he heard a voice, but he couldn’t be sure. He thought that he was encased in black tar, unable to move even a finger, but he couldn’t be sure of that, either.

He heard someone groaning and wondered if it were Scotty. What had happened to Scotty? He struggled again, trying to free himself from the dark bonds that held him fast. The groaning was louder

now. It sounded like someone making a mighty effort to free himself from something.

He pressed his lips tight with the effort of moving and the groaning stopped abruptly. That startled him. The groans were his! He tried to force his eyes open and a glimmer of light showed through.

“He’s coming out of it.” The voice was small and faraway.

Rick opened his eyes and stared up at a white ceiling. He tried to roll his eyes, and miracle of miracles, he succeeded! Faces were bent over him, anxious and familiar.

Dr. Keppner. And Hartson Brant!

Rick yelled, “Dad!”

Hartson Brant was white, but he managed a joke. “Now you know how Dismal felt, son.”

With his father’s help, Rick sat up and looked around him. He was in Dr. Keppner’s lab, on a leather couch. And Scotty was sitting next to him on a chair, a dazed grin on his face.

“We’ve had it,” Scotty said. “We’ve really had it good!”

“What happened?” Questions poured from him.

“Didn’t those men get us? Dad, where did you come from? How did we get here?”

“One thing at a time.” Hartson Brant smiled. “You got here with the help of the hotel clerk and Steve Ames. As for me, I got in by train half an hour ago after stopping over in New York. Scotty will have to tell you the rest of it.”

“I don’t know how you felt,” Scotty said, “Taut I didn’t feel anything. I just heard a whispering noise and then I turned into a statue and fell flat on my back and lay there. The men got out of the car, and the driver went for you and the other one started for me. The driver put you on your feet like a length of cord-wood and started to shove you into the car head first.”

“I remember that,” Rick said. He was slowly realizing that he hurt all over and that his head throbbed like an ulcerated tooth.

“That was when the hotel clerk and two others came steaming down the street. Or that’s what I was told later by the clerk. My range of vision didn’t extend that far. I only know that the driver dropped you. You landed face first in the road. Isn’t your nose sore?”

Rick reached up with his hand and felt gingerly, then he let out a yelp of anguish.

“I thought it was,” Scotty said. “I guess the driver must have left the whispering box in the car, otherwise he would have used it on the clerk. As it was, he didn’t dare take time to get it, I guess, because the clerk was waving a pistol. So the two guys hopped in the car and roared off. This is hearsay, remember. I was lying there stiff as a hunk of hickory.

“Anyway, the clerk and his two helpers picked us up and carried us to the hotel. Quite a crowd was gathering. While we were in the hotel, I snapped out of it. I didn’t lose consciousness, but you must have been knocked silly when you hit the road. When I could walk, we carried you out the back way and

loaded you into a car. Steve Ames had arrived by this time. The effects of the box had worn off, all right, because you were limp.”

“That was about five minutes ago,” Dr. Keppner said. “Steve has gone to try to get a line on that car.”

“But how did those men know us?” Rick asked. “How did they know we’d be there for them to get?”

“They evidently know a lot more than we give them credit for,” Keppner said grimly. “As for the rest, they obviously had the hotel tinter observation. Perhaps a traitor on the staff tipped them off. We’ll find out sooner or later. They merely waited until you left, then swung around the block to meet you.”

Scotty rubbed his head. “But why did they want us?”

“For information, possibly,” Dr. Keppner said. “And another possibility is that they wanted you as hostages.”

Rick got to his feet, a little unsteady until Hartson Brant slipped an arm around his shoulder. There was a mirror on the other side of the small room. Rick stared, and he couldn’t believe it.

There was a large purple bruise on his forehead, and his nose was a swollen red blot that spread across the middle of his face. No wonder he felt as though he had come off second best in a war with an armored truck.

“The nose isn’t broken,” Dr. Keppner said. “It only feels broken, Rick. It’s fortunate that you have a good, thick skull. Otherwise we’d still be working over you.”

Scotty laughed. “A good, thick skull! That disposes of brother Brant. Wait until I tell Barby what the doctor said.”

“If you do,” Rick warned, “it won’t be whispers that you’ll hear, it’ll be birdies.”

Hartson Brant and Dr. Keppner chuckled.

“Unfortunate choice of words for a very fortunate boy,” Dr. Keppner said. “The clerk, who is very alert in spite of his apparent sleepiness, had been keeping an eye on the sedan, which had been parked across the street. That’s why he happened to be out there at the crucial moment. He was looking to see where it had gone.”

“We’re a lucky family,” Hartson Brant said.

“I’ll say!” Rick looked at his father. “We got a letter from Barby. She said you had vanished. We were worried sick. Honest, Dad, it was worth getting knocked out just to wake up and find that those men didn’t have you.”

“Thanks, son,” Hartson Brant said seriously. “But we mustn’t lose sight of another important fact. Those men do have Weiss and Zircon.”

“If they’re still alive,” Dr. Keppner added grimly.

CHAPTER VIII

Needed: A Counterweapon

On the day following the first appearance of the whispering box, Rick, Scotty, Hartson Brant, and Dr. Keppner were seated in Keppner's office.

Rick's nose and forehead were still very tender, but the swelling had subsided and he looked almost normal. Aside from the wounds caused by sudden contact with the macadam road, he had not suffered from the whispering weapon.

"The effects are easy to analyze," Dr. Keppner said. "The first impact of the sound waves causes a paralysis of the inner ear, which is the seat of balance. The person attacked loses entire control over his balance. That is the reason for the complete lack of bodily coordination. What was the term you used, Scotty?"

Scotty grinned. "Just flopping around. Like a hooked trout."

"A good simile. The first effect is immediately followed by a more complete paralysis of the nervous system, which I think is caused by the sheer volume of sound."

"It seems funny to talk about sound when we couldn't even hear it," Rick said. "What do you think caused the whispering?"

"Leakage," Hartson Brant explained. "I'm sure some of the compressed air leaked out, possibly through the valve or trigger that operates the weapon. Such a leak would cause a whispering or hissing sound."

"That reminds me," Rick said. "Maybe the reason those men didn't use the box on the hotel clerk was because there was no time to recharge it. Wouldn't they have to build up air pressure again?"

Dr. Keppner shook his head. "The first time they used the box, at the hospital lab, they used it twice in succession. I'm sure it needs recharging frequently, but they are probably able to build up enough pressure to last for two or three shots. They may even have two or three separate pressure tanks built into the box."

Rick had tried to think of some way that a counter-weapon might be created, but with no success. How could they combat a sound wave?

"In order to understand what we are trying to do," Hartson Brant said, "you boys must have a clear idea of the forces we're working with. You've seen one effect of ultrasonic sound. There are many others that have been observed in experiments. There is a definite effect on the nervous system of humans when certain frequencies are used. People become irritable and nervous, without even knowing why. Then, there are certain mechanical effects. Ultrasonic sounds have been used to set paper afire. In England, experiments have been conducted in washing clothes ultrasonically. The waves actually vibrate dirt right out of things."

Dr. Keppner added, "The field has been badly neglected. Only now are we realizing the potentialities of silent sound. We may soon be using it to kill bacteria, or using it in industry to shake tiny particles around

so that more uniform compounds may be formed. There are unlimited possibilities. For the present, however, we must create an ultrasonic defense. Until we do, we are vulnerable to such attacks as you have experienced.”

“But how can we defend ourselves against a sound?” Rick demanded. “We can’t soundproof buildings well enough, and we can’t get people to wear ear muffs.”

Hartson Brant and Dr. Keppner chuckled.

“We won’t go at it in quite that way,” Mr. Brant said. “We have learned that the whispering box operates at a very high frequency. We think the wave length of their sound may be high enough so that we could use what in radio is sometimes termed a heterodyne. In other words, we can create a beat frequency.”

“That’s nice,” Scotty remarked blankly.

Rick had a glimmer of understanding. Sometimes, when two radio waves were close together in frequency, they produced a squeal. That happened often on old-fashioned radios.

Hartson Brant was watching his son’s face. Rick felt his father’s glance and smiled. “I’m working on it, dad.”

“Take your time, Rick. You can figure it out.”

“I’m not sure, but I think I know what you mean. Suppose the whispering box operates at a frequency of 50,000 cycles per second, which is just another way of saying 50,000 vibrations. You create a sound of 49,500 cycles a second and they beat against each other. The result, which would be the difference between the two frequencies, would be a tone we could hear. It would be a 500-cycle note, which is just above middle ‘A’ on the piano.”

“Very well put,” Keppner said.

Scotty had an objection. “Suppose they change frequency on you? Your counterweapon would be useless until you analyzed the new wave length.”

“Very true. And that is what makes the creation of our own defense such a problem.” Dr. Keppner rose and paced the room. “We must make our counter-weapon flexible, and automatic. It must analyze the frequency of the whispering box, adjust its own mechanism to emit a counterfrequency, and do it so rapidly that people near by will not be affected by the attackers’ weapon.”

“There is only one means of getting such speed,” Hartson Brant added.

“Exactly. That means is electronics. Only electrons move rapidly enough. That is why we had to call on Spindrift Island. We were depending on Weiss and Zircon to work with us here, while you, Hartson, and John Gordon continued research at home. Now, with Weiss and Zircon missing, we have had to call you down to join us.”

“How about Professor Gordon?” Scotty asked.

“We’ve asked him to stay at Spindrift to continue his work on the long-range aspects. He is engaged in making artificial crystals. You know, of course, that most frequencies in electronics are crystal

controlled?”

Rick said, “That’s what he was doing with the annealing furnace!”

“Correct, Rick.” Hartson Brant smiled. “But, Keppner, surely you and I can’t do this job alone! Think of the scope of the task. We need more help.”

“Help is on its way,” Dr. Keppner assured him. “You’ve heard of Dr. Ralph Bertona?”

“Of Western University? I certainly have! I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting him, but I know his work very well. He’s a man I’d like to have on my staff.”

“Which is certainly the highest compliment you could pay,” Dr. Keppner chuckled. “Well, Bertona is flying from the West Coast. He should be here late tonight.” He stood up. “Suppose we get to work. We have the broad outline of what we need. I’m sure we can produce.”

He took them into the laboratory where two men were already at work. One, an older man who looked like the traditional figure of a nearsighted bookkeeper, was bent over a drawing board.

“This is Mr. Terhune,” Dr. Keppner said. “A wonderful craftsman with a drawing pen. He’ll draft the blueprints from which we will work.” He indicated the other man who was busy with a broom. “Mr. Fanning is my assistant. If you need any equipment, he will supply it.”

Fanning, a younger man with rimless glasses and a luxuriant brown mustache, looked up from his floor sweeping and nodded. “Glad to know you. Are any of you experts with a broom?”

“We don’t employ a janitor for security reasons,” Keppner explained, smiling. “Fanning makes an excellent assistant but a poor sweeper.”

Rick and Scotty were assigned to a workbench equipped for shaping and drilling metal. Dr. Keppner put them to work on the blueprint of the chassis, or aluminum base, on which a part of the electronic circuit would be mounted.

“Where does the compressed-air tank go?” Scotty asked, looking at the design.

“There won’t be one.” Dr. Keppner indicated a cone-shaped device. “This is a little development of my own. It’s what might be called an ultrasonic loud-speaker. A speaker, that is, capable of reproducing ultrasonic sounds. The sounds themselves will be created electronically.”

“How can you make sounds with electronics?” Scotty objected.

Rick knew the answer to that one. “Ever hear of a Hammond electric organ or a Novachord? They play music created by electronic tubes.”

“Quite right,” Dr. Keppner agreed.

The boys found sheet aluminum and went to work as Dr. Keppner and Hartson Brant joined the draftsman and began a long discussion over the drawing board.

It was an easy job. Rick’s hands worked mechanically while his thoughts were busy on other things. None of them had talked much about Weiss and Zircon, but the mystery of their disappearance was on

every mind. The thought that they might have been harmed made the job of tracking down the enemy and creating a counterweapon a personal thing. If anything had happened to the scientists, the other Spindrifters would see that they were amply revenged.

But revenge was useless, Rick thought. What he wanted was to see Weiss and Zircon alive and well.

"I wonder if Steve Ames is making any progress?" he inquired aloud.

Scotty shrugged. "Probably not much. Hell have to have a whole lot of luck. When people just vanish like that, it isn't easy to find them again."

"I wish we could do something," Rick said grimly.

"So do I." Scotty was bending a strip of aluminum into shape. He gave it a vicious twist. "But if Steve Ames and all of JANIG can't find them, what could we do?"

"Nothing," Rick answered morosely. He concentrated on the work before him.

When Hartson Brant came to the bench, Rick and Scotty had completed the chassis, except for the drilling of the tube socket holes, and that couldn't be done until the circuit-wiring diagrams were completed.

"Good work," Hartson Brant said. "Well, the afternoon is over, so far as you two are concerned."

Rick glanced at his wrist watch. It was only half past four. "Isn't there anything else we can do?"

"Not until tomorrow, I'm afraid. Keppner and I are working on the circuits, but there is still a great deal of calculating to do. We'll keep on this evening. Besides, Dr. Bertona may arrive and we'll have to brief him on the problem. Can you two amuse yourselves?"

"I guess so." Rick tidied up the bench with Scotty's aid and saw that all the tools were put away.

Fanning, the helper, came over to give them a hand. He examined the chassis they had been working on. "Neat job," he complimented them.

Rick and Scotty thanked Fanning, then walked with him to the front of the lab where Dr. Keppner, Hartson Brant, and Terhune were bent over the drawing board.

Fanning looked at the intricate lines on the board. "Looks like the wiring diagram for a Christmas tree. Does it make sense?"

"We hope it makes *some* kind of sense." Hartson Brant smiled. He addressed Rick and Scotty. "I'll get a bite to eat at the drugstore next door. Don't plan on my coming home early. We may be here until late."

"We'll get some exercise," Scotty said. "We need it."

"Good idea," Dr. Keppner approved. "Why not walk around and see the sights? If you haven't seen the Lincoln Memorial, I'd recommend that. To my mind, it's the most impressive thing in Washington."

"I'd like to see it," Rick said. "I've seen it before, but so long ago that I can't remember."

“It’s one thing people don’t get tired of looking at,” Scotty agreed. “We’ll get something to eat, then hike down that way. So long, everybody.”

He and Rick went down the stairs and out into the late afternoon sun. Rick clapped a hand to his head. “I forgot my hat again.”

Scotty grinned. “Never mind it. I can’t get used to seeing you with it on, anyway. I keep thinking I’m with a stranger.”

“Speaking of strangers!” Rick pointed across the street. The second stranger, the one who had been at Spindrift with Steve Ames, was smiling at them from a doorway.

“I wondered when he’d show up,” Scotty remarked.

The stranger came across the street and shook hands, smiling. “Pete Davis is my name,” he said. “Don’t tell me yours; I know all about you.”

“What are you doing here?” Rick asked before he remembered that he wasn’t to ask questions.

Davis had no hesitation about answering. “I’m head of the guard detail.”

Scotty looked around. “What guard detail?”

“You can’t see the boys, but they’re around. One is on the roof of the building opposite-no, don’t look up. If anyone is watching, we don’t want them tipped off.

Another is on the third floor of this building. Both of them have rifles. And we have a couple of carloads of men spotted around.”

“I don’t know what good guards will do if the whispering box is turned on,” Rick objected.

“Plenty,” Davis assured him. “Far as we can figure, the box is pretty directional, and it won’t work at any great distance. That’s what Dr. Keppner told us. So I spotted my men in all directions. If the gang shows up with the box, they may get a couple of my boys, but while they’re doing it, one of my sharpshooters will pick them off like ducks from another direction. No matter which way they turn, they’ll be covered.”

“If it’s as easy as that, why not just post guards at all the government buildings?” Rick asked.

“We do have extra men on,” Davis said. “But it’s not the answer. To do it properly, you need men at every point of the compass. That takes more guards than the government has. What’s more, it’s human nature to get careless. My own men won’t, but regular guards are apt to. And with this box gadget, one second of looking in the wrong direction at the wrong time is plenty.”

“I see what you mean,” Scotty agreed. “Have you heard anything from Steve?”

“He tracked the car that got you kids. It’s at headquarters now, being checked over. It won’t tell us anything, though. It was stolen, naturally. They wouldn’t use one of their own.”

“No sign of Weiss or Zircon?” Rick queried.

Davis shook his head. "Sorry."

"I didn't really hope for any news," Rick said. "Well, we'll be going. See you later, Mr. Davis."

"Right. And don't worry about Mr. Brant. We're keeping him so well covered that a mosquito couldn't get to him without our knowledge."

"That's a relief," Scotty said. "How about us?"

"You're on your own. We're not worried about you. The gang isn't interested in anyone but the scientists."

Rick rubbed his sore nose ruefully. "Wish you'd tell the guy with the whispering box that."

Davis chuckled. "Doesn't it make sense? I'm surprised at you. I thought sure you'd figured out why they went after you yesterday."

"They wanted us for souvenirs," Scotty said.

"Don't flatter yourself, sarge," Davis said, grinning. "They were after Hartson Brant. It just happened that they didn't know his son was a ringer for him."

Rick's jaw dropped. "So that was it! Sure! Scotty, remember how you said I looked like Dad with that hat on?"

"That's right," Scotty agreed. "But why were they waiting at our hotel?"

"It's Mr. Brant's hotel, too," Davis reminded them. "They must have thought he'd check in before going to the lab. He crossed them up by coming directly to Dr. Keppner. Meanwhile, you two came out of the hotel and walked right into their arms."

"Then they know about the hotel," Rick said soberly. "And about the lab, too."

"They know plenty," Davis sounded grim. "I'd like to know their source of information. We're keeping an eye on every man connected with this job. I'm getting so I don't even trust myself." Suddenly he smiled again. "But that's not your worry. Go along and have a good time. There's plenty to see in Washington."

The boys said good-by and walked down the street toward Lafayette Square.

"So they thought they were getting Dad," Rick said. "I couldn't figure out what they wanted with us."

"It makes sense. Anyway, I'm glad the hotel clerk was on the ball. Otherwise we'd be with Weiss and Zircon, wherever they are."

"I wish I knew where that was."

"So do I," Scotty said gruffly. "But wishing isn't going to help. We can't do anything except hope."

CHAPTER IX

The Menace at the Memorial

Scotty took a last sip of water and pushed back his chair. "Now I feel better," he said. "That was a good meal."

Rick was comfortably full, too, after a dinner of barbecued spareribs, salad, and pie. "Now what do we do?" he asked. "It's almost eight o'clock."

The time had flown since they left the laboratory. They had started in the general direction of the Lincoln Memorial, but had been sidetracked. The squirrels and pigeons in Lafayette Park had taken over an hour of their time, particularly the squirrels. The little animals, probably the best fed of their kind, had made begging for peanuts a science. The boys, like most other visitors to the park opposite the White House, had purchased peanuts to feed to the fat little beggars.

Tiring of the squirrels, they had walked to New York Avenue and Fourteenth Street and on impulse had gone into the newsreel theater to see a one-hour show of news, cartoons, and sports features.

Now, Rick and Scotty left the restaurant and paused on the sidewalk to consider their next move. A phone call to the hotel had informed them that they were not wanted for anything.

"We can still go to the Lincoln Memorial," Scotty said.

"That's okay with me."

They were silent as they walked down Twentieth Street to Constitution Avenue. Rick's thoughts were busy on the problem of Weiss and Zircon. He had tried to convince himself that the scientists were probably safe, but he had to admit there were no grounds for such optimism. The only thing hopeful in the situation was that the gang, so far as was known, had yet to commit murder.

"Anyway," Scotty said aloud, "they wouldn't have anything to gain by getting rid of Weiss and Zircon."

"You've been reading my mind," Rick accused. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

Scotty smiled. "I didn't, but I'm not surprised. I guess they've been on both our minds."

"They'll turn up one of these days," Rick said with more confidence than he felt.

"Sure. They're all right. Both of them have been in tougher spots than this."

They had reached Constitution Avenue. Across the street was the old Navy Department Building, and next to it the beginning of the park grounds surrounding the Lincoln Memorial.

"It will be dark pretty soon," Rick remarked. "Doesn't the memorial close?"

"Not until nine o'clock. Besides, night is the best time to see old Abe. The way they've arranged the lights makes you think he's going to get right out of his chair and come down and speak to you."

Scotty turned up Constitution and they walked past the Federal Reserve Building, then the National Academy of Science Building that had been turned into a clearing house for scientific information.

Rick had read about the new government scientific information center and what the building contained. In its files were documents from scientific authorities all over the world. If a researcher wanted to know what work had already been accomplished in his particular field, they could tell him. He wished he could have a chance to go through the files. Perhaps it could be arranged before they left Washington .

“We cross here,” Scotty said.

As they waited for the light to change, Rick looked up a small hill on their side of the avenue. Inside a high wall were what appeared to be barracks. He asked Scotty about them.

“There’s a naval hospital a little farther up,” Scotty explained. “Those particular buildings are barracks. There’s a Marine guard detachment there.”

They crossed Constitution as the light turned green, then hiked through the park toward the Lincoln Memorial. It was already growing dark as they reached the edge of the reflecting pool in front of the building.

Rick looked up to the memorial, through the great marble columns to where Abe Lincoln sat illumined in light and shadow. He started across the roadway to the marble stairs, then stopped, seeing that Scotty lingered behind.

“What’s up?” he asked as Scotty joined him.

“I’m not sure, but I think we’ve picked up a tail.”

“A tail?”

“Yes. I think someone is following us.”

Rick stared into the trees. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Neither do I , now. But I have a hunch we’ve been followed ever since we left the restaurant. I got a quick look at a man a couple of times, but I thought it was just another guy out for an evening stroll until we crossed Constitution. Then he came hotfooting it after us.”

Rick frowned. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t want to swear to it, but I’m pretty sure. Let’s cross over and go up to the memorial. And keep your eyes open.”

Rick agreed, more than a little perturbed. What had Pete Davis said about their having nothing to fear?

“Maybe it’s one of Steve’s men keeping an eye on us.”

“Not a chance,” Scotty denied. “Steve’s men aren’t the kind who’d let themselves be seen.”

They crossed and mounted the long steps of the memorial. It was growing dark rapidly, but people

thronged the stairs. Abe Lincoln was easily the most popular of all the Washington memorials.

As Rick went up the long climb he forgot for a moment that he was supposed to be watching for a pursuer. The huge statue of Lincoln, seated in a massive chair, was in such perfect proportion that it seemed almost normal size. The wonderfully arranged lights gave the illusion of reality. Every detail was perfection, even to the veins in the great hands, the folds of Lincoln's clothing.

Rick drew in his breath. Always imaginative, he felt as though the Great Emancipator were about to rise and speak.

Scotty shattered the illusion. "Keep an eye open. I wish it weren't quite so dark."

They reached the top level of the memorial and turned, looking down the stairs to the road. Rick searched the edge of the trees along the roadway beyond the reflecting pool. For an instant the head lamps of a passing car picked out a figure.

He grabbed Scotty's arm. "Is that the man?"

"That's the joker. I wish we could get a look at his face."

Rick spotted a soldier just coming up the steps, a pair of field glasses slung over his shoulder. "Maybe we can," he said.

Scotty saw the soldier, too. "Wait," he cautioned. "Don't be obvious about it."

"We'll wait until he gets inside, then ask him if we can use the glasses for a minute," Rick agreed. "If we look from the shadow of a pillar, maybe our friend down there won't know we're onto him."

They retreated into the shadow of the pillars and waited until the soldier reached them. Rick smiled at him. "I see you have a pair of glasses. Would you mind if we took a look through them for just a minute? There's something we'd like to check on."

The soldier hesitated for a moment.

Scotty motioned to the patch on his shoulder. "How's the old Twenty-seventh Division?"

The soldier grinned. "About as usual. Were you in it?"

"Second Marines," Scotty said. "But I knew a lot of guys in your outfit."

The soldier unslung the glasses. "Most of them are civilians now. Here, take a look while I pay my respects to Honest Abe."

"Thanks, soldier." Rick took the glasses, then stepped

to the shadow of a pillar from which he could see the edge of the trees across the road. Scotty was at his shoulder.

Rick focused the glasses quickly, but he could see only the vague figure of the man.

“Let me look,” Scotty begged.

Rick gave him the glasses. “You can’t see much.”

Scotty pointed the binoculars and studied the scene below for long minutes, then he lowered the glasses.

“If a car would only come by and turn up the right-hand road, we could get a good look.”

Rick saw that the soldier was a few yards away, looking up at the statue. “I guess he doesn’t want the glasses for a few moments,” he said. “Hang on until a car passes.”

One of the park police officers who guard Washington public buildings had been watching. He sauntered over, curious about what they were looking at.

“See anything through those?” he asked.

“Not much,” Scotty answered. “We’re waiting for a car to pass. There’s a man down there we want to look at.”

“What for?”

“We think he’s following us,” Rick said.

“Following you? What would anyone want to follow you for?”

Rick looked at Scotty. They couldn’t very well go into details. Steve Ames had cautioned them not to talk to anyone. Presumably that included police officers.

“We don’t know why he’s following us,” Rick said. That was true, anyway.

“Are you sure he is?”

“No,” Scotty admitted.

The officer snorted. “Sounds to me like you kids have been seeing too many movies.” He turned and walked back to the other side of the monument.

“No help there,” Rick said. “Hey, Scotty, here comes a car. See if he makes a right-hand turn.”

Scotty already had the glasses to his eyes.

Rick watched as the car swung slowly toward the right road. The headlight beams moved across the pavement and picked out the dim figure at the edge of the trees.

“Holy smoke!” Scotty exclaimed.

“What is it?” Rick demanded.

Scotty put down the glasses. He handed them to Rick, a strange expression on his face. “I don’t want to say anything until I’m sure. You’d better take a look.”

Rick accepted the glasses, then kept watch for the next auto to come their way. He searched Scotty's face. His pal looked grim. "What is it?" he asked again.

"I'd rather not say," Scotty evaded. "I don't want to influence your judgment. You decide for yourself."

"Okay."

Cars were coming their way around the Lincoln Memorial. If only one made the correct turn . . . one neared, swung right. Rick raised the glasses as headlights speared the figure at the edge of the trees.

Rick saw the man's face clearly. He felt a swift sensation as though someone had kicked him in the stomach.

"You're right, Scotty," he said huskily.

What had Pete Davis said?

"Were not worried about you. The gang isn't interested in anyone but the scientists."

The man at the edge of the trees was the driver of the kidnap sedan, and he was holding what appeared to be a camera-but wasn't.

The whispering box!

CHAPTER X

Rescue from the Sky!

The soldier joined them and asked, "Through with the glasses?"

Rick handed them to him. "Yes. Thanks very much."

"That's okay. See what you wanted to see?"

Scotty grinned wryly. "We saw what we *didn't* want to see."

That didn't make sense to the soldier. He slung the glasses over his shoulder by their strap, gave them a puzzled smile, and said, "Well, see you later."

"Thanks again," Scotty said. As the soldier left, he drew Rick deeper into the shadow of the pillar. "Got any suggestions, pal?"

"I don't know," Rick said. "Is he after us? Or is he just keeping track of us?"

"Search me. If I had to make any bets, I'd say he wanted us for his specimen collection."

“He can’t do it single handed.”

“How do we know he’s alone?” Scotty gestured at the cars parked in the area. “His friend is probably in one of those, waiting for him to put the freeze on us with his little box.”

Rick agreed that it was likely. “Then all we have to do is keep away from any roads where there isn’t much traffic.”

“You make it sound so simple!” Scotty peered out from the shadows. “He’s still there. And if we do cross the park area, what’s to prevent him from just picking us off, then motioning for his friend to come help him lug the bodies away?”

“Nothing,” Rick admitted. “But what if people see what’s happening and try to interfere?”

Scotty made a short, high, whispering noise. “Zip! and the people would lose interest in a hurry. On account of why?”

“On account of he could knock them over with the whispering box,” Rick finished grimly. He looked over to where the two park policemen were talking. “They wouldn’t be much help.”

“Not much. Before they could even reach for their guns they’d be flat on their faces wondering what had hit them.”

Rick shivered. “Then what can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Scotty said.

Rick leaned against the marble column and felt the chill of the stone through his coat. “If we could outrun the box, we’d be all right. Pete Davis said it only worked at a limited distance.”

“That’s one answer,” Scotty agreed. He had been keeping watch on the man with the whispering box. Now he gripped Rick’s arm. “He’s coming around to the front of the monument. Probably wondering why we’re spending so much time up here.”

Rick thought rapidly. Between the row of columns and the building itself was a corridor that went completely around the memorial. He asked, “Are there steps in the back?”

Scotty tried to remember. “No. I’m sure there aren’t. But it isn’t a very high drop. We could make it.”

“Then let’s get going.”

Hugging the columns, Rick led the way around the building, going toward the side away from their pursuer. They passed the policemen. The one who had spoken to them grinned and waved. Rick grinned back, a little stiffly.

They reached the corner of the building and turned down the side facing the Potomac River. Then Rick increased his speed. In a moment they were at the back of the memorial. He looked out to Memorial Bridge, trying to estimate their situation. Under them, the road curved all the way around the building. Directly ahead was the river. To their left was the bridge. On the right were park areas, thinly dotted with trees along the edges and with baseball diamonds in their centers. There wasn’t much cover.

“Where now?” Scotty asked. “Let’s make it fast.”

Rick noticed that Riverside Drive , the road along the riverbank, ran under the approach to Memorial Bridge . The bank dropped sharply away in several places. If they could reach the underpass, they might be able to conceal themselves.

“Here we go,” he said, and dropped to his hands and knees, swung by his hands, and let go. He landed in a bush that drove thorns into him, but he didn’t stop to investigate. With Scotty close behind him he made a dash across the road, heading for the parking area next to the bridge approach.

A horn sounded, three sharp blasts, then three more.

A car parked at the side of the road coughed into life. Rick stopped short. It must be the gang car. It had signaled!

“It’s between us and the river!” Scotty exclaimed. “Come on, double back!”

Rick ran, heading back toward the front of the memorial, angling away from the river. As he sprinted, he kept an eye on the point where the man on foot would probably emerge. There was no sign of him.

“Keep going,” Scotty urged. They had crossed the road and were running parallel to Riverside Drive , heading in the direction of the city.

“Keep away from the trees,” Rick urged. “We’ll make it.”

Scotty threw a glance over his shoulder. “I can’t figure out where the guy with the box went. This is too easy!”

“Step on it,” Rick pleaded. He increased his speed, running easily. Scotty stepped up his pace until their strides matched. They were getting away from the memorial now.

A car shot by on Riverside Drive , swung into the curb and screeched to a stop a short distance ahead.

“To the river,” Rick yelled. He swerved sharply and almost bumped into Scotty. No wonder they hadn’t seen the man with the box! The car had picked him up, then whipped down Riverside Drive after them! He groaned. There were so many streets around the Lincoln Memorial! A car could follow them almost anywhere.

He looked over his shoulder. The man with the box was out of the car and running, too, in a direction that would head them off.

“Double back!” Scotty gasped.

They turned sharply, heading back in the direction from which they had come.

“Right up the road,” Rick said through clenched teeth. “They can’t turn around fast enough to get us until we’re past the memorial. Then we can turn again. We’ll lose them.”

The man with the box had stopped trying to head them off. Instead, he was running toward Constitution Avenue , away from the river! Rick saw the strategy at once. The man could double around and always manage to stay between them and civilization. Meanwhile, the car would keep them running. Eventually,

they would have to stop from sheer exhaustion. They were trapped in a wedge-shaped area with the Lincoln Memorial as the pointed tip of the wedge and the river as the side opposite the tip. The sides of the wedge were streets. The only escape would be across the bridge- but they could never make it on foot before the car overtook them.

He wondered if the man in the car also had a whispering box and decided that he must have.

The car was turning around, ignoring the one-way-street sign. The gang had nothing to fear with the whispering box in their hands. Let a policeman object and a short blast from the box would take care of him.

The bridge approach loomed ahead. They would pass right under it.

“Get to the other side of the underpass, then we can duck,” Scotty said. “Run, Rick!”

They shot into the darkness of the short underpass, and the car lights were gaining on them. If they turned right, the man with the box would be waiting. If they turned left, the river would block them. But the river was better than the whispering box.

“Go left,” Rick directed. He was worried, because he could feel his breath coming faster. They couldn’t keep running forever.

To the left of the underpass were row after row of seats on terraces leading down to the river. In the river was a barge built like a stage. They had reached the place where Washington held many of its outdoor concerts.

The car roared through the underpass and skidded to a stop.

Rick turned frantically, looking for a way out. The only way was along the riverbank, going upstream from the concert area. He led the way, leaping right over the low benches. He didn’t know the range of the whispering box, but he was afraid it could reach them. He wanted desperately to look back to see if the driver had gotten out of the car, but he didn’t dare.

They reached the opposite side of the deserted amphitheater in safety, but their situation still wasn’t very much improved. The man with the box was somewhere near by, up on the road to their right. Behind was the car.

Rick risked turning and saw that the driver had got out of the car. He was starting after them, and he had a box in his hand! Why didn’t he use it? The distance was about a hundred yards, not more.

Then the box didn’t operate effectively at that distance! If they could keep a hundred yards away they were safe!

The riverbank was narrowing to a grassy tree belt. Scotty stopped short, digging his heels into the turf.

Rick saw why. The first man with the box had cut across and was waiting for them!

Now they were between two fires. If they could break out halfway between the two men! Rick looked for a way. He thought he saw it. There was another underpass a short distance ahead where Riverside Drive ran under the beginning of Rock Creek Parkway. He didn’t remember the names of the streets, of course, but he recognized the possibilities. If they angled a little to the right, they might be able to reach

die underpass before the first man with the box could. It depended on how much faster they could run than he!

Rick sprang for the underpass, running all out, Scotty abreast of him. He could see the man with the box clearly. He saw him angle over to intercept them, running fast. Why didn't a car come; some strange car that might get between them for a moment?

Rick stifled a gasp. They weren't going to make it by much-if at all! Behind them he heard a car door slam shut and the clash of shifting gears. He knew that even if they reached the underpass the car would be close on their heels.

He sensed that neither of their pursuers was worried about the outcome. The car was content merely to keep them moving, knowing that their endurance must wear down soon. The man on foot would tire, too, but not before they did because he didn't have as far to run.

Rick recalled that the driver of the kidnap sedan had been young; he was the one now trying to cut them off at the underpass. They wouldn't outrun him by much.

The underpass was directly ahead. The man with the box was too close for comfort, and the car was coming!

Rick somehow found more speed in his hard-driving legs. For an instant he pulled away from Scotty, but his pal caught up with long strides. They reached the underpass and shot through it! They had beaten the man with the box! But not by enough.

Rick heard the shrill, high whisper of the box and his stride faltered. The sound ceased. He could no longer hear the car. But he was still running!

He shot a glance at Scotty and saw his friend weaving unsteadily, but still going ahead. They passed the edge of the underpass and turned to the right, scrambling up the bank.

Scotty's lips moved, but Rick couldn't hear what he was saying.

"What did you say?" he panted . . . and couldn't hear his own voice!

A field stretched ahead of them. Across the field lay Constitution Avenue. If they could reach it, they might be able to get into a building. If only they could rest! Rick's heart was pounding and his lungs ached. He knew his legs were unsteady and that he lurched as he ran. Why was he able to run at all?

The whispering box had hit them, but from too far away. The high frequency had deafened them and had partially upset their equilibrium. But it hadn't made them helpless. They could still run at a shambling gait.

Rick turned to see where their pursuers were. He turned too far and his unsteadiness betrayed him. He slipped and fell in the road.

Somehow, Scotty got him to his feet again. Scotty was saying something, but Rick couldn't hear. He steadied himself and started off again, across the field. They passed through a narrow belt of trees and into the field itself. In the instant of falling he had seen what was happening. The car had shot past, heading for the corner so it could turn down Constitution and cut them off. The man on foot was right behind them, but not close enough yet to bring the box into full play.

Rick looked back again, but more carefully, and saw him come through the trees. He was running with less speed; Rick guessed that he was tiring.

Constitution Avenue seemed awfully far away. Besides, the car already had passed them. What was the use?

Rick kept his legs going and concentrated on keeping his balance. He thought the deafness was clearing a little. They had got only a mild dose of ultrasonics this time.

He could see the car clearly now. It turned the corner and started down Constitution!

If he and Scotty separated, it would confuse their pursuers. Why hadn't he thought of that before? He tried to yell instructions, but he could hear his voice only as a faint, faraway sound. He tugged Scotty's arm and motioned for him to go to the right. He himself would angle to the left. The car wouldn't know which one of them to head for, and the man behind them wouldn't know which one to follow-he hoped!

They were almost across the field! Rick headed for the left, toward the car that was coming down Constitution, but keeping well away from it. There were other cars, of course, but he was interested only in the one with the whispering box. The others couldn't help him. If anyone interfered, the box would come into play.

He saw the car slow down. He turned and started back the way he had come, feinting to confuse the man in the car. He was between the car and the running man with the box now. The car speeded up again to cut him off. He did an about-face. The car slowed, but it had gone a few feet beyond him! It couldn't turn around now!

Rick reached the edge of the field. He ran in the opposite direction from which the car was heading. He looked back quickly and saw the man with the box, still coming after him. The car must be after Scotty!

Rick stumbled and almost fell as his ankle turned on a stone. Inspiration hit him. He picked up the stone, gauged the distance, and heaved with all his strength.

The stone arched through the air and landed with a splintering of glass! The car skidded to a stop. Rick saw Scotty follow his example. A well-placed rock landed on the left headlight. It winked out.

Rick hadn't stopped moving except to pick up the stone. Now he sped across the avenue, angling back toward Scotty, who was also crossing. The man on foot with the whispering box had reached the sidewalk and was just stepping into the street.

Scotty motioned to Rick to join him, not breaking his stride.

They were at the foot of Twenty-third Street. Across Constitution Avenue, the driver of the car had gotten out and joined the chase. Both he and the man with the whispering box were rapidly overtaking them!

Rick could hear clearly again. He heard Scotty's yell to keep moving. He rounded the corner and ran up Twenty-third Street, noticing that he no longer had trouble keeping his balance. His breath was coming in painful gasps and his vision kept blurring with fatigue.

He thought despairingly that he couldn't run much farther.

But the pursuers were closing the distance!

There was a high wall to Rick's left and some kind of temporary buildings across the street. He saw no place where he and Scotty might find sanctuary. Every breath was an effort now. When he tried to breathe deeply it was like a knife-thrust in his lungs. He knew he couldn't last much longer.

Scotty was ahead of him, arms and legs pumping. He was running purposefully, as though with a definite goal in mind. Rick threw a glance back over his shoulder and saw his pursuers coming up on him. They were within range now!

He saw one man lift a black box!

From ahead came- a wild yell, an instant before the shrill whisper of the box.

"Sergeant of the guard! Help!"

Rick's legs crumpled. Ahead, he saw Scotty sway. He fought to keep his balance without success. He landed on the sidewalk and tried to keep crawling ahead. Every ounce of his will was concentrated in the terrible effort. He thought that he still moved, but he couldn't be sure. He kept trying, even when he realized he wasn't moving.

He rolled over, face to the night sky, and his imagination filled the sky with leaping bodies.

He thought: I'm going crazy!

They were flying at him, past him, coming out of the sky from nowhere. Some in full uniform, some in shirts and trousers.

Right out of the sky!

Marines!

CHAPTER XI

The Next Target

Rick sat on a chair, his head in his hands. He was still dizzy and his throat felt parched. Scotty was next to him, grinning from ear to ear, and around them were almost two dozen Marines in various stages of dress and undress.

And opposite Rick sat Gizmo, Scotty's taxi-driver friend.

"I never saw such a sight in my life," Rick said. "Honest, I thought I was going batty. I lay there on my back and you guys came right out of the sky. It was weird."

“Weird and wonderful,” Scotty agreed. “No kidding, I expected to see you wearing wings.”

Gizmo, grinning widely, repeated what he had told them five times before. “We were all having a bull session when that yell for help came. That sergeant-of-the-guard business was what made us move fast. We didn’t know what was up, but from the tone of voice, we knew some ex-serviceman was in plenty hot water. So we didn’t bother going out through the gate. We went right over the wall. That’s a high wall, too. Wonder we didn’t break our necks.”

A youthful Marine lieutenant, the officer of the deck, pushed his way through the group and spoke to Rick. “I called that number. Your friends will be here in a few minutes.”

Rick had given him the number of the hotel and asked him to call, knowing that the clerk would send Steve Ames or someone.

The lieutenant chuckled. “It wasn’t funny at the time, but now that it’s over I can see the whole picture and believe me, it is funny.” He sat down on a vacant chair.

“I was just coming back from making the rounds and I heard you yell. The next thing I knew, this bunch of madmen came pouring out of the armory and flew over the walls. I ran after them and jumped up on the wall and looked down. All I could see was Marines, and all flat on their backs. I thought they were dead. Then I saw Gizmo and the corporal of the guard hightailing it down Twenty-third after a couple of people.”

The corporal of the guard, a youthful-looking Marine private, grinned. “I was really hightailing it, too. My shirt wasn’t tucked in, and the tail was flapping like a parachute. And what made it even funnier was that I didn’t even know why I was running, except that two guys were running away from me.”

“They got into a car and beat it,” Gizmo said. “Some car, too. One of its headlights was busted and the rear window was damaged.”

A husky six-footer in full khaki uniform scratched his head. “What I want to know is, what hit us? I was the first one over the wall. I saw Brant lying on his back, and a little farther up, Scott was on his knees trying to move. Then whammo ! I’m on my back too, deafer than a post and not able to even wiggle my eyebrows.”

“Same here,” another Marine said, and several others joined in.

Only Gizmo and the corporal, the last ones over the wall, had escaped the box. Evidently the wall had saved them.

They had all come over the wall in response to Scotty’s desperate yell for help and had run into the two gang members. The whispering box had reaped a harvest of Marines for a few minutes, then the two men had turned tail and run to their car. Rick wondered. Had they run because the whispering box was out of compressed air? Or had they realized that it wouldn’t be possible to knock out a whole barracks of Marines and sailors? He probably would never know.

No one answered the question of what had hit them. Scotty spoke up. “I was running like crazy, right alongside the wall. For a while it didn’t register, then I remembered that a guard post was up at the next corner. I let out a yell, but I didn’t have much hope. Then you guys dropped from heaven. Gizmo, how did you get in on it?”

“I come down often,” Gizmo said. “Sometimes I have a couple of hours when there’s no rush for cabs, so I come down and have a gabfest with this gang. I went through boot camp with a couple of ‘em. Some others I knew when I was in the Pacific, before I got into the squad with you.”

A Marine showed up and spoke to the lieutenant. “There’s a man at the gate to see the officer of the deck, sir. Says his name is Ames.”

“Send him in,” the lieutenant ordered.

Rick breathed a sigh of relief. Now Steve could take over and he and Scotty wouldn’t have to answer embarrassing questions.

In a moment Steve entered. His keen glance went from Scotty to Rick. “The box again?”

“Twice,” Rick said. He shuddered. “They almost had us when the Marines landed.”

Steve turned to the lieutenant. “Did it get any of your men?”

“All of those here but two. Except for myself.”

“Let’s hear the whole story,” Steve requested. “The Marines’ story, that is.”

The corporal of the guard outlined what had happened. Steve nodded. He spoke to the curious group of Marines. “Listen, gang, I know you’re all plenty curious about what hit you and what Rick and Scotty were doing with a couple of hoods chasing them, but if you want to continue to be helpful, don’t ask any questions.”

There was a chorus of complaints.

Steve held up his hand for silence. “I know it’s tough, but if I tell you it’s a question of national security, you’ll all know what that means. Keep quiet about this. Don’t let it out of the barracks. I promise that within a week or two we’ll take you all out for a cup of Java or something and give you the whole scoop.”

There was more grumbling, but the magic word “security” had the desired effect because there were no more questions, Rick and Scotty shook hands all around, thanking their rescuers wholeheartedly, then Steve Ames ushered them out to the waiting car. Gizmo trailed behind.

Outside the barracks gate, Steve spoke to Gizmo. “You’ve gotten into this by accident, but your record is good so I don’t suppose it will hurt. Want to stay on the case?”

Gizmo’s face lighted. “Doggone right!”

“Okay. Report to the Hotel Elliston in the morning. Rick and Scotty will ride with you. You’ll be private chauffeur for them. From now on they’re not to walk anywhere, and they are not to ride with anyone but you.”

Gizmo saluted. “Right, chief. I’ll take care of these two babes in the woods.”

“You and a whole guard detachment,” Scotty said, grinning. “Thanks, Giz. We’ll see you in the

morning.”

They climbed into the waiting car and settled back. “Now,” Steve said, “what’s the rest of it?”

Rick told him the story, beginning with when they had first noticed the pursuer. Steve listened in silence until the recital was done, then he laughed grimly. “I guess you know how lucky you were. Many people right here in Washington don’t know there’s a Marine Barracks behind that wall.”

“I didn’t remember myself until it was almost too late,” Scotty said.

“Good thing Marines are used to acting fast and asking questions later,” Steve assented. “We’ll have to do something nice for that gang. Well, kids, have you any bright ideas? Why did those men want to snatch you?”

“Not because I look like Dad,” Rick said. “They must know the difference by now.”

“You bet they know the difference,” said Ames. “It’s pretty obvious that you boys know something which makes them uncomfortable. Either that, or they would like to hold you as hostages to keep Hartson Brant from going ahead on the counterweapon. We’ll have to see that you chaps get better protection from now on.”

Rick noticed that the car had gone past the hotel street and was proceeding uptown. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“The lab. Your father and Doc Keppner will want to hear about your latest brush with the whispering box. That business about a partial effect because of distance is interesting. It offers possibilities for a defense until some gadget is worked out to handle the job.”

“We need a defense to carry in our pockets,” Scotty said ruefully.

They fell silent as the car sped through the streets toward the lab. Rick was going back over the events of the preceding hour. Every detail might be important to Dr. Keppner or Hartson Brant. He wanted to be sure he remembered everything. He knew he couldn’t recall their exact route. Perhaps it would help if he could see a map. He was curious about what their trail would look like on paper.

He marveled at the assurance inspired in the enemy by the whispering box. The men using it hadn’t seemed at all afraid of interference. They had gone about their work with a casualness and persistence that was terrifying.

In the laboratory, Hartson Brant and Dr. Keppner greeted them anxiously, then with relief when it developed that the boys were none the worse for their experience.

“I phoned the lab before coming after you,” Steve told Rick. “Now, suppose you give your father and Dr. Keppner the whole story? Try not to leave out anything.”

Rick launched into a recital of the evening’s events, omitting no details. Now and then Scotty broke in to elaborate on a point that he thought important.

When Rick had concluded, Hartson Brant and Dr. Keppner started a barrage of questions.

“I want to know more about the distance at which the box operated,” Hartson Brant said. “Rick, review

that for me.”

Rick thought back. The first time the men had used the whispering box had been as they ran through the second underpass. He turned to Scotty. “How far away was the man on foot when he turned the box on?”

“About seventy-five yards,” Scotty said. “That’s only a guess, of course, but I think it’s pretty close. I’m used to judging distance.”

“And the effect was only partial?” Dr. Keppner made notes on a pad of paper. “Was that the first time either of the men got closer than a hundred yards?”

“No,” Scotty said. “They were closer than that at first, but we doubled back so fast I don’t think they had a chance to get the box into position.”

Dr. Keppner continued making notes. “Correct me if I’m wrong on any points. When you were hit by the box from seventy-five yards, you were deafened, but the deafness soon wore off. Also, your balance was disturbed but not sufficiently so that your progress was materially hindered. Witness the fact that you managed to stay well ahead of the driver.”

“That was because he wasn’t in very good shape,” Rick volunteered. “Anyway, that’s what I think. He kept up with us at first, but he began to lose ground a little even before he fired the box. How about it, Scotty?”

Scotty assented. “That’s my idea, too. By the time he got close enough to fire the box he was out of breath. Toward the end, when we were crossing the field, we made better time than he did even with our legs wobbling.”

“Why didn’t the car overtake you while you were on the road?” Hartson Brant asked.

Rick thought back. “A couple of times, it was because the car had to turn around, which took time.”

“When we went through the second underpass,” Scotty added, “the car shot past within fifty yards of us, or that’s how it looked to me. But the driver was on the side of the car that was away from us. By the time he could have gotten out, we’d have been out of range again.”

Steve Ames complained, “There’s too much talk about drivers. Let’s get it straightened out. The man on foot was the driver of the car that almost got you yesterday, right? Now, was the driver of tonight’s car the man who was in the car yesterday as a passenger?”

“No,” Rick said. “I didn’t get too good a look, but I’m sure it wasn’t the same man. We’d never seen this one before.”

Scotty nodded agreement. “What I want to know is why the men don’t suffer from the effects of the box? I wondered about that while we were running. Do they have some kind of defense?”

“I think not,” Hartson Brant said. “It’s evident that the box is highly directional. Its effective field might be compared to that of a searchlight. A man in front of the light is blinded, while the man behind it gets only a very small percentage of reflected glare.”

“But anyone behind a car horn hears it as well as the people in front,” Scotty objected.

“True,” Mr. Brant said. “However, we are not dealing with audible sound like car horns, Scotty. These are ultrasonics, which act differently. Remember that the higher the frequency of a wave the greater its tendency to travel in a straight line.”

Steve Ames was obviously restless. During the questioning he had risen several times and walked to the window, staring out into the street, then resuming his seat for a few moments.

“I’m getting into a fine state of nerves,” he announced. “We’ve made no progress whatever in collecting this gang. We’ve no idea where Weiss and Zircon are being kept. We haven’t a defense against this thing. I’m sure the gang is planning something, maybe another attempt to break into one of our labs or offices, but not knowing where or when, it’s a tough job to set up a defense. And, finally, I can’t imagine why they made this second try to get Rick and Scotty. Yesterday I was sure they mistook Rick for Mr. Brant. Tonight, that theory no longer holds water.”

“There’s one more thing you haven’t mentioned,” Dr. Keppner reminded. “What is delaying Dr. Bertona? He should have arrived by now.”

“I’m checking on him,” Steve said. “I’ve wired our offices all the way from here to California. I should have a report on his whereabouts any moment.”

Rick asked, “Why are you sure the gang is planning another try at getting secret stuff?”

“They’re smart,” Steve said. “So far, they’ve been smarter than we have. But they’re also smart enough to know that no one can get fancy with the United States Government for very long. We may be slow, but we’re certain. They know that before long we’ll have a counterweapon. They also know that some one of these days a member of the gang will slip and we’ll discover his identity. After that, it isn’t a far step to getting the dope on the rest. I think they have set up a definite number of items they want, and that they have set a time limit within which to get them. At least that’s what I would do if our positions were reversed.”

“That would account for their snatching Weiss and Zircon,” Rick agreed. “They could slow down the production of a counterweapon.”

“Who are they?” Scotty demanded. “Spies?”

Steve shrugged. “That’s the jack-pot question. Before we can answer that, we’ll have to catch them. Their identities will tell us.”

“Who else but spies from another country would want our secrets?” Rick asked.

“Anyone who wants to get rich quick and doesn’t care how he does it,” Hartson Brant said. “There are always groups of men who will sell their own nation’s secrets to the highest bidder, Rick.”

Steve Ames nodded. “I have a hunch this is such a gang. For one thing, the secrets they’ve already stolen are not strictly military. They could be sold to industrialists of other countries as well as to governments.”

A request that they be told the nature of the stolen secrets trembled on Rick’s tongue, his curiosity overcoming his reluctance to ask questions.

The telephone rang.

Dr. Keppner answered it, then beckoned to Steve.

Steve took the phone. "Ames. Yes? Okay, let's have it."

He jotted down notes in a notebook, interrupting the man on the other end of the phone occasionally with terse questions. Finally he closed the notebook, said, "Keep checking," replaced the phone, and turned to the group in the lab.

"Well, here it is," he said flatly. "Dr. Bertona boarded the plane in California as scheduled. He was aboard at Denver ; he didn't even get off to eat or stretch his legs. He was aboard at every other stop until Pittsburgh . He got off at Pittsburgh and went into the Terminal Building ."

Steve's grim eyes went from one face to the other. "He never got back on the plane."

CHAPTER XII

A Desperate Dilemma

Scotty, in a spare moment, had found a sheet of cardboard and a wax crayon and had printed a sign which he placed over the lab door. The sign was on the inner side, of course, so that it wouldn't attract the attention of occasional patients who came to see Dr. Keppner who was actually a doctor of medicine as well as a physicist. The sign read:

home of the sleepless wonders

In the past few days, sleep had become a commodity that was, to use government terminology, "in short supply."

Hartson Brant, Dr. Keppner, and Terhune the draftsman were bleary-eyed from hours spent over sketches, preliminary drawings, and equations. Mr. Brant's prized slide rule was in constant use for computations. As Scotty said, it never had a chance to cool off.

Rick, Scotty, and Fanning were also pale from lack of sunshine, too hurried meals, and inadequate sleep, but they were in far better shape than the older men.

Steve Ames could only be described as haggard. Rick wondered if he slept at all. He would pop in at odd hours of the day or night, have a cup of the coffee that was constantly brewing in the lab, announce dejectedly that he had nothing whatever to report, then vanish again.

An equivalent of the whispering box had been built, Rick and Scotty doing most of the wiring under Keppner's direction. They could now produce ultrasonic blasts of any frequency. The sound apparatus was yet to be tested, but they were sure it would work.

The thing holding up progress on the counterweapon was the electronic control.

“The theory is simple enough,” Hartson Brant said during one of his increasingly rare moments of relaxation. “We simply make an automatic device that will analyze the frequency of the whispering box, adjust itself, and emit a counterfrequency that will cancel out the box. It sounds easy. It isn’t.”

Dr. Keppner sighed. “No, it most definitely isn’t. There are times when I’ve come close to admitting defeat.”

“So have I,” Hartson Brant admitted.

Rick stared at his father. It was unthinkable that any problem could stump Hartson Brant! Any problem in the field of electronics, at any rate.

The scientist saw the look. “Do I surprise you, son? Why do you think the Spindrift group has been so successful in the past? Not because of the brilliance of any *one* of us, but because of the combined training of *all* of us. We have faced every problem and solved it because each of us is strong in certain fields. My particular field happens to be design. But my designs have been based on the mathematical computations of Weiss, on Zircon’s intensive knowledge of material analysis, and on John Gordon’s ingenious solving of mechanical problems.”

“Don’t be overmodest, Hartson,” Dr. Keppner said. “You have conceived the ideas. That takes a special kind of genius.”

Mr. Brant smiled. “Perhaps. But an idea doesn’t end when it is ‘dreamed up,’ as Rick would put it. The idea must be resolved into a working arrangement. On a matter like this, I admit myself lost without my associates.”

Rick asked hesitantly, “Couldn’t we get Dr. Gordon down?”

“He couldn’t help us very much in this case,” Hartson Brant said. “What we need most is Julius Weiss’s mathematical mind.”

“I wonder where they are?” Scotty murmured.

All of them had refused to consider that the missing scientists might not be alive. What would anyone have to gain by murder? If the whispering box gang was after delay, as seemed likely, the same purpose would be achieved by merely holding the scientists.

Rick thought of Weiss and Zircon when anyone mentioned the missing scientists. After all, he hadn’t known Dr. Bertona. Neither had Scotty nor his father. He asked, “Dr. Keppner, you know Bertona, don’t you?”

“Very slightly,” Keppner said. “I met him several years ago at a scientific convention in San Francisco. We have corresponded on mutual problems since then, but we haven’t met.”

“Could he have solved this problem?” Scotty wanted to know.

“He could have helped. He does not have the specialized knowledge of either Weiss or Zircon, but he would have been an extra mind to grapple with these confounded equations.”

Hartson Brant finished his coffee and put his cup on the lab bench. Rick noticed that his hand shook with

fatigue.

“Well, Keppner, that last design has possibilities, I think. We might see what results we get by coupling the frequency analyzer to the variable resistor.”

Rick and Scotty watched as the two scientists walked back to where Terhune labored over a drawing.

“It must be tough if it has, Dad buffaloed,” Rick said.

Scotty nodded. “You know, I get the feeling that we’re parked on an unexploded atom bomb. I keep waiting for it to go off.”

“Same here. I keep waiting for Weiss or Zircon to walk in the door. I keep waiting for news that someone else has vanished into thin air. And mostly I keep waiting to hear that the gang has cracked some other government building and walked off with more of our secrets.”

“I wonder why they haven’t?” Scotty mused.

“Maybe there’s nothing more they want at the moment.”

“At the moment,” Scotty repeated. “Maybe you have something there. We know they must have inside information. Suppose they’re just killing time until something big is completed?”

“Steve Ames has thought of that,” Fanning said from behind them.

Rick turned. “Where did you drop from?”

Fanning put down a package and began untying it.

“Out to get a few parts we needed. Anyway, I heard Ames tell Dr. Keppner they have an extra guard on all special assignment stuff that’s being developed right now.”

“They think of everything,” Rick said. “I don’t know why we bother speculating.”

“Except we’d go balmy if we didn’t try to figure it out,” Scotty told him. “Well, what do we work on now?”

“Check the ultrasonic gadget,” Fanning said.

“And knock ourselves silly?” Rick objected.

“We’ll set the frequency above the whispering box,” Fanning said. “That will give us different results. Wait a minute, I’ll get the reports on ultrasonic experiments from the government clearinghouse.”

The ultrasonic part of the counterweapon was mounted on the aluminum chassis Rick and Scotty had made. It looked like an ordinary radio set without its cabinet except for the conical metal projection from which the ultrasonic sounds came. This was Dr. Keppner’s “silent loud-speaker.”

Fanning returned from a desk at the front of the lab carrying a sheaf of papers. “Doc Keppner says to go ahead and try it out.” He consulted a sheet covered with mathematical symbols. “Want to see this thing set fire to a sheet of paper?”

“I’ll have to see it before I believe it,” Scotty said.

“Okay, Doubting Thomas. Watch this.”

Rick watched closely as Fanning set a control dial to the frequency indicated on the report, then found a sheet of paper and held it before the conical projector.

“Turn on the juice,” the assistant directed.

Rick threw the switch, a little fearfully. He still wasn’t certain that the machine wouldn’t act like the whispering box. Instead, his skin tingled as though from a faint electric shock.

The paper turned brown, charred, then burst into flame!

Fanning blew it out and grinned triumphantly at Scotty. “See? Try holding your hand in front of the speaker.”

“Not me,” Scotty objected. “I need my hand. I only have two.”

Fanning put his own hand directly in front of the conical metal. Rick stared. A moment ago, a paper held there had burst into flame!

“Try it,” Fanning invited.

Rick did. The tingling sensation in his hand increased a hundredfold. It wasn’t unpleasant, just strange.

“Well, I’m a chimp’s cousin!” he exclaimed.

“There’s something in here about that experiment in washing clothes,” Fanning said. He leafed through the papers. “Here it is.” He grinned at Scotty. “Want to see if we can wash the gravy stains out of that necktie?”

“Those are part of the design,” Scotty said with dignity. “Wash your own necktie. Want everyone to know you had ketchup on your sandwich this noon?”

“That’s not ketchup. That’s the blood of the last guy who insulted me,” Fanning retorted. “Hey, there isn’t any frequency given.”

“Try it anyway,” Scotty said. “What have you to lose? Or are you afraid it will ruin that burlap bag you wear?”

“Listen to the way he talks about fine linen. Okay. Stand by. I’ll shoot the frequency up 2,000 cycles. That ought to give us plenty of vibration.”

Rick objected quickly, “Wait a minute! How do you know what will happen?”

“Don’t worry,” Fanning soothed. “It’s 40,000 cycles higher than the whispering box. It won’t hurt you.”

Rick watched nervously as the assistant moved the frequency control higher. He didn’t like experimenting without any idea of the possible results.

Fanning turned on the power.

Scotty had been standing directly in front of the projector. He let out a yelp and jumped into the air. Rick stared as his friend started to do a jig, then he burst into laughter.

Fanning was laughing, too, so hard he couldn't manage to shut the switch again. Scotty, his face contorted in a look of utter amazement, was doing a wild jittering dance!

Rick stopped laughing abruptly. It was funny, but it might be serious! He stepped forward to grab Scotty and the thing hit him, too! For a moment he felt as though needles were pricking him, then, unable to control his movements, he began jumping around, holding tightly to Scotty's shoulder!

Their inability to control their movements finally saved them. Scotty's long legs tangled with Rick's. For a moment they tottered, then they collapsed on the floor, out of range of the speaker.

Fanning controlled his mirth long enough to throw the switch.

Rick and Scotty sat up, dazed. The scientists had arrived on the run from across the lab.

"Are you all right?" Hartson Brant demanded anxiously.

"I don't know," Rick said ruefully. He tried his arms and legs and found he could control them once again, then he got to his feet. Scotty got up, too, grinning from ear to ear.

"I'll buy it," Scotty said. "With that thing, Rick and I can become dancing champions overnight. What hit us?"

Dr. Keppner shook his head. "There is a lot we don't know about ultrasonic sound. Fanning, I told you to stick strictly to established experiments. You might have killed yourself and these boys!"

Fanning was still trying to smother a grin. The grin broke through. "I never saw anything so funny!"

"Laugh," Scotty said ruefully. "Go ahead. Laugh your head off."

"Thanks, I will." Fanning went off into another gale of mirth.

Even the scientists chuckled.

"It was amusing," Hartson Brant agreed. "I thought Rick had suddenly gone berserk. Or that he and Scotty were having some strange kind of fight."

"As long as no harm was done, we'll forget it," Dr. Keppner agreed. "But stay strictly within bounds from now on, Fanning. You should know that ultrasonics are not to be played with."

"I'm sorry, sir," Fanning said. To Rick and Scotty, he said seriously, "Dr. Keppner's right. It was a dumb stunt for me to pull."

Rick saw the twinkle in Fanning's eyes. "Forget it," he said.

"Forget it for the time being," Scotty added.

“And watch out for arsenic in my soup? Okay, Scotty. By the way, speaking of soup, you kids had your lunch?”

Rick looked at his watch. It was almost five in the afternoon. “Gosh, we forgot,” he said.

“That won’t do,” Hartson Brant told them. “No matter how busy we are, you must eat on schedule. Otherwise you’ll serve no other purpose than dragging down your resistance. Skip out, both of you. There’s nothing for you right now anyway.”

Rick and Scotty cleaned up their workbench and went down the stairs to where Gizmo’s taxi was parked. He was their constant shadow now when they were outside the lab.

“Where to?” he demanded. “Chow? I wondered if you’d forgot to eat. I’ll take you to a good place.”

The cab whisked them through the streets to a restaurant on New York Avenue near the corner of Tenth Street. On the way into the restaurant Rick purchased a copy of the *Washington Star*. Gizmo parked the cab and followed them into the restaurant.

The trio sat down at a table and Rick and Scotty ordered. Gizmo accepted a sandwich, not that he was hungry, he said, but to keep them company.

Rick studied the newspaper. He had been out of touch with the news and he was curious about what was happening outside the tight little sphere of lab activity. There was only the usual news of government activities, diplomatic difficulties, and so on. Then, on an inner page, he found a column written by a leading Washington newsman. He stiffened as a short paragraph caught his eye. “Scotty! Listen to this!”

He read it aloud.

“ ‘Unless a certain government protection agency has more luck in the next few days than it has had in the past, one of the biggest stories of recent months will break soon. Newsmen in the know can’t keep it under their hats much longer. Big names are involved, including those of a trio of missing science savants.’ ”

Scotty gave a low whistle. “If the newspapers have it, the top will blow right off. Didn’t I say we were sitting on an atom bomb?”

Gizmo instinctively looked under his chair. For a moment he was shocked into silence, then he asked shakily, “You kidding?”

“Just a figure of speech,” Rick said quickly.

Scotty hurriedly changed the subject. “Listen, Giz, I just thought of something. Do you know where there is a store that sells jokes? I want to get something.”

Gizmo’s forehead furrowed. “Jokes? What kind? Like in books?”

“No. Practical jokes. You know. Exploding matches, itching powder, stuff like that.”

“What do you want a store like that for?” Rick asked suspiciously.

“I want to find something to amuse our friend Fanning,” Scotty said.

Rick grinned. Scotty hadn’t forgiven the lab assistant’s laughter.

“There’s one down on Pennsylvania Avenue,” Gizmo said. “Let’s go. It’ll only take a minute.”

They paid the check and went out to where the cab was parked. As they approached, Rick saw a figure seated in the back. He stopped short. “Giz! Someone’s in your cab”

“Some guy wanting a taxi,” Gizmo said. “I’ll tell him it’s already hired.”

He walked to the cab, Rick and Scotty beside him. Then, as Gizmo opened the door, Rick gasped.

Sitting calmly in the rear seat was the driver . . . the man with the flattened nose, who had chased them on foot with the whispering box!

Rick’s first instinct was to run. He turned, Scotty beside him.

The stranger’s voice stopped them.

“Wait a minute, Look, I haven’t got the sound box. Turn around, both of you.”

Rick half turned, still poised to run, and saw the man with both his hands in the air. And his hands were empty.

“Peace conference,” the man said, smiling.

“Don’t trust this joker,” Rick warned.

Again Scotty turned to run. “I’m going to call a cop!”

“Wait! Don’t, if you value your friends’ lives!”

That stopped Scotty. Rick stood as though frozen.

“Weiss and Zircon? Are they all right?”

“They’re fine,” the man said. “Get into the cab.”

Rick’s eyes met Scotty’s.

“If he has any information about Weiss and Zircon, we want to know it,” Scotty said.

“I hope you guys know what you’re doing,” Gizmo said. “If it was me, I’d call for help!”

Rick stood undecided. He couldn’t believe that one of the gang had placed himself in their hands without the whispering box! Yet the man’s hands were empty, and there was no place he could have concealed the box and still have been able to reach it before they could jump him!

“Can’t you make up your mind?” Again the man smiled confidently. “I’ll make it up for you. I’m unarmed, sure, but I have a weapon that will persuade you. Unless I return to my headquarters tonight,

and unless you two are with me, Weiss and Zircon will be shot!”

CHAPTER XIII

In the Hands of the Enemy

There was nothing Rick or Scotty could do. Behind the man’s smile they sensed his deadly seriousness. They knew how ruthless the gang was, and they had every reason to believe his words were not a bluff. Unless they went along with him, Weiss and Zircon would almost certainly suffer for it.

“You win,” Rick said dully. He got into the cab and sat down beside the man.

Scotty followed suit. “Okay,” he said. “You’ve got us over a barrel. What do you want us to do?”

“Just make yourselves comfortable,” their enemy directed. “McLean, get in and drive us. I’ll tell you where to go.”

Gizmo looked at Scotty and Rick hesitantly.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Rick told him. “Better do as he says, Giz.”

Gizmo shrugged and got into the driver’s seat. It was obvious that he didn’t like giving in so easily. “I could drive right up to a cop,” he offered. “We could land this character in the city brig so fast he wouldn’t know what hit him.”

“Neither would your scientist friends,” the man said gently. “Don’t try anything foolish.”

Rick studied the gang member’s face. He was young, but a definite puffiness around his cheeks and eyes told of soft living. No wonder they had been able to outrun him that night by the Lincoln Memorial. Once, though, he had been an athlete, and probably a fighter or wrestler. His nose had stopped many a punch.

“Are Weiss and Zircon all right?” Rick demanded.

“And how about Dr. Bertona?” Scotty added.

“They’re okay. A little unhappy but healthy. Unless you three try something foolish, of course.”

Rick was on the right side of the rear seat and Scotty on the left. Their “captor,” if he could be called such, was seated between them, very much at ease.

Gizmo looked back over his shoulder. “Where to?”

“Drive over to Fourteenth Street and go downtown.”

The taxi moved away from the curb and into traffic. By the stiff set of his neck, it was obvious that Gizmo was unhappy about the situation. Rick guessed that he might try something. That couldn’t be

permitted, if Weiss and Zircon were to escape the gang's vengeance.

"Don't try anything, Gizmo," he said sharply. "And take it easy. If we get into a wreck, we won't get to where we're going in time."

"Very smart," their captor approved. "Just relax, boys, and we'll have a comfortable ride."

"It took a gag like this to get us," Scotty said bitterly. "You tried twice before and missed."

"Tough luck," the stranger admitted. "We were careless the first time. The second, you were lucky. We weren't equipped to fight a battalion of Marines."

"Because the whispering box only carries a couple of charges?" Rick asked quickly.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

"There's a lot we'd like to know," Scotty replied. "Where are you taking us?"

"To your friends."

"Why?" Rick demanded. "We can't do you any good. We're just a couple of junior assistants. What do you want us for?"

Flat Nose chuckled. "We need you. Do you think we'd go to so much trouble if we didn't? Keep on going down Fourteenth, McLean."

Gizmo obeyed orders. The taxi proceeded downtown through the Fourteenth Street traffic. They crossed Pennsylvania and continued on past the Washington Monument and the Department of Agriculture. In a short while they were crossing the Potomac into Virginia.

"Swing right," Flat Nose commanded. "Go upriver." He glanced at his watch. "Go as far as Key Bridge, then turn around and come down the river again. Cross the Memorial Bridge back to the city."

Gizmo growled, "What is this, a joy ride?"

"Just killing time. Do as you're told and you'll be okay."

"Better do it," Scotty said. He turned to their captor. "Have you got a name? We might as well get acquainted. I guess you know who we are."

"You bet I do. I've been camped on your trail ever since we almost got you near the hotel. If you want something to call me, make it 'Nails.' That's my nickname."

"Nails," Rick repeated. "That's a funny name."

"What's funny about it? How about your own name? Where I come from, a rick is something they put hay on."

Gizmo was driving up the parkway on the Virginia side of the river. As they moved along at a moderate speed, a police cruiser drifted past. The officer on the passenger's side looked over at them.

Nails's affability vanished. "Don't try anything," he snapped. "Just sit tight and look pleasant."

Rick and Scotty did. There was nothing else they could do. The cruiser pulled ahead of them and continued on its way.

"Let's stow the chatter," Nails said. "You'll have plenty of chance to talk later, when you compare notes with your pals."

"Are you going to keep riding around until dark?" Scotty asked, ignoring the order. "That's what it looks like to me."

"Bright boy," Nails said.

Rick calculated. His watch told him it was almost six. It wouldn't be fully dark until about half past eight. "That's more than two hours from the time you picked us up! Suppose we're not there in time?"

Nails grinned. "You'll have to excuse me, kids. I sort of exaggerated a little." He added quickly, "But don't get any ideas. I wasn't kidding. We have to get where we're going by a definite time, and you have to be with me. Otherwise, Weiss and Zircon get it in the neck."

"Why can't we go directly there?" Rick demanded. "It won't do us any good to know where your headquarters is. You wouldn't be stupid enough to let us get away so we could use the information."

Nails motioned with his thumb toward the back window. "Didn't you kids know we were being trailed? Sure. There was a guy in a blue coupe following you when I picked you up. We have to wait until dark to get rid of him."

For an instant hope flared, then it died as quickly. The only way anyone could be trailed successfully was to keep them from knowing they were being followed. Nails knew about their shadow—which was more than Rick or Scotty had known. Steve must have put a tail on them for their own protection.

Rick slumped down in his seat. In a little while they would have the answer to the riddle of the missing scientists. They might have the answers to a lot of riddles. But it wouldn't do them the slightest bit of good.

CHAPTER XIV

Dead End

The man in the blue coupe drove with one hand while he held a microphone to his lips with the other. Three cars ahead, he could see the taillight of Gizmo McLean's cab.

"It's getting darker," he said. "If they're going to try anything, it will be pretty soon."

He spoke in clear, understandable English instead of using the cryptic code numbers used by most police transmitters. Built into his radio was a word scrambler that reduced his messages to unintelligible sounds.

At the receiving end, a similar device unscrambled the frequencies so the listener heard the message just as it was transmitted. The device prevented eavesdropping by anyone equipped with a short-wave set. Only radios manned by Steve Ames's men were equipped with that particular type of scrambler.

Steve's voice came through the loud-speaker in the blue coupe. "What's your present location?"

"We're on Connecticut Avenue, proceeding toward Chevy Chase Circle. The next corner will be Chesapeake Road."

"Are you sure they know you're on their tail?"

"They haven't pulled anything queer, but I think they know."

The man in the blue coupe was sure that no other reason would have kept the taxi driving around in circles until darkness started to fall. Not until the street lights came on did the taxi head out Connecticut Avenue as though finally starting for a destination.

Steve Ames's voice came through the speaker again. "Keep your eyes open, Dave. They're apt to try something at any time. I'm at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Military Road. If you get this far, I'll swing in behind you. Watch for Bill in the tan Mercury. He's coming up Connecticut trying to overtake you. Once he passes, let them lose you if they try. Bill and I will take over."

Dave picked up his microphone and acknowledged. "Okay, Steve. I think we've got 'em boxed."

It was fully dark now, but the lights on Connecticut Avenue enabled Dave to see the taxi. He kept a few cars between them just as a matter of principle, although he was sure there was no longer a need for secrecy. He was just as sure that some sudden maneuver would be made to lose him. He grinned. If the driver would only hold off until Bill passed, or until they reached Military Road so Steve could take over, it wouldn't matter. He would even play dumb so they could "lose" him with no trouble.

The taxi went ahead at a moderate speed, stopping for all the lights. Dave trailed along, keeping his distance but prepared to move faster if necessary.

They reached a long stretch between two street lights. The taxi picked up a little speed. Dave looked ahead and saw that the next light was green. He picked up speed a bit, too, but let the taxi pull away from him slightly. He knew they wouldn't make the green light.

Sure enough, while the taxi was still two hundred feet from the light, it changed to amber, then to red.

But the taxi kept on going, right through the light. It swerved to avoid a bus, straightened out, and shot ahead!

Dave pushed the gas pedal to the floor and went after them. The intervening cars blocked his way. He started to swing past when he saw the taxi suddenly cross the avenue and shoot down a side street.

He relaxed and grinned, content now to wait for the light. He had been brought up in this part of Washington and he knew every street in it. What the taxi driver or whoever was directing him evidently didn't know was that the street was a dead end, nor did it have any alleyways where the car might turn off. He had only to wait and the car would come out again. It had to come out. If it didn't, he would know that the people in the cab were in one of the houses on the street or had taken to walking. In either case it was all right. In a matter of minutes they could throw a net of men around the area.

The light changed. Dave pulled ahead and swung to the curb opposite the street down which the taxi had turned.

A car came out, but it was a convertible, the top down. A man and a woman were in it. Dave waited patiently. A moving van came out followed by a khaki Army car. There was another long pause, then a coupe came out.

Dave began to wonder. They would have discovered by now that it was a dead end. He waited for a pause in the avenue traffic, then swung his coupe around and went down the street.

He drove slowly, inspecting the houses as he passed. There were only a few. He picked up his microphone.

“Steve, this is Dave.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m on Colway . It’s a private street, dead end. They came down here about five minutes ago. They haven’t come out.”

“Right.Bill, did you get that?”

A new voice came on the air. It belonged to the operator in the tan Mercury. “Got it, Steve. I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’m on the avenue heading that way. I just passedChesapeake .”

“Okay, Bill. Step on it. Dave, keep looking. I’m coming down the avenue to meet you. Keep in touch.”

“Right.”

The houses were set some distance apart. Cars were parked on the street, but none of them were cabs, Dave could see the woods where the street ended, and he began to worry. He should have seen the cab by now.

He stepped on the gas. At the end of the street he stopped, suddenly frightened. Had he lost them? There was no way out. They must be in some garage.

But he knew they weren’t. They had known they were being trailed. They wouldn’t try to hide in a garage where they could easily be located again. He was sure the four people in the taxi had not been in any of the cars that came out of the street. And even if they had been hiding in a baggage compartment or crouching in a rear seat, where was the cab?

He reached for the mike again.

“Steve, this is Dave. They’re gone!”

“Gone?” The reply came swiftly. “They can’t be gone! Where did they turn off?”

“They didn’t,” Dave said. “There isn’t any place for them to turn off. But they’re gone!”

“Think, man!” Steve sounded urgent. “If they’re gone, where did they go? Taxis don’t vanish.”

“This one did,” Dave said miserably. He had turned around and was driving back toward Connecticut Avenue, surveying every house as he passed. He was certain they wouldn’t have driven into a garage, trapping themselves. He was equally certain they couldn’t have turned off anywhere. Then where had they gone?

It hit him.

“The moving van!”

He still had the mike in his hands. Steve had heard.

“What moving van?”

“It came out of the street,” he said quickly. “They must be in it! Steve, I’m going after them. Bill! You listening?”

“Go ahead. What does the van look like?”

“A yellow one. No name on it. Watch for it, Bill. I’m on my way!”

“Get going,” Steve said. “Keep in touch! I’m coming down to cover that street.”

Dave punched a button on his dashboard. His headlights turned red and a siren under the hood began to wail. He pushed the pedal to the floor and hunched over the wheel. The van had gone down Connecticut Avenue toward the city.

He spun around the corner of the avenue. Cars scattered before the wailing siren. Traffic lights flickered past. Police officers came from nowhere to hold up traffic for his mad rush down the avenue.

“Bill,” he said into his mike. “Use your red lights so I’ll know when we meet.”

“I’m using them. We must be close.”

Down the avenue he saw the red gleam of headlights and slowed his speed. He swung to the middle of the road and saw Bill do the same. The cars met, edged together.

Bill, a stocky man, leaned across the intervening space. “No moving van passed me, Dave.”

Dave picked up his mike. “Steve, Bill and I met on the avenue. Neither of us saw the van.”

Steve’s voice shook with anger. “Get going, both of you. Quarter the streets. Find them or I’ll take the hide off you myself!”

“Okay,” Dave said. He moved off, siren screaming. Bill headed down the nearest side street.

Dave felt sick. The two kids were his responsibility. Steve had set him to guard them. Now their captor had neatly tricked him by driving the cab into the back of a moving van. He could see the setup perfectly. The brains behind this thing had figured all the angles. If the taxi hadn’t been able to meet the van on the dead-end street, the big truck would have gone to another rendezvous. They would have kept it up until the trick had succeeded.

Dave searched the near-by streets as fast as the siren and reckless driving would let him but deep down he knew it was no use. They wouldn't find the van again. Or, if they did, it would be empty and abandoned.

The whispering box gang had succeeded again.

CHAPTER XV

Reunion in Capture

It was dark inside the moving van. Rick could see lights now and then that filtered through a small window behind the van driver's seat. He, Scotty, Gizmo, and Nails were still in the taxi.

Nails had directed Gizmo's every move once they reached upperConnecticut Avenue . They had run the red light, swung sharply into a side street and, at Nails' order, Gizmo had snapped his lights off and on.

At the end of the street, a moving van waited with its great rear doors open and two steel channels leading up to the opening. It had been the work of a moment for Gizmo to drive the cab up the ramp. The steel channels were swung inside the van by the driver and another man, the taxi wheels had been chocked so they couldn't move, then the doors had closed.

Rick could see at once what the result would be. To the man in the blue coupe who had followed them through their time-killing wanderings, the taxi would seem to vanish. He guessed that the trick would be discovered, but by that time the van would be on its Way without a pursuer.

He slumped in his seat, completely dejected. In the darkness around him he could hear the soft breathing of the others. No one talked. There wasn't anything to say. Nails wasn't handing out information.

They would be taken to the gang headquarters, and presumably they would see Weiss and Zircon. After that, Rick didn't know what to expect. If he could only guess why the gang had gone to so much trouble to get Scotty and him, he might be able to speculate about the future. For a while he pondered the possibility of their ganging up on Nails. It would be easy to subdue him and strap him up with their belts, but that would gain nothing. It would only place Weiss, Zircon, and Bertona in danger.

The van bumped and swayed along. He thought they must have leftConnecticut Avenue . It felt like a second-class road, full of bumps.

Just to make conversation, he asked: "Suppose you hadn't lost the blue coupe at that red light, Nails? Your trick wouldn't have worked."

Nails chuckled. "Why not? We'd kept going instead of turning down the side road. Then your pal McLean would have done some fancy twisting and turning, running a few more red lights until the coupe was far enough behind so we could double back without being spotted. Getting a break on the light just made things easier."

“Your luck is going to turn one of these days,” Scotty said quietly. “You’ll find yourself in tough luck that will end up with the whole gang of you in a Federal prison.”

“Our luck will turn,” Nails acknowledged. “We know that. But before it does, we’ll make a final cleaning and shove off. And you kids are going to help.”

“Not on your life,” Rick protested. “You’ll get no help from us!”

“We’ve got it. Just keeping you out of sight for a while will be all the help we need. Now stow the gab.”

Rick fell silent, thinking over what Nails had said. It was interesting to know they were planning one final job. Where would it be directed? He stirred restlessly. Somehow they would have to get free to warn Steve Ames and the others! But they couldn’t make a move until they were sure Weiss and Zircon wouldn’t be placed in danger by any sudden act.

There were no more lights coming through the small window in the front of the van. Rick guessed they were on a sparsely traveled road, one without street lights.

The van swerved and they bumped along for perhaps ten minutes, then they swerved again in a half-circle and stopped.

“Everybody out,” Nails directed. “And watch yourselves! We don’t want to have to put a slug in any of you.”

The van doors swung open. Rick opened his door and got out, squeezing into the narrow space between the side of the van and the side of the cab. Nails was right behind him. Gizmo and Scotty followed.

Through the now open rear of the van Rick saw flashlights. In their reflected glare he could make out trees.

“Jump down,” a voice directed.

Rick obeyed, and saw the glint of a flashlight on a shotgun barrel. He swallowed. Scotty and Gizmo leaped to the ground beside him.

“This way,” Nails directed.

He led them around the front of the van to where a darkened house sat in the woods. It was a big, Victorian mansion, shabby and neglected. Once it had been the home of persons of wealth. A wrought-iron fence sagged with rust and age and a once-beautiful lawn was grown over with weeds and tall grass. They followed Nails up broken steps to the front porch. He swung the door open and took them into a musty hall.

Inside, behind hanging curtains, Rick saw the flicker of lights. A man came out of one of the rooms carrying a kerosene lamp.

“All okay,” Nails said. “No trouble.”

“Good. You kids come with me. Nails, keep them covered.”

Nails took a shotgun from one of the other men who had followed them in. "Let's go. Follow the light."

Their guide led them up creaking stairs into an upper hallway.

Rick kept his eyes open, trying to impress every detail on his memory. He had counted the men. Now he counted the stairs, and the doors in the upper hallway. There were five doors. All of them were closed. From under three of them light filtered.

The entire house was broken with age and disuse. A scent of mustiness filled the air. It was a depressing place. Rick half expected to see bats or spiders hovering just outside the rim of yellow lamplight.

Gizmo said, "This place gives me the creeps."

"You'll be comfortable," Nails replied briefly.

The man with the lamp took out a key, opened a door, and motioned them inside.

Rick led the way into a boxlike room completely devoid of furniture. Wallpaper, bleached and peeling, hung in festoons from the walls. From overhead, a broken chandelier hung. In one corner, mud wasps had built tier after tier of nests.

The man with the lamp motioned to the two windows. They were sealed shut with heavy planks. "Don't bother trying to push out the boards. There's an iron grill on the outside. You'd only waste your time."

He put the lamp down in the middle of the floor. "You can keep the light. We'll bring you blankets later. No chow until tomorrow morning, but you can have water."

He and Nails backed to the door, keeping the boys covered with the shotgun. Then *the* door swung shut and the key rasped in the lock.

"Welcome to Dusty Manor," Scotty said.

Gizmo shuddered. "I got the willies. What you bet this place is haunted?"

"Haunted is right," Rick said. "By a bunch of spooks with shotguns and whispering boxes. That shotgun shows the kind of people they are. They have a perfectly good scientific weapon, but they carry a shotgun Just to be sure. Well, what now?"

Scotty shrugged. He sat down on the floor, his back against the wall. "Nothing. What I want to know is, Where are Weiss and Zircon?"

"In the house somewhere," Rick said.

He examined the room again. In addition to the door through which they had come, there was a door that evidently connected with another room. He went over and tried the knob. It turned, but the door didn't open. He pushed and the door rattled.

A voice spoke faintly from beyond the door. "Who is it?"

Rick froze. The querulous voice belonged to Julius Weiss!

“Professor,” Scotty called, “is that you?”

For an instant there was shocked silence, then Hobart Zircon’s distinctive bellow shook the walls.

“Scotty, Was that your voice? Rick! Are you in there?”

Then they were all shouting at once.

“Are you all right, Professor Zircon?”

“Professor Weiss, are you okay?”

“Rick-Scotty!How did you get here?”

The door to the hall swung open. Nails came in, and he held a small black box that looked like a box camera except for the small affair on its front. To Rick, it looked like a tiny tin horn. Evidently Nails had more confidence in the box than did his friend.

“Knock off this noise or I’ll blast you,” Nails warned.

Rick reminded him. “You said we could see the professors!”

Nails considered. “Okay,” he said finally. “I guess it won’t do any harm.”

He called to someone in the hall. “Joe, got the key to the connecting door?”

The man who had carried the lamp came in. He selected a key from a ring. “Sure the boss won’t object? Maybe you better check with him.”

“It’s okay,” Nails said. “Open it.” He tapped the whispering box. “Talk to your pals all you want, but keep your voices down and don’t try anything. Remember it’s just as easy to blast you with this thing as not.”

“Well be quiet,” Rick promised.

The key turned in the lock. The door swung open.

CHAPTER XVI

The Man with the Mismatched Eyes

There was never such a reunion. Rick and Scotty were almost tearful with relief at finding Weiss and Zircon in good health. Gizmo, who had heard Rick and Scotty talk about the two scientists, greeted them warmly. The two professors, aside from their delight at seeing the boys, were burning with curiosity about

what had been happening in the outside world. It was several minutes before they quieted down enough so that their conversation made sense.

“Suppose we start with what happened to you?” Rick suggested. “Why did you get off the train at Baltimore, and what happened?”

Zircon grimaced. “I’m still embarrassed at how easily we were fooled. I was asleep in the lower berth, and Julius was in the upper. While we were still an hour away from Baltimore, a voice awakened us.

“It said, ‘This is Ames. Listen, both of you, and get it the first time, because it’s urgent,’” Zircon continued. “Naturally, we had no reason to think that it wasn’t Ames. It sounded like him. It was dark in the Pullman and we could see only a vague blur through the opening in the curtains. The man said we were in danger, and that we must leave the train at Baltimore. He said further that we should open the vestibule door on the side away from the station, and climb the embankment where we would be met by one of his men.”

“We did as directed,” Weiss said. “There was a man waiting, in a sedan. We got into the back seat. He turned around and—well, you can imagine.”

“The whispering box,” Rick said grimly. “I think they like to use it.”

“It amuses them,” Weiss agreed. “We were brought here and placed in the room next door. I can’t say that we have been mistreated. We have been given good meals on a regular schedule and allowed to bathe every two days. The floor is a little hard for sleeping purposes, but we’ve slept on worse beds. No, it hasn’t been bad from a physical standpoint. But you can picture our mental state. What has been going on?”

“Omit no details,” Zircon boomed. “We’re starved for news.”

Rick acted as spokesman. He told their story in detail from the time of their arrival in Washington until the connecting door had been opened between their two prisons.

“Ralph Bertona,” Weiss said reflectively. “I know his work. But we haven’t seen him.”

Zircon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “One time when our meal was brought there was an extra plate on the tray. I thought nothing of it then. Perhaps it was for the guard. On the other hand, Dr. Bertona may be here in this building. He could be in a room down the hall and we would have no way of knowing.”

“I think we can assume that he is,” Weiss stated.

“The question of the moment, it seems to me, is the reason for Rick and Scotty being kidnaped and brought here. Why not Hartson or Keppner? Surely that would make more sense.”

Gizmo had been sitting quietly during all the discussion. Now he spoke up. “Never mind the theories, gents. It seems to old Giz that the problem in hand, so to speak, is how do we get out of this rattrap?”

“Well spoken,” Zircon boomed. “Julius and I have discussed the possibilities of escape. With a guard outside our door at all times and the windows barred, there wasn’t much chance. But with five of us here . . .”

“Keep your voice down,” Weiss said tartly. “Do you want to inform the whole house of our plans?”

Zircon slapped the little professor on the back. "You should know by now that these old walls are fairly soundproof, Julius. We haven't heard a thing since we arrived. And I feel rejuvenated by the presence of our three young friends. It gives me new hope. Remember all the tight places we've squeezed out of together? This creaking mausoleum is surely no more difficult a nut to crack than the Hill of a Thousand Repentant Ancestors, eh?"

Scotty held a finger to his lips. "Go easy. I felt the floor vibrate a little. It may have been footsteps."

They fell silent, watching and listening. In a moment Scotty's warning was justified by the sound of a key in the door. Nails came in. He beckoned to Rick.

"Come on, kid."

Rick got to his feet. "Where to?"

"You'll see. The rest of you stay here."

"I'm going with him," Scotty stated.

Nails lifted the whispering box. "Want to bet on it?"

"I'll be all right," Rick said quickly. He wasn't so sure that was the truth, but he saw no reason to involve his friends in a futile fight.

Zircon smiled unpleasantly. "Someday," he told Nails, "I'm going to find you without that little box."

"Don't lose any sleep waiting," Nails said. "Come on, Brant."

Rick went before him down the corridor and the stairs to the first floor. Nails motioned to a closed door.

Go in.

The knob turned under Rick's hand. He pushed the door open and went into a room lit by a single lamp.

At an ancient desk in one corner a man sat, and before him was another whispering box. He was big, past middle age, with smoothly combed gray hair. But the oddest thing about him was that one eye was brown, while the other was a light blue.

Rick recognized him at once, even though he wasn't wearing black glasses. He had been the passenger in the sedan the first day Nails had tried to get them. "I've seen you before," he blurted. "In the . . ."

"In the car with Nails," the man finished. "Yes. I was afraid your memory might be good. We were a little overconfident that day." He motioned to a rickety chair. "Sit down. I want to ask you some questions."

Rick obeyed. His palms were sweating and there was a queer feeling in his midriff. He wasn't sure of what might be coming.

"You'll be all right," the man said, "and so will your friends, provided you don't try anything. I dislike violence and bloodshed. You may have noticed that my men have avoided it up to the present. However,

if violence becomes necessary, we will use it. We cannot let my personal qualms stand in the way when we are playing for such big stakes.”

“We won’t try anything foolish,” Rick said.

“That is wise. Now, a few questions. How far have your father and Keppner progressed in their quest for a weapon to combat the box?”

“Very far,” Rick said. “The box is as good as useless right now.”

The man smiled. “A slight exaggeration, I think. Another question. How much have you heard your elders talk of Dr. Bertona?”

Rick considered. An evasive answer wouldn’t do much good that he could see, and truthfulness might pave the way for a needed evasion later on.

“Not much. Dad doesn’t know him at all.”

“Does Keppner?”

There was some reason behind the last quick question. Rick wondered what sort of answer would be the least helpful. “Keppner knows him,” he said finally.

“How well?”

Rick was getting more and more nervous. He had the feeling that he might be able to throw his questioner off by the proper answer. But what was the proper answer? He decided on the truth, lacking an indication of the answer he was expected to give. “Not very well. He met him years ago, but he hasn’t seen him since.” He shot a sudden question of his own. “Why don’t you ask Dr. Bertona?”

“I have.” The questioner smiled. “I just wanted to see how your answers checked.”

“Why did you have us brought here? We can’t help you.”

“On the contrary, young Mr. Brant. You have helped me already. Now I suggest that you go back to your friends. Be content to remain quiet and I promise that in due course you will all be freed unharmed. I hope that it won’t be long.”

Rick stood up. “So you’re going to make one more try?”

The mismatched eyes narrowed. “I should be angry at your attempt to pry, but I must admit it’s a logical deduction. Yes, we will try again in a few days. We will be successful. After that, your JANIG people can hunt for us all they like. We will be out of reach.”

He motioned to Nails. “Take him back upstairs. Be sure the doors are well secured and guarded. You had better put the two scientists back in their own room. No use giving them a chance to work together.”

Rick’s hopes spiraled downward. Being separated lessened their chances of escape. As he started toward the door, the man at the desk rose.

“Have you instructed the men, Nails? I may have to make a fast getaway and I want them at hand.” He

walked to the door, picking up his hat from a table. "You and Joe can handle things here, can't you?"

"Sure, boss. Everything is fixed."

Rick preceded the two men to the front of the house. The boss opened the front door and disclosed a car waiting, the motor already turning over, and a driver in the front seat whom he recognized as the one who had driven the van.

Nails waited until the boss had gotten in, and the car had driven off, then he closed the door and turned to Rick. "Okay, kid. Back to your room. With any luck, you and your pals will be out of here in a few days."

"I hope so," Rick said. He looked down at the whispering box, held ready in Nails's hand. The cone of the nozzle was pointing right at him. He turned and went up the stairs.

Toward the top, he hesitated. His friends were singing in the upstairs room! He could hear even through the closed door. They must be bellowing at the top of their lungs!

Nails pushed him and he went faster.

"Joe!" Nails called to the man on the upper floor.

Joe appeared carrying a lamp and the shotgun.

"What's the idea of letting them make all that racket?"

"Aw, they ain't making much noise. No one could hear it. There ain't a house for half a mile."

"Never mind that," Nails snapped. "You got your orders. Keep them quiet!"

Rick strained to make out the words. It was queer. Why should his friends be singing? He deliberately slowed his pace, and suddenly he caught on to the tune. He almost laughed out loud. Zircon's booming voice rose above the rest, and he was singing an old Stephen Foster song they had in the record library at Spindrift. It was "Old Black Joe."

Rick's brows furrowed. The words weren't as he recalled them.

*When you come in, when you come in Just be sure you're bending low
Can't you hear our gentle voices catting Hit the floor . . .*

His pulse leaped. Zircon and the others were trying to give him a message. Suddenly he knew what they wanted him to do.

"Get going," Nails said sharply. Rick moved faster. In a moment he faced the door.

"They'll knock off that racket or I'll stiffen them," Nails growled. "Open the door, Joe."

Joe reached past Rick and inserted the key. He turned it. He had to tuck the shotgun under his arm to do it. He reached for the knob and pushed the door open.

Rick dived headlong into the room.

Over his head, tumult broke loose!

CHAPTER XVII

The Third Scientist

Rick hit the floor and kept going, scrambling frantically out of the way. His friends had a plan of attack and he wasn't going to ruin it by getting underfoot.

Once in the middle of the room, he whirled around. He was in time to see Nails stagger backward, Scotty and Gizmo clinging to him. One of Scotty's hands was covering the nozzle of the whispering box, and his hand was dark brown as though he wore a glove.

Then Rick lost sight of Nails as the battling trio went through the door.

Joe had been trying to get the shotgun into position, but the press of bodies at the door effectively blocked his hands. Now Zircon swung a beamlike arm and Joe bounced against the doorframe. There was a shattering of glass as the lamp in his hand dropped.

All this had happened in a fraction of a second. Rick charged into the melee. For a moment he lost track of his friends, because there was a single mad jumble of arms and legs in the hallway. He hurtled the pile and let out a sudden yell.

Flames from the shattered lamp were licking up the walls and across the hall floor through the spreading kerosene!

Joe and Zircon were locked together on the floor, threshing around as they fought. Weiss danced back and forth across the narrow hall, seeking an opening to hit Joe with the shoe he held in his hand. Gizmo, Scotty, and Nails were all mixed up in a tangle of flailing arms and legs.

Strangely, after the first impact, no one had uttered a sound except for an occasional grunt as a fist connected. Rick spied the whispering box on the floor and scooped it up. Holding it in one hand he began to stamp at the spreading flames. He saw at once that it was hopeless, but he kept trying, scorching his shoes and trouser legs. If only he had a bucket of sand! But as he stamped on one patch of flame, another sprang up a foot away, licking hungrily at the pool of kerosene.

Weiss stepped in and brought his shoe down on Joe's head. The man stopped his struggles long enough for Zircon to deliver a knockout blow. Then the big scientist got to his feet and reached down into the grunting, struggling trio next to him. One hamlike hand found Nails's collar. Zircon gave a mighty heave and Nails came out of the melee like an olive out of a bottle.

Scotty was on his feet instantly. He took Nails's arm and pulled it behind him, locking the gangster in a judo hold.

“Got him,” he panted. “Get that fire!”

“The whole place will go up like tinder,” Weiss said shrilly. “Rick, it’s no use! We’ve got to get out of here!”

Rick saw that Weiss was right. The flames were going up through the torn, dried wallpaper. Already little tongues of red were near the ceiling. He abandoned his futile struggle and helped Zircon and Gizmo lift Joe to his feet.

“Hike!” Gizmo commanded. He propelled the groggy thug toward the stairs, Scotty following with Nails. Rick, Weiss, and Zircon hurried after them, Rick holding the whispering box and Weiss the shotgun.

The frantic cavalcade piled down the stairs and out onto the weed-choked lawn, Rick bringing up the rear. As he stepped to the front walk he suddenly remembered.

“Good night! Dr. Bertona is in there somewhere”

The scientists gasped.

“I’ll find him,” Zircon bellowed. The burly professor turned and ran back into the house. Placing the black box carefully on the ground Rick followed the scientist. Meanwhile Weiss handed the shotgun over to Gizmo and trotted after them.

“Bertona! Where are you?” Zircon’s voice lifted in a roar that shook the walls.

In immediate reply came a frantic rapping on the ceiling almost over their heads.

“Upstairs,” Weiss shouted. He led the way up to where ruddy flames made the hallway light as day. Rick whipped out a handkerchief and held it to his nose as smoke eddied around him.

At the top of the stairs they paused, aghast. In the few moments since they had left, the hallway was a seething mass of fire.

“This way.” Zircon headed for the front room at a run. He pounded on the door. “Bertona!”

“In here!”

“The keys!” Rick exclaimed in horror. “Joe has them!”

“No time,” Zircon said. He crouched, then his powerful legs straightened as he hurled himself against the door. It rattled and a panel cracked, but it didn’t give.

“Again!” This time Rick and Weiss were with him, shoulder to shoulder. The door shuddered and creaked.

“Again!”

Rick’s shoulder hit the door with painful force. The hinge screws let go with a rasping screech. The Spin-drifters catapulted into the room, knocking down a slender man who stood within.

Zircon pulled Dr. Bertona upright. "Hurry," he bellowed. "Fire!"

"I tried to call you," Bertona said shakily. "I heard noise. Then I smelled smoke--"

He stopped short. Rick gasped. The flames were at the top of the stairs.

Zircon didn't hesitate. "We've got to jump through," he said quickly. "If we don't, we're trapped."

The bars on the windows! Rick saw at once that Zircon was right. His heart quailed at the thought of trying to get through that barrier of flame, but hesitating only made it worse.

"Here goes," he said. He ran to the edge of the flame and sized up the situation. The worn carpet was a mass of flame, and fire was licking the stair posts. But a leap would take him through it to the stairs. He held his breath and jumped.

One foot landed on the edge of a stair and he had to clutch at the rail to keep from falling. He turned and shouted, "Come on! If you wait any longer you won't be able to make it!"

He went down half a dozen stairs as the figure of Weiss appeared beyond the curtain of fire. The little professor leaped into space. Rick caught him as he clutched for balance.

"Here comes Bertona," Zircon yelled.

Rick and Weiss braced themselves to catch the scientist. For an instant he hesitated, then jumped headlong. His foot slipped! He fell, half his body in the flames, the other half beyond. Rick got his arm and heaved. Weiss got a grip on his coat collar. They dragged the scientist to safety.

"Down the stairs," Rick gasped. "Make way for Zircon!"

The big scientist stood at the edge of the flames. He gauged the distance carefully, then jumped. He landed feet first and at that instant the stair cracked under him!

Rick gave a yell of warning as Zircon staggered, fought for balance, then fell forward on the railing! The dry wood cracked, held for a moment, and then collapsed. Zircon tumbled from the stairs to the floor with a sickening thud.

"Scotty!" Rick yelled for his pal even as he leaped to the scientist's side. If Zircon were hurt, it would take all of them to carry him from the building, and they couldn't waste time!

Scotty came through the door with a rush and took in the situation at a glance. Zircon was groaning through clenched teeth. "My leg! You'll have to help me."

Rick got one arm around his shoulder while Scotty took the other side. Weiss took his colleague's belt and together they got him upright. It was the work of a moment to get him through the door. Zircon helped as best he could, hobbling on his good leg.

Bertona had gone right on through the door. He was slapping his clothes, extinguishing smoldering sparks in the cloth, and he was weak and pale with shock.

"Your friend," he managed, "on the lawn . . . you'd better help him."

“Gizmo!” Scotty exclaimed.

They rushed Zircon down the front steps and away from the house. Then, after seating him on the grass, they ran to where Gizmo was huddled against the iron fence.

There was no sign of Nails or Joe.

Gizmo’s jaw seemed swollen in the uncertain light, but he was breathing normally. Scotty shook him vigorously and he showed signs of returning consciousness.

“He was knocked out,” Rick said. “He’s okay.” He left Gizmo in Scotty’s capable hands and hurried back to Zircon. The scientist was sitting upright, wincing as Weiss felt for any sign of a fracture.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” he said finally. “We can hope it is nothing more serious than a sprain, Hobart.”

Zircon nodded. “Bertona, are you all right?”

“Quite.” Dr. Bertona had a soft, pleasant voice. Rick could see that he was slender and not very tall, but it was too dark to tell what he looked like. “I have a few burns, but minor ones,” he said. “My clothing protected me. I’m very grateful to you, gentlemen. May I ask your names?”

Weiss and Zircon introduced themselves.

Rick fidgeted. He could see that Scotty had Gizmo on his feet. “Let’s get out of here,” he pleaded. “How? do we know but what the boss and the others will come back?”

He was upset at the escape of Nails and Joe and worried about the possibility of their return with guns. He searched in the grass near the front door until he found the whispering box he had abandoned when they went back after Bertona. There was more light now, because the fire was spreading inside the house and flames were visible through the front door.

“I wonder if there’s a fire department near,” he said. None of them had even thought about saving the house after the first attempts.

“A fire department couldn’t help much,” Weiss replied. “Scotty, is your friend all right?”

Gizmo spoke for himself, chagrin in his voice. “Yeah, I’m all right. I haven’t any right to be, but I am. I got so interested in watching to see if you were all making out all right I forgot to keep a sharp lookout. Nails swung one from the deck that knocked me over backward. I guess I bashed my head on the iron fence because I went out like a light.”

“It’s done,” Scotty said. “No use crying about it. Rick’s right. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Gizmo pointed to a boxlike bulk in the fringe of woods. “There’s the van. I’ll bet my cab is still inside of it.”

“We’ll soon see.” Rick walked swiftly over to the van. It was standing with the rear doors flung wide, just as they had left it. True to Gizmo’s prediction, the cab was inside.

He climbed up to the interior and saw that the steel channels on which they had driven the taxi were in a

rack along one wall. With Gizmo and Scotty helping, it was the work of only a few moments to tug them out and place them.

Weiss and Bertona had helped Zircon to hobble over. The big scientist's leg obviously hurt him, but he said nothing about his discomfort. Nor did Bertona mention his burns.

Gizmo got into the van and made his way through the narrow space to the front of the cab. The boys and the scientists moved out of the way, Rick staying close enough to direct Gizmo as he backed down the twin ramps.

The taxi roared into life. Gizmo shifted gears, then backed cautiously to the edge of the ramps. Rick ran around back and saw that the taxi was lined up perfectly. "Come on," he shouted, "but take it easy."

Gizmo backed slowly until he was sure the wheels were in perfect alignment, then he rolled the cab down the incline to the ground. "All okay," he said. "Let's

go"

"Look." Weiss pointed. At the very top of the old house a red flame thrust through. The downstairs door was crimson with the fire. The smell of smoke was everywhere now and they could hear the crackle of the flames clearly.

"It's going," Rick said. The sight fascinated him. He had seen burning houses before, but always with an efficient fire department working to save them. The old mansion was doomed. He realized suddenly that they should have searched the house for clues about the gang. It was too late now.

"We had better phone a fire department," Zircon said. "And then I think a phone call to Ames and Hartson will be in order. Does anyone have any idea where we are?"

"I think we're in Maryland," Gizmo said. "What are we waiting for?"

Rick opened the taxi door. Bertona got in, followed by Weiss. Rick noticed that the little professor was limping.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, confound it," Weiss said. "I took off my shoe to rap that Joe person on the head. I dropped it somewhere upstairs."

Rick laughed, relieved. He helped Scotty get Zircon into the cab, then the two boys unfolded the floor seats and got in.

Gizmo put the taxi in gear and circled around. The passengers stared at the house as the cab rolled down the dirt road. It wouldn't help the old place to call a fire department now. The most firemen could do would be to keep the flames from spreading to the woods.

Gizmo gave the taxi the gas and it shot ahead, bouncing on the rough road. Rick remembered that the worst part of the ride in the van had been at the end. They should reach a hard-surface road shortly.

Sure enough, in a moment the taxi reached a crossroads where the dirt road crossed a macadam highway. Gizmo braked to a stop.

“Which way?” he asked. “I don’t remember.”

Through the front windshield Rick saw a junction where two hard-surfaced roads met in a Y.

“I think it was the left fork,” Scotty said.

Rick shook his head. “It wasn’t a very sharp turn. I think it was the right.”

“So do I,” Gizmo agreed.

“Are you sure?” Scotty asked doubtfully.

Rick had to admit that he wasn’t. Gizmo wasn’t positive, either.

“Try the right fork,” Zircon suggested. “It’s bound to take us somewhere.”

Gizmo swung the taxi into the right fork and stepped on the gas. There were woods on both sides of them. Rick couldn’t see any sign of civilization.

Dr. Bertona spoke up. “Now that we are safe, may I ask what happened? I was resigned to staying in that room indefinitely. Then I heard sounds that seemed to indicate some sort of fight. I called once or twice, but no one answered.”

“We were pretty busy,” Rick said.

“Very busy,” Weiss agreed. He launched into a recital of events, including what Rick had told him. “And that,” he concluded, “is how we happened to be prisoners.”

Rick spoke up. “Dr. Bertona, what happened at Pittsburgh?”

“Briefly, I was decoyed into a waiting car. When I discovered that I was a prisoner, I tried to get away. I was given a dose of ultrasonics.”

“The whispering box,” Scotty said.

“Eh? The whispering box? A very good name for it. How did you manage to overcome the gang members without being paralyzed by it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Rick said. In the excitement he had forgotten that the revolt had succeeded in spite of the whispering box Nails had held in his hand. He reached down on the floor and retrieved the captured box. “Here it is. Why didn’t it work?”

“Thank Scotty for the idea that put the box out of action,” Zircon said. “To begin with, we hatched our little plot while you were downstairs talking with- Rick, whom were you talking with?”

“The boss of the gang,” Rick replied. “Go ahead, professor. I’ll tell my story later.”

“Well, we decided that if a break were to be made, it must be at once before they separated us. We assumed that they wouldn’t dare leave us together. Scotty proposed a solution for the whispering box. He suggested that we use the mud wasps’ nests, make a mud pie, and plaster it into the nozzle of the

box. That, he thought, would give us time enough to go into action against Nails and Joe.”

So that was why Scotty’s hands had been brown. They had been muddy!

“We had drinking water in our room,” Zircon said. “We used enough of it to wet the nests until they had a claylike consistency.”

“And then you started singing!” Rick laughed at the memory. “At first I thought you had gone crazy, until I got the sense of the song. When Joe opened the door I went in headfirst.”

“Scotty reached over you and plastered his handful of mud right into the box,” Weiss said.

“It wouldn’t have worked,” Scotty said. “The pressure in the box would have blown the mud right out again.”

Weiss and Zircon chuckled. “We realized that,” Zircon boomed. “We weren’t sure you did. But we felt it was better to try something than to give up without a struggle.”

“The mud wasn’t necessary,” Scotty said. “Nails didn’t even have a chance to push the button before Gizmo banged into him.”

Gizmo spoke from the front seat. “No signs of civilization yet. Think we ought to turn around?”

More than ten minutes had passed since they left the old mansion and they hadn’t seen a single house or a light. Rick thought they must be deep in the Maryland woods-if they were really in Maryland .

“There must be some sort of village close by,” Zircon said. “Surely the house we just left wouldn’t have been built so far from stores or other people.”

“Doubtless there are houses and stores near,” Weiss said. “We have just taken the wrong road.”

“If we turn around, we lose all this time,” Rick spoke up. “Let’s keep going for a few minutes. Then, if there isn’t any sign of civilization, we can turn around.”

Gizmo nodded and picked up speed again.

“I’ll bet Joe and Nails are still running,” Scotty guessed. “They wouldn’t stay near the house.”

“More likely they are riding,” Weiss said dryly. “I’m sure they know this section of the country better than we. They probably went out of the woods to some near-by community and stole another car to take them back to Washington .”

“After making a telephone call,” Rick amended. “They probably hated to tell the boss we were free, but they wouldn’t dare not to tell him.” He remembered his conversation with the boss. “He was going somewhere tonight. I wonder if he is pulling another robbery? Listen, we’d better step on it!”

Scotty switched on the dome light and looked at his watch. “It’s too late,” he said. “If he went out to steal another secret, he has had plenty of time to get back to the city. Do you realize it’s almost an hour and a half since we made a break for it?”

Rick looked at his own watch, unbelieving. It didn’t seem that more than a few minutes had passed. But

Scotty was right.

“Anyway,” he suggested, “let’s get to a phone as soon as we can.”

“Lights ahead,” Gizmo called.

All eyes turned to the front. Far up the road, twinkling lights indicated some sort of settlement. In a few moments they were rolling into the driveway of a service station.

Rick jumped out before the cab had stopped rolling. He ran into the station and found the attendant tilted back in a chair, his feet on a desk. He was dozing.

“Wake up!” Rick said. “Listen, do you have a phone?”

The attendant opened his eyes. “Nope.”

“Where can we find one? Please, it’s urgent!”

The attendant thought it over. “Maybe Lake’s Grocery. Naw, they’d be closed now.”

Rick asked impatiently, “Where are we? There must be a town near here.”

“This is it. Our phones are connected through Kensington, and that’s quite a piece back down the road.”

“Are we in Maryland?”

The sleepy eyes opened wider. “Shucks, yes. Didn’t you know?”

“Which way is Washington?”

The attendant looked out at the taxi. “Back the way you came. That driver must be a green hand. Never knew a taxi driver before as didn’t know where he was going.”

Rick was almost dancing with impatience. He had a sense of urgency that was growing by the minute. They must find a phone! If Steve were warned, he might be able to catch the boss!

“Where is the nearest place we can be sure of finding a phone?”

“Kensington fire station. Back the way you came. Turn into the other fork and keep going. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks! Could you give us some gas in a big hurry?” Rick tossed a five-dollar bill to the attendant. Before the man had time to screw on the tank cap, Rick jumped into the cab and instructed Gizmo. “Scotty was right! Turn around and go back, and take the other fork. Step on it, Giz.”

The taxi whirled around, tossing them into a corner. Gizmo straightened out and gave the cab the gas.

The minutes ticked past as the woods flew by on either side. Rick fidgeted, his eyes glued to the highway. The successful break for freedom had taken their minds from the importance of getting in touch with their friends. If only they had been able to call at once, they might have been able to warn Steve that the boss was on the loose.

Gizmo had the throttle to the floor. The speedometer crept up to sixty and past. Ahead, the road was deserted. Rick remembered that they hadn't seen another car. That should have been warning enough that they were on the wrong road.

The fork of the road approached and Gizmo slewed the cab into the turn without slowing. A few hundred yards ahead they whizzed past a gas station, closed for the night. Rick thought he could see lights far ahead.

As the distance closed, he was sure of it. What fools they had been! The nearest settlement had been only a few minutes' drive away!

The taxi whirled out of the country macadam road onto a concrete highway, and in a moment they sped past dark houses. The lights were closer now. Before they realized they were so close, Gizmo was braking to a stop in front of a red-brick firehouse. This must be Kensington Fire Station . . . yes, the sign over the door said it was.

Rick jumped out, Scotty and the others behind him. A fireman came to meet them, his eyes curious at their evident haste.

"Do you have a telephone?" Rick asked.

"Sure. Right inside. What is it?"

"We must notify the police," Dr. Bertona said. "Something terrible has happened."

Rick looked at him, and for the first time he saw the scientist in clear light. A shiver ran through him as answers to some of their most puzzling questions clicked into place and showed a definite, incredible scheme. For Dr. Ralph Bertona had mismatched eyes!

He ran for the phone, the fireman beside him.

"Just dial," the fireman said. "We're on the Washington exchange. What's happened? Anything to do with the fire? The engines are over there now."

"Tell you later," Rick shot back. He lifted the receiver, dialed the number of the lab. On the second ring, Dr. Keppner's voice replied.

"Dr. Keppner's office."

"This is Rick," he said swiftly. "Has Dr. Bertona been there?"

Keppner's surprise was in his voice. "Why, yes, Rick. How did you know? Where have you been?"

"Is he still there?" Rick persisted.

"No. He came in about forty minutes ago. Then, about ten minutes ago he left. I don't know where he went."

Rick groaned. "Call Steve Ames and tell him! We're coming right away, and we have Weiss, Zircon, and the real Dr. Bertona with us."

“What!”

“It’s true,” Rick said. “We have the real Bertona. The one you thought was Bertona was the leader of the whispering box gang!”

CHAPTER XVIII

The Crisis

Dr. Keppner’s laboratory was crowded with people. In addition to the Spindrift scientists, Rick, Scotty, Gizmo, and Steve Ames, there were Fanning, Terhune, and three of Steve’s men.

Keppner had the floor. “Things happened so rapidly there was no time even to get our thoughts straightened out. First of all, this man who claimed he was Dr. Bertona arrived. I didn’t doubt that he was Bertona. You must remember that I hadn’t seen the real Dr. Bertona for many years, and the only characteristic I remembered distinctly was his eyes.”

“A family inheritance,” Ralph Bertona said.

“Yes. To our questions, he replied merely that his story could wait, that Steve Ames already had been notified, and that the men who kidnaped him would be picked up shortly. He said the important thing was the counterweapon, that it must be completed immediately, because he had overheard talk of a new attempt on a major secret by the gang. He did not know the nature of the secret. He demanded to know what had been accomplished.”

“We told him,” Hartson Brant said ruefully. “We didn’t suspect he might be an impostor. His questions were those the real Dr. Bertona might have asked. He even suggested procedures that we might have followed, and his suggestions were very sound. Then, while we were checking one of his suggestions against our diagrams, he asked to be excused for a moment and walked out. He didn’t return.”

Steve Ames said, “Well, we know now that your fake scientist won’t be back. He got the information he was after.”

Rick said uneasily, “Thanks to me. If I’d only not insisted on taking the right fork, we would have got back in time to head off the impostor.”

“How did he know you *hadn’t* told someone about the man with the sunglasses?” Scotty demanded.

“He couldn’t know,” Steve answered. “He took a chance. He was probably prepared in case he was recognized. He could have pulled a gun, tied up everyone in the lab and walked back out again without being stopped.”

Pete Davis, who had been assigned to guard the building, shifted uncomfortably, then spoke up in his own defense. “He fitted the description and he had a wallet full of identification cards and a pocketful of letters, including the one about reporting here. Why should we doubt he was Bertona?”

“Never mind, Pete,” Steve said. “I’m not blaming you. The only thing you might have done was to call me.

“He told me he had already talked to you,” Davis said sheepishly. “I believed him.”

“He was very plausible,” Keppner agreed. “Rick, we haven’t heard all of your story.”

“I’ll make it short,” Rick said. “As soon as I got a good look at Dr. Bertona, things made sense. You remember we couldn’t figure out why the boss had wanted to kidnap Scotty and me? It was because we had seen him with Nails the day they first made a try. That was the day they mistook me for Dad. After that, they had to get us because we had seen the boss. He was planning to impersonate Dr. Bertona and he couldn’t do it as long as we were around the lab.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Bertona’s ankles and one of his hands had been bandaged. Now he plucked at one of the bandages, obviously ill at ease. “I can corroborate Rick’s deduction because the gang leader admitted as much to me.” He paused, reluctant to proceed. “I dislike having to tell you this, but there is no alternative. The leader is my cousin. His name is John Goss. He inherited the peculiarities of eye coloring just as I did.”

The group in the laboratory stared at the scientist.

“It was because of the relationship that he succeeded in getting me away from the plane at Pittsburgh. I knew his reputation. I knew he had served a prison sentence for embezzlement. However, I had no reason to suspect that he was involved in the case for which I was flying to Washington. In fact, even I did not know the reason for my coming here. I knew only that Dr. Keppner had requested me to come on a confidential mission for the government.

“My cousin talked a great deal,” Bertona continued. “He even outlined his plans, in a general way. He said he was working against time, because the government was bound to have a counterweapon shortly. When the time limit expired, he said, he would be ready. He has a foolproof route for getting out of the country. He didn’t tell me the route, of course. Once over the border or out at sea, whichever he contemplates, he will be met by representatives of foreign industrialists to whom he plans to sell his stolen secrets. On the proceeds from the sale, he and his men will live in comfort for the rest of their days, probably in some other country. Surely he wouldn’t dare return.”

“Industrialists,” Hartson Brant repeated. “That answers one question. We are not dealing with agents of some other nation, but with a group working for their own interests.”

Steve Ames spoke up. “It answers that question, but it brings up some new ones. Dr. Bertona, how did your cousin know what plane you were coming on? How did he know you were coming at all?”

Bertona shrugged. “I cannot answer that, I’m afraid. He didn’t tell me.”

“Someone in the organization is evidently working for Goss,” Keppner said slowly.

Steve’s sharp eyes went from one face to another. “That’s the only possible answer. Let’s find out who that person is. Rick, when you called up, Dr. Keppner answered the phone. Right?”

“That’s right.”

“Dr. Keppner, who else has answered the phone this evening?”

Keppner looked puzzled. “I’m sure I don’t remember. Anyone can answer it.” He pointed to where the telephone rested in open view on ‘a desk.

“Did the fake Bertona answer it?”

Hartson Brant replied, “I’m positive he didn’t. Neither Keppner nor I were more than a few feet from him all the time he was here.”

Steve nodded. “My point is this. Goss had convinced all of you that he was the real Bertona. He would have had no reason to leave the lab. Think of how many obstructions he could have put in your way had he hung around for a day or two! You respected his opinions. He could have sabotaged you neatly.”

“That is true, except for one consideration,” Hartson Brant said. “The moment you came into the lab, the jig would have been up. We would have known that he never contacted you and our suspicions would have been aroused.”

Steve smiled without mirth. “He thought of everything. Just a short while ago I got a hurry call from one of my men in New York. A whispering box had been found up there. I’m certain that one of the gang planted it, knowing that I was in such a state over this business that I would have hurried right to the spot and investigated for myself. The only reason I’m not flying to New York right now is that your call, Mr. Brant, after Rick phoned, caught me just as I was packing my bag.”

Scotty whistled. “That’s being thorough!”

“Right. But they couldn’t be that thorough all through this case without inside information. Which gets us back to where we were. My theory is that Goss suddenly beat it because he had been tipped off. From Rick’s story, Nails or Joe got to a near-by phone. They probably knew where there was one close to the house. You say Goss never answered the phone, here in the lab. All right. Who did?”

Keppner started suddenly. “I know! I remember now! The phone rang while Hartson, Goss, Terhune, and I were at the drawing board. I heard Fanning say something about this being the wrong number. A few minutes later, Goss hurried away!”

“Fanning!” Rick turned in time to see the assistant rush for the door. He jumped to his feet, as did the others, but Steve only grinned and waved his hand.

“Come on back,” he called. “You won’t get far.”

Fanning jerked the door open, then stopped short. He turned back, his face white. One of Steve’s guards, a pistol in his hand, stepped into the room behind him.

“You can’t prove anything,” Fanning said. “You’ll never make the charges stick!”

“We’ll see,” Steve told him. “There’s no time to bother with you now, Fanning. I’ll see you in your cell tomorrow sometime. Pete, take him in.”

The others watched in silence as Fanning was taken away. Rick remembered how he had turned the sound machine on them and had made them dance. It had seemed like a joke at the time. Now he wasn’t so sure. Maybe Fanning had been really trying to get them out of the way. No wonder the gang had been

so well informed!

“I am astounded,” Dr. Keppner said. “Fanning! It never occurred to me that he . . .”

“It didn’t occur to me, either,” Steve said grimly, “and I’m a lot more suspicious by nature than you are. But you see what we’re up against. Fanning’s record was thoroughly checked. There has never been a word against him, nor has he ever been connected with any questionable groups. We’ll find that it was strictly money that made him turn traitor.”

His manner changed abruptly. He smiled, as Rick hadn’t seen him smile for days. “Anyway, we’re making real progress. Let’s review the situation. Added up, it comes to this: Goss knows where we stand on the counterweapon. He also knows that with Bertona, Weiss, and Zircon at work, the time limit is shortened. He intimated to Rick that he would make one more try before getting out of the country.”

Steve’s smile widened. “And I know where he will make his try.”

Rick’s jaw dropped. His respect for Steve, always high, had gone up like a rocket stratosphere plane at the young agent’s discovery of the traitor’s identity by his quick analysis of the situation. But if Steve had found out where the gang would strike next . . .

“I had a hunch,” Steve told them. “I took the plan for a project now being worked on by one of our civilian agencies. I added a few frills with the help of Dr. Keppner, so that it added up to the most important industrial secret since the discovery of the atomic pile.”

Keppner gasped. “But, Steve! When you consulted me, I told you such a project wouldn’t work. We won’t have the technical knowledge for it for the next ten years!”

“Goss doesn’t know that,” Steve said, grinning. “I carried a brief summary of the project around in my pocket for a week. I let it get lost everywhere we had people who knew anything about this case. But I always remembered to look for it before the finder had a chance to more than glance at it. I remember that Fanning had just finished refolding it when I came back into the lab hunting for it. You can bet that he relayed all the dope in the paper to Goss.”

Scotty shook his head in admiration. “So the gang will try to get this secret!”

“That’s what I hope. The idea is sound, but as Dr.

Keppner says, we haven’t the technical know-how to carry it out at present. Goss can’t know that, however, because he can’t possibly know about all the projects being worked on. For all he knows, the technical knowledge may very well exist.”

“Plenty smart,” Rick said admiringly. “But suppose he strikes and the counterweapon isn’t ready?”

“It will be. It has to be! How about it?”

Hartson Brant looked at his associates. “We have Weiss, Zircon, and Bertona with us now. You’ll have the counterweapon when you want it.”

A little shiver of excitement made Rick tremble. He asked, “When do you want it?”

Steve sobered. “If my guesses are any good, you had better finish it within forty-eight hours, or we might

as well not finish it at all!”

CHAPTER XIX

The Frantic Hours

Rick sipped at a steaming cup of chocolate and watched the group at the other side of the laboratory. Next to him, Scotty was stretched out on the lab couch, dead to the world.

The group consisted of Hartson Brant, Keppner, Weiss, Zircon, Bertona, and Terhune. A lab table had been pressed into service as an extra desk and the scientists had grouped around it. That had been last night.

Much of the preliminary work had been done by Mr. Brant and Dr. Keppner, leaving only the major difficulties to be tackled. The scientists had plunged right into the heart of the problem. Rick, sleeping intermittently in an armchair or on the couch with Scotty, had heard only portions of the all-night debate.

There had been periods of heated argument, during which the scientists covered sheets of paper with equations and calculations. There had been other periods of silence when all of them were sketching wiring diagrams. Zircon, Weiss, and Bertona had been in confinement, but at least they had had opportunity to sleep. Keppner and Hartson Brant had spent sleepless nights on the problem and were almost worn out. Zircon's leg bothered him and he was forced to remain seated. Bertona's burns must have been troubling him, but he gave no sign.

Rick enjoyed his chocolate, made on the lab hot plate, and thought that they looked unlike any group of scientists he had ever seen in pictures. All of them were in need of a shave. Their collars were open and their clothing was wrinkled.

Scotty turned over on the couch, then his eyes opened and he was suddenly awake. Unlike Rick, who always took a little time to get fully awake, Scotty could snap from deep sleep to alert awakening instantly. Now, he swung his feet to the floor and sniffed at the cup Rick held.

“Any more of that?”

“In the pan.Help yourself.”

Scotty did so. He sat down on the couch and tasted.“ Mmmm. That's good. How are things coming?”

Rick shrugged. “I don't know. I lost track sometime last night. I went over there a while ago and I couldn't make any sense out of the diagrams.”

“Why do you think Steve set forty-eight hours as the limit?”

“I asked him,” Rick said. “I couldn't hear very well because you were snoring, but he told me.”

“Never mind remarks about my deep, regular breathing,” Scotty retorted. “What did he say?”

Rick summed up briefly what Steve had said. "Goss knows we'll put everything we have into the weapon now, and he knows that with all the scientists working on it, it won't take long. So he'll strike right away. Whether he gets what he's after or not, it will be his last try. He's too smart to take any big chances. The house burned down and probably a lot of his stuff with it. By the time he gets organized, even rushing things, about two days will have passed. At the end of the two days, he'll make a try for that phony secret Steve planted."

"That was smart," Scotty said thoughtfully. "But suppose he didn't fall for it?"

"Then we're sunk. Steve figures on planting the counterweapon at the place where the phony secret is located. If Goss strikes somewhere else, we're licked."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed," Scotty promised. "Where did Gizmo go?"

"Home to sleep. I told him we wouldn't be leaving the lab for a long while."

"That's a good guess." Scotty tilted his cup and swallowed the hot chocolate, then he got up and wandered over to where the scientists were in deep conversation. Rick finished his chocolate in a more leisurely fashion, then joined him.

"We agree on every point, then," Hartson Brant said wearily. "Except on the method of energizing the automatic control. Let us put that aside for a moment. Give me your opinions on whether we are safe enough in our figures to proceed with actual construction."

"Yes," Zircon boomed.

"I believe we are," Weiss said.

Terhune, the draftsman, looked at the scattered papers on the table. "These drawings aren't in very good shape," he said doubtfully.

"They are not pretty drawings," Keppner agreed, "but they can be used. Hartson, what do you suggest?"

Rick had picked up the thread of the conversation.

Now he waited anxiously for his father's reply. An affirmative would plunge them into a whirl of activity that would end only when the counterweapon was functioning.

Scotty, too, had his eyes riveted on the Spindrift leader.

Hartson Brant looked at his associates soberly for a moment, then he smiled.

"Let's go!" he said.

It was a battle cry. Weariness dropped away from the group at the table. Zircon rose to his feet, hobbled over, and clapped Rick soundly on the back.

"You and Scotty stick with me, Rick. We're working together. Where is your bench?"

Rick pointed to the other side of the lab. "Over there."

Zircon scooped up the papers that had been on the table before him. They were covered with diagrams and equations. "We're on our way," he bellowed. "Hartson, get some sleep. You too, Keppner. It will be hours before we're ready for further discussion."

Rick and Scotty hurried with the big scientist to their workbench. While Zircon sorted his papers, Rick plugged in soldering irons and rigged up the testing set with which the bench was equipped. Scotty opened drawers and laid out an assortment of tools, then he went to the stock pile across the room and picked out several sheets of aluminum.

Rick hunted the lab until he found a high stool. He placed it for Zircon to sit on. The scientist nodded thanks and sat down, holding a sheet of paper.

"All right," he boomed. "Here's the first step. Scotty, cut and shape a chassis from that aluminum.

You'll find the dimensions on that top piece of paper. Rick, get these parts from stock." He handed him a list. Rick glanced at his watch. It was just half past six in the morning.

It was afternoon before he had a chance even to look at his watch again, and then only because it was necessary to take time to eat. He munched on a sandwich and gulped steaming coffee, meanwhile rechecking the almost complete circuit in the base of the aluminum chassis Scotty had built. Zircon was working out a problem while eating his lunch. Scotty cleaned up the bench between bites.

At another bench, Weiss and Bertona were at work on a delicate bit of equipment that used tiny acorn tubes and printed silver wire. Hartson Brant and Keppner, little refreshed after a morning's sleep, were at the drawing board with Terhune.

Rick was groggy. He had concentrated over the circuit, intent on following orders to the letter. He didn't even know what they were doing, because Zircon was too busy to explain. He did as he was told, and the work progressed rapidly. From raw metal and assorted parts they had built up what looked like one section of a radio set. But no radio set had ever had such a peculiar combination of tubes and controls.

Zircon swallowed the last of his lunch. "Hurry up, boys. There is still a lot to do on this part, and we have another complete stage to build up."

Rick downed the last of his coffee.

"What are we waiting for?" Scotty demanded.

Rick worked automatically, following Zircon's directions like a machine. Next to him, Scotty operated an electric drill, fixing a panel on which instruments would be mounted. Zircon's huge fingers, skilled as a surgeon's, worked right next to Rick's in the growing mass of wires. Time passed and the intricate job progressed.

The smell of hot metal and scorched insulation made Rick cough. He realized that his throat was raw and that he badly wanted a drink. He took a moment while Zircon was examining a circuit diagram and hurried to the front of the lab. As he drank a glass of water, he noted that a fourth person had joined Hartson Brant, Dr. Keppner, and Terhune.

It was Steve Ames.

Rick heard Hartson Brant say, “You’re asking the impossible.”

“I know it,” Steve returned gloomily.

Rick hurried over. “What is it?”

Hartson Brant looked wearily at his son. “Steve wants us to finish by tomorrow morning.”

“But why?”

“Because Goss and his gang are together again, and I think they’re ready to strike,” Steve said. “They were spotted all together in a stolen car by a Maryland State Police cruiser. The cruiser recognized it as a stolen car and chased it, not suspecting the gang was inside. The officers in the cruiser had just time to get a good look before the whispering box hit them. They ran off the road and smacked into a tree. Both of them are in the hospital. I talked with them half an hour ago. Their descriptions of the men in the car fit the ones we put out on the teletype circuits. It’s Goss and Company, all right.”

“Why do you think they’re ready to strike?”

“I’m assuming it. When I said forty-eight hours last night I knew it was a generous estimate. Now that we know the gang has reassembled, I’m sure of it. According to my calculations, they may strike between eleven-thirty and eleven-forty-five tomorrow morning.”

Rick looked at his watch. It was almost seven in the evening.

“How can you fix the time?” he persisted.

Steve shrugged. “I’m guessing, but that’s the time I’d choose. The employees in the building go to lunch at noon. They start to get ready for lunch at eleven-forty-five by cleaning up their desks, wandering around to find someone to eat with, and things like that. Now, people who come to the building on business usually come before eleven-thirty. After that, since lunch is so close, they haven’t much time to transact their business. If the gang strikes at any time between eleven-thirty and eleven-forty-five, they miss the noon rush of employees and they also miss the morning visitors, most of whom have gone by that time. Also, if they get away by eleven-forty-five, they can miss the noon traffic.”

“But why not just before closing time?” Rick asked.

“That could be, too,” Steve admitted. “The same thing would apply. Only I think we’d better be ready for morning, just in case.”

“No matter,” Hartson Brant said. “We’re wasting time by talking. Steve, if it’s humanly possible, you’ll have your counterweapon in time!”

CHAPTER XX

Screaming Susie

Dawnlight filtered through the drawn blinds of the laboratory, but no one noticed it. Their attention was focused on the apparatus on a lab table.

Rick eyed the thing doubtfully. The individual parts had worked when tested, but he couldn't believe that it would actually function to neutralize the whispering box.

"Check from stage to stage," Hartson Brant requested.

Weiss plugged his testing device into a socket. Zircon finished making a connection, then motioned to Rick, who plugged the power cable into another wall socket.

The counterweapon was made up of four separate units, or stages, mounted in a frame. The bottom unit was the power supply. The next unit was the section that analyzed the frequency of the whispering box. It had a built-in microphone of a special type, borrowed from the United States Bureau of Standards to pick up the sound. The third unit was the complex control that selected the proper counterfrequency. The top section, revised during the night by Keppner and Hartson Brant, was the silent-sound apparatus they had built previously, with the help of Fanning. A quick examination had shown that the traitor had not sabotaged the unit. He had probably realized that any attempt to ruin it would immediately point him out as the gang's informant.

Weiss got busy with his testing, going from unit to unit. The others watched in silence. At last he turned to the watching group. "All the circuits are functioning properly."

"Let's try it," Steve Ames said impatiently.

"In a moment." Hartson Brant moved to the front of the apparatus and began adjusting the controls. Rick watched as he checked the power supply to be sure the proper voltages were reaching the other units. Then he set the sensitive volume control for the detector stage, hesitating over the adjustment. "I'd better turn it down for this test," he said. "When we install it for use against the whispering box gang, we'll open it wide so that it can pick up the sound from the box at a considerable distance."

The scientist finished his adjustments and stood up. "I think we can test it now," he said.

Scotty swallowed. "What happens if it doesn't work?"

"In that case," Zircon boomed, "we'll all be stretched out on the floor for a while, like so many codfish dumped on a pier."

Weiss chuckled dryly. "We have a certain degree of confidence in our handiwork. Back, get the whispering box."

It looked deceptively innocent sitting on the lab desk. The horn on the front, which Bertona had diagnosed as a directional device, might have been the lens shade of a simple camera. The handle on the top, with a push button at its front end, might have been just a carrying handle with a shutter release at its end. Rick picked it up, careful to keep his thumb away from the handy button.

Keppner took it from him and brushed the last speck of Scotty's mud out of the horn. At the back of the box was a little opening, like a hinged door. Keppner opened it, disclosing a chamber that held two

carbon dioxide cartridges-the kind used to charge home seltzer bottles. When the trigger button was pressed, a cartridge was punctured, releasing the compressed gas. The box could be fired twice, and reloaded quickly. Rick wondered how many of them had been made. He knew of two, probably there were others.

“Who fires the shot?” Scotty asked.

Terhune, the draftsman, who had limited his conversation to mere greetings until now, spoke up. “Why not one of the two it has been used on the most? Rick or Scotty.”

“Good idea,” Zircon approved.

“Let them match for it,” Steve Ames suggested.

“No,” Rick said quickly. “Scotty should turn it on. He’s the one who got it away from Nails.”

Weiss agreed with Rick. He took the box from Keppner and handed it to Scotty.

The boy accepted the weapon, a little gingerly. There was some doubt in his eyes as he looked at the counter-weapon, gleaming in its unpainted aluminum cases. “Sure this will work?”

“We’ll soon know,” Hartson Brant said, smiling. “Go ahead, Scotty.”

“Here goes,” Scotty said, and pointed the horn at the counterweapon. His face tightened, as though he were trying to stop up his ears by sheer will power. His hand tightened on the grip and his thumb found the button.

He fired the whispering box.

Rick never forgot the result. He didn’t hear the shrill voice of the whispering box. The whisper was drowned out by the most awful scream he had ever experienced. He didn’t exactly hear it, it was much too loud for that. He felt it. He felt as though every bone in his skull were vibrating like a drumhead. He vowed later that his entire spine had thrummed like a tuning fork.

It was only for a handful of seconds, and then the scream ran down like a failing phonograph and was silent.

Keppner spoke first, his voice sounding a little faint because Rick had been slightly deafened by the blast. “Loud,” he said, with fine scientific detachment “Loud, but quite harmless.”

There was a mass sigh of relief. As Hartson Brant had said, when the theory of a counterweapon was first described to Rick, the counterfrequency had nullified the whispering box, beating against the wave from the box and producing an audiblesound that was the mathematical difference between the box frequency and that emitted by the counterweapon.

Steve Ames patted the gleaming aluminum and his face was one big smile. “If this thing only had a fresh coat of paint,” he proclaimed feelingly, “doggoned if I wouldn’t consider marrying it!”

“That’s our girl,” Scotty said. “Screaming Susie.”

The name stuck. From then on, the counterweapon was Screaming Susie.

The fatiguing hours were over. Steve Ames took the responsibility at that point. "Let's get moving," he said tersely. He waved at Pete Davis who had come to investigate the noise. "Get a couple of men, Pete. Bring the station wagon around, too."

To the scientists, he said, "Now we have to connect this thing."

"A simple matter," Hartson Brant said. "We can install it in a few moments."

"And then we can all go to bed, except for Steve and his men," Keppner said with relief.

Rick and Scotty exchanged glances. Rick knew his thought was in Scotty's mind. Go to bed now? When the whispering box gang might meet Screaming Susie this very day? Not on your life!

Susie wasn't large, but because of her content of transformers and other equipment, she was heavy. Pete Davis and three others carried her with the tender caution they might have used in transferring a wounded comrade to a hospital bed. They took her down to the waiting station wagon and tucked her inside with loving care.

Hartson Brant said, "It will take only one of us to install it and make adjustments. I'll go along and the rest of you can go to bed."

The chorus of protests ended with all of them piling into the station wagon and Steve's car. The two-car caravan sped through the awakening streets of the city.

Rick didn't know where they were going. He had forgotten to ask Steve. In a short time, however, they drew up before a brick dwelling. He looked at it in surprise, then reflected that he shouldn't be surprised at anything that might happen. Still, one of the modern government buildings near by would seem a more likely place.

Steve led the way into the house, down to the cellar, and through a wooden door into a brick passageway. He called back over his shoulder, "This passage is with the compliments of the man who was undersecretary of the treasury in President Buchanan's time. He had it cut so he could go from his home to his office without getting rained on. The city has a lot of places like this. It's one of the reasons I chose this building for a trap."

They followed the passage for what seemed five hundred yards, but was probably less. There were electric lights, strung along the way on a single pair of wires.

At the end of the passage, Steve took them through an opening in a cement-block wall. Rick looked around him as they stepped into an enormous modern basement. Then they were hurrying up a flight of stairs, through a door, down a long corridor, and presently to the front of a modern governmental office building.

"Here we are," Steve said. "I brought you the long way around in case any of our friends from the whispering box gang have an eye on this building. Now, where do we install it? It mustn't be in plain sight."

After a few moments discussion, a place was decided upon. In one corner of the building lobby was a booth set up for the sale of government publications. It was a temporary structure of board shelves covered with the brown, heavy, but loosely woven fabric called monk's cloth. The fabric was draped

down to the floor to conceal the unpainted wood. During office hours, the counters would display the various publications of the Government printing office. Now, it was bare.

Screaming Susie was placed on the floor, directly behind the front-counter drape. The fabric wouldn't impede the ultrasonic wave she emitted, and it would conceal her effectively. In a short time a wall plug had been found, an extension run, and current supplied to Susie. Hartson Brant retuned her, turning the control of the hidden microphone wide open. Now let the whispering box whisper! If it came close enough for Susie to hear, she would drown it out with one loud blast!

The scientists made a final recheck.

"Now," Hartson Brant said wearily, "who's in favor of getting some sleep?"

Rick had expected to make himself comfortable, to wait until the whispering box gang arrived. He looked at his father, surprised. Didn't he want to be in at the finish?

Hartson Brant smiled. "There is still time for a few hours sleep before Goss and his friends appear, Rick. Unless Steve has guessed wrong."

"It's a good bet," Steve said. "If anything does happen, I'll call you right away."

Scotty looked at Rick doubtfully, as though asking for a cue. Should they go to the hotel for a nap or remain?

It was Rick's heavy eyelids that decided him. "Well go with the rest, Scotty."

"Okay." The quickness with which Scotty agreed was a testament to how tired he was.

They went back the way they had come, to the waiting cars one street away from the entrance. The time would pass rapidly. Before long, the hour would come when Screaming Susie would have to show her worth under fire.

CHAPTER XXI

Tricked!

Rick's eyes wouldn't stay unglued. From the moment he had opened them at the hotel, they had tried to close again. He couldn't remember ever having been so sleepy.

Scotty, Hartson Brant, Zircon, and Keppner seemed to be in about the same condition. Weiss and Bertona had refused point-blank to get up. The only one with any pep was Gizmo McLean, who had been waiting in front of the hotel when the weary group of Spindrifters came from a hurried breakfast. Gizmo was parked around the corner next to one of the JANIG cars. Only the possibility that they might need him and his cab had kept him from joining them in the lobby.

Steve Ames had met the group as they came up from the building's cellar and assigned them to shadowy

corners of the lobby. "Remember you're here as spectators," he warned them. "My boys will do all that's necessary."

There were four of the JANIG men in the lobby itself. Half a dozen others were outside at various vantage points. One was on the roof of a building across the street with a rifle. At both corners of the block were cars ready for instant action. And, their ace in the hole, Screaming Susie, waited silently behind the cloth drapery.

The counter was busy now. The clerk sold copies of the publications to people who drifted through the lobby or paused on their way out of the building. The traffic wasn't very heavy. Rick had no trouble seeing every person who passed through.

Steve had chosen his trap wisely. The rear and side doors of this particular building were always locked from the outside. Of course, Goss might have a confederate in the building to open a door for him, but Steve had placed a guard at every entrance. If the whispering box gang entered the building at all, it would have to be by the front door.

Rick licked dry lips and fought to keep from falling asleep. Scotty was standing a few feet away, lost in thoughts of his own. Hartson Brant was on the other side of the lobby with Zircon and Keppner. All of them were concealed from anyone who came through the entrance. By the time the person was far enough inside to recognize them, the trap would be sprung. Steve Ames was not to be seen.

Rick yawned cavernously. He tried to stifle it, but it was too vast a yawn for that. Scotty chuckled.

"Thought you were going to swallow the building."

"Even rough marble in my stomach wouldn't keep me awake for very long," Rick said. "Hope we don't have to wait forever."

Scotty pointed to the wall clock. It lacked only a minute to 11:30. "Any time," he said. "Keep awake."

More people were coming into the building now. That was wrong! Steve had said traffic in the building would fall off at this time. Rick watched the incoming people carefully and saw that they were confused. Most of them headed for the building directory on the wall near the elevators. Some questioned the uniformed guard at the door. Rick began to fear that Goss, Nails, and Company might slip by in the crowd, but he saw that the JANIG men were alert.

The crowd thickened. More people were coming into the lobby. They were all men, most of them young. They stood uncertainly, as though waiting for something. Now and then one of them questioned the guard, or the clerk at the publications counter.

There was something very strange going onl

Rick snapped out of his lethargy as Steve Ames came through a door in the lobby. Steve stopped short at the sight of the growing crowd. Rick ran to his side.

"Steve, what's up?"

"We'll soon find out," Steve said. He tapped the shoulder of the nearest man. "Say, what's all the crowd, mister?"

The man turned. “Didn’t you see the ad?”

“Ad?What ad?”

The stranger drew a newspaper from his pocket.“In this morning’s *Post*. ” He pointed to an advertisement he had circled in pencil.

Rick and Steve read it quickly.

Wanted-young men for service with the Government outside the country. Highest salaries, living quarters, and expenses guaranteed. No experience necessary, but applicant must be in good health. Apply promptly at 11:30 .

The name of this building was the only address!

Steve Ames turned white. “This ad is a phony! No one in this building placed an ad like that!” He raised his voice to a yell, warning his men.

“Watch it! This crowd is a cover! Get them out of the building, and hurry!”

For an instant there was shocked silence. Rick grasped what Steve meant. Goss must have placed the ad, knowing it would attract a crowd of young men that would cover his own entrance! The JANIG men couldn’t use their guns in a crowd like this!

Then the silence was shattered by Zircon’s distinctive bellow.“Nails! Steve, watch out!”

Rick saw one of the crowd near Zircon lift a black box, and then came the terrible, deafening blast of Susie’s scream!

CHAPTER XXII

The Getaway

Susie’s hair-raising howl subsided and gave way to the pounding of shoe leather on the tile floor. The crowd in the lobby didn’t know what was happening, but no one was curious enough to wait and see. That scream had been too much! The men broke for the door.

Rick and Steve started for Nails, but the press of people blocked their way. Steve was shouting orders that were lost in the confusion. The men at the doors got into each other’s way, effectively jamming the entrance. From somewhere in the crush of men came a loud shout, and Susie wailed again.

Rick quailed before the blast. It hurt his eardrums and almost deafened him, but he kept trying to push through. From the corner of his eye he saw Scotty, also trying to get through the crowd. He couldn’t tell whether or not the whispering box gang was trapped in the building. He could only hope that they were.

Goss had pulled a master stroke this time. Suspecting that the building would be heavily guarded, the whispering box leader had placed a false ad, knowing it would give him the best protection of all—a crowd. Under cover of the crowd he and his men could have walked into the building, into the office suite where the supposed secret was kept, and out again, secure in the protection of the whispering box and in the knowledge that the officers of the law couldn't shoot into a mob of innocent people. But Goss hadn't thought Susie would be ready so soon!

More men were getting out through the doors. Rick shoved and pushed and made headway, Steve beside him. They reached the doors and with a concerted effort broke through the crowd of men, looking for some sign of the whispering box gang.

They were in time to see more of Goss's careful planning. A car swept to the curb and slowed. Three men leaped from the crowd and got in. The car spurred ahead.

"They won't make it," Steve said swiftly. "My men are at the corner."

But another car entered the scene. A maroon convertible had been parked at the curb, close to the corner. Now it raced into action, ahead of the car that held the gang.

Rick stood petrified, watching. He didn't even hear the rifle from the opposite rooftop as it barked away at the fleeing car, driving steel-jacketed bullets through the turret top.

A heavy sedan swung out of the cross street to block the way. Steve's men were waiting!

But the maroon convertible, racing ahead of the getaway car, never slowed! It plowed at full speed into the JANIG sedan, striking shrewdly just behind the front bumper.

The two cars, locked together, spun under the impact and left enough space for the getaway sedan to pass. Rick saw the figure of the driver leap from the shattered convertible and swing to the running board of the getaway car as it passed.

And then the whispering box gang was speeding out of sight!

Steve went down the building steps in long leaps, Rick close behind him. Another JANIG car was coming down the street from its post at the corner behind the action. But Gizmo McLean's cab was there before it. Steve piled in, Rick at his heels.

"Get going!" Steve commanded.

The acceleration snapped Rick against the cushion. He regained his balance and turned for a look through the rear window. The JANIG car had slowed. Men were getting in, Scotty among them.

Then Rick turned his eyes to the front and kept them there, meanwhile holding on for dear life.

Far ahead, the gang car careened around a corner. Gizmo swung past a delivery truck, almost going up on the sidewalk to miss it. He fought the taxi to an even keel and jabbed the pedal to the floor. The corner came and they took it without slowing, the tires wailing in protest. Gizmo straightened out and kept going.

Rick said shakily, "We banked like a plane on that corner."

They went through a red light as though it didn't exist. A police whistle screeched and was lost behind them. The car ahead wasn't gaining, but neither were they!

The chase went across Pennsylvania Avenue, past the upraised arms of a traffic officer. There was just a glimpse of his open mouth, then he, too, was gone. From somewhere in the rear came the sound of a siren. Rick tore his eyes from the scene ahead and looked back. The JANIG car was gaining slightly, and coming past it, bent over his handlebars, was a motorcycle officer.

Gizmo leaned on the horn and kept his hand there. Cars moved out of their way, some a shade too slowly, so that Gizmo had to swing the taxi like a mammoth ballet dancer. Rick lost track of the close calls. Once there was even the rasp of metal as their fender kissed a slow-moving truck.

"Where is he heading?" Rick asked breathlessly.

"Memorial Bridge, I think," Steve replied tensely. "That's a fast car. If he gets across the bridge, he may lose us."

"He won't," Gizmo said briefly from the front seat.

Ahead, the gang car passed an intersection, barely missing a black car. Rick choked on his heart, because it leaped into his throat. The black car was a hearse. A funeral procession was crossing in front of them, the cars close together!

Gizmo's horn tooted rhythmically, but he didn't slow down. The taxi roared up at the line of cars. They were almost bumper to bumper. Gizmo blasted the horn at them.

Rick could almost read the thoughts of the drivers. They had the right of way, a privilege accorded to such processions. They wouldn't stop for a mere taxi, even a berserk one.

They were too close to stop now! They would smash broadside right into the line!

A horrified driver saw the juggernaut bearing down on him and jammed his brake to the floor. A space opened and the taxi shot through it.

Rick slumped back in the seat.

And all the while Steve Ames kept yelling, "Faster! Faster!"

Constitution Avenue passed in a blur of cars and wheeling landscape as Gizmo weaved through the traffic, horn blaring. Ahead, the gang car sped toward Memorial Bridge.

Gizmo leaned over the wheel and coaxed the taxi to greater efforts.

Then they were on the bridge, going so fast that the rough cobbled surface didn't even jar them. Rick vowed later that the taxi only touched the ground on every hundredth brick.

At the other side of the bridge, the gang car swung right. For a moment there was doubt. Would they head toward Falls Church, or go in the opposite direction, toward Alexandria?

The doubt was resolved as the taxi took the turn on two wheels. The gang car had taken the ramp to the south.

They were in the open now, on a broad, concrete highway. True to Steve's prediction, the gang car began to pull away. From behind, the siren crept up on them. Rick risked another look. The JANIG car was closer, and the motorcycle cop had almost caught up!

The highway unrolled before them and far ahead Rick saw the broad shape of the Pentagon Building. He caught a glimpse of motion from the corner of his eye and turned as the motorcycle officer, bent low over his handlebars, rolled past with siren pulsing.

The motorcycle couldn't be pushed to excessive speed on the city streets, but here on the broad highway it could catch almost any car!

Rick looked at the speedometer of the cab. Almost eighty miles an hour! Yet the motorcycle officer was pulling away from them!

The road curved in a long, slow sweep. They went past other cars that had gone to the side of the road at the sound of the siren. The JANIG car was almost at their rear bumper and the motorcycle was a good distance ahead.

The caravan swept toward a fork in the road, and for an instant the gang car slowed in indecision. That instant was enough. Brief though the moment of slowing had been, it had given the motorcycle officer time to gain more than a hundred yards.

Rick held his breath as the officer drew his gun from its holster, sighted across the handlebars, fired, sighted, fired, and fired again.

It was the fourth shot that brought results.

A rear tire on the gang car exploded. The sedan swerved, slid sideways, tires screaming and smoking on the concrete. But the driver, by sheer strength, pulled the car out of its deadly spin and held it steady.

The taxi's tires were smoking, too. Rick heard the spine-chilling howl of tortured rubber and felt the whole car shudder. He held on for dear life, and noticed that Steve's hands gripped the back of the front seat so hard that the knuckles were white.

The motorcycle officer, unable to slow as rapidly as the cars, shot on past the careening sedan to safety.

As the taxi ground to a shuddering stop, Rick saw the doors on the gang car fly open. Three men leaped out and ran. Two of them were carrying black boxes. Nails was not among them.

Rick had the door open by the time Gizmo brought the cab to a stop. He didn't need Steve's urging to get moving. He jumped from the cab and ran after the three men.

The chase had come to an end a short distance past the Pentagon Building. The men were running toward the building at top speed! They leaped a low, cement wall and vanished from sight as the ground dropped away to the Pentagon grounds from the built-up highway.

The JANIG sedan was unloading, too. Rick saw Scotty get out, but he couldn't wait for his friend.

"Hurry!" Steve Ames yelled. "If they get into the building we'll lose them!"

Rick stretched his legs and really ran. He went over the cement wall, Steve on his heels. They skidded down the rock embankment to the cement road at the bottom, and ahead, going into the vast, car-filled parking area, they saw the three men.

Steve waved his arms in command. The JANIG men scattered, going in opposite directions to surround the building. The motorcycle officer had finally stopped, turned around, and was rolling down a ramp into the parking space.

“We’ve got them,” Steve exulted. “Dave will radio, and in ten minutes we’ll have a net thrown around this area that a cockroach couldn’t crawl through.”

Rick looked at the huge building. “I’m not so sure,” he said doubtfully. “It’s an easy place to get lost in!”

CHAPTER XXIII

The Box Again

From the highway past the Pentagon came the sound of sirens. The police were arriving, three cruisers and half a dozen motorcycles. Steve Ames paused at the sound. He turned to Rick.

“You and Gizmo keep out of this. You’re not armed and Goss and his men are. Keep out of the way and let the police take care of things.”

Scotty arrived, running, as Steve Ames left.

“What’s up?” he demanded.

“We’re supposed to keep out of it,” Rick said. He realized that what Steve said made sense, but he didn’t like it. To be on the job so long and then to stand by while others caught the criminals?

“Well, I like that!” Scotty exclaimed. “Where did Goss go?”

The wave of Rick’s arm took in row after row of parked cars in the great south parking area of the Pentagon. There were hundreds of cars and Goss and his two men were in there somewhere.

The sirens were screaming into life again. As Rick, Scotty, and Gizmo watched from outside the first line of cars, the police cruisers and motorcycles moved into positions evenly spaced around the parking area. Goss and his men were trapped.

“Joe was with Goss,” Rick said. “I recognized him. I think the other one was the man who drove the van. But how about Nails and the fifth man?”

“In the maroon convertible,” Scotty said. “Didn’t you see Steve’s man shooting from the roof back at the Government building? Nails has a smashed shoulder, and the other man has a bullet in his leg. Pete Davis is taking care of them.”

Gizmo had been scanning the rows of cars. Now he grabbed Rick's arm.

"I saw one of them!"

"Are you sure?" Rick looked where Gizmo pointed, but he couldn't see anyone.

"I'm sure. It looked like Joe.

Scotty's eyes narrowed. "What will you bet they've separated? They're too smart to stay together."

That sounded reasonable to Rick. He had another thought. "They still have whispering boxes, too. What's to prevent them from knocking down anyone who goes after them? If they can stay hidden until dark, they may have a chance to get away."

"They don't have to stay hidden until dark," Scotty pointed out. "If they can stay out of sight until office hours are over, there will be a mob of maybe three or four thousand people milling around. It would take an army to check all of them."

Rick surveyed the parking area. "I'll bet they plan to stay hidden, too. Listen, suppose we separated? We could sneak in and out among the cars and maybe get behind them."

"What good would that do?" Gizmo demanded.

"Suppose we get behind one? Do we call him names or do we throw pebbles at him? We don't even have clubs, much less guns. And you can bet those guys have guns as well as whispering boxes."

"He's right," Scotty said sensibly. "We can't do anything."

The JANIG men were gathering on the roadway. Rick pointed as Steve Ames motioned them into line. Then, spread out, they started for the parking area. All of them were armed.

"They're going to go right through the area," Scotty said, his voice hushed. "There's going to be some shooting."

Gizmo gestured toward the windows on their side of the building. Every available space was occupied with employees watching the drama unfolding below. They couldn't know what was going on, but they were aware that it was something extraordinary.

"They have box seats," Gizmo observed.

"And there is no reason why we shouldn't have," a new voice bellowed.

The boys turned to greet Zircon, Hartson Brant, and Dr. Keppner who were coming toward them from the road.

The three scientists had been left behind in the wild chase, but had caught up in a police cruiser. They had already been briefed on the situation.

"I suggest we go into the building," Keppner said. He waved a whispering box. "We can see what is going on from a window. Steve Ames is right. Since we are unarmed, it would be extremely foolish to interfere."

“Where did you get the box?” Rick asked.

“From the gang car. It is empty, otherwise Goss would have taken it with him. It’s evidently the one that caused Susie to go off.” Keppner showed them the two punctured cartridges he had removed from the box.

They fell in with his suggestion that they watch from the building and hiked toward the nearest entrance. As they went, Rick told his father about the wild ride.

Hartson Brant smiled grimly. “We didn’t linger on the way, either.”

At the door, a building guard stopped them. One of Steve’s men had already alerted the building guards.

Hartson Brant identified the group and they were allowed to pass.

“Go up to Captain O’Malley’s office,” the guard suggested. “You can look out over the whole area from there.” He pointed toward the inner door that led to a staircase. “One flight up, go past the exhibit, and turn right.”

The scientist thanked him and led the way. Rick kept pace with his father, but he had to stretch his legs to do it. Hartson Brant had a long stride that seemed to cover yards when he was in a hurry. They went up the stairs and found an exhibit of Army Air Forces personnel equipment. It included pressure suits for fighter pilots, jet-pilot helmets, oxygen masks, inflatable life jackets for over water flying, fur-lined high-altitude boots, electrically heated mittens, and similar equipment. Rick’s eyes took in the array automatically. He didn’t slow down long enough for a good look.

Captain O’Malley’s name was on the door. Hartson Brant knocked and a loud voice invited them to enter.

They went in and found the office unoccupied except for a young, redheaded captain.

The officer introduced himself as O’Malley, heard a brief resume of the day’s happenings, then motioned them to the windows. “Make yourselves comfortable,” he invited. “This is the first time I’ve seen a real skirmish from a box seat. And watch that green station wagon in the eighth row, counting out from here. I think one of your fugitives is in there.”

Rick, Scotty, and Gizmo squeezed together at one window. They looked out on the entire south parking area with its row after row of cars. They could see the JANIG men and the police moving slowly down the rows of cars, pausing to examine each one. Around the area, at regular intervals, were the police cruisers and motorcycles. Reinforcements were arriving from moment to moment and taking their place in the line.

It was dramatic and exciting. The more so because both sides in the strange chess game were playing for keeps. Rick knew that Goss and his men would fight to the end. They had nothing to lose, because capture would mean trial and conviction on a charge of treason. Besides, if they could hold out for a while, their chances of escape were increased.

It would take a long while for the advancing line of Government men and officers to cross the parking area. They had to move slowly, not knowing where their quarry had gone to ground. Now and then Rick lost sight of one of the men in the maze of cars. He wasn’t good at estimating distances, but the parking

area looked about a quarter of a mile long and half as wide. He later found that to be a good guess. And the huge area was packed with cars!

A shout from near-by windows made him jump. The watching crowd had yelled as one of the gang crossed an open space between two cars. The brief appearance of the figure made Rick watch more closely. The gang had to stay near the middle of the parking lot. He was rewarded by the sight of Goss himself, scurrying from car to car!

The parking lot was crisscrossed with driveways. The gang men had to cross the driveways occasionally as the pressure of the advancing line kept them on the move.

After a while Rick thought he could make out a planned strategy. Goss was moving steadily toward the building, dashing across the open spaces, losing himself among the cars, then making another dash for it. Rick tried to locate Steve, and saw him at the end of the line of cars nearest the building. He calculated swiftly. If the pace kept up, Goss and Steve would meet eventually, about a hundred yards down from where he stood at the window.

If only there were enough men to put rifles at the windows! But that wouldn't be a sure way. Goss and his men moved fast when they were in the open and the range was pretty great. He wondered why building guards hadn't been posted and decided that there weren't more than enough of them to guard the entrances.

Goss appeared again for a brief moment as he crossed an open space. There was no doubt about it; he was making for the building!

Rick couldn't be sure, but he thought the gang leader was carrying a whispering box. If he had one, he could reach the line of cars nearest the building, make a quick dash, and fire the box at the entrance. That way, he could get past the entrance guard and into the building. Once in the building, finding him would take a huge number of men. Rick wasn't even sure they would get him. It would be possible to get away somehow. Prisoners had gotten out of jails that were especially made to hold them. The Pentagon wasn't a jail or even close to one. Goss was clever enough to find a way.

If Steve and Goss met in the line of cars, his friend might get hurt. Goss was in the fourth line now, about opposite an army car with a cracked window. Chance would decide. If Goss saw Steve a fraction of a second before Steve saw him . . .

Rick said urgently, "Somebody ought to go down and tell Steve where Goss is now."

Gizmo showed no signs of leaving his place at the window. "Tell him yourself," he suggested.

Scotty eyed Rick sympathetically. "Tell you what, let's toss for it."

The three boys drew away from the window for a moment and each dug out a coin. "Odd man goes," Rick said.

The three coins dropped to the carpet and the boys leaned over them.

Rick's was a head. So was Gizmo's.

Scotty's was a tail.

“Just my luck,” Scotty groaned, but he abided by the whim of fate and ran for the door. Rick and Gizmo, both grinning their relief, resumed the vigil at the window.

They saw Scotty emerge and head for Steve. For a moment the two stood talking, then Steve ran for the place Scotty had described, Scotty at his heels.

Rick groaned in sudden fright for his friends. “Why doesn’t he take it easy? If he shows himself, he’ll get shot! And so will Scotty!”

“If we only had a rifle,” Gizmo said. “If we only had anything, even one of them boxes!”

“We’ve got one,” Rick said, “but it’s empty. No cartridges in it.” He broke off as Goss sneaked around the side of a car and vanished behind a panel truck.

Goss couldn’t see Steve and Scotty, nor could they see him.

Scotty had picked up a large stone and was hefting it. Rick’s heart did a loop. Was Scotty out of his mind? He couldn’t fight an armed man with rocks!

Steve found the Army car with the cracked window, and moving slowly, he went around it and disappeared. Rick licked his lips. Steve was going into the maze of cars after Goss, and they were only a few cars away from each other.

He got a quick glimpse of Goss again. The gang leader had moved over one row. For another instant he was in sight as he came around a car, and it wasn’t a box in his hand, but a gun!

Steve moved into the maze. Rick saw him move swiftly around a car. Steve had a gun, too. Scotty, moving with more caution, followed after him.

Gizmo gasped, “They’re going in the wrong direction!”

Rick saw it at the same instant. Goss’s change of direction had fixed things so that the gang leader would be *behind* Steve and Scotty if they continued their present line! Let him get one quick look at them and he would use the gun he held!

Rick started away from the window and almost fell over the whispering box Keppner had placed on the floor.

He stared at the thing. If he had ... he did have!

“Wow!” He let out an exclamation that made the others look up in astonishment. They were just in time to see him dash out the door with the empty whispering box.

Rick’s legs carried him almost as fast as wings . . . right down the hall to the exhibit. He had his fingers crossed. If only the jacket were complete! He skidded to a stop in front of the orange-colored life jacket. It was the kind that could be inflated by pulling cords on the bottom. The cords pulled levers that forced pins into carbon dioxide cylinders.

Cartridges! Like the ones used in soda-water bottles. Like the ones used in the whispering box!

The screw-top containers were in place. He unscrewed the tops as fast as his fingers would move.

There was one cartridge in sight! He pulled it out and examined the neck, afraid of what he might find.

The tip end was unpunctured ! The cartridge was good.

He didn't wait to get the second one from the jacket. He ran for the stairs, opening the back of the whispering box as he went. The cartridge rammed home, and he snapped the back of the box shut. The spring catch caught. The box was ready for use!

The guard had no chance to question him; he was out the door too fast, running to where Steve and Scotty had entered the line of cars.

Goss might have moved over a line from the last position he had seen, but he had to chance it. He ran into the maze of cars, and began working his way toward where he thought Goss might be. It wasn't far ahead. He couldn't see any signs of other men and he knew that the three ahead of him were crouching low, working their way from car to car. He dropped flat and peered under the line-and he saw legs two cars away, and another two cars away were two pair of legs! He lay flat for a moment until he was sure all the shoes were pointing away from him. He saw the nearest legs bend a little and move slowly.

Goss had seen Scotty and Steve He was going toward them I

Rick got to his feet, his breath unsteady. He bent low and went to the front of the car. In a moment he should see Goss come out to the front of the second car beyond the one that concealed him. He leaned far forward and peered around the chrome grill.

Goss appeared, his back to Rick. The boy took his nerve in both hands and prepared to jump into the open, the box ready for use. And then he saw Goss's hand lift!

Steve and Scotty! They were just coming out from behind a car-and their backs were to Goss!

Rick sprang forward, the whispering box lifting. His thumb found the button. He let out a cry of warning for Steve and Scotty.

Three startled faces turned toward him just as the box whispered.

All three of them wavered, fought for balance, then fell writhing to the ground!

CHAPTER XXIV

Letter from Home

The scientists, except for Bertona, were sitting in Hart-son Brant's hotel room when Rick and Scotty entered.

Hartson Brant greeted them with a smile. "Everything finally under control?"

“Perfect,” Rick said. “Nails, Joe, and that other man in the hospital under guard. Goss and the other one are in the District of Columbia jail along with our old friend Fanning. We just came from there. Steve is downstairs. He’ll be up in a minute.”

“And that’s not all,” Scotty said. “Guess what happened to the stuff they stole!”

“Let me guess,” Zircon boomed. “Eaten up by mice?”

Scotty grinned. “Try again.”

“Used by the gang for sandwich wrappers,” Weiss suggested dryly.

Hartson Brant chuckled. “Don’t let them pull your leg, Scotty. It happens that Pete Davis phoned a moment after you and Steve left the jail.”

“Oh.” Scotty looked deflated. “Anyway, they didn’t have a chance to sell them.”

“I guess that’s what made Goss try for that last big secret,” Rick surmised. “The others went up in flames when the old mansion burned. He had to make one more try or fail entirely.”

Goss hadn’t been obliging enough to admit that, but JANIG investigators, sifting every last ash of the old mansion, had found the remnants of the secret papers in a strongbox that hadn’t been fireproof.

Keppner smiled. “What’s this about giving you a medal, Rick?”

“Nothing serious.” Rick grinned. “Steve said something about awarding me what he called ‘The Order of the Wiggling Worm.’ He also said something about making Scotty a Knight of the Bath. With soap.”

The scientists laughed.

“I’ll wager it isn’t the first time a war has been won by someone lying on his stomach,” Weiss said.

Rick had retained enough presence of mind to yell, “Get flat on the ground,” and the quick-thinking JANIG agents had known at once what he meant. One agent some distance away had fired an instant after dropping to the ground, shooting Joe in the leg from under half a dozen cars. After that, the third gang member had howled that he was ready to surrender.

“Davis said that a conviction is a matter of course,” Keppner told them. “Steve’s men have reconstructed the secret documents from the ashes found in the house, if they need them for evidence. Fanning has already confessed a great deal. Only the judge, jury, and prosecutors and witnesses will know the truth. So far as the public knows, it will be just another trial for armed robbery.”

Rick almost jumped out of his skin as a shrill whisper sounded behind him. He whirled to see Scotty, an innocent look on his face.

“Did I scare you?” Scotty asked. “I was trying to whistle.”

Rick grinned. “You’re just mad because I laid you low along with Goss. I suppose I’ll have to be on guard or I’ll find itching powder in my bed some night.”

“Forget it,” Scotty said, smiling. “It was worth it.”

Hartson Brant scaled an envelope at his son. "A letter for you, Rick. It's from Barby. I had one from Mother, too. She wants to know when we're coming home."

"Tonight," Weiss said. "We'll take a sleeper."

Zircon chuckled. "And we won't get off, even to answer a bleat from Gabriel's horn. That's a promise!"

Rick tore the letter open and scanned it briefly, reading the highlights aloud.

"Barby has a fine tan. She says things are dull at home and wants to know when we're coming back . . . Jerry Webster dropped in for a game of tennis . . . Professor Gordon has been doing the shopping, flying in my Cub . . . Dismal caught the woodchuck . . . Hey! Did you hear that? Dismal got that chuck!" He read on. " 'He brought him home, the chuck, I mean, and it was quite a job, because the thing was almost as big as Diz. He must have shaken the chuck senseless, because there wasn't any fight left in him, but he (the woodchuck) was still alive and not much harmed. Professor Gordon thought we ought to kill him, but he looked so unhappy and defeated (the woodchuck, I mean) that I made Professor Gordon put him in a burlap bag, then we took him to the mainland in the boat and let him go. Dismal was with us, and he didn't even try to chase the woodchuck. I guess he felt gallant toward a defeated enemy, and I know I felt proud of Dismal. Like a brave and shining knight he had vanquished the invader and now he was generous toward the fallen foe, refusing his right of the coup de grace.' "

Scotty commented, "She's been reading Tennyson again. I recognize passages from the Knights of the Round Table."

"Not knights of the bath with soap." Rick grinned. "Anyway, I'm glad they let the woodchuck go. He put up a good fight."

"Anything else?" Hartson Brant asked.

"Let's see. Yes. She says there is a lot of mail for us."

One letter is from Chahda, in Hawaii . There's another one from Hawaii that's not from Chahda. She doesn't know who it's from because she can't read the writing and she can't see anything when she holds it up to a light bulb." He had a picture of Barby, burning with curiosity, holding the letter in front of the light.

"I guess we'd better go home before she dies of sheer wondering," Scotty said.

Hartson Brant rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It may be from Dr. Warren. I remember he said something about a new expedition he was planning. He also said something about wanting Rick and Scotty to go along."

"What!" Rick and Scotty shouted together.

The door opened and Steve Ames came in.

"Who's yelling?" he asked.

"We are," Rick said. "Dad, what's all this about?"

“Something about a trip down to the islands south of Tahiti. I don’t remember all of it. We’ll talk about it later, Rick. Steve, do you have any more news?”

“Nothing you don’t know,” Steve said. He looked tired. “The case is almost closed, so far as JANIG is concerned. We have only to locate the gang accomplice in New York, and Fanning has already given us a good lead. He’s willing to talk, hoping the judge won’t be too hard on him. The case is mostly up to the Department of Justice now.” Steve’s smile included them all. “I won’t try to thank you. Thanks wouldn’t express it.”

“No thanks necessary,” Hartson Brant said for all of them. “It was a privilege to help. How is Bertona?”

“Pretty disgusted with that cousin of his,” Steve answered. “He feels especially chagrined that he had not mentioned his name at the time the FBI man was making his routine check. He hadn’t seen Goss since they both were boys-up to the time of that meeting at the Pittsburgh air terminal.”

He looked at Rick and Scotty and gave them a comradely grin. “How about the two junior commandos? They’ll get bored if you take them back home where no whispering boxes disturb the peace.”

“We’re going on an expedition,” Rick said hopefully.

“To Spindrift Island,” Hartson Brant added. “After that, we’ll see.”

Scotty spoke up. “Steve, I’ve been wanting to ask you something. Goss and his gang got away with some pretty valuable stuff, didn’t they? I mean the secrets that were burned.”

“You never told us what the secrets were,” Rick said.

Steve sobered. He went to the door and opened it, peered up and down the hall and then closed the door again. He went to the window and looked out, as though expecting to find an eavesdropper hanging from the window sill. Then he turned to the now quiet group.

“You’ve done an invaluable service for your country,” he said seriously. He spoke directly to Rick and Scotty. “Now, I’m going to ask you to do something even harder.”

Rick tensed. Scotty’s voice was hushed. “You mean, not to divulge a word of what you’re going to tell us?”

“Harder than that,” Steve said. “Much harder.” He lowered his voice and spoke in a confidential whisper. Rick and Scotty moved closer, so as not to miss a single word.

The twinkle in Steve’s eyes broke through and the scientists burst into laughter as he said:

“I’m going to ask you not to ask any questions.”

THE END

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