

STAIRWAY TO DANGER

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY, No. 9

BY JOHN BLAINE

CHAPTER I

The Thoughtful Robot

“It’s weird,” Rick Brant said. “It’s uncanny.” He perched on the edge of his father’s desk and stared at the famous scientist. “It sounds like science-fiction, Dad. Will it really work?”

Hartson Brant smiled. “It isn’t like you to doubt a scientific probability, Rick. If we weren’t sure it would work, we wouldn’t be putting so much time and money into the project.”

Except for the gray in the scientist’s hair, he might have been Rick’s elder brother. Both were lean and long-legged. Both had brown eyes and light-brown hair. Their mannerisms were the same and they even dressed somewhat alike, preferring slacks and open shirts to more formal attire.

Don Scott, called Scotty, shook his head at the elder Brant’s amused grin. “I’m like Rick,” he said. “I don’t doubt the scientific probability of this project, but the idea of a thinking robot is kind of hard to swallow. All I hope is that this robot doesn’t have a wrong sense of humor. Imagine a machine pulling

practical jokes!”

Hartson Brant chuckled. “Even that isn’t too farfetched, Scotty. Wait until you get better acquainted with Parnell Winston. His sense of humor runs to practical jokes, and there’s no telling what he might build into the machine.”

“He must be good,” Rick said.

“He’s very good indeed, Son. He’s as close to a genius as we have on the staff.”

Rick’s eyebrows went up. That was high tribute, because the Spindrift Scientific Foundation staff, which his father headed, had more than its share of brains. Leading scientists from all over the world wrote or came to the little island off the New Jersey coast for aid or advice. More than once, the United States Government had looked to Spindrift for help.

In fact, Rick, Scotty, and Professor Hobart Zircon had just returned from the Far East where they aided the government in locating the source of an Asiatic supply of heavy water. They had almost lost their lives in the fabulous Caves of Fear, near the Chinese-Tibetan border, in tracking down what might have been a menace to the security of the United States .

During their absence, three new members had been added to the Spindrift staff, including Dr. Parnell Winston, a cyberneticist. Cybernetics, Rick knew, had something to do with the relationship between the human mind and machines. The “giant brains,” the electronic computers, were the results of the new science. Dr. Winston, however, had immediately started on a different kind of problem. He had undertaken to build a machine capable of thinking.

“I’m a little confused,” Rick admitted. “Barby told us; something about the project, but I can’t believe she had it straight.” Barbara Brant, his pretty sister, had been more excited about the new project than about the trip from which they had returned only the day before.

“That’s right,” Scotty said. “She told us the machine would be eight feet tall, have six arms, and sense enough to make cakes, give permanent waves, and repair television sets, all at once.”

Hartson Brant chuckled. “That’s Parnell Winston for you. He teases Barby almost as much as you do. Seriously, this robot will have limited use. If you can visualize an armor-plated bulldozer—that will give you a good idea.”

Rick tried to picture it. “You mean a regular bulldozer? A tractor with a big blade for pushing things?”

“Regular in two ways,” the scientist said. “It will have a bulldozer blade, and caterpillar treads like a tank. But it will look more like a huge turtle than a bulldozer.”

“Why a bulldozer?” Rick asked. “Couldn’t you think of something more human for our first real robot?”

“We didn’t select the design,” Hartson Brant explained. “It was selected for us by the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Defense. That’s secret, by the way. Our connection with them is not to be discussed. AEC wants the machine to help dispose of radioactive wastes. The Department of Defense wants it for obvious reasons. You can see how valuable an armored machine capable of thinking for itself could be to the Army or Marines.”

Scotty sat forward on the edge of his chair. “It’s terrific!” he exclaimed. “You could tell the bulldozer to

go cover up an enemy pillbox with dirt, and never risk a man!”

“Yes,” Rick said. “But I still don’t get this part about how it thinks. Unless you mean that it will have a memory, and learn from experience.”

Hartson Brant nodded. “That’s exactly right, Rick. It will not be capable of really creative thought. But it will be able to remember, and to interpret its memories.”

Rick kept abreast of new developments by reading all the scientific journals to which the staff subscribed, and he knew that an English scientist, named Walter, had created machines that could go almost that far. Dr. Walter had named his latest one *machina docilis*, because it was capable of learning. This Spindrift machine evidently was another step along the same line.

Scotty scratched his head. “How about an example, Dad?”

The scientist tamped tobacco into his pipe. “All right, Scotty. Take an enemy pillbox as an example. Imagine it with concrete tank pillars in front of it. You know the kind I mean. They’re like huge concrete teeth. We would merely instruct the tank buster-our robot-to destroy the pillbox, and we would give it compass directions. The machine would advance until it struck the concrete pillars. It would try to knock them down. If it failed, it probably would go completely around the pillbox looking for a weak point. If it found no weak point, it probably would back off and start shoving dirt until it buried the concrete pillars and then it would roll right over them. It would then try to crush the pillbox. If it failed, it probably would just bury the thing by shoving dirt.”

“You keep saying ‘probably,’” Rick pointed out. “Don’t you know?”

“Not exactly. The machine would try everything within its capabilities, remembering each failure and each weakness. It would keep trying until it succeeded, or failed altogether.”

Scotty stood up. “I quit,” he said. “This is too much. I’m a simple soul, and such things are not for the likes of me. Next thing you know we’ll have pixies or leprechauns running around the lab.”

Rick grinned in sympathy. He knew how Scotty felt, because he had the same feeling himself. It was uncanny. “Where do we fit in, Dad?” he asked.

“Dr. Winston has assignments for you,” Hartson Brant said. “Plan to start in the morning, as early as possible. We’re rushing to meet a deadline the Department of Defense has given us, and you may find yourselves working nights. You can fly to work, Rick. I checked the field bordering the amusement park. There’s room enough, although the grass is a little long.”

The robot project was not on Spindrift Island, but at a place down the coast. When finished, the machine would weigh several tons, and the scientists had decided it would be easier to travel to work than to face the engineering problem of getting it to the mainland. Dr. Winston had found a place below the town of Seaford, a building owned by a small college. The building was next to Seaside Playland, an amusement park that had gone out of business about two years before.

Hartson Brant himself was not taking part in the project. He was working with Shannon and Briotti, two of the new scientists, on a forthcoming expedition. Zircon was starting work on the same expedition. Julius Weiss, Spindrift’s brilliant mathematician, was working with Dr. Winston.

“Come on, Rick,” Scotty said. “Let’s get back down to earth. I’m in need of something simple but

sustaining. Like doughnuts. With milk.”

The boys left the scientist to his work and walked to the kitchen where Mrs. Brant was seated at the kitchen table, going over her accounts.

Rick gave her a bear hug. “How’s the doughnut situation?”

“Good,” Mrs. Brant replied, smiling. “Unless Barby has had more than her share.”

Scotty was already investigating the doughnut jar. “Where is she, Mom?”

“In Whiteside. Jerry Webster is covering a swimming meet at the Scout camp and she went along with him.”

Jerry Webster, reporter for the Whiteside *Morning Record*, was an old friend.

“Hope she took a bathing suit along,” Rick said, pouring a tall glass of cold milk. “Some of the Scouts are good, but I’ll put my money on Barby. She could be a champion, if she’d only practice.”

Barby was a year younger than Rick, and although they had their minor battles as brother and sister often do, he was very proud of her—even though it was a pride he didn’t often express.

In the same way, he was proud of Scotty. The ex-Marine, an orphan, had been a member of the Spindrift family since the moon rocket experiment. The two boys had become closer than brothers, and they had shared danger and fun in equal proportions. Both of them were on the pay roll of the Spindrift Foundation as junior technicians.

They finished their milk and doughnuts and wandered from the kitchen door to the orchard. Beyond the orchard, on the seaward side of the island was a grassy stretch which Rick used as an airfield. His small plane was moored under the trees. On the inland edge of the orchard were new cottages, built to house the new staff members and their families. Rick had had some misgivings when his father decided to enlarge the staff, but after meeting the new people, he was satisfied that the increase was a good thing. They were all very congenial.

On the southeast tip of the island were the low, gray-stone laboratory buildings. Rick led the way toward them, curious about the work in progress. He stopped and examined the Cub. He hadn’t flown it since leaving for Hong Kong.

“Let’s go for a hop,” Scotty suggested.

Rick shook his head. “I’d rather see what’s happening in the lab. But we might turn the engine over and see if it still runs.”

“Okay,” Scotty agreed. He checked the gas gauge. “Plenty of fuel. Get in. I’ll crank the prop.”

Rick slid into the pilot’s seat and moved the wheel-type control column. The controls responded. He checked the switch and called, “Switch off.”

“Switch off,” Scotty repeated. He pulled the propeller through a few times to prime the cylinders, then called, “Switch on.”

“Switch on,” Rick repeated. He advanced the throttle and snapped on the switch. Scotty pulled the propeller back on compression. The engine coughed. Scotty tried again, and this time the engine caught. Rick let it warm, watching his instrument panel carefully and holding fast on the brakes. When he was satisfied that everything was in perfect order, he cut the engine and got out.

“Runs like a watch,” he said with satisfaction. “Now let’s see what’s happening at the lab.”

The laboratory buildings had been built originally by the government, then purchased by the Spindrift Foundation with the cash prize resulting from the moon rocket. Since then the Spindrift group had added equipment until the laboratories compared favorably with any in the country. The Spindrift portion of a treasure found while exploring the bottom of the Pacific had permitted the purchase of new equipment and the salaries of three new staff members.

As the boys walked into the main room, two men looked up.

Dr. Howard Shannon was very tall and very thin. He wore glasses so thick they magnified his eyes-but they were eyes with a twinkle in them and their color was a brilliant blue. His thinning hair was almost white. Rick’s first impression had been that of a bookworm, but then he had noticed Dr. Shannon’s big, powerful hands. He had noticed also that the scientist’s face was weathered from years in the sun and wind, and he suspected that

Howard Shannon probably was as good a trail companion as Weiss or Zircon.

Dr. Anthony Briotti was surprisingly young to be a famous archeologist. He was of medium height, well-knit, with black hair and a deeply tanned complexion. He had a pleasant grin that showed white, even teeth. Both boys had liked him at once. He was more like someone of their own age than a senior scientist. He was the only bachelor among the new staff members. It had never occurred to either Rick or Scotty to call the other scientists anything but “Doctor” or “Professor.” But within a few moments after meeting, they had, quite naturally, started calling Dr. Briotti “Tony.”

Dr. Shannon greeted them. “Good afternoon. Both rested from your trip, I hope?”

“Sure they are,” Tony Briotti said. “I can tell by looking at ‘em. And you can bet curiosity brought them in here. I’m surprised they haven’t shown up sooner, especially when we’re planning a new trip.”

“We had to get a little sleep,” Rick protested. “But you’re right. We’re curious. What’s going on?”

“A joint project,” Shannon said. “Usually, as a naturalist, I have rather special interests, but Dr. Briotti has come up with a plan that, as he says, is right down my alley.”

Tony smiled. “In other words, he thinks some very interesting new bugs are located near a place where I hope to find some fine artifacts. Seriously, I’m in hopes of tracking down the race of people that built the temple of Alta-Yuan, which you so kindly dug up for me.”

The search for the lost temple, drowned ages ago in the Pacific, had taken the Spindrift group to Kwangara Island a short time before.

“It will be a good trick if you can do it,” Scotty said. “They vanished centuries ago.”

“Consider me a kind of detective,” Tony replied. “I’m a Bureau of Missing Persons that works only on cases a thousand years old. I’ve got a good clue. Hope it works out.”

“What do you hope to find, Dr. Shannon?” Rick asked.

The tall scientist polished his thick glasses. “I really have little hope, but there is a possibility that I may succeed in finding the rarest of all beetles, *scarabaeus planderus*, an ancient relative of the Egyptian scarab. If I find the beetle in the same area where Briotti uncovers his lost people, it may also show that they came originally from the Near East.”

Rick hid a grin. The Spindrift scientists had gone on expeditions for many things, but going after anything so unromantic as a beetle was a new twist.

“Isn’t there something else you’ll be hunting?” he asked.

“Indeed there is!” Dr. Shannon exclaimed. “The beetle would be the prize, but I also hope to find a few varieties of the sensitive mimosa. There may possibly be a chance to collect a few cloud rats, and if there is time for side trips I should like very much to pick up a slow loris.”

Scotty looked incredulous. “You’re making up those names,” he accused.

Shannon peered at him over the tops of his glasses. “Eh? Making them up? No, indeed!”

Tony Briotti laughed heartily. “There really are such critters,” he assured them. “Only a naturalist like Howard would know about them, or get excited about them, but they do exist.”

Dr. Shannon smiled. “Thank you, Anthony. I acknowledge your support.” To the boys, he added, “We will make a first-class team, Dr. Briotti and I. We have interests in common. Beetles, for example. We both like beetles. But where I prefer to take them alive, as specimens, Anthony prefers them mummified and at least ten centuries old.”

Rick didn’t quite know what to make of the conversation for a moment, then he saw that this was Dr. Shannon’s dry way of making a joke. He started to ask the location of the new expedition when the phone rang.

There was a streak of clairvoyance in Rick. He explained it by saying he had hunches, but it was there. He knew the moment the phone rang that it was for him, and that it meant disaster. He was leaping for the phone even as Briotti answered, then handed the instrument to him.

Rick took it, his heart beating rapidly. “Yes?”

“Better come at once, Rick,” Hartson Brant said, and his voice was shaking. “We’ve just had a call from Captain Douglas of the State Police. Jerry and Barby are in the hospital. They’ve been struck by a hit-and-run driver!”

CHAPTER II

The Search

Rick dashed into the front door of the big house, Scotty close behind him. Hartson Brant beckoned from the library. His usually tanned face was white.

"It's not serious," he said quickly. "Barby is being X-rayed right now. At worst, it will be only a broken bone, but it probably will turn out to be nothing more than a badly twisted ankle. Jerry was bruised, but he's all right."

Rick's heart went out of his throat.

"Captain Douglas is on the phone," the scientist continued. "He wants to speak to you."

Rick's hand shook a little as he picked up the phone. "This is Rick, Captain."

The State Police officer said, "I need you, Rick. I want to get that hit-and-run car that almost got Barby and Jerry, but most of my men are tied up now helping the New York police look for Soapy Strade. He escaped from prison last night. I want you to get in your plane and start searching toward the south for the hit-and-run car. Cover the area from Whiteside to the junction of the Shore Road and Route 1. Gus is already in the air. He's covering the area between Whiteside and Newark. What men I can spare from the New York job are going to cover the roads north of Whiteside."

"What do I look for?" Rick asked.

"A maroon sedan." Captain Douglas named the make, and gave Rick the license number. "Take a sack and some weights with you, and paper and pencil. You know where the police stations are in Seaford and Jerriek's Crossing. If you pick up the car, drop a note giving direction and road. I'm phoning the police in those towns to watch for you. Once you've dropped the note, pick up the car again and keep following it until you see a police car stop it. Got it?"

"Got it," Rick returned swiftly. "I'm on my way."

"Step on it. The sedan has a fifteen-minute start. And don't worry about Barby and Jerry. They're all right. I'm sorry this had to happen when most of my men are tied up hunting Strade, but I'm betting on you to find that hit-and-run car."

Rick hung up, and repeated the conversation to his father and Scotty as he hurriedly collected paper, pencil, and a pair of lead paperweights from his father's desk. Then he rushed to the kitchen, rummaged in a drawer, and found a sugar sack. His mother was already on her way to Whiteside in one of the motorboats.

"I'm going with you," Hartson Brant said as Rick returned. "You can drop me at the airport and I'll join Mother and Barby at the hospital."

Rick's plane was only a two-seater, but he didn't say anything. The extra load wouldn't put the plane beyond the safety limits and this was an emergency. The three of them ran from the house to where the plane was staked down. Rick and the scientist got in while Scotty untied the plane, pulled the chocks from in front of the wheels, and then spun the prop. The engine caught and Scotty got in, taking a seat on Hartson Brant's lap.

Rick adjusted his trim tabs for the heavy load, then taxied to the very end of the strip. Holding fast on the brakes, he revved up the engine until it howled. Then he released the brakes and the plane rolled

forward.

The tail came up sluggishly. Rick held the Cub on the ground as long as he dared, then slowly pulled back on the wheel. The plane left the ground with only a few feet of runway to spare.

“Made it,” Scotty said quietly. “Am I too heavy, Dad?”

The scientist grunted. “You’re about a hundred and fifty pounds too heavy for comfortable lap sitting, Scotty. But I can stand it if you can.”

Rick adjusted his trim tabs a little more, then asked, “Dad, who is Soapy Strade? Captain Douglas didn’t explain. I guess he thought I knew, but I don’t.”

Hartson Brant got a little more comfortable. “He’s a gang leader, Rick. He had one of the biggest crime rings in the East until he made the mistake of kidnaping a wealthy banker. That made it possible for the FBI to take action. He drew a twenty-year sentence.”

“I don’t remember reading about it,” Scotty said.

“It happened while we were in the western Pacific,” Hartson Brant explained. “I didn’t know about it, either, until the news broke last night that he had escaped.

Both the New York and New Jersey police are hunting him. I’m not surprised Captain Douglas hasn’t many men to help us.”

Whiteside was already in view. Rick hadn’t bothered climbing for altitude, and he swept over the town at little more than five hundred feet. He picked up the windsock at the Whiteside airport, banked into the wind, and cut the throttle. In a few moments they were on the ground. Rick taxied at high speed to the hangar and the scientist got out. The boys waved good-bye and Rick yelled, “Tell Barby we’ll catch that car.”

Scotty added, “And tell her we’ll see her tonight, either at the hospital or home.”

Rick poured throttle to the little plane and took off crosswind. He estimated quickly that the hit-and-run car couldn’t get out of the area in less than thirty minutes, no matter how fast it traveled. That gave him about ten minutes leeway—just enough to reach the junction of the Shore Road and Route 1.

The highway curved along the coast, but Rick flew in a straight line. “We’ll get to the junction, then work back up,” he told Scotty. “Better get the binoculars out of the back.”

“Got ‘em,” Scotty said. He held up the glasses.

Rick climbed to about twenty-five hundred feet. He had the Cub wide open. Time enough to throttle down to cruising speed once they reached the junction. His mouth was set in a straight line. If the maroon sedan was in the area, he would find it. The fact that Barby and Jerry were not seriously injured had nothing to do with his intentions. He was going to get that sedan, anyway. Nobody could put his sister in danger and get away with it!

Scotty looked at him. “Relax, pal. We may be flying for a couple of hours. You can’t make this airplane go any faster by sitting there like a ramrod.”

Rick hadn't realized he was so tense. He sat back in the seat a little, then worked the tabs until the plane was perfectly balanced and able to fly itself. The tabs were small movable pieces on the control surfaces that enabled the pilot to trim the plane to match weight distribution.

Far to the left was the Atlantic Ocean. Inland, curving to follow the coastline, was the Shore Road. The plane was moving slowly away from the road, cutting across a wide swing it made toward the town of Seaford.

Rick didn't need a map. He knew the area as well as he knew Spindrift Island. The Shore Road met main U.S. Highway 1 just below the town of Jerriek's Crossing. From the junction he intended to work north along the shore. There were only two roads that turned off the Shore Road between the junction and Whiteside. One of them petered out into a wood road. The other curved into a small village and then joined the Shore Road again.

Scotty motioned to the right. The main highway was in sight. "We'll be there in a couple of minutes," he said. He held up the binoculars and looked ahead through the plexiglass windshield. After a moment he added, "Coming up. Want to lose a little altitude?"

"Good idea," Rick agreed.

He put the Cub into a shallow dive, letting it pick up speed as they went. Presently the intersection was below them. Cars could be easily identified by color, although not by make. Rick banked sharply, wrapping the Cub up in a tight circle. Both he and Scotty watched carefully, but no maroon cars were in sight.

"The car couldn't have gotten here so soon," Scotty said. "Let's head north up the Shore Road."

Rick looked at his friend, sensing something in the other boy's voice. No doubt of it, Scotty was controlling deep anger. Rick had been so busy since the phone call that he hadn't been conscious of how Scotty felt. Now he knew. Scotty was as fond of Barby as if she were his own sister.

"We'll find the car if it's in our area," Rick stated positively. He put the Cub on a northward course, at slightly less than a thousand feet altitude. From that height they could see great stretches of the road, but it was still possible to tell a car's color without error.

The Shore Road was almost deserted. It was little traveled, except by people who lived in the towns along the coast, because the main highway south from Newark was much better.

They passed over Jerriek's Crossing without seeing more than a half dozen cars. None of them were maroon. Jerriek's Crossing, so called because of its railroad bridge over a section of marshland, was asleep in the afternoon sun.

A short distance above the crossing Rick saw an angular structure loom on the horizon. In a few moments he identified it as the roller coaster at Seaside amusement park. Its form became more rounded and other buildings became visible. On the south side of the park was a building with a slate roof. That was the location of the new Spindrift project.

As the plane neared the amusement park, Rick saw that it was surrounded by a high board fence. On the road side, there was a good stretch of grass. That was where he would land in the morning when they reported for work.

Scotty watched the highway through the binoculars, examining every car.

“There’s nothing rottener than a hit-and-run driver,” Scotty said once.

Rick nodded, but didn’t reply. He was suddenly conscious that the plane still moved at top speed. He throttled back to cruising speed, taking an anxious look at the gas gauge. He had enough for another hour’s flying time. That would be plenty. If an hour passed with no sign of the maroon car, it would mean that it wasn’t in their search area.

He swung off the mainShore Road onto a turnoff, covered it completely, then swung south again to retrace some ground in case the maroon car had passed while he was exploring the byway. No maroon car was in sight, although nearly every other color was represented in the thin stream of traffic.

“Seaford ahead,” Scotty said.

Tenseness was growing in Rick again. The maroon car would have gotten farther south thanSeaford . He dropped to eight hundred feet and circled the town. Then he did figure eights over it, giving Scotty a chance to examine every street. There weren’t many. He flew north along Million Dollar Row to Smugglers’ Reef. When he saw the Creek House below, he turned inland again and went south along theShore Road .

When he had covered enough of the highway to be sure the maroon car hadn’t slipped by while he circled overSeaford , Rick went north again. He found the turn-off that ended in a wood road and followed it until it lost itself in cutover timber. There was no sign that a car had been on the road, even though he dropped down to treetop height to permit a close look at the dirt road itself.

“We’ve missed it,” Scotty said tonelessly.

“Yes.” Rick brightened at a thought. “But don’t forget the other areas are covered, too. Maybe Gus or the State Police found some sign of it.”

“I hope so.” Scotty didn’t take his eyes from the terrain below. “But I wish Captain Douglas had all of his troopers looking for the car with us, instead of hunting that gangster.”

Rick considered. He didn’t know where the accident had taken place. But the camp where the swimming meet was held happened to be west of Whiteside. A hit-and-run driver would have to go right through the town to reach theShore Road . That wasn’t impossible, of course, but it was unlikely, unless the car had a definite destination within the area. If the driver didn’t know the area, he probably wouldn’t take a chance on unknown roads. He would head west, planning to lose himself in the maze of traffic aroundNewark ,Bayonne , and the other sprawling industrial cities of theNew Jersey flatlands. If he did know the roads, he would realize that going south would trap him. So he would surely go west.

Gus, manager of the Whiteside airport and Rick’s good friend, was covering the western sector. If the maroon sedan had gone west, Gus would surely spot it.

Rick covered the highway right into Whiteside itself. For luck, he circled over the town as he had over Sea-ford. There was no maroon sedan.

“We’re going home,” he told Scotty. “I’m anxious to find out how Barby is.”

“Same here,” Scotty agreed. “Anyway, we’re sure the car didn’t go south. Or if it did, the driver put the

car in a garage or something. It isn't out in the open or we'd have seen it."

"Maybe we ought to take a look at those summer cottages below Spindrift," Rick said thoughtfully. He banked south once more.

A short distance down the coast from his home were two summer colonies. He lost altitude and went over them low enough to see every detail. In spite of the trees, he was certain no maroon car was in either of the settlements. The trees weren't thick enough to hide a car, nor did the cottages have garages.

"That does it," Scotty said.

Rick headed the Cub toward Spindrift, in sight on the ocean ahead. From the air one could see that Spindrift was not really an island. It was connected to the mainland by a rocky tidal flat, above water at low tide. However, no car could cross the flat and it was difficult for foot traffic. So the island's privacy was guaranteed. Rick circled in order to look into the boat cove on the north side of the island. Both motorboats were tied to the dock. His father and mother were at home, then. Suddenly anxious, he slipped to lose altitude quickly, banked vertically over the laboratory, almost touching the radar antenna with his wing, and slapped the Cub down on the springy turf. He didn't wait to taxi back to take-off position. Instead, he let the Cub roll right to the front door of the big house that faced the Atlantic. He set the brakes and got out, Scotty right behind him.

Rick ran up the steps and onto the porch, then stopped short at the sight of Barby. Worried as he was, he couldn't restrain a grin.

Barbara Brant was a very pretty girl, always in radiant good health. Her high color and exuberant spirits had always made it impossible for her to look languid, and, as she put it, "so spiritual." But now she looked very languid indeed, and she was making the most of it. The shock of the accident had drained the color from her face and she looked very pale.

The Brants had placed her in a comfortable armchair, her legs on a hassock. One leg was bandaged from knee to foot. Her golden head rested on a pillow—a dark-colored one from the porch sofa. Rick, knowing his mother, was sure Mrs. Brant had wanted to use a regular soft bed pillow. He was equally sure that Barby had insisted on the dark one, knowing the pallor of her face would be much more dramatic.

She raised a limp hand. "Rick," she said huskily.

Rick heard Scotty's sudden intake of breath behind him. Scotty didn't know Barby as he did. Scotty thought Barby's act was genuine illness. He didn't know that Barby would be upstairs in bed with Mrs. Brant in anxious attendance if she were as faint as she looked. Rick managed to control the grin that kept popping to the surface. Part of the grin was his pure relief at finding that she really was all right. He feigned what he hoped was a worried look and hurried to her side. He took the limp hand.

"Will you live?" he asked tenderly.

There was sudden suspicion in Barby's eyes, but she answered faintly, "I hope so."

"How about Jerry?" Rick asked.

"He was wonderful," Barby sighed. "Just wonderful. He carried me from the wreck all the way to the hospital/Rick had a mental image of Jerry, who wasn't particularly husky, carrying Barby. "In his arms?"

he asked incredulously.

“Well, no.” Barby bit her lip.

“How?” Rick demanded.

A little color came into Barby’s face. “He used the fireman’s carry,” she said.

Rick coughed. He had to, to keep from laughing. How Barby’s love for the romantic and dramatic must have suffered! He had a picture of her draped over Jerry’s shoulder like a sack of grain. “First-aid training is a wonderful thing,” he managed. “Don’t you think so, Scotty?”

Scotty did. He looked at Barby anxiously. “Sure you’re all right, Sis?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him.

“How’s the leg?” Rick asked.

“It’s all right,” Barby said.

Rick nodded. He was sure the leg was all right, but he was just as sure that it was very painful. Otherwise, Barby’s color would have come back, at least a little. But she was game. She would deny the pain to everyone except their mother. He squeezed her hand. “You had us worried, Sis. What happened?”

“Jerry was bringing me to the boat landing and we stopped at the light two blocks above the department store. We went ahead on green, but the other car went through the red and hit us. I didn’t see the car. Jerry did. He even got the license number. The car backed away, then kept on going. Jerry made sure I didn’t have any broken bones, and that I wasn’t bleeding, then he put me over his shoulder and took me to the hospital. I haven’t seen him since.”

Rick knew the intersection. It was less than a hundred yards from the hospital. Also, Barby’s concise recital confirmed his belief that she was far from being as badly off as she looked. He said, “We didn’t find the car, Sis. I’m going to call Captain Douglas. Maybe someone else did.” He left her with Scotty and went into the library. He shook his head as Hartson Brant asked if he had had any luck.

“Barby’s fine,” the scientist told him, “except that she won’t be walking for a day or so. She got quite a painful bruise. Jerry had gone when we got to the hospital. So I assume he’s all right.”

Rick called the State Police Barracks and got Captain Douglas. “Not a sign of a maroon car of any description,” he said. “Any luck in the other areas?”

“Not yet,” Captain Douglas replied. “But we haven’t given up. The hit-and-run driver couldn’t have gotten out to the main road, no matter what direction he took, before you and Gus got to the intersections. He’s near Whiteside somewhere, and the moment he pokes his nose out, there will be a police car waiting for him. We’re blocking all roads to catch Soapy Strade, and I’ve instructed the men at the road blocks to watch for the hit-and-run car, too. Thanks for trying, Rick.”

“I’ll be here if you need me,” Rick replied. “Have you seen Jerry?”

“Yes. He came here as soon as he delivered Barby to the hospital emergency room. He’s at the

Morning Record now. He kept his head and got a good description of the car. He also got the license number. We've checked on it. A stolen car."

"No wonder it was hit and run," Rick said thoughtfully. "Looks like we've got car thieves to deal with."

"That will make it easier, not harder," Captain Douglas assured him. "We'll get the man responsible, Rick. Never fear."

"I know you will," Rick said. "But I wish you had him now. Barby's fine, but it's just luck."

"We'll get him," the captain said again. "It may take a little time, but it's sure. We'll get him, Rick."

And from the tone of his voice, Rick knew that he meant it.

CHAPTER III

Strange Tracks

Rick awoke with his mother's voice in his ears. For a moment he lay still, then he realized that she was calling him. He jumped out of bed and ran to the door. "Yes, Mom?"

"Telephone, Rick," Mrs. Brant replied. "It's Captain Douglas."

Rick didn't wait to dress. He ran downstairs in his pajamas and hurried into the library. There was a phone upstairs in his parents' room, but he wasn't sure his father was up yet.

His voice was still thick with sleep as he answered, "What is it, Captain?"

"We have a lead," the State Police officer replied. "It isn't much, except that it gives a direction. One of my cars picked up a man who claims to have seen a maroon sedan heading south. He said the car was going so fast it hit only the high spots in the road."

"But we covered the southern area like a blanket," Rick objected.

"I know you did. We have to consider the timing, Rick. You got to the intersection before the car could possibly have made it, then you worked north. I figure the car could have made about five-eighths of the distance from Whiteside to the intersection in the same time, if it really traveled. We'd better assume that it turned off somewhere and never got to the intersection. In other words, the car is still somewhere in the area."

"Couldn't it have gotten out during the night?" Rick asked.

"Not a chance," Captain Douglas replied definitely. "I didn't remember to tell you this last night, but we asked for help from the Civil Defense Auxiliary Police in our search for Soapy Strade. They set up road blocks on every road out of the area about the time you and Gus got back. They'll be on duty until we get Strade. And we've given them a description of the hit-and-run car, too, so they can watch for it as

well as for Soapy.”

Rick knew New Jersey had a good Civil Defense force. He was glad the State Police had asked for their co-operation.

“How do we dig this car out?” he asked.

“Mainly, by keeping your eyes open,” Captain Douglas said. “Will you take another swing over the southern area this morning?”

“We’ll get going as soon as I can dress and have breakfast,” Rick agreed. “There will be plenty of time before we have to go to work.”

“Good. Drop a message, as I told you yesterday, if you see anything. Then phone me when you land.”

“Will do,” Rick said. “How’s the search for the gangster coming?”

“No luck. So far as we know, he hasn’t crossed into our state. The New York police think he may have headed north to the border.”

“Hope you get him,” Rick said. He rang off and ran upstairs to shower and get into his clothes.

A short time later he paused on the way downstairs and knocked on Barby’s door.

“Come in,” Barby said.

He pushed open the door and walked in. Barby was propped up in bed with a breakfast tray on her lap. She had regained her color.

“What luxury!” Rick exclaimed. “Breakfast in bed How long does this go on?”

Barby smiled. “If it wasn’t extra work for Mother, I’d just as soon have it go on indefinitely. But I’ll be all right by tomorrow. Rick, will they catch that car?”

“Captain Douglas says so,” Rick told her about the phone call. “We’ll keep trying,” he finished. “If the car’s in this area, we’ll get it.”

Barby frowned. “I know you and Scotty,” she stated. “Let the police do it, Rick. Anyone who would smash another car and keep on going is dangerous. You and Scotty can help find the car, but don’t try to do anything else about it, please?”

“We probably won’t get a chance,” Rick said evasively. He didn’t want to make any promises. “Listen, Sis, I got to run. We’ll see you after work tonight. Leg hurt much?”

“Not much,” Barby said. “It was pretty bad last night, but it isn’t hurting much this morning. I’m fine, Rick.”

He gave her a comradely wink. “Make the most of it, Sis. An opportunity to be the center of attraction doesn’t come very often.”

Barby threw a muffin at him. He fielded it and tossed it back. “Temper, temper,” he cautioned. “Invalids

don't throw muffins."

"This one does," Barby said. "Go away." But she couldn't help smiling.

Rick found Scotty already eating breakfast in the big dining room. Mrs. Brant joined them for coffee.

"The others have gone to work," Mrs. Brant told them. "Your father took them to the Whiteside landing a little while ago. He should be back any moment. Are you going to start working today?"

"After we take another look for that hit-and-run car," Rick said.

The boys finished breakfast quickly, then went out to the Cub. The gas supply was low and it was necessary to go via the Whiteside airport.

Gus, the airport manager, speculated on the maroon car's location as he hosed gasoline into the tank. "Must be close by. Didn't get out in my area. I stayed in the air until I saw the Civil Defense cops setting up road blocks. Douglas said he radioed his patrol car up north and they kept the highway bottled like a cork. You'll find it somewhere around Seaford, and I'll bet on it."

"I hope you win," Scotty said grimly. "I want to widen my circle of friendship. I want to meet a guy who drives a maroon sedan."

Gus nodded soberly. "When you do, I'll lend you a heavy wrench."

Air-borne once again, Rick headed south as he had the day before. At the intersection, he and Scotty saw the road block set up by the Civil Defense police. They were stopping each car as it approached the intersection from the Shore Road, and they were giving the cars a careful going-over before permitting them to continue.

Rick spoke his satisfaction. "Strade or the hit-and-run driver won't get past those guys."

"Unless they've managed to already," Scotty added. "Let's head north. Take your time and keep low. I'll keep my eyes peeled."

They covered the area practically a yard at a time, now and then swooping low for a closer look at something. Only once did they find a maroon car. It was in a garage at Jerriek's Crossing. The garage doors were open, and Rick flew so low his wheels touched the topmost branch of a tree. The car was a convertible, and of the wrong make.

Nowhere else, from the intersection to Whiteside, did they even see a suspicion of a maroon car. The hit-and-run car had vanished from sight.

"If it's in the area, it's under cover," Scotty said. "No use beating the air. Might as well go to work."

Rick nodded. Scotty was right. He banked around and headed for the project. In a short time the curving structure of the roller coaster was in sight, then the amusement park itself.

"I'm going to buzz the field," Rick said. "Take a long look for any obstructions."

He lost altitude rapidly, pulling out at a hundred feet. As they flashed over the level stretch where they could land between the amusement park and the road, he stood the plane up on a wing to give Scotty a

better look.

Past the strip, he leveled off and gained altitude. He cast a look at Scotty. "Is it okay?"

Scotty had a thoughtful expression on his face. "Do it again. Stay a little higher and slower."

"All right." Rick banked around and made another run. "See anything?"

"Yes. I saw a track in the grass where a car has gone in through the fence."

Rick's pulse quickened. "I want a look at the amusement park. Let's ride the roller coaster."

"Let's," Scotty agreed.

Rick circled over the amusement park, keeping barely above the top of the roller coaster. Both he and Scotty scanned the ground below. There was no sign of life. The buildings were shabby, either unpainted or with peeling paint. Grass had sprung up everywhere. Even the midway was overgrown. But here and there were stretches of black-top road, running between the buildings.

"Mighty queer," Scotty said. "Why should they pave inside, and not pave the main entrance?"

"The main entrance isn't on the Shore Road," Rick explained. "I'll show you." He made another wide swing over the amusement park. On its north side was a paved roadway leading in from the Shore Road to a huge gate. "There's the main entrance. They put it there so people could find parking space in that big field across the way." The parking field would have been a better landing place, except for posts that had marked off the parking areas.

"There must be some kind of gate on the Shore Road side," Scotty objected. "A car wouldn't go right up to the fence, stop, and back out again."

"Of course not," Rick agreed. "There's probably a service gate of some kind. But the best way to tell is to land and see. We have to land, anyway, if we're going to work."

He swung wide and gauged his altitude and distance, then cut the throttle. The nose dropped to glide position. "Keep a sharp eye out," he warned. "Let's not pile up on an old bucket or something." His father had examined the field, but someone could have tossed junk there since.

The Cub lost altitude rapidly, dropped low over the electric wires that had served the amusement park, sped down the grassy field and then "sold out." Rick hauled the wheel back into his lap and felt the wheels touch grass. The plane settled and slowed rapidly. In a moment Rick locked the brakes and the boys got out.

Around the corner of the amusement park fence they could see the project building, but before walking to it, they went back to where Scotty had seen the automobile tracks in the grass.

The grass was a good ten inches high. There was no doubt that a car had passed over it, crushing it down. The boys looked at each other without speaking. No words were necessary because they were both thinking the same thing. They walked down the twin rows of crushed grass to the high board fence that surrounded the amusement park. The rows ended at a gate. It was obviously not a public gate, since no paved road led to it. Probably it had been used to bring in heavy equipment, shortening the distance from the main highway.

“First we go to see Dr. Winston,” Rick said.

“Then what?”

Rick grinned at Scotty, but there was no mirth in it. “Then we figure out a way to get inside this fence. A car went in, all right, but no car came out. At least not this way. So it’s still inside, probably. And maybe . . . just maybe . . . it’s a maroon sedan.”

“Well find out,” Scotty said.

The project building was a boxlike affair, two stories high. The first floor was all one big room. Benches had been improvised at one end, and packing cases had been stood on their sides in tiers to form shelves. There were tables made by putting planks across sawhorses. The place was so cluttered Rick wondered how anyone could possibly find anything.

In the midst of the clutter, Dr. Parnell Winston and Dr. Julius Weiss were bent over a stack of wiring diagrams. At the benches were several technicians who had been hired for the project. The air was heavy with the typical odors of an electronics laboratory, mostly burnt insulation and the acrid smoke of soldering.

At one end of the big room, in front of a wide, flimsy door, stood what appeared to be a tractor. It had caterpillar treads and a powerful engine. But there were no shift levers, no steering wheel, and no place for a man to sit. Against the wall near by was a huge bulldozer blade.

Rick and Scotty walked through the maze of cases and parts to where Winston and Weiss were pouring over the diagrams. Not wanting to interrupt, they stood waiting.

Parnell Winston was a powerfully built six-footer with a heavy thatch of thick black hair and amazingly bushy eyebrows. His face was ruddy. He was forty, but looked ten years younger. Rick had seen him only a few times, and then briefly, but he liked what little he had seen of the new scientist.

Julius Weiss, an old friend, was a much older man. He was small, slight, and stooped, with thinning hair. He was widely known as a mathematician, as well as a leading scientist in the electronics field.

“I think we’d better redesign the circuit,” Winston said. “There’s a space problem, but we can overcome it by using transistors instead of tubes. I prefer transistors for a job of this sort, anyway. They won’t break on impact.”

Julius Weiss agreed. “Suppose you check on the progress of the memory circuit, then, and I’ll get to work on this.” He looked up and saw the boys. “Well! Did you find the car?”

“No, sir,” Rick answered. “How did you know we were looking for it?”

Weiss smiled. “Behold the younger generation, Winston. It appears that they have never heard of a communications device called the telephone.”

“Your father called to explain that you’d be late,” Winston explained. “Welcome to the project. Ready to buckle down?”

“We will be,” Scotty said, “but there’s something we want to do first.” He told the scientists about the

track into the amusement park.

Winston shook his head. "I doubt that you'll find what you're looking for, but you go ahead and try. We'll discuss your work when you get back."

"We can't overlook any possibilities," Rick said. "This won't take long. We'll find a loose board in the fence, or we'll make one. Expect us back in about fifteen minutes."

Weiss motioned to a workbench. "You'll find a pinch bar over there. In case you have to pry a bit." He turned back to his diagrams.

"Let's go," Rick said. Scotty was already on his way to the bench. He picked up the bar and followed Rick into the open.

The fence ran along the edge of the project driveway. They inspected it for loose boards and found none. Scotty selected a wide one and grinned at Rick. "Here we go housebreaking." He inserted the end of the bar and pried. Nails protested. Scotty put on a little more leverage and the bottom of the board came loose.

Scotty tossed the pinch bar to the grass next to the project building door. "After you," he said politely.

"If we find what we're looking for, you may wish you had kept that bar," Rick told him. He squeezed through the opening into the amusement park.

CHAPTER IV

The Amusement Park

Rick surveyed the amusement park carefully, his quick eyes taking in the circular platform of the caterpillar ride, and the flat, wooden bowl of the whip. The machinery had long since been removed from both. He saw wooden platforms where barkers had once touted various other rides which had been removed bodily, leaving no clue as to their type. There were booths which had housed spun candy, lemonade, frozen custard and hot-dog concessions, and low buildings where he remembered seeing a rifle range, a quoit game, and other devices for removing money from the customers.

He pointed to the biggest building. "That used to be the fun house," he told Scotty. He kept his voice low. "That long building with the queer shape was the water ride."

Scotty's voice was low too. "What's a fun house?"

Rick looked at his pal with amazement. "Haven't you ever been to an amusement park?"

"Nope. I've been to carnivals and circuses, but there never was a fun house."

"I guess they have them only in permanent places,"

Rick agreed. "There's a whole collection of stuff inside. This one had a giant shoot the chutes, a big barrel you could walk through while it turned, a big turntable that spun people off, those wavy mirrors that make you look fat or skinny, and a flight of stairs that would straighten out when you climbed them."

"Sounds like a good way to break your neck," Scotty remarked. He, too, was examining every visible inch of the amusement park.

"We'd better go to the spot in the fence where the car came in," Rick suggested. He led the way. "Nobody broke their neck because there were warning signs. Anyway, only kids and young people usually tried the stairs and the shoot the chutes. It was fun. There were men to catch anyone who slipped."

Rick kept close to the fence, Scotty behind him. They reached the corner and turned. Rick watched for a track in the grass, and for signs of a gate, but the grass was so high that they didn't see the track until they were almost on it. The gate was a hinged section of the fence, secured by a spring-bolt type of lock.

Scotty examined the lock, then tried it. "It's fairly new," he commented. "Looks like the park is occupied."

Rick nodded. He had a sort of creepy feeling, as though they were being watched. "Wonder where the occupants are?"

"In one of the buildings," Scotty said. "But which one?" They sighted along the path in the grass, but it joined a paved road. "Guess we'll just have to explore," he added.

Rick's eye caught a glimpse of twisted grass a little distance away. He walked over and studied the ground. There was no doubt of it. A single path led away from the fence toward the paved road. "Must be a footpath," he mused. "Where does it come from?"

Scotty was already tracing the path back to the fence. "Look here," he said softly. He pushed at a board and it swung smoothly away from the fence. He released it and it swung back again.

Rick looked upward and saw a hinge where the board should have been nailed to the upper fence rail.

"We must be on the wrong track," he said. "This isn't just a one-time deal. Whoever comes in here must come often. You don't hinge a section of the fence just to sneak in once or twice."

Scotty scratched his head. "Now that you mention it, why do you put a hinge on a board at all when there's a perfectly good gate a few feet away?"

That stopped Rick. He didn't know. "Now that you mention it," he replied, "I can't see any reason."

Scotty studied the amusement park buildings. "While we're mentioning things," he added, "why use this section of the fence, anyway, if there's a main entrance?"

"There's only one way to find out." Rick pointed across the grounds to where the towers of the main gate could be seen under the roller coaster. "Let's take a look."

They walked diagonally across the grounds toward the gate. It was broad daylight and there was no point in trying to conceal their presence. If anyone challenged them, they would simply say that they were curious about the old amusement park.

The reason for using the highway side gate was clear before they even reached the main gate. It was not only barred, with a piece of four-by-eight timber, but it was nailed shut. The ticket houses through which pedestrians had once poured were boarded up.

Rick searched his head for a clue to the reason for a hinged board. He said aloud, "The lock on the gate isn't an old one. Besides, anyone with time enough to put a hinge on a board could either change the gate lock or break it."

Scotty grinned. "Now we've got a real mystery to solve."

"The clue of the squeaky hinge," Rick agreed. "Except that it doesn't squeak. Look, we have to assume that the same man, or men, uses both the gate and the board. What's the board got that the gate hasn't?"

Scotty rubbed his chin. "Next question. I don't know the answer to that one."

They were under the roller coaster now. Scotty pushed on an upright and it creaked a little.

"Not very steady," Rick observed. "Must have termites." He traced the path of the coaster with his eyes. It rose into the air, then dipped sharply to the roof of the fun house. He recalled that an upper room had been a labyrinth, pitch black inside. It had taken a good five minutes to find one's way in the darkness, and once or twice during that time the roller coaster had passed overhead, filling the room with a terrible thundering noise. Very scary stuff indeed, until you had been through it a couple of times.

"The fun house is nearest," he said. "We'll give that a try." He led the way, pondering meanwhile about the hinged board and the gate. He speculated for a moment, then suggested, "Suppose the hinged board was fixed first, then the gate was added later in order to let a car in?"

Scotty disposed of that theory. "The hinges on the gate are a lot older than the hinge on the fence. That's not even rusted very much. The gate hinges are thick with rust."

Rick gnawed at the problem the way Dismal, the Spindrift Island pup, gnawed at a bone. He thought of many things and rejected them in the same instant.

"I'd better stop thinking about it," he muttered. "The more I think, the more confused I get."

Scotty chuckled softly. "Leave it in the oven for a while. Maybe it will turn into pie all by itself."

That method usually worked pretty well for Rick. If he stopped worrying about a problem, the solution often came unbidden while he was thinking about something else.

He shifted his attention to the side of the fun house. There was a painted clown that covered the entire wall, with the words "Fun House" in crooked letters across his pointed cap. Once the clown had been gay with bright colors, but the paint was peeling and one eye was missing entirely. The remaining eye was forlorn and a little sad.

"Wonder why the place went out of business?" Scotty asked.

"It ran down the same time the summer residents stopped coming to Seaford," Rick explained. "They kept it open for a few years hoping to draw people from Newark and the other big cities, but it's too much of a drive for an evening's fun." He added, "Besides, I don't think people care much about

amusement parks any more. I've heard of two or three closing down recently."

They reached the building and Rick put his ear to a bare section of board and listened. There was no sound from inside. "All quiet," he said in a low voice. "Let's try the front."

They walked to the front of the building, making as little noise as possible. The main doors were closed, locked with a heavy padlock. Rick tried the door into the teller's booth and it gave slightly. He cast a quick look at Scotty, then pushed a little harder. The door creaked complainingly.

In a moment the door was open far enough to slip through. Rick stepped into the booth and looked around. He guessed that the door through which he had come was only a convenience, not often used while the fun house was open for business. Usually such booths were reached from inside the building, so there must be another door. It took him a moment to find it because it was only a half door that opened under a little counter. There was no knob. He pushed and it gave.

Scotty had stepped into the booth behind him. He grunted with satisfaction as Rick found the door under the counter. "Go ahead," he whispered. "I'm right behind you."

"Okay." Rick's heart beat faster as he crouched down and swung the door wide. Bending low, he went in, then straightened up in the fun house itself. Scotty joined him and they stood in silence, looking the place over.

To their right, the giant slide rose from the floor to a sort of gallery. Rick remembered shooting-the-chute down the slide. It gleamed dully under a coating of preservative, probably a plastic spray. Next to the slide was the stairway to the gallery, and beside the stairway a huge door. The door led into a room filled with mirrors, he recalled. They were the kind of mirrors that give a distorted view, making you look twisted, fat or skinny, or like weird twins. To the left of the doorway was another stairway. There had been a sign at the bottom warning that the stairway was a trick giant slide, but the sign was gone.

The big barrel was somewhere in the dimness to the right of the main entrance. The centrifugal dish that spun people off as it whirled was back under the trick stairs.

"What's upstairs?" Scotty asked in a whisper.

"A labyrinth room," Rick replied. "Perhaps other rooms, too, but I don't remember them."

"We going to search?"

Rick shrugged. There didn't seem to be anyone in the building. "I don't think it's much use. There's no place here to drive a car in."

"Let's take a look, anyway. There would be room for ten cars behind those stairs and the slide."

Rick started to say that the mirror room was behind the stairs, then he realized that one room couldn't take up all the space. There must be others. He walked across the dusty floor to the entrance to the mirror room and looked in. There was very little light. The main room was bright enough because windows were set high in the walls, but in this inner room there were no windows at all. He wished for a flashlight.

The mirrors had been removed. He could see in the dim light that the walls were bare.

"I see a door," Scotty whispered. He pointed to the rear of the room.

Rick made out the outline of a door and moved toward it. Scotty was there first, however. He put his ear to the door and listened, then whispered, "No noise. I'm going to try it." He turned the knob slowly, then pulled on the door. It opened with only a faint creak of rusty hinges. Scotty peered through.

In a second he was at Rick's side, lips against his ear. "There's a car in there," he said excitedly.

Rick felt a shiver run down his spine. He stepped forward to see for himself. His nostrils twitched. There was an acrid, familiar smell in the air that he couldn't place. He peered into the dimness and saw a car. It was a sedan, and it was black. There was no doubt of the color because a vagrant ray of sunlight came through a crack somewhere in the room beyond and fell across the car's hood. It was a car, but not the right one.

Scotty sneezed.

Instantly feet hit the floor somewhere on the other side of the wall, out of range of the door. A man's voice called, "Who's there?"

Rick froze. Then he realized there was no use of trying to run or take cover. Before they could get out of the park the man would get a good look at them. He decided on boldness.

"Where are you?" he called. "We didn't know there was anyone here." He stepped through the door.

Feet pounded on the boards of the outer room. There was a moment of silence, then footsteps ran toward them. In a second Rick was face to face with the occupant of the fun house.

He was dressed in trousers and sweat shirt, and his hair was tousled. His thin face needed a shave. A white streak across his chin indicated that an old injury had left a scar.

"What you kids doin' in here?" he asked in a rough manner. "Come out here so's I can git a look atcha."

The boys stepped forward a little, hesitantly. The man cast a look over his shoulder, then changed his mind. He crowded forward, forcing them back. "Get out in the other room. I wanna see whatcha look like."

Scotty led the way into the main room.

The man looked them over. "This here's private prop-pity," he grated. "Whaddayawant? Whatcha after?"

"We work next door," Rick said. He added, placatingly, "Sir."

Scotty spoke up. "We thought it would be fun to look in here. We didn't know anyone was around."

"Awright," the man said. "So ya didn't know anyone was here. Now ya know, so get out. And don't come back. I'm the caretaker, see? I gotta job, and it's keepin' people out, see? Now go on back where ya came from. Beat it, see? I catch ya in here again and I'll bump yer skulls together, see? Then I call the cops and turn you in for trespassin'. This time I'm lettin' ya off. Now get goin'."

“Yes, sir,” Rick agreed. His glance warned Scotty not to make any trouble. “We’re sorry. We didn’t mean any harm.”

“Yeah,” the caretaker said. “Get goin’.”

They did so, back the way they had come. As they hurried toward the project, they heard the caretaker moving around in the booth, probably locking up.

“I would have to sneeze,” Scotty groaned. “But I couldn’t help it. Banana oil always makes me sneeze.”

Rick stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his pal, eyes wide. “Banana oil! Of course! Scotty, that car”

Scotty got it, too. “You’re right! They use banana oil in automobile lacquer. That car must have been repainted, and only a few hours ago! Otherwise we wouldn’t have smelled the stuff.”

Rick increased his stride. They weren’t done with the amusement park, not by a long shot. Repainting a car in the back of the fun house could only mean that there was some good reason for changing its color. Covering maroon paint with black was as good a reason as any. Especially if the maroon paint had been scraped in an accident—a hit-and-run accident!

“Wonder who the other guy was?” Scotty asked.

“What other guy?” Rick had seen only the caretaker.

“There were two,” Scotty said. “Remember how the boards sounded after I sneezed? Those were the footsteps of two men. Then there was a little delay, and I think that was when the second man got under cover somewhere so we wouldn’t see him. What’s more, the caretaker told us to step forward, then he looked over his shoulder and changed his mind. Someone else was in that room, all right.”

It made sense. Now that Scotty had pointed out the caretaker’s actions, it made a lot of sense. Rick nodded. “And the second man didn’t want to be seen, either.”

“We woke them up,” Scotty guessed. “We were quiet until I sneezed. They heard that and started to investigate.”

Rick reached the board they had pried loose and stepped through it, Scotty close on his heels. “Maybe we’d better put a hinge on it,” Rick said jokingly. “We’ll be going back in again, won’t we?”

“You bet we will,” Scotty agreed. “And not in broad daylight, either.” He turned and pushed the board into place, and as he did so, Rick let out a yip.

“Got it! Scotty, I know why they hinged the board at the front fence! For a man on foot, that’s easier and faster, especially if he doesn’t want anyone to see him going into the park!”

They shook hands solemnly. “That’s it,” Scotty agreed. “The quickest way would be for a car to drop a man off right at the fence. He could be inside in a matter of seconds, and if he took the precaution of not getting out of the car until the highway was clear, no one would ever know, even if he went in and out by day-light.”

“And that,” Rick concluded, “means that our friend isn’t a caretaker after all, and that he has no more

business in there than we have!”

CHAPTER V

A Problem in Cybernetics

“We’ve got to be sure of our ground,” Rick said. “We don’t want to get Captain Douglas to send a cruiser without more proof than we have-not when he’s so shorthanded.”

Julius Weiss and Parnell Winston nodded agreement. “It wouldn’t do to call for help without more proof than the odor of banana oil and a hinged board,” Winston agreed.

“But how can you get any sort of proof?” Weiss asked.

Rick knew the answer to that one. “If we can show that the amusement park has no caretaker, isn’t that reason enough for Captain Douglas taking a look?”

Winston grinned. “Plenty.”

Rick picked up the telephone and dialed the operator. “I want to place a call to New York,” he said. “No, I don’t know the number, but it’s a business firm: Michael Curtis Investigations.”

Scotty handed him a pencil and a pad of paper. Rick wrote down the number as the operator recited it after calling Information. There was a pause, then the number rang. A girl’s voice answered.

“Is Mr. Curtis there?” Rick inquired.

“I’m sorry. Mr. Curtis is not in. Can I help you?”

Mike probably was working on a case, Rick thought. “Can you get in touch with him?” he asked.

“I can try, if it’s urgent.”

“It is,” Rick said definitely. “Take a message for him, please.”

“All right.”

Rick dictated slowly. “Urgent you find out present status Seaside Play land, amusement park, located Shore Road, Seaford. Especially need to know if caretaker employed there. Park now out of business. Sign it Rick Brant.”

The girl read the message back, promised to do what she could, then rang off. Rick turned to his friends. “That’s that. Mike is out, which means he’s probably on a case, so we can’t expect too much speed. I could go into New York and sniff around myself, I suppose, but it’s probably faster to wait for Mike. He knows how to get such dope in a hurry.”

Mike Curtis, private detective, was an old friend who had worked with Rick and Scotty during the *Sea Gold* adventure. Mike had learned the identity of the mysterious and ruthless figure who had not stopped at attempted murder in trying to take over the Sea Gold plant.

"We might as well get to work," Scotty said. "Need any hired hands?"

"Just by coincidence, we need two." Parnell Winston smiled. "Come on, I'll give you assignments. Know what we're up to?"

"In a general way," Rick told him. "Dad described the thing to us, but there's plenty more I'd like to know."

"You can ask questions as we go along." Winston showed them a workbench. "That's yours. You'll find most of the tools you need. If any are missing, borrow from the technicians."

The new scientist found a sheaf of sketches and handed them to Rick. "Your father tells me I can turn over a project to you two and then forget about it."

"That would sort of depend on the project," Rick said with a grin. "What is this one?"

Winston replied with a question. "Did Hartson tell you about possible military uses for this thing?" As the boys nodded, he went on, "Well, such uses require that the control unit used by the soldier be compact, waterproof, rugged enough to take a beating, and cheap to produce."

Rick leafed through the drawings. "Just to give us an idea before we start studying these, can you tell us how the control unit will work?"

"Very easily. The unit will be a microwave radio, operating on a wave length of one centimeter. That means, of course, that it will be useful only on a line of sight, since a centimeter wave acts like light. The operator will speak code words into the unit and the machine will respond. For the sake of ruggedness, compactness, and simplicity, we'll use a printed circuit and transistors in a plastic case. Any other questions?"

"Just one," Rick said. "Is this a variable circuit? Will we need to tune the unit?"

"No. We'll use a fixed circuit for this machine. If the machine is acceptable to the Military, it will be a simple matter to vary the circuit as required."

"Good enough," Rick agreed. "We'll get busy. I suppose all the dope we need is in these papers?"

"It's all laid out for you," Winston told them. "If you run into trouble, call me, or Julius."

Julius Weiss was back at work again on a complex-looking circuit, built into an aluminum frame about the size of a portable typewriter case.

Scotty found stools and they sat down. The ex-Marine rubbed his chin. "Where do we start?"

"By studying these papers," Rick said. He proceeded to lay them out on the bench.

He had never had an assignment quite like this one before, but as he went through the design he saw that it was not going to be a very hard job. It would require precise, painstaking work, but they could do it.

The first step was to lay out the design of the printed circuit. Instead of using wires, this little control radio would use lines of silver, actually silver ink, printed onto a sheet of plastic. The condensers, resistors, and other parts would be glued into the circuit as required.

“Not too bad,” Scotty said. “We can do it in a couple of days if we really plug away. But what’s this transistor stuff? We’ve never used transistors before. They must be tubes, because the places in the design where they go are the places where we’d use tubes.”

“They act like tubes,” Rick agreed, “but that’s all. They’re nothing like tubes.” He searched for a simple explanation. “You know how a vacuum tube works? Electrons flow from the cathode and are made to do certain things. Well, to make them flow, the cathode has to be heated. You might even say that the electrons are ‘cooked’ off the cathode. That takes a lot of power, and it produces a lot of heat. Also, the cheapest way to make a tube is to use glass, either with the air taken out, or with some inert gas like krypton put in. Glass breaks, so that kind of tube isn’t very rugged. There are metal tubes, but they cost more, and they’re still subject to failure.”

“I know about that,” Scotty said. “But where does the transistor come in?”

“Well, if you take certain elements in the form of crystals-I mean, with crystalline structures-you find places where there are either too many electrons or too few. The electrons can move inside the stuff just the way they move through empty space in a tube, and it’s easier to make them move. It doesn’t take so much power. Now, if you apply a little current at the right point, between the part which has too many electrons and the part that doesn’t have enough, you can control the flow of electrons. Just the way the grid in a vacuum tube does. Is that clear enough?”

“I get the idea,” Scotty agreed. “It’s like having a solid tube which doesn’t take much power to operate.”

Rick nodded. “That’s about right.” He searched through a box of materials on the back of the bench and found a tiny object that resembled a plastic bean. Three wires projected from it, one from each end and one from the center. Rick pointed to them in order. “Input, output, and grid. And this little gimmick is the equivalent of a tube.”

Scotty shook his head. “I’m snowed,” he said. “Every time I think I know a little about electronics, up comes something new.”

Rick drew a set of draftsman’s tools toward him from the back of the bench, rummaged through a box of assorted material until he found some heavy white paper, then settled down to work. The first step was to plan the physical layout of the tiny control unit, which was nothing more than a miniature transmitter. The size would be determined mainly by two things: the power supply and the microphone, those being the bulkiest.

“Take a look,” he suggested. “What kind of power supply does this thing need?”

Scotty went through the design until he found what he needed. “Believe it or not,” he announced, “this thing will operate on one pencil-type battery. It’s the kind of battery they use in hearing aids.”

“That’s because we’re using transistors. How about the microphone?”

Winston came by in time to hear the question. He reached toward the back of the bench and produced

a cardboard box. "Here it is. It's a crystal, designed to be mounted on a plastic plate. You'll find instructions inside."

The microphone was about the size and thickness of a bottle cap.

Rick did some quick figuring, then turned to Scotty with a grin. "Know how big this handy-dandy dingus is going to be?"

"Pretty small," Scotty guessed. "About six inches by three?"

"It's going to fit into a playing-card pack," Rick told him. "And there will be a little room left over!"

The boys worked rapidly for the rest of the day, not talking much. They divided the work as always, with Rick taking the job of building the circuit while Scotty made the case and then some of the parts that were required.

Rick drew the circuit on stiff paper, first in pencil, with frequent erasures. Then, as he fitted the lines into a rectangle of the proper size, he began to ink them in. When he had finished, he had an exact scale drawing of the completed circuit.

He let the ink dry while he chatted with Parnell Winston, then went to work with scissors and painstakingly cut the circuit out of the paper. It was late afternoon before he finished. He put the fragile paper skeleton down and looked at Scotty.

"How are you doing?"

Scotty had been cutting and shaping thin sheets of plastic. He had the various parts of the case completed, but not assembled. His biggest job remained to be done; it was the slow, careful grinding of the front of the case to take the tiny microphone. The little mike would be inside the case, and the plastic wall in front of it had to be so thin that it would vibrate when voice sound hit it. Scotty was planning to do the job with a sanding disk mounted on a drill press.

"I'm making good time," Scotty said. "How many of these sets are we building?"

Rick didn't know. He called to Parnell Winston, who was working across the room. "How many of these will you want?"

"Let's have four," the scientist answered. "We have just enough parts for that many." He put down the work he was doing and joined the boys at their bench. His keen eyes took in what they had accomplished. "You're a fast pair. When will you have the first one done?"

"It depends on how long we work tonight," Rick answered. "How about our staying over? We could work late, and at the same time we could keep an eye on the amusement park."

Dr. Winston thought it over. "I'm not so sure it's a good idea," he said. "We'd better ask Julius." He walked over to the little mathematician and talked with him briefly, then came back, grinning. "I was a little worried about your ability to take care of yourselves," he admitted. "Julius tells me to stop worrying. He claims that if you were dumped into a cage of tigers he would worry about the welfare of the tigers."

The boys chuckled. "Then we'll stay," Rick said.

“All right. You’ll find army cots and blankets on the second floor. There’s a hot plate under the bench nearest the door, with the makings for coffee and a few assorted cans of food. You won’t eat like kings, but you won’t starve, either.”

The scientist looked at his watch. “It’s just about quitting time.”

Winston and Weiss rode from Whiteside to the project and back each day with one of the technicians. Someone from Spindrift met them at the pier in one of the island motorboats.

Rick and Scotty waited until the others had gone, then they walked to the plane and staked it down, using a pair of steel stakes from the baggage compartment. When the Cub was secure, they took four additional stakes and drove them into the ground in the form of a square with the plane in the middle. They took a coil of wire and strung it between the stakes, forming a low, two-strand fence. Then Rick took the ends of the wires and led them in through the plane door, which he left partially ajar. Inside, he connected the wires to a small black box under the dashboard. Taking care not to touch the plane, he reached in through the open door and flipped a switch.

The device was a cross between an electric fence and a burglar alarm. If anyone touched the fence he would get a slight warning shock. If he jumped the fence and touched the plane, a loud horn would blow, and it would continue blowing until someone came to shut it off.

The gadget was not foolproof by any means. Anyone determined to steal the plane could do so by studying the circuit and then disconnecting it. But casual visitors would be warned away.

As Rick backed away, he looked at the amusement park fence. For a moment he thought he saw the hinged board move, but he watched steadily for a few seconds and saw nothing. Imagination, he thought.

“Let’s go crack a can of beans and make a pot of coffee,” Scotty suggested. “I’m so hungry my stomach is sending out SOS messages.”

“Come to think of it, I could eat myself,” Rick admitted.

“Don’t eat yourself,” Scotty exclaimed in mock horror. “That’s cannibalism. Eat beans instead. More nourishing.”

Rick groaned.

CHAPTER VI

Will-o’-the-Wisp

Rick sat in darkness, letting his thoughts wander, keeping his eyes turned in the direction of the amusement park. Scotty’s deep, regular breathing was the only sound.

The luminous dial of Rick’s watch told him it was just past midnight. Two hours to go before he would awaken Scotty and then go to his own cot. They had decided that they should take turns, four hours on

and four off, in keeping an eye on the amusement park.

Rick was sure the car was still in the fun house. The project building was close enough so that the sound of the car would not have gone unnoticed if it had left during the day. He was determined that it would not get out without their knowing it. They couldn't be sure it was the maroon car, repainted, but there was a chance. He and Scotty had a score to settle with the driver who had come within an ace of hurting Barby seriously.

He leaned forward and stared out the window. He was above the level of the fence and he could see clearly into the amusement park-or as clearly as the darkness permitted. It was a moonless night, slightly overcast, and the buildings inside the fence were only dark blurs.

The sudden glitter of a star, low on the horizon, attracted him. He watched it, noticing how diffused it seemed. It must be one of the planets, probably Jupiter, diffused by a thin cloud, he decided. Then he changed his mind. No star or planet moved abruptly, and this one had!

He leaned out of the window, straining to see. The light was too high to be on the top of any building. But, he suddenly realized, not too high to be on the top of the roller coaster!

The high curve of the roller coaster was just visible. No doubt of it, the light was on the coaster's highest point!

With a bound he was at Scotty's cot, shaking him. Scotty sat bolt upright.

"What's up, Rick?"

"There's a light on the roller coaster."

In a moment both boys were at the window. Scotty watched for a moment. "Wonder you didn't miss it entirely," he said. "It's no brighter than a will-o'-the-wisp. Wonder what it is?"

"Could be a pencil flashlight with a handkerchief over it," Rick surmised. "Question is, what do we do about it?"

Scotty hesitated. "If we could get closer . . ."

Rick knew what he meant. "What are we waiting for?"

They went down the stairs and through the litter of parts on the first floor, then out into the night. They had to go slowly, because there was so little light. They found the loose board in the fence and slipped into the amusement park.

Scotty put his lips against Rick's ear and whispered. "How do you get to the top of the roller coaster?"

"I noticed a sort of ladder," Rick answered in a whisper. "It leads from the top of the fun house."

"Looks like we'd better pay another visit to our pal the caretaker," Scotty murmured. "Let's go."

They made their way slowly, stopping frequently to listen. The light on top of the roller coaster was no longer visible, and once when they stopped to listen they heard a muffled voice.

Rick turned and looked back the way they had come. There was only darkness. What was more important, there was nothing against which they could be seen as silhouettes. They were safe enough, if no lights were turned on, and if they were very quiet.

Rick estimated that they had covered about a third of the distance to the fun house. He tugged at Scotty's sleeve and whispered that they had better swing wide and approach the place from the rear. The caretaker had probably succeeded in locking the door through the booth. Besides, what they wanted to see was in a room at the back.

Scotty whispered his agreement and they slanted off past a row of concession buildings, keeping far enough away from the buildings to avoid rubble, but close enough so they could jump behind them if necessary.

Rick's pulse was a little faster than usual. The caretaker was a tough customer, and his threat to knock their heads together was not an idle one.

The clouds overhead were thinning a little and starlight enabled them to see somewhat better, although it was still far too dark for easy going. Once Rick banged his shins against something and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. He had to sit down and rub his legs until the pain went away.

By slow stages they passed the fun house, then started angling in to approach it from the rear. They were close enough under the roller coaster to see every detail of its structure, as a dense black outline against the lesser darkness of the sky.

There was no longer a sign of any light, nor of any living thing on the roller coaster. Rick wondered for the tenth time what anyone would be doing up there. He thought of going up for a look, but knew that was not possible. The climb would be bad enough with a light. Without one, it would be close to suicide. Roller coasters weren't made for casual climbing, at least not in the darkness.

The back of the fun house was in full view now, but no light showed through. Then, as they approached, a light appeared. It was a yellow, unsteady light that came through a window set in the back of the building. The window was about eight feet above the ground.

The boys stopped fifty feet away and consulted in whispers.

"How do we get a look into the window?" Rick asked.

Scotty whispered back, "Don't know. Unless you stand on my shoulders."

"Too risky," Rick replied. "One slip and they'd have us. We couldn't keep from making noise. There must be some other way."

"Look for a crack," Scotty suggested.

They scanned the rear of the building for a telltale gleam of light, but there was none. "Now what?" Rick asked. He looked for a vantage point from which they might be able to see through the window, but saw only the roller coaster.

He examined the structure more closely. The highest point was close to the fun house, so getting on the track wasn't practicable. But it might be possible to shinny up one of the uprights. There were enough cross-pieces to help out. He whispered the idea in Scotty's ear.

Scotty immediately walked to the nearest upright and felt for handholds. There was a crosspiece directly above their heads, and another about six feet above that. Rick nudged Scotty and pointed to the second one.

Scotty wrapped his legs around the upright and started up. Rick waited until he was standing on the first crosspiece, then followed.

The wood of the upright seemed soft. Rick realized that it was rotting away under the flaky paint. But it seemed sturdy enough; it would hold them. He gripped the first crosspiece and hauled himself up. In a moment he was standing on it, waiting for Scotty to get a seat on the upper piece.

Scotty whispered something that Rick didn't get. He answered, "Be with you in a second." He shinned up the upright and swung to a seat next to Scotty. Both had their arms braced around the upright.

Rick looked down. It was black under them. He could just make out the white paint of the upright.

Ahead, at a slight angle below them, was the window. They looked into a big room filled with machinery. Rick guessed it was the machinery that had operated most of the fun house apparatus. A car sat in a clear space. He could see its engine hood, but that was all.

The source of the light was a lantern. It sat on a wooden plank table, and two men were seated before it. One was the caretaker.

The second man was redheaded, with close-cropped hair. His face was thin, and its thinness emphasized the width of his jaw. His mouth was just a colorless line, turned down at the corners.

"Not much for looks," Scotty whispered.

That was a fine piece of understatement, Rick thought. The man gave him the creeps. "Wonder who he is?" he said.

Scotty whispered, "I won't forget a face like that."

Whoever the man was, he was nervous. His big hands kept drumming on the table as he talked to his companion. He fidgeted in his chair. Then he stood up and walked out of the boys' line of vision.

Rick craned to see where he had gone, and leaned too far out! He grabbed desperately at the upright, missed, then got one arm wrapped around the cross-piece on which he had been sitting. His body swung down, and there was an unholy screech as the nails of the crosspiece gave!

The crosspiece swung down and Rick dropped, flexing his knees. He landed with a thud and sprawled flat on the ground. Scotty came down the upright like a fireman down a pole and helped him to his feet.

"Run for it," Rick gasped.

He led the way, running at top speed despite the stinging in his feet from the landing. The back door of the fun house crashed open and yellow light came through.

Rick dodged into the shadow of a building and kept running. Scotty was close beside him.

They heard running feet, but no other sound.

“Be as quiet as you can,” Scotty whispered. “They can’t see us, and if they can’t hear us, they won’t know where to look. Slow down.”

That made sense to Rick. He slowed his headlong flight and took time to look back. Their pursuers were not close, but he saw a flashlight beam searching the ground some distance behind them.

Scotty took his arm and pointed. A second flashlight was moving away from the first. That was good. So far as they knew, there were only two men. They could keep track of their movements.

Going slowly, with frequent checks on the locations of the flashlights, they angled across the park. The pursuers were together again, far up the fence near the hinged board.

“All safe so far,” Rick whispered. He led the way to the loose board quietly, but without lingering. In a short time they were behind the locked doors of the project.

For a long time they crouched at the upstairs window. They watched the flashlights move, first to the gate near the road, then outside. Rick held his breath, waiting for the plane’s burglar alarm to sound. After a while the flashlights returned again, and approached to a spot almost under their window-to the loose board in the fence. The boys watched, scarcely daring to breathe, although Rick was sure the two men had guessed their identity. Probably the reason the two hadn’t invaded the project was that they couldn’t be sure how many men had stayed overnight.

Presently the flashlights moved away and there was nothing but darkness.

CHAPTER VII

Locked Controls!

When Parnell Winston and Julius Weiss arrived from Spindrift the following morning they found Rick and Scotty already at work.

The boys told the scientists about their adventure of the previous night. At the end, Rick pulled up his trouser leg and showed a pair of bruised knees. “Do I get a Purple Heart for my wounds?” he demanded.

“I’m tempted to revoke your junior G-man badge,” Winston said. “What you did was fine, but where are the results? The only thing you know today that you didn’t know yesterday is what the second man looks like. Where’s the gain in that?”

“None,” Rick agreed unhappily. “That’s what makes it rough. All we have to show for it is a pair of skinned knees.”

“Now what?” Winston asked.

“Now we go to work and forget about the characters in the fun house. At least for a while.” Rick sighed. “And we have to go back again.”

“What for?” Julius Weiss demanded.

“We have to get a look at the engine serial number of that car,” Rick stated. “I don’t know how we can do it yet, but that’s the only way we’ll have of proving that it’s the hit-and-run car.”

“There’s only one way we’ve thought of,” Scotty added. “One of us can cause a commotion, and when the men come out to see what’s happening, the other one can sneak in.”

Parnell Winston rose abruptly. “Better not say any more,” he warned. “You spring ideas like that on us and we’ll have no choice but to tell you not to try it. Right, Julius?”

“Absolutely,” Weiss agreed.

The boys got down to work. The evening before, Rick had completed his cutout of the circuit and had stretched a piece of silk on a small frame. Now he put the circuit cutout on the silk, and systematically sprayed the silk with layer after layer of liquid plastic until he was certain that the coating was watertight. Then he let the last coat of plastic dry and lifted the circuit cutout. Where the cutout had been, the silk was still untouched. Everywhere else it was coated with plastic.

Scotty, meanwhile, had cut a sheet of thin plastic to the right size. Rick took it, placed the silk screen on it, adjusted it carefully, then put clamps on to hold it in place.

The next step was to mix finely powdered metallic silver with a special quick-drying resin glue. Rick took a fine paintbrush and painted the silk screen with a uniform coat of the mixture. Then he waited a few moments, removed the clamps, and lifted the silk screen off.

On the plastic sheet, which was slightly smaller than a playing card, silver lines gleamed in the exact shape of the circuit. These printed silver lines were the wires of the small transmitter.

The rest was easy but slow. Rick carefully glued the various parts in place. There were condensers, transformers, the microphone, a screw for the antenna rod, and a toggle switch. After they were in place, he soldered them to the silver lines.

While he worked, Scotty ground out the dime-size hole in the front plastic cover where the microphone would rest.

After lunch, Scotty took Rick’s plastic on which the transmitter was now complete, and mounted it with the plastic sheets which he had fabricated the day before. As each piece went into place, forming a box, he “welded” the pieces of plastic together by using acetone as a solvent. The last step was to insert the battery. It went home against the contact points Rick had wired into the circuit. Now only the antenna remained. A tempered steel wire a few inches long was thrust into place and the little control transmitter was complete, except for testing.

The boys walked over to where Parnell Winston and Julius Weiss were fitting a completed unit to bolts on the tractor.

“We’re ready for a test,” Rick announced.

The scientists looked up in surprise. “So soon?” Winston asked. “That’s remarkably fastwork . Julius, are we ready?”

“Just barely,” Weiss said. He connected terminals to a twelve-cell storage battery, threw a switch, and said to Rick, “Say something.”

Rick held the transmitter to his lips and asked, “Does it work?”

Relays clicked in series through the unit the scientists had just mounted.

“I’ll say it does!” Winston exclaimed. “Well done, both of you! How long will it take for the other units?”

“Another day,” Rick said. “We have the silk screen now, and Scotty has the templates for the case. It’s just a matter of assembling the parts.”

Weiss examined the little transmitter. “Fine. Now, I suggest you set the entire circuit in plastic. That will prevent any breakage, no matter how roughly it is handled.”

“Good idea,” Rick agreed. “Do we have the stuff?”

“You’ll find it in the supply box,” Winston said.

The boys left the scientists to their work and rummaged in the supply box until they found what they needed, a can of liquid plastic and hardening powder.

While Scotty took off the upper lid of the tiny box, Rick mixed some of the plastic with hardening powder. Then he poured the stuff into the radio until it was level with the top and put the box aside to harden. Once the plastic hardened, the control unit would be completely embedded, almost impervious to damage, moisture, or temperature.

“Let’s go home,” Rick suggested. “Nothing more we need to do today.”

They said good-bye to the scientists, then went outside into the bright sunlight.

On an impulse Rick walked to the fence. He was curious about what the two men had been doing last night. He found the board they had pried loose and motioned to Scotty. “Take a look.”

Scotty did so. He grinned. “Tight as a tick. They were making sure we didn’t get in that way again. But how? They didn’t do any hammering.”

“Probably used screws,” Rick surmised. “Anyway, they did a good job of it.” He pushed at the board and it didn’t move at all.

Scotty frowned. “When do we do our next job? We can’t stall too long. If that’s the car that hit Barby, we want to know it now, before it can get away.”

“Maybe tonight,” Rick suggested. “Suppose we come down by boat?”

“Depends.” Scotty looked at the sky. “Another dark night like last night and we could do it.”

The plane was as they had left it. Just to be sure, Rick touched the Cub. The horn blasted. He cut the

switch quickly and disconnected the wires.

They stowed the stakes and wire in the luggage compartment, then Rick got in the pilot's seat while Scotty spun the propeller. The engine caught. Scotty climbed in while Rick let it warm up.

Rick gunned the plane and taxied down the field to the very end of the amusement park fence. He tested the controls and they reacted perfectly. He released the brakes and the Cub rushed through the grass, sluggish because of the drag. Finally the tail came up, and in a moment they were air-borne. Rick climbed for altitude, and at about eight hundred feet banked left on a course for Spindrift. The Cub slid around smoothly and Rick moved the wheel to level off. It didn't respond!

He put more muscle into it, but the wheel wouldn't move at all. The controls were locked! Tentatively he tried his ailerons again, in the opposite direction. It was no use. They were frozen. He tried his elevators, gently at first, then hard. They were locked. So was his rudder. He looked at Scotty, his face white.

"She's frozen!"

Scotty lost color. "What do we do?"

Rick was already cranking his tab controls. "I'll try to trim for level flight. You get as far away from me as you can."

Scotty was on the upper side of the plane. They were flying in a shallow bank of about 15 degrees. When Rick got his tabs fully trimmed, the angle was a little less, but they were still swinging in a wide circle.

"There's only one thing to do," Scotty said. "I've got to get out and hang on the strut. That will balance us."

Rick considered. He had no suggestion to counter Scotty's. One thing was certain. They couldn't keep swinging in circles forever.

He tried the controls again. From sheer habit he had kept his hand on the wheel and his feet on the rudder pedals, but both were useless. "Stand up as much as you can," he said. "I'm going to slide under you. Maybe if we're both on that side it will balance us."

Scotty did so and Rick slid under him. The horizon leveled somewhat, but still not enough. "We'll have to do it your way," he told Scotty. Only *I'll* get out."

Scotty grunted. "If we ever land this thing, it will have to be done with the tabs. I can't do that. I haven't been flying long enough. You'll have to. So *I'll* get out."

Rick had to agree that his friend was right. He started to tell him to be sure to hang on tight, but realized Scotty would need no such instruction. He looked out and estimated their position. They were over the land, facing south. He wanted to be over the water, facing north.

"Sit tight," he directed. "We'll let the plane circle a little more, so we're going in the right direction."

He had to marvel at Scotty's calm tone of voice. "Exactly how much chance do we have of landing?"

Rick's own voice was pretty steady. "Poor, but not impossible. If we can get level, I'll try to let us down

on the tabs.”

“Where? At Whiteside airport?”

That had been Rick’s first thought, but he changed his mind. “At Spindrift. Frankly, Scotty, I don’t think we’ll make it. This kite is so light any breeze could knock us off course. I’d rather take my chances on dropping into the water than to smash into a house or something.”

“You’re right!” Scotty said. “Well, give me the word and I’ll climb out.”

Rick watched the horizon move slowly around. Fortunately, he had leveled off before banking. The plane had maintained altitude.

“Get set,” he said.

Scotty pushed the door open, using plenty of muscle to force it out against the wind.

The compass settled on due north. “Now,” Rick called. His voice shook.

Scotty swung out, his knuckles white as he gripped the door. His body had a tendency to fly back in the wind, but he hunched forward until he had both feet on the diagonal strut that ran from wing to undercarriage.

Rick reached into the luggage compartment behind him, got a steel stake, and pushed it into the crack of the door just above a hinge. The door stayed open. But the plane swerved as the wind struck the door and Rick had to move quickly across the cabin and work the rudder trim tab until they were flying straight again.

The breeze sweeping in through the door was cold, but both boys were sweating.

Seaford passed underneath. Rick sat upright and watched for Spindrift.

Scotty was holding on for dear life, but he was in a more comfortable position now, one arm locked tight around the door frame. He had taken the precaution of lowering the window before opening the door.

Why had the controls locked? Why? Rick knew he had tested them. Such testing was automatic. Besides, they had taken off all right. Going into the bank had locked them somehow. He tried the rudder pedals again and thought they moved the smallest bit.

Brendan’s Marsh was below. They were on course. Rick went over a plan in his mind. He had just under eight hundred feet to lose, using the elevator trim tabs.

He knew perfectly well that he would never make the field at Spindrift. The margin was too close. But if he could gauge it to land in the water right off Pirate’s Field, they should be able to crawl out with a whole skin.

There was only one small joker. To make a full stall landing in the water, he would have to get the tail down. That took elevator control. Also, he couldn’t even try it with Scotty holding on outside the plane. Scotty would have to come in. That meant the plane would hit the water with one wing low, which in turn meant disaster.

Spindrift loomed ahead on the horizon. Rick worked the tabs and the plane started letting down in a very shallow dive. He throttled back a little.

Scotty raised his eyebrows. Rick bent toward him and yelled, "Be ready to get inside in a hurry when I tell you."

Scotty nodded. His face was red from the wind, but he was grinning. Rick thought his pal would probably grin into the faces of a firing squad if it ever came to that. It wasn't far from it now. The crack-up, when it came, would be like driving head on into a stone wall at high speed.

The altimeter registered the loss of altitude. They were down to five hundred feet and still losing. But Spindrift was coming closer. Rick began to worry. Had he started down soon enough? He sighted along the nose of the plane. No doubt of it, he was overshooting.

He pulled back on the throttle and the nose dropped.

Scotty grinned at him.

The altimeter read three hundred feet.

Scotty's nerve was good, Rick knew. He shifted plans slightly and motioned to his pal to go out as far as he could. Scotty took a firm grip on the door with one hand and leaned far out. The plane banked a little, out to sea. Rick helped the move with the rudder tabs. Then, when they were about 30 degrees away from land, he called:

"Scotty! Come on in!"

Scotty's teeth were chattering and his lips were blue. "Now what?" he asked.

Rick was back in his own seat, and the plane was banking in toward land, but very slowly. "If I've figured it right, we should come in parallel to Pirate's Field. When I give the word," he instructed, "you hop into the luggage compartment. Keep on your own side, because I'll be there with you. We've got to get the tail down if we want to come out of this."

"Got it," Scotty said coolly.

They weren't banking fast enough. Rick moved the aileron trim tabs back to normal and increased the angle of turn. He saw with satisfaction that they would make it.

The plane was low over the water now, so low that the altimeter was no longer trustworthy. Rick estimated about fifty feet. Spindrift was dead ahead. They had banked out and then banked back and the plane was approaching it from the sea.

"We'll just miss the end of the island," Rick said with false calmness. This was going to be rough!

The plane was settling toward the water rapidly. From the corner of his eye, Rick saw the cliff at the southwest corner of Spindrift flash past.

"Here we go!" he yelled.

Scotty was gone in a dive, into the luggage compartment.

Then Rick cut the throttle, jerked back on the wheel with all his strength, and felt something give. He turned and went headlong into the luggage compartment, landing in Scotty's lap just as the plane smashed into the water.

There was an instant of whirling chaos as the plane gyrated and water flew. Rick thought he heard the crack and splintering of wood, metal, and fabric, then his forehead bounced off something and he sank back, limp.

CHAPTER VIII

Fifty Frantic Seconds

The Cub struck the water with one wing low. The wing hit first, whirling the small plane around, pulling the nose into the water. During the instant before the propeller snapped, the engine was barely turning over because Rick had cut the throttle but had not killed the ignition. As the propeller gave, the engine raced wildly, the broken propeller shafts dragging the plane into the water like a motorboat screw. Then the engine was drowned into silence, leaving the plane standing nose down, with one wing off and the other dragging.

Rick had been dazed by the impact but not knocked out. He lay across Scotty, limp, his head ringing. Cold water brought him to full consciousness and he began to struggle. A giant bubble broke loose and raced through the open window, taking most of their air with it. Rick fought his way headfirst to the door, and struggled to get through the window. Then he realized that Scotty was not moving!

Water poured into the cabin, knocking him sideways with its force. There hadn't been time to be afraid. Now a touch of panic gripped him and he kicked violently against the instrument panel, forcing himself back into the luggage compartment. His groping hands felt Scotty's jacket. He took a firm grip and heaved, his feet braced. The plane was almost entirely under water, but some air remained trapped in the cabin.

Scotty's body shifted but didn't come forward. Rick tugged again, desperation in his arms. He didn't realize he was yelling his pal's name until water surged up to his lips and he gulped a great, salty mouthful. He gagged, then gasped for air, lifting his head high. The cabin was almost full of water now as the remaining air seeped out. He fought to pull Scotty loose, using his legs for leverage. He shifted to get a better grip and one foot smashed through the plexiglass windshield and caught fast.

In sudden panic he kicked violently, trying to free his foot. The plexiglass tore a great furrow in his leg and the water was suddenly cloudy with blood, but the foot came free. His groping hands found the back of the seat and he pulled himself upward. Holding with one hand he found Scotty's belt and gave a heave that used most of his strength. Scotty came out of the luggage compartment and floated down on top of Rick.

There was no air left. Rick fought free and began to let the breath out of his lungs in tiny dribbles. He tried to move Scotty headfirst through the window, but the boy's legs caught in the control column. Despairingly, Rick realized that he didn't have breath left to do any more. His hands caught the window

frame and he pulled himself outward, tangled for a terrible moment with the wreckage of a strut, and then shot to the surface. He reached it as the last of his air gave out.

As he sucked in fresh air greedily, he caught a glimpse of men running toward the beach, then he surfaced, grabbed the fuselage of the plane, and pulled himself downward. Only the tail surfaces were above the water now.

The trailing strut struck him across the chest. He grabbed it and used it for additional leverage, dragging himself downward toward the cabin.

He had to get Scotty! He had to! He forced himself to think calmly as he fought his way toward the cabin door. Get the door open! That was it!

He kicked frantically and felt the plexiglass of the window behind the luggage compartment. His eyes weren't working well. Now that he needed desperately to see what he was doing, his eyes kept blurring. He felt for the cabin door, found it, then fingered his way back to the door handle. It turned easily, but the door wouldn't open!

He put both hands on the handle, then braced his feet against the side of the plane. One foot tore through the fabric, but the other hit a structural member and held. The door flew open, propelling him backward. He saw the broken strut sliding past and grabbed at it, held fast, then heaved himself forward again.

The open door loomed blackly ahead. He had a clear view for an instant, then his vision fogged again. His groping hands touched cloth, then hair. He gripped the hair with all his strength and pulled back. Scotty came out of the cabin headfirst, feet and arms trailing limply.

Rick got an arm around his pal's chest and began to kick his way upward. He was almost out of breath, his head roaring. He let the breath out in tiny bubbles, legs and one arm flailing, face upturned to the surface. He could see light above, and then it got cloudy again. He knew there was a long way to go.

The pressure in his chest was unbearable. He let out air a little faster and increased his kicking. Scotty was a dead weight, dragging them down. Rick's free arm drove downward in steady but weakening strokes, and there was a redness in front of his eyes. He let out the last of the air from his lungs in an effort to decrease the pressure and blackness closed in. He kept struggling upward, fighting the terrible urge to breathe, feeling consciousness slip from him.

Something grabbed him, shot him violently to the surface. Fresh air flooded into his tortured lungs and he opened his mouth wide, gasping. He opened his eyes and light struck his eyeballs painfully. He was dimly conscious of pressure under his chin, forcing his head back. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Weakness had him. He couldn't move or even think.

He knew that he was moving, but he didn't know how, nor did he think about it until sand grated under him. Then he remembered and yelled, "Scotty!"

"He's all right," Hobart Zircon's deep voice said. "Easy, Rick. I've got you." The big scientist picked him up bodily and carried him to the parched grass of Pirate's Field. At the same instant, Hartson Brant strode from the water with Scotty slung over his shoulder.

"Rick's all right," Zircon said.

Hartson Brant snapped, "Scotty isn't." He put the boy face down on the grass, turned his head to one

side, felt in his mouth for obstructions, then pulled his tongue forward. Kneeling with one leg between Scotty's thighs and the other outside, he began artificial respiration. A little water gushed from Scotty's mouth and there was a gurgle as air rushed in on the release.

Rick lay unmoving, still gasping for air. He couldn't see what was going on next to him.

For perhaps two minutes the scientist kept up his rhythmic motion, then he looked up at big Hobart Zircon. "He's breathing." Hartson Brant's voice was quietly triumphant. He changed the rhythm to correspond with Scotty's breathing and in a few moments the boy groaned.

The two men watched with anxious faces as Scotty's breathing grew less spluttery and finally almost normal. Then they went over him for broken bones. Finding none, Hobart Zircon lifted him in a fireman's carry and started with long strides for the big house.

Mrs. Brant had remained in the house long enough to call a doctor and to get Tony Briotti underway to the mainland in one of the speedboats. Dr. Shannon, who had started to the beach with the two scientists, was intercepted and sent back to the lab for the first-aid kit.

With everything prepared, Mrs. Brant ran to the beach just as Zircon lifted Scotty. She got to his side in time to see Scotty open his eyes. It was typical of the ex-Marine that his first almost inaudible, gasping words were "Mom, you're upside down"

Mrs. Brant kissed him briefly, told Zircon to put him to bed, then hurried to Rick's side.

Things were making a little more sense to Rick now. He tried to sit upright. "Where's Scotty?"

"He's all right, Son," Hartson Brant replied. "Zircon is taking him to the house."

Mrs. Brant's face had gone white at the sight of Rick's bloody leg, but she said calmly, "Lie down, Rick. I want to take a look at you." She motioned to Shannon who was running toward them with the first-aid kit, then pulled Rick's torn trouser leg aside.

The wound was long and deep, but not serious, and it was already clotting.

"We won't disturb it," Mrs. Brant decided. "Howard, let me have the scissors."

Dr. Shannon produced them from the kit. Rick's mother cut the trouser leg away completely, then said to his father, "We must carry him. I think an army cot would do. Don't you have one in the lab?"

"No need," the scientist replied. "We'll use the three-man lift and carry. You take his head, dear. I'll be in the middle and Howard can take his legs."

Under the scientist's direction, they knelt in a row at Rick's side, lifted him to their knees, then picked him up. He was rapidly coming back to full consciousness. "I can walk," he protested.

Hartson Brant grinned at him. "I'd hate to see you try."

Mrs. Brant said gently, "Be quiet, Rick. You can talk when we get you settled comfortably."

The new families had gathered a few moments after the crash, but Hartson Brant waved them away. Too many people could cause more confusion than aid, he knew. Now he called to them, "Both boys are

fine. Thanks for wanting to help.”

As they carried Rick upstairs, Barby hobbled out onto the landing. She was pale but composed until she saw Rick smile feebly at her, then she broke into tears.

“Just like a woman,” Rick teased huskily. He looked up at his mother. “Except you, Mom.”

There was pain in his leg now, and his head throbbed mightily. He was glad to feel the bed under him as they put him down, and glad to have his father remove his wet clothes. Mrs. Brant hurried off to get clean sheets and blankets.

Hartson Brant inspected him from crown to sole. “Bruises,” he announced. “You’ll be sore tomorrow. One lump the size of a golf ball right above your nose, and one cut leg. Otherwise you’re all right.”

“How’s Scotty?” Rick asked. His voice had a tendency to gurgle when he talked.

Scotty answered for himself from his own room. “I’m okay. You all right?”

Rick shivered at the weakness in his friend’s voice. “All okay.” He said huskily, “Dad, if you hadn’t come . . .”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Hartson Brant said. “I hear a boat. It must be Tony returning with the doctor.”

Zircon’s voice boomed from the next room where he was undressing Scotty. “A fine thing! An island full of doctors and not a doctor of medicine among us! Hart-son, I’m going to study for a medical degree.”

In a short time the physician was inspecting the boys for hidden damage. “Nothing serious,” he stated. “That cut on Rick’s leg will force him to be quieter than he likes for a few days, but that’s all. A plane crash, you say? I’d say you have two very lucky youngsters here, Hartson.”

Rick winced as the doctor swabbed his leg with antiseptic, then clamped the edges of the wound together. Sterile gauze was put in place and the leg was bandaged expertly. The doctor searched his bag and came up with a bottle of tablets. He measured out a half dozen and put them in an envelope. “Two each before they go to sleep,” he directed. “Just to ensure a good night’s rest. Rick, come in to see me day after tomorrow.”

“How long do I have to stay here?” Rick asked.

“No longer than you need to,” the doctor replied. “Why? Do you feel like going out for a hot game of football?”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Rick said, grinning.

“I thought so. No, I suggest you stay in bed for the rest of the day. You can do as you like tomorrow, although I don’t think you’ll feel like doing much.”

The doctor snapped his bag shut. “This is like old times, Rick. Haven’t had to sew you up recently, have I? Rut a few years ago, before you got old and wise and started high school, I used to think that I should buy a sewing machine, just to keep you in repair. I do believe I’ve put enough stitches in you to make myself a suit.”

“You did a good job,” Rick said, smiling. “I’ve hardly a scar that shows.”

“Well,” *the* doctor said, “it wasn’t for lack of trying. Hartson, I don’t think you’ll need me except to dress Rick’s leg in a couple of days, and he can come in for that. Will someone run me back to the mainland?”

“Briotti will,” Hartson Brant replied. “I’ll stay here and help Rick get into pajamas.”

The doctor hurried away, stopping long enough to look in on Barby.

Rick sat upright and slipped into a pajama coat, then swung his feet to the floor and got into his pajama trousers. He started to walk to his leather armchair and would have fallen except for Hartson Brant’s steadying hand. He hadn’t realized he was so weak.

Mrs. Brant changed the bed, which was wet with sea water, then she kissed Rick and hurried in to do the same for Scotty.

Scotty appeared in the connecting doorway, supported by Hobart Zircon.

For the first time, Rick noticed that both his father and Zircon were shoeless and dripping wet. Zircon sat Scotty on Rick’s bed, then said, “Hartson, let’s change these clothes. Then we can find out what happened. I’m bursting with curiosity.”

The boys looked at each other and grinned weakly as the scientists went away to change. They shook hands silently.

“What happened?” Scotty asked. “I was knocked out. I came to draped over Zircon’s shoulder like a bag of sand.”

“I got knocked around, too,” Rick answered. “I got loose and tried to get you out. I made it, but I couldn’t get you to the surface. If Zircon and Dad hadn’t been there, we’d both have had it.”

“I came close a couple of times while I was in the Marines,” Scotty said, “but nothing like this. I guess we’re both living on borrowed time now.”

Rick shuddered. “Both of us,” he agreed. “And I don’t want to have to do any more borrowing!”

CHAPTER IX

A Better Rattrap

“Rise and shine,” Scotty commanded.

Rick opened his eyes and looked up. He had been awake for some time, but just hadn’t felt like making the effort to get out of bed. “How do you feel?” he asked.

Scotty shrugged. "To be frank, I've had better days."

Rick sat up too fast and let out a grunt. His backbone had felt like the cracking of bamboo. "I see what you mean," he said. More carefully, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, braced with his hands, and heaved himself to his feet. For a moment the room swayed, and he plopped back down on the bed again.

"I thought I was getting feeble in my old age," Scotty joked. "Now I can see I'm not the only one. Try it again."

Rick did so, and his knees clicked like pennies dropping on marble. Now that he was upright, he began to ache all over. "The doctor wasn't kidding when he said I wouldn't feel like a game of football," he said wryly.

"You look like a game of football," Scotty replied critically. He stared at Rick's eyes. "Like the day after. You have the loveliest pair of black eyes I've seen in a long while."

That accounted for his cloudy vision the day before, Rick thought. He must have had quite a knock on the forehead.

"A hot shower will take some of this stiffness away," he said.

"Did mine," Scotty agreed. "You shower and I'll make a safari downstairs. Just to let Mom know we're up in time for breakfast. But be careful of that cut leg."

The hot shower helped. Rick felt almost human as he dressed and went downstairs. Scotty and Barby already were having breakfast.

"Three invalids," Barby said. "Two bad legs and . . . what do you have, Scotty?"

"Gravel in the gizzard," Scotty answered. "Every time I talk it feels as though I were talking through a bushel of sand. What causes that, Rick?"

"You swallowed a lot of water, and I guess you breathed in some," Rick told him. "Don't put any salt on your eggs. You've had enough to last for weeks."

Scotty finished his bacon and eggs. "Come on. Get that breakfast down. I'm anxious to find out why we got into this particular mess. I want to know what happened to the Cub."

So did Rick. He had been so glad to get out of the crash alive that he hadn't thought much about the loss of his plane. Realizing that he would never fly his beloved Cub again made him choke up so, he was glad to hear a scratching at the door. It distracted the others, so they couldn't see how he felt.

Scotty went to the door and let in a shaggy little dog. Barby snapped her fingers. "Come on, Diz. I've finished my breakfast, but you can have Rick's."

"Here I need all my strength and you give my breakfast to the pup," Rick growled. But he wasn't serious. He took the best piece of bacon from his plate and gave it to Dismal. The pup sat down, studied the bacon for a moment, then gave a wild leap and gulped it without even trying to chew.

"He's starved," Barby said sympathetically. "Aren't you, Diz?"

Dismal, pleased with the attention, rolled over and played dead. It was his only trick and he never missed a chance to show off.

Mrs. Brant's voice from the kitchen was suspicious. "Rick, are you feeding Dismal at the table again?"

"Just a little, Mom," he answered. "He's hungry."

Mrs. Brant appeared in the doorway with a fresh platter of bacon and eggs. "He's always hungry," she said with complete truth. "I'll feed him in a few minutes. Scotty, here are more eggs for you. I think you'd better have a heavy breakfast this morning. You'll feel better."

"I feel fine," he assured her. "But I'll eat, anyway."

"Who's always hungry?" Rick demanded. He grinned at his mother. "How do you like my new facial scenery, Mom?"

Mrs. Brant smiled. "I'm glad I looked in on you before you woke up. Having two eyes like that appear without warning at breakfast would be rather a shock. Are you sure you feel well enough to be up?"

"I'm fine. Honestly, Mom. And we're both anxious to find out what happened to the plane."

Mrs. Brant paled a little. "I am, too, Rick. You know I've never worried about your flying. Very much, anyway. I knew you were careful. I won't start worrying now, either, but I would like to know that what happened yesterday won't happen again."

Rick smiled grimly. "It won't, if I have anything to say about it."

Hartson Brant arrived in time to hear the last exchange. "I took a walk down to the beach, Rick. The Cub has shifted out to sea a little, but the tide is out and I can see the tail clearly. I think we'd better get Huggins to bring the tractor over. We can put a rope around the tail and haul the plane out of the water fairly easily."

"I hope there's enough left to tell us what happened," Scotty said.

"The plane's all there but the wings," Rick assured him. "Did you see the wings, Dad?"

"No. Are you sure the wings aren't still on?"

Rick remembered definitely that one wing was missing. The strut had been loose and the wing itself was gone. He wasn't sure about the other. But he had the impression that both wings were gone. It made him heartsick to think about it.

"I just remembered, Rick, that Jerry Webster called last night after you were asleep," his father said. "I didn't give him any details, except to say the controls had locked. Just said you had crashed off Pirate's Field. He'll want more details for the *Morning Record*, though. Will you call him?"

"Soon as we find out what happened," Rick agreed. "I want to give him a definite reason for the crash. Nouse letting the folks in Whiteside think I'm a bum flier."

"They won't think that," Mrs. Brant said firmly. "We've had a dozen calls since last night, and they all

want to know what happened to the plane. Not one thinks it was your fault.”

Scotty finished his second helping and carried his plate to the kitchen. When he returned he asked, “Will your leg stand up to a walk, Rick?”

“I think so,” Rick said. “It feels stiff, but I can use it.” He had taken his shower in the most awkward manner possible, holding his bandaged leg outside the shower curtain with a towel wrapped around his knee to keep water from running down. He had succeeded in keeping the bandage pretty dry, but the bathroom generally had suffered. Water had dripped from the protecting towel to the floor. He remembered that he had forgotten to tell his mother that the floor was wet. He told her now, apologizing for the mess.

“Mrs. Brant sighed. “It’s all right, Rick. But haven’t you ever heard of a sponge bath?”

“I forgot,” he admitted. “All I could think of was getting under some hot water. I didn’t even think about the leg until I had the water fixed just right and got out of my pajamas.”

Barby shook her head. “That’s the trouble with men,” she complained. “They don’t know how to be graceful patients. Come on. I’m going to the beach with you. We can limp together, Rick.”

Hartson Brant got Huggins, the island farmer, on the phone. He issued instructions and then joined the boys. “I’ll get Hobart Zircon, too. Hellbe able to help.”

“Who’s going to put a rope around it, Dad?” Rick asked. “I can’t go in the water, and I don’t think Scotty should, either.”

“You’re right,” the scientist agreed. “I must be getting absent-minded. You three go ahead and I’ll get into bathing trunks.”

They stopped at the laboratory and picked up Zircon. Shannon and Briotti stopped their work, too, and joined in the walk to the beach. As the group reached Pirate’s Field, Huggins was just driving the tractor out of the woods. It was a light tractor, built especially for small farms.

Rick could see the Cub clearly through the green water. The tail was just below the surface. It would be an easy matter to slip a noose around it. The change of tides during the night had moved the plane about fifty yards in the direction of the open sea.

The others talked about the smashup, but Rick said nothing. He just didn’t feel like talking. Sight of the wreck had brought back vividly the few seconds after the crash. Rick had thought minutes had passed, but his father assured him that he probably had been under water for less than two minutes in all. The second time he had gone down, after surfacing to breathe, he had been under for about fifty seconds. Certainly it was less than a minute. Shock and panic had speeded up time. Normally, he could hold his breath under water for more than a minute.

Hartson Brant came through the woods, dressed in trunks. He talked with Huggins, then took a rope the farmer had brought and fashioned a noose. He slipped one arm through the noose and waded into the water.

Within two minutes he was ashore again, the noose secured around the tail of the plane. Huggins, meanwhile, had tied the shore end firmly to the back of the tractor. He climbed into his seat, and at a signal from the scientist he took up the slack in the rope and started ahead. The watchers lost sight of the

Cub in the murky cloud that rose from the bottom. Little by little the tractor moved ahead until the tail emerged. In a moment the Cub was moving slowly up onto the beach.

It was a sorry sight. Both wings were gone. The propeller was only two jagged stumps. The windshield was broken where Rick had put his foot through the plexiglass, and it was torn away in other places. The fabric was ripped and the undercarriage was bent back at an angle that showed something was badly damaged.

Rick swallowed hard.

Barby squeezed his arm. "We'll get another Cub," she whispered. "I've saved a little money from my allowance, Rick. You can have it."

Rick was touched. He knew Barby had no real idea of the cost of a plane. All she could save if she kept her entire allowance wouldn't buy a new prop. He ruffled her hair. "Thanks, Sis," he said. "Thanks."

Her generous offer made him feel better. He walked to the plane as the tractor hauled it high above the beach and looked into the cabin. It was a mess. He didn't wait for the farmer to unhitch the rope. He leaned in and tried the control wheel. It moved easily. He looked back at the tail in disbelief and tried again. Except for the rope, nothing blocked the movement of his tail surfaces.

"But they were locked!" he exclaimed.

"Possibly whatever locked them came apart when you hit, Rick." Hobart Zircon boomed; "I think we had better start tracing the cables from the cabin back to the tail."

There was a hail from the edge of the woods. Rick looked up to see Jerry Webster and Gus, the airport manager. He shouted a greeting. If the trouble could be found, Gus would find it.

The two ran up to the group and shook hands all around. Jerry said, "I hoped we'd be in time. I knew doggone well you'd be looking for trouble first thing this morning."

Gus growled, "Thought you knew better than to try landing on water. You a pilot or a duck?"

Rick grinned. "Anyway, I don't chase girls in a plane."

Gus had cracked up the year before, trying to avoid a girl who walked across the runway just as he was putting his plane down. He had ground-looped and broken an arm. Rick had kept up the joking belief that Gus had been trying to chase the girl off the field.

"I was trying to spoil her hair-do," Gus retorted. "Well, what we waiting for? Or do you know what jammed your controls?"

"How do you know the controls jammed?" Barby demanded.

Gus pulled a Whiteside *Morning Record* from his pocket and handed it to her. "Read all about it in the Daily Bleat," he told her. "Compliments of the author. J. Webster, that is."

Scotty cracked, "Got your facts right for once, Jerry?"

Jerry looked pained. "I only write fairy tales when news is dull. Like Gus says, what are we waiting for?"

The Press is anxious to get at the Truth.”

“You take over, Gus,” Hartson Brant invited. “Where should we start looking?”

The airport manager took a jackknife from his pocket. “First thing is to get the fabric off. No use trying to save it. Unless I’m getting blind, this plane will never fly again. The entire frame is twisted.”

Rick winced as Gus stuck the knife into the unbroken fabric in front of the tail and ripped a long gash. He walked along, letting his knife tear the stiff covering. When he was right in back of the cabin window, he put the knife away, took the fabric in both hands, and jerked. It ripped away in big strips. Zircon helped, and in a moment the side of the fuselage was bare.

Gus reached in through the naked tubular ribs and took the cables which controlled the tail surfaces in his hand. He pulled, and the elevators responded. “They work,” he said. “Whatever jammed them must have just come loose.” Rick joined him as he walked from tail to cabin, looking at the cables.

Suddenly Gus bent down and touched a square block of wood.

“What’s that?” Rick asked. He had never seen it before.

“I’ve heard of termites in planes,” Gus said. “But never rats. When did you start having rat trouble?”

The group crowded around. There was no mistaking the object attached to the plane. It was a common rat-trap.

Rick stared, puzzled. The trap was wired to a piece of metal which was hinged on one of the structural members. The metal had been a small door, an inspection port, located just behind the cabin. It was at the point where all control cables from the control column passed before separating. From that point, the tail cables went back along the fuselage and the aileron cables ran up to the wings.

“Could that have caused the trouble?” Zircon asked.

Gus scratched his head. “I don’t know how. The cables pass right in front of it, close enough to touch it. But I don’t see how they could have caught on it.”

“It must mean something,” Rick objected. “I didn’t put it there, and I’m sure Scotty didn’t.”

Scotty shook his head. “Not me. Never saw it before.”

“What’s that thing on a string in the bottom of the plane?” Barby asked.

Gus followed her pointing finger, reached down into the bottom of the fuselage where the fabric was untorn and came up with a bolt which was tied to a piece of heavy string. He handed it to Rick.

Rick took it, examined it, then handed it back. “Never saw that before, either,” he said. “But it must have something . . .” He stopped short as his eye caught a broken end of string hanging from the topmost piece of tubing in the frame. His eye estimated quickly. That string was tied exactly on a line with the rattrap!

Yesterday, taking off, he had flown straight ahead, climbing. When he reached a good altitude he banked left, and the plane had refused to come out of it. The controls had locked as he banked!

Words tumbled from him as he saw instantly, clearly, what had happened.

“It was deliberate,” he choked. “Scotty, everybody, I know why the controls locked. It was sabotage!”

CHAPTER X

The Missing Caretaker

Rick leaned over the plane and tied the bolt string to the dangling piece. The bolt hung straight down. Then Rick pried the rattrap open and set it.

“Watch,” he said grimly. He put both hands on the bent frame and pulled it toward him. The bolt swung on its string, straight toward the rattrap!

“That’s how it was,” he said. “The controls worked until we banked. Then the bolt swung down and hit the trigger and the trap snapped shut, catching the cables. The string broke, and I made it shorter when I tied it. But you can see it was just long enough.”

He bent, picked up a twig from the brown grass, and touched the trap trigger. It snapped shut, the stiff wire pinioning the cables firmly. “I had to move the cables out of the way to open the trap, if you remember,” Rick said. “They’re so close to the trap that the wire couldn’t miss.”

“But the bolt could have missed,” Hartson Brant pointed out. “If you had been climbing or diving slightly, it would have struck to either side of the trap.”

“I don’t think it would have mattered,” Scotty disagreed. “This kind of trap doesn’t take much to spring.” He reset the thing, then rapped sharply on the outside of the metal inspection door. The trapped snapped shut.

That was demonstration enough.

For a moment the group was silent, the same thought in the minds of all. This had been deliberate attempted murder!

“Who did it?” Barby asked weakly. “Rick, who would do such a thing?”

There was only one possible answer. “It happened after we took a look at the fun house. We were after the car that hit you and Jerry, Sis. Looks like we found it.”

“We found it, and more,” Scotty said. “No one would try murder to cover up a car theft, or even a hit and run. At least I don’t think so. There’s more than that behind this, and I think we’d better have the State Troopers try to find out what!”

“You’re right,” Hartson Brant stated. “I’m sorry we didn’t know this last night. Rick, we’ll go back to the house at once. Captain Douglas will want to know about the details.”

The group started toward the house, but Rick lingered with Gus. "Is it really done for?" he asked.

Gus nodded. "I'm afraid so, Rick. We might salvage the engine. I haven't looked at that yet, have you? But the frame is too distorted for anything but complete rebuilding. Where are the wings?"

"They must have floated off somewhere," Rick said dejectedly. "Let's go to the house, Gus. I'm sick. Cracking up was bad enough, but to find out it was deliberate sabotage makes my stomach churn."

Anger made him forget to favor his injured leg until the pang of strained clamps reminded him sharply. He slowed down a little. "I'm going to get another plane, Gus. Maybe I won't be able to pay cash for it, but the insurance on this one will at least cover some of it. I'll see if the Spindrift Foundation will put up cash for the rest. I can pay them back sooner than I paid for the Cub, because there are more scientists who want to be ferried back and forth."

Gus nodded. "Got the same kind of plane in mind?"

Rick didn't want another one just like the Cub. It had been a wonderful little plane, but it had carried only two. "I'm thinking about a flying station wagon," he said. He named the make. "It will carry four, but it's not too big for the island field."

By the time they arrived in the library, Hartson Brant already had the State Police captain on the phone and had told him of the sabotage and the car at the amusement park. "Herecomes Rick," he said.

Rick took the phone. "Hello, Captain."

"I think we'd better have a look at the amusement park, Rick," Captain Douglas answered. "Are you well enough to come with me?"

"You bet I am," Rick said swiftly. "And Scotty, too."

"Meet you at the dock in ten minutes," Captain Douglas said. "You can tell me the details later."

Rick agreed and hung up, then turned to Jerry. "How did you and Gus get here?"

"We borrowed a boat," Jerry said.

"We'll ride back with you. Scotty and I are going with Captain Douglas to the amusement park."

"I'm going with you," Jerry decided. "After all, I have some interest in finding the jokers who wrecked my car!"

Captain Ed Douglas was waiting at the dock when they arrived. During the drive down the Shore Road, Rick and Scotty took turns reciting their adventures in 'as much detail as possible. Then Rick described the rat-trap device that had locked the Cub's controls.

After the recital, Captain Douglas sat in silence for a while, thinking. Then he began to ask questions.

"Can you guess when the rattrap was planted?"

Scotty thought he could fix the time. "They moved around a lot after we got back to the project, and we

saw lights by the gate. I think they sabotaged the plane then.”

“Was there time?”

“Plenty,” Rick said. “It couldn’t have taken more than a few minutes to fix the rattrap. All they had to do was disconnect our warning horn and wire the trap to the inside of the inspection port. Hanging the bolt was easy.”

The captain nodded. “Smart. Very smart. They decided to knock you two out, and they had to do it quickly, with whatever was at hand. So they used a rat-trap, a piece of string, and a bolt.”

“Wonder where they got the trap?” Jerry Webster asked.

“That’s not hard to figure out,” the captain replied. “If men have been living there, they certainly would need ratttraps. The amusement park always was infested with rats, probably because of the food that was sold.”

Scotty spoke up “There’s one thing. Whoever these men are, they must know something about planes. Otherwise they couldn’t have figured a way to wreck us so quickly. And they knew enough to disconnect the warning horn.”

“You have a point,” Captain Douglas agreed. “We’ll remember that when we start hunting for them. You can be sure they won’t be at the amusement park.”

“Why?” Rick asked.

“Because they would know that the cause could be found very easily, and that the finger of suspicion would surely point to the amusement park. I think the answer is revenge. They wanted to get you for some reason.”

That made sense to Rick, all right. “That means the caretaker was a phony.” He told the captain of his call to Mike Curtis. “No word yet, but I don’t think we need proof now.”

They passed the Seaford turnoff and in a short time the gaunt skeleton of the roller coaster was in sight. “Wonder what they were doing up on top last night?” Rick mused.

“Could they have been setting up a signal of some kind?” Jerry questioned in turn.

That was possible, Rick told him. He didn’t have any other answer to offer.

“Signals are for someone to see,” Captain Douglas stated. “And I see no reason to signal to anyone on land, not when they could get into the amusement park with no trouble. Could these men have been signaling a boat offshore?”

“Golly,” Scotty exclaimed, “that could be it! Do you suppose we’ve bumped into another smuggling case?”

“I don’t know what you’ve bumped into,” Captain Douglas said frankly, “but I intend to find out.”

A patrol car was waiting on the highway in front of the amusement park fence. As Captain Douglas and the boys drew up behind the car, a trooper got out and saluted the captain. “Nothing happening, sir.”

“Very well, Parks. Rick, where’s this hinged board?”

Rick made his way through the tall grass. His leg was hurting a little now. Scotty followed and they found the hinged board and loosened the screws. Captain Douglas slipped through, then two troopers, and the boys followed.

“Haven’t been in this place for years,” Jerry Webster remarked. “I’d forgotten what it looks like.”

Scotty pointed to the fun house. “There it is, Captain.”

In front of the fun house, the State Police officer stopped and surveyed the top of the roller coaster. “Show me exactly where you saw the light.”

“It’s hard to be sure,” Rick said. “It was pretty dark, but I think we saw it right there at the highest point.”

The tracks rose to a high curve, then dipped again. At the top of the curve the underside of the track was solid boards. Elsewhere, there were boards with spaces between, like railroad ties.

“Signaling,” Captain Douglas muttered. “There doesn’t seem to be any other possibility. But signaling to whom?”

At the rear of the building Rick pointed to the cross-piece that had given way under them. Captain Douglas shook his head. “The way you kids take chances gives me gray hair. If I hear of you pulling anything like this again I’ll put you in the cooler just to keep you safe.”

“It wasn’t much of a chance,” Scotty objected. “We were just unlucky. If the crosspiece hadn’t given, the men wouldn’t even have known we were around.”

“If the crosspiece hadn’t given,” Jerry repeated. “Take a look at that structure! That’s nothing but a termite’s lunch. I’ll bet there isn’t a sound timber in the whole thing.”

“He’s right,” Captain Douglas agreed. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

The back door, which led into the room where the two men had sat, was not locked. One of the troopers, hand on pistol, pushed it open. He stepped inside, disappeared for a moment, then came back to the doorway. “No one inside, Captain. There’s a car here.”

The rest followed him in. This was the engine room for the fun house. Two huge electric motors, belts still in place, were bolted to steel frames. At one side was the big door, like a barn door, through which the car had been driven. A pile of metal junk at one side of the big room indicated that the back of the fun house had been a general garage and storage place.

Two army cots were set up, blankets still in place. There was a kerosene stove and a small stock of canned goods.

Jerry pointed to a small break in the bottom of one wall. Rick looked and saw a rattrap, set and waiting. The men had the traps, all right. As Captain Douglas had said, they used what they had on hand to wreck his plane.

A state trooper already had the hood of the car up and his flashlight working. As the second trooper took a list from his pocket, he read off the serial number of the engine.

The trooper with the paper called, "It's the maroon sedan, Captain. Same engine number."

Scotty had been searching through a cabinet. "I know how they painted it, too," he said suddenly. "Look here."

He had found a small compressor, driven by a little electric motor from which hung battery clips. A spray gun stood near by. The car's own battery had provided the power for spray painting.

Captain Douglas rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "This is a permanent hide-out of some kind. It's too well equipped to be anything else. Now we have to find out who occupied it."

The second trooper had been bending over the stove. He joined Captain Douglas and said, "I'm afraid there's not much chance for fingerprints, sir. The stove has been wiped clean, and I'll bet the car has, too. All we can do is hope they overlooked a few places."

"We'll try, anyway," Captain Douglas decided. "Parks, go back to the barracks and get yourself an outfit." As the trooper hurried out, he turned to the boys. "How about a conducted tour of the rest of the building?"

Rick led the way through the mirror room into the main part of the fun house. "Wish I didn't have a bum leg," he said. "I'd like to try the slide."

Captain Douglas looked the big room over. "What's upstairs?"

"There used to be a dark labyrinth," Rick told him. "I don't remember anything else."

"Let's take a look." The captain led the way and the boys followed him up the stairs to the landing. At the top they found a small booth, just to the left of the stairs. Inside the booth was a lever projecting from the floor. Scotty tried the lever and the stairs ironed out to a slide. He pulled the lever back and the slide became stairs again.

"Go stand on the stairs and let me try it," Scotty suggested to Jerry.

The reporter grinned. "Not me. I'm too old and brittle. You stand on the stairs and I'll work the lever."

Behind the booth, the roof slanted down sharply. Rick saw light leaking through a crack and called the captain. "There's a trap door of some kind in the roof."

Douglas found the catch and threw it open. A short distance away a ladder rose from the roof to the roller coaster track. The captain got out onto the roof and took a closer look at the very top of the coaster, which was perhaps fifty feet beyond the fun house.

"Nothing there," he reported.

They closed the door and inspected the room that had once been a mysterious, noisy labyrinth. The partitions were still in, but the roof leaked light and the paint had flaked off. By night it would still be a labyrinth. By day it was merely an odd, dirty room.

“Nothing to be gained by hanging around here,” Captain Douglas said. “Suppose we walk next door to the project, Rick? I’d like to see this thing you’re building. Besides, it’s about lunchtime. Think we could wrangle a bite to eat?”

“If you like beans,” Scotty said, grinning. “There isn’t a cook in the place, and beans and coffee are the only things on hand.”

“In my youth,” Captain Douglas said, “I served in the Marine Corps. I estimated once that I had probably eaten about ten billion beans while I was in uniform. I think I could eat a few more.”

Rick cautioned Jerry as they walked to the fence and around the corner to the project. “We don’t mind our friends looking in on the project, but no stories, please. We’d rather not have any publicity.”

Weiss and Winston greeted the boys and the officer. “We’re making very good progress,” Weiss reported. “There will be a preliminary test tomorrow sometime, and perhaps we can make an outdoor test on the following day, unless we run into unexpected difficulty.”

“Incidentally,” Winston added, “your father called, Rick. He said to tell you Mike Curtis had phoned. He asked if you could meet him at the Whiteside landing at nine tonight. He has something to tell you.”

Rick looked at Captain Douglas. “Mike has been working on the amusement park ownership, I guess. We’ll meet him, Captain, then give you a call. This may be a lead. If so, it will be our first one!”

CHAPTER XI

Shots in the Dark

“I suppose it isn’t really strange that those men should leave a perfectly good car behind,” Barby remarked. “After all, it wasn’t their car.”

Rick grinned. “The owner is going to be surprised when the police return it. He loses a maroon sedan and gets a black one back.”

“I hope it isn’t a girl who owns it,” Barby said.

The two boys and Barby were sitting on the front porch of the big house looking at the ocean, waiting until time for Scotty and Rick to go to the pier to meet Mike. Scotty hadn’t been paying much attention to the small talk between Rick and Barby, but he looked up at her last remark.

“Why do you hope it isn’t a girl?”

“She probably picked all her clothes to go with the color of the car,” Barby said seriously. “Now she’ll either have to have the car repainted or get a whole new wardrobe.”

The boys laughed so hard that Hartson Brant came out on the porch to see what had happened. When Barby repeated her remark, the scientist grinned. “I don’t know what all the laughter is about. That’s a

good theoretical conclusion, based on empirical data.”

Rick lifted his eyebrows. “And just what is empirical data?”

His father chuckled. “You’ll find a dictionary in the library.”

Scotty looked at his watch. “We have time enough for a little research. I’ll go look it up.”

While Scotty was gone, Hartson Brant asked, “Do you feel well enough to go out tonight, Rick? I could go to meet Mike for you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Rick replied. “I’m fine, honestly.”

“I knew you’d get into trouble if you tried finding that car,” Barby said.

Hartson Brant smiled. “More empirical data.”

“Now I’m really getting curious,” Rick replied. “What’s keeping Scotty?”

Barby looked in through the front door. “Here he comes now.”

Scotty was grinning. “Add a new word to the vocabulary,” he told Rick. “Empirical means based on observation and experience, rather than on science or theory. In other words, it’s the way girls reach conclusions.”

“Well,” Barby said smugly, “if I may make an observation, it’s my experience that every time you two start to unravel a mystery, you get into trouble.” She looked pointedly at Rick. “That may be empirical, but it’s true!”

“I can’t deny it,” Rick said. “But this case has taught me a lesson.”

“You mean you won’t try to solve any more mysteries?” Barby asked quickly.

“Not exactly,” Rick replied with a grin. “The lesson is to be more careful and to invent a new warning system for the next plane I get. One that can’t be disconnected by some smart guy like the one who sabotaged us.”

“Listen, Rick,” Scotty said with a glance at his watch. “we’d better get started. Mike should be arriving in the next fifteen minutes.”

“I hope he has something that will give us a new lead,” Rick said. “An empty amusement park isn’t much help to Captain Douglas. Chances are the caretaker and his pal are out of the area by now in some other car.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Rick,” Hartson Brant agreed. “But every possibility should be explored. Ask Mike to stay here tonight if he plans to stay over.”

The boys said good night to Barby and the scientist. Rick patted Dismal, who had been asleep at Barby’s feet, and the two walked down the path to the landing steps.

It was dark, with only a faint trace of sunset remaining on the western horizon. Rick chose the speediest

of the island's two boats and asked Scotty to take over. He was most comfortable with his leg stretched out, and that wasn't possible in the driver's seat. He cast off the lines and got aboard as Scotty started the engine. Then he relaxed as the other boy backed out of the slip, spun the wheel, and started them off toward Whiteside.

Scotty switched on the searchlight mounted on the bow and a swath of white light showed them the water ahead. He advanced the gas lever and the bow lifted with the increased speed.

Rick spoke over the engine's roar. "It will be good to see Mike again."

Scotty nodded. "Even if he doesn't have much news."

The run to Whiteside was a short one. Before long the lights of the town were bright enough to make use of the big searchlight unnecessary. Scotty cut the switch and steered toward the string of lights that marked the dock area. The small boat pier which they used was beyond, and it had no lights.

A few other boats were tied up when they arrived, but there was no one in sight. Scotty cut the engine as Rick tied the craft to a cleat.

"We must be a little early," Rick said. His voice sounded loud in the sudden silence. "Might as well wait right here."

Scotty agreed and they sat in companionable silence, waiting. A car came down the road toward Whiteside but turned off before it reached the pier. The water lapped gently against the side of the boat, and Rick began to feel sleepy. Once he thought he saw someone move across the shore end of the pier. It was too dark to see details. He saw only a vague silhouette against the glow from the city. He started to call out, then realized that Mike would drive into the parking lot among the trees that lined the water front at this point. He sank back in the leather seat. Probably someone out for a breath of cool sea air. It was a good night for it.

Car lights appeared from the direction of town. Rick waited to see if the car was going to swing into the parking area, or whether it was a casual passer-by going along the water-front road toward the summer cottages a half mile beyond.

The car slowed, passed the end of the pier, and swung into the parking lot. Rick jumped to his feet and started to yell a greeting, but the words clogged in his throat. Scotty's grip on his arm told him his pal had seen the same thing!

At the edge of the tree belt, on the water front a few yards up from the pier, three men were crouching, and the lights of the car had glittered from metal in their hands!

Rick and Scotty acted instinctively, as a unit, in such cases. Without speaking, they got to the pier, crouched, and ran along it. At the end of the boardwalk was crushed rock fill which anchored the inshore piles. They reached it, scooped up rocks without stopping, and ran toward the parking lot.

The car engine died and the lights switched off. Rick yelled, "Mike! Watch out! Ambush!"

A gun barked spitefully ten feet away and Rick heard a brief crack as something sailed past his head. He threw a rock at the flash, a powerful overhand throw with his shoulder behind it. The rock landed with a meaty thud, followed by a cry of pain. Scotty pulled Rick down as three guns blazed.

For a moment Rick thought they were all shooting at him. His mouth dried up and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Then he realized the shots were aimed at the parking area. The men were shooting at Mike!

He rose to one knee and started hurling rocks. Scotty was right beside him. From somewhere in the trees, Mike yelled, "Give it to them, guys!" A gun cracked from the direction of the voice and Rick knew Mike was shooting back.

An instant later there was silence. The three men had realized that they were wasting their shots. That meant they were jockeying for a better position.

Rick felt around, careful to make no noise, and collected a few more rocks. Scotty was inching ahead on his stomach. Rick followed. He felt sudden pain in his injured leg as he dragged it over some obstacle. He bit his lip. The three men would shoot at noise, he knew. He didn't intend making any.

Scotty was a dim figure, moving slowly forward. Rick kept his eyes on him, ready to take a cue from his friend. He saw Scotty rise to one knee and saw his arm move. A rock landed off to their left. Instantly guns cracked as the unknown enemy fired at the sound.

Scotty had tossed the rock with his left arm. His ready right arm flashed down in a strong throw and a lucky one. The rock clashed with metal and one of the enemy let out a strangled yelp. Something Rick hoped it was a pistol-clattered to the rocky ground.

And in that instant Mike Curtis switched on his car lights.

The twin beams caught and blinded the three men. They turned to flee from the revealing glare and ran head on into a barrage of rocks hurled by Rick and Scotty.

The boys were outside the glare of the headlights, but they were only a dozen feet from the three men. And two of the enemy were the caretaker and his pal!

Rick threw, and wild anger sped the rock straight to its mark. These were the men who had tried to kill him and Scotty! His rock caught the caretaker over the eye, sent him reeling backward. Scotty's arm flashed down in an overhand throw that had all his weight behind it. The stone brought a groan from the caretaker's friend.

But the enemy wasn't taking it lying down. All three were firing blindly at the rock throwers.

Rick and Scotty were past caring. They knew only that here were the men who had tried to kill them, one of them the driver of the hit-and-run car that had struck Barby. They stood upright, anger giving accuracy and weight to their throws. Rocks crashed into faces, chests, and stomachs. The rocks bruised or brought blood, but they couldn't land a knockout blow because the rocks weren't heavy enough.

Mike Curtis was firing, too. Suddenly the third man clutched at his arm and dropped his pistol.

Instantly the redheaded man who had been with the caretaker let out a yell. "Get the lights!"

As though on signal, the lights went out. Mike Curtis had turned them off before the enemy could fire.

Scotty whispered hoarsely in Rick's ear. "I'm out of rocks and I can't find any. We'd better retreat."

Rick had only one left. With the lights out, he no longer had a target. He started moving backward, slowly, carefully, feeling for each footstep.

Now that the face-to-face fight was over, at least for the moment, he realized how foolish he and Scotty had been to stand up to guns while armed only with stones. But he felt exultation. The gunmen had come off second best!

So far! The fight wasn't over yet.

He backed cautiously, eyes peeled for movement in front of him, until his foot grated on loose stones. Then he knew he was at the pier once more. He stooped and took a handful of stones. This time he rejected all but the biggest. He filled his pockets with them, one at a time, careful to make no noise.

Where were the gunmen? He lobbed a rock into the air in the direction in which he had last seen them. He listened carefully, and heard the rock bounce off a tree trunk. There was no reaction.

Scotty was crouching next to him. Rick got down in a crouching position, too, and felt sudden wetness as the motion put too much strain on his leg. He had opened the wound again. It hurt like the very dickens, too. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore it.

There was silence except for the lapping of the water under the pier and the sound of a breeze high in the trees. Somewhere in the darkness ahead men were moving, or waiting. They had no choice but to wait it out.

Rick grinned in the darkness. He had repaid part of the debt. So had Scotty.

From the direction of town a siren wailed. Rick stiffened. The police! Of course someone would have heard the shooting and reported it.

There was a sudden crashing in the underbrush some distance away.

"They're getting away," Scotty said. He started off on a run, and his foot crashed into a tin can someone had left.

Mike Curtis' voice rose. "Stay where you are! Don't try to follow."

A gun shot answered him, and the flash was faint through the trees. The gunmen had made good their escape. Rick was sure of it when an engine coughed into life and tires spinning on gravel marked the getaway car.

He and Scotty ran to the road to meet the oncoming police car. Mike Curtis emerged from the trees and joined them. The three shook hands.

"Fine reception committee you fixed up for me," Mike said. "I can tell you don't live in glass houses." He chuckled. "Not after seeing you throw those stones."

The police car saw the three and skidded to a stop. An officer leaned out. "Who's been shooting?"

"Go after them," Mike snapped. "They headed up the road. Not a minute ago. You may catch them if you step on it."

“Not so fast,” the officer said. “Who are you?”

Rick stepped forward. “I’m Rick Brant. Please hurry! You might be able to catch them.”

The driver of the police car turned a flashlight on the three. “Those are the kids from Spindrifft, all right. Let’s go. Where can we find you when we get back?”

“State Police Barracks,” Rick said swiftly.

The police car shot ahead, siren wailing.

“Too bad we didn’t see the car,” Scotty said. “We can’t even pass on a description to the road blocks.”

Rick had a sudden thought. “Who says we can’t? Listen, they’re marked up plenty. Let’s get to Captain Douglas and he can radio a description of the men. The road blocks can stop every car and look the occupants over, can’t they?”

Mike Curtis was already running for his car.

“You’re right!” Scotty exclaimed. “Come on. We may get them yet!”

CHAPTER XII

Lefty the Gonif

Rick sat in the comfortable armchair in Captain Douglas’ quarters at the State Police Barracks. His leg was stretched out on another chair while the doctor, brought to the barracks by a patrol car, repaired the damage.

The doctor muttered while he worked. “Of course you can keep this from healing very simply, Rick. It isn’t necessary to crawl over rocks. Just kick it against a door now and then.”

Rick smothered a grin. The doctor was definitely irritated. The state troopers had fetched him from a movie-the first one he had been able to attend in weeks, he said. When he finished, the leg was throbbing like a sore tooth.

“There you are,” the doctor said. He added tartly, “If you expect to crawl over any more rocks before that heals, stop by my house first. My son has a pair of catcher’s leg guards. I’m sure he’ll be glad to lend you one.” He turned to Captain Douglas. “If you’ll have me returned to the theater, Ed, I may be able to get back to my seat in time to see the villain caught.”

As he departed in company with a trooper, Captain Douglas grinned at Rick. “You’re not very popular with the doctor. And I’m not so sure you’re popular with me. You’ve got blood all over my chair seat.” He went to a bureau and opened a drawer, rummaged around and found a pair of socks. “Here. Put these on.”

Rick's sock was saturated because his leg had bled freely. His shoe was wet, too, but there was nothing he could do about it. As he changed, Scotty described what had happened. Mike Curtis paced the floor, adding explanations from his point of view.

When the recital ended, Captain Douglas looked from one to the other. "I think the big question is, why were you attacked? Obviously these men didn't know Rick and Scotty were there. So the attack must have been just for you, Mike. And I'd say they were interested only in shooting you, not trying to kidnap you."

Mike was big and blond, dressed in slacks and sports jacket. The jacket was made to conceal the fact that he carried a .38 in a shoulder holster. Rick knew he seldom carried a gun, but tonight Mike had acted on a hunch.

"I didn't know anything about the hit-and-run car or the amusement park," Mike said, "until Rick and Scotty gave me the details on the way here. I came down because they asked me to find out about the present ownership of the place and I found what seemed to me to be an interesting tie-in."

"What was it?" Captain Douglas asked.

"The amusement park is owned by Soapy Strade's brother-in-law!"

The boys gasped. Soapy Strade was the gang chief who had escaped from prison the night they arrived from Hong Kong, the one for whom the road blocks had been set up.

Scotty whistled. "Don't tell me we've been tangling with his mob!"

"We'll soon find out," Douglas stated. He pushed a buzzer and a trooper came in. "Get me a picture of Soapy Strade, Joe."

The trooper was back in a few seconds. He handed the picture to Captain Douglas who wordlessly passed it to the boys.

Rick gulped. Talk about playing with dynamite! Soapy Strade was the redheaded man with the big jaw who had been in the fun house last night.

"You can add a mark on his left cheek," Scotty said shakily. "I smacked him solidly with a rock."

Mike Curtis shook his head. "For years, really tough guys try to nail Soapy with rods, knives, and submachine guns, and then he runs into the Spindrift gang and gets beamed with a rock! If I'd known it was Strade and company shooting at me from behind the trees I'd have been a much more careful citizen, and you can believe that!"

"Maybe they'll catch him at the road blocks," Rick said hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," Captain Douglas replied. "He's too smart to get caught in a net, but I'd better warn the Civil Defense people and my own men that Strade is in this area." He buzzed again, gave instructions to the trooper, then beckoned to the boys. "We have a rogues' gallery. It isn't very big, but it has the best-known mugs from this area. I want you to take a look. Maybe you can pick out a few of Soapy's pals."

Scotty spoke up. "There's a big question in my mind. Mike, how did they know you were coming to

White-side? And how did they know where and when to lay for you? And most of all, why did they want to get you?"

"I think I have the answers," Mike told them. "First of all, I found the dope about the amusement park in a real-estate office where that kind of property is handled. A girl in the office gave me the information, and as soon as I saw the owner's name I got the connection. I muttered something about Soapy Strade, and she must have heard me. I didn't know what you two were up to, but I got worried when I thought you were bucking Strade. So I called Spindrift then and there and left a message. She heard that, too. She's the only one who could have tipped off Strade and company."

"That doesn't tell us why they tried to get you," Rick objected.

"I think that's pretty obvious." He waved his hand at Rick and Scotty. "He tried to get you, didn't he? And for the same reason. He didn't want his presence in this part of New Jersey known. The search for him has been mostly in New York. Isn't that right, Captain?"

"Yes. I think you're batting a thousand, Mike. Somehow he slipped through the net the New York police had at the river and got into New Jersey. If he hadn't plowed into Jerry and Rick's sister, he probably could have hidden out indefinitely in the amusement park."

"But he knew that hide-out was no longer safe as soon as we started to prowl around," Rick pointed out. "He had nothing to gain by wrecking the Cub and trying to kill us."

Captain Douglas smiled grimly. "Didn't he? You saw him, didn't you? He had no way of knowing whether or not you recognized him, but he probably felt it was better not to take a chance. There's an old saying that dead men don't talk."

"I still say that wasn't reason enough to try to get us," Scotty stated.

"Soapy Strade doesn't need a reason," Mike Curtis said. "He's as apt to pull a gun on a man because he doesn't like the color of his eyes as for any other reason. You gave him cause enough just by making a little trouble for him."

"All right," Rick agreed. "But that doesn't account for his ambushing you. By the time you found out his connection with the amusement park he had already tried for us, and the amusement park was out, at least for a regular hide-out."

"There's something in what you say," Captain Douglas said. "I think we have only a part of the answer."

Mike Curtis patted Rick on the shoulder. "Remember I told you once I'd give you a job any time you wanted one? That still goes. I have to agree that we don't have all the answers."

"But," Douglas said decisively, "we have enough for some action. Let's get you started on the rogues' gallery and I'll do something about spreading the alarm that Strade is in our area."

The rogues' gallery was on a series of circular files. Each file had a number of leaves which contained overlapping clear plastic folders. Each folder contained a photo and a description.

"Are we supposed to go through all those?" Scotty demanded. "Good night! There must be thousands. We'll be here for a month."

"It's not as hard as you might think," Captain Douglas said. "Most of the photos won't look anything like the men you want. You can rifle through them pretty fast. Just start at the bottom and run your hand up. You can see the photos as they fall back into place. If anyone looks promising, you can take a closer look. Get started while I put a message on the teletype and hand some dope to the radio dispatcher. We'll have half the police in New Jersey in this area by morning."

Rick stared at the files. "I didn't think there were this many criminals in the world."

Mike Curtis grinned. "Good thing for me there are. That's what keeps me in business. Listen, kids, I can't be of any help here. I didn't get a good look at any of those men."

"You going back to New York?" Scotty asked.

"No. I'm going into business right here. Didn't you know there's a fat reward for Soapy Strade? If I can catch up with him, it's money in the bank for Michael Curtis Investigations."

"But you haven't even got a lead," Rick objected.

"Sure I have. Listen, Soapy Strade and his pal vanished from the amusement park. Somewhere, they picked up another car and a third man. Correct? Now, I can't believe they left the area after getting out of the amusement park, because that would mean going by the road blocks twice, once on the way out of the area and once on the way back in. Those Civil Defense auxiliary cops are thorough. Believe me, I know. They stopped me on the way down and gave me a good, long look before they passed me. They all have pictures or descriptions of Soapy. He couldn't have gotten by them."

"So you think he's still around?" Scotty asked.

"Yes. I think he's holed up somewhere, maybe in one of the summer communities. There are plenty of them inside the road blocks. So I'll just float around and ask a few questions and keep my eyes open. You never know what will turn up."

"Good luck," Rick said.

"Thanks." Mike said, smiling. "I shouldn't hold out on you. I've another angle, too. If Soapy was tipped off by the girl in the real-estate office, it probably was by phone. In fact, I don't see how it could have been anything else. So Soapy is somewhere near a phone- and there is a record of the call somewhere. It had to be a long-distance call from New York, remember."

Mike had certainly figured out the angles. Rick grinned his admiration. "I have an idea where you should start."

The private detective held up his hand. "Wait a minute." He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket and wrote rapidly, then he tore the sheet out and slid the paper face down across the cabinet on which Rick had been leaning. "Tell me. Then take a look at the paper. Let's see if we think alike."

Rick eyed the paper dubiously. "Well, I'd start at the local phone company. There are no dial phones in this area, so operators handle all the calls. I'd find the operators who were on duty this afternoon and talk with them."

Mike laughed. "Take a look."

Rick turned the paper over and read: Find phone ops on local board between noon and eight p.m. today.

“On the nose,” he said. “Maybe I’ll take that job, Mike.”

Mike Curtis winked at him and hurried out the door.

“There goes a sharp operator,” Scotty remarked. “I’d hate to have him on my trail.”

“Same here. Come on. Let’s start through these photos.”

Following Captain Douglas’ advice, the work went rapidly. Rick would put his hand under the bottommost of the photos, which were hinged at the top, then move his hand up slowly, letting the cards fall back into place. Now and then he saw a face that fit the general description of one of the two men who had been with Strade and stopped for a closer look.

It was interesting. He began to realize there was no such thing as a criminal type of face. Every man in the file had a police record of some kind. Some had served prison terms. Others had gotten off. Others were listed as wanted.

There were faces that could have belonged to every known profession. Some were gentle, some were tough. Most were just people.

Captain Douglas came in and asked, “Any luck?”

“Not so far,” Rick replied, and Scotty confirmed it.

They resumed the tedious work, stopping fifteen minutes later for a cup of coffee with the captain. Then they went at it again. Just as Rick had decided his leg wouldn’t take it much longer, Scotty let out a yell.

“Got one!”

Captain Douglas, Rick, and two troopers came running.

Scotty pointed to a picture of the caretaker. He didn’t need a shave, and his hair was shorter, but there was no mistaking the man.

Scotty read the description aloud. “George Blomer, alias Lefty the Gonif.” He read off a physical summary hurriedly and then continued. “Served ten years manslaughter, 1931. Freed on technicality ‘42 after indicted for knife murder James Strep. Believed implicated mass murder East River gang. Connected Soapy Strade gang.”

“Lefty the Gonif,” Captain Douglas said. “A caretaker, no less! Well, he’s taken care of more than *a* few in his day, even if we can’t prove it.”

That was a funny nickname. Rick asked its meaning.

“It’s thieves’ argot,” the state officer explained. “Derived from the Yiddish for thief.”

Rick shuddered. “We walked right up to him, claiming to be a couple of innocent neighbors looking over the amusement park. I’m glad I didn’t know anything about him then! My knees would have knocked together so hard he’d have thought I was playing castanets with my toes!”

CHAPTER XIII

The Tractosaur

Through the cities and countryside of eastern New Jersey the hunt for Soapy Strade and Lefty the Gonif was in full cry. Cars passing southward were stopped once, twice, even three times as they reached road blocks manned by Civil Defense or regular police.

In the area around Whiteside, state troopers patrolled the roads, eyes open for any suspicious event, no matter how insignificant.

Mike Curtis talked with the officers who had chased the ambush car the night before, and with a phone operator. Then he drew a circle on a map of the area, procured a sample brush kit and became a salesman, knocking on every door.

Jerry Webster and Duke Barrows, editor of the *Morning Record*, spent so much time answering queries from out-of-town papers that they had no time to cover their usual beats.

The Spindrift scientists were interested, of course, but only casually. They had two projects underway, and at least one, the building of the “thinking bulldozer,” was urgent. That project was so near to completion that

Hartson Brant and Hobart Zircon dropped what they were doing in order to help Winston and Weiss make the final assembly.

Rick and Scotty slept late. The crash had taken toll of both of them and they needed extra sleep to regain their usual stamina. By the time they came downstairs for a late breakfast, even Barby had been up for some time. She was no longer limping, and only a discoloration where her leg had been badly bruised remained of her close call.

When the boys told her the identity of the man responsible, her eyes opened wide. Barby listened to the radio much more than they, and she could repeat tales of Soapy Strade that they hadn’t known.

“We’ve made Barby’s day for her,” Rick said as his sister ran for the library. “She’ll be on the telephone from now on, telling all her friends about it. I’d better call Dad before she starts.”

The scientist was at the project. In a few moments Rick had him on the phone. “This is Rick, Dad.”

“How do you feel?”

“Good. Is something up?”

Hartson Brant chuckled. “I’ll say so. The highway is crawling with police. A cruiser goes past on the average of once every ten minutes. You certainly stirred up a hornet’s nest. However, that wasn’t why I asked mother to have you call. We had a phone call this morning from our . . . our sponsors. You

understand?”

Rick did. That meant the Defense Department, or maybe the Atomic Energy Commission. “I know what you mean, Dad.”

“Fine. Well, they will have observers here to see a test run tomorrow afternoon. They’re in rather a hurry to get the first model. That means work for all hands, and I want to know if you and Scotty can finish the other control units. If we have a full test it will take all the units. They’ll want to try transferring control from one point to another.”

“We can do it, Dad. We have the stuff, and the silk screen for the circuit and Scotty’s templates for the case are ready to use.”

“Good. Then come to work, and be ready to stay late.”

Rick considered. Getting a ride to the project was uncertain. “We’ll come by boat, Dad. And we’ll be ready to stay over, if we have to. There’s a lot of work on those little things, and we’re getting a late start.”

“Sure you feel up to it? How’s the leg?”

“I’ve got a leg,” Rick admitted. “But if I sit down it won’t bother me. It’s only when I stand on it too long.”

“All right, Son. We’ll look for you later.”

Rick hung up and went to the kitchen. Mrs. Brant had eggs and ham almost cooked. Coffee was percolating and there was toast browning in the automatic toaster.

In a short time the hearty breakfast had been consumed, the boys had collected toothbrushes and a change of clothing, and were on their way to the project by boat.

Again, Scotty was the pilot. The trip by boat would be only a little longer than by car. Also, it gave them a chance to get their thoughts straightened out.

“We’ve got two unanswered questions,” Rick said. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the roar of the engine. “First, what was the meaning of the light on top of the roller coaster? I’m not satisfied with that signaling theory. Captain Douglas pointed out that a signal has to be to someone, and we have no evidence Strade needed to signal anyone. The second thing is, why did Soapy Strade ambush Mike Curtis? So far as I can see, he didn’t have a thing to gain.”

“Unless he was anxious to have his connection with the amusement park kept secret a little longer,” Scotty suggested.

“Then that raises a whole new question: Why? There’s a whole lot about this business we still don’t know.”

“Anyway,” Scotty answered, “we know more about Soapy Strade. I got up before you did this morning and listened to a morning newscast. The story’s out that he is in this area, and the announcer gave a lot of dope about him. He’s a wealthy man, I guess. At least he’s credited with some real big robberies, including a payroll stick-up that netted close to a million. Of course little of it can be proved. He was in

jail on a charge of income tax evasion as well as kidnaping.”

They passed a summer colony and Rick wondered how Mike Curtis was doing. He hoped his friend would win the reward, if anyone did.

A short distance below Seaford they saw the roller coaster, most prominent landmark in that part of the coastal area.

They tied up to the pier in front of the project building. The pier had been built originally to take much bigger boats, when the building was in use as an oceanographic laboratory. Rick had to climb to get to the top of the pier and his leg began to ache again.

Inside the building, all hands were working on the tractor itself. A workman was welding curved steel plates which had been ordered preshaped for the purpose. They would form the armored shell for the machine. Another workman was rigging a chainfall which would be used to lower the shell when the scientists were ready for it.

Hartson Brant, Hobart Zircon, and Julius Weiss were studying an oscilloscope, a device which showed the electrical pattern of sound on a circular screen much like that of a television receiver. The principal was the same. Both television and the scope used cathode tubes to project a picture. Rick was familiar with the device. One similar had been used in the Submobile the scientists had constructed for use under water.

“What’s up?” Rick asked.

Zircon turned. “We’re trying to establish word patterns to which the machine will respond. So far, we have several. We need as many more.”

“What’s the scope for?” Scotty inquired.

“We don’t want words with too similar patterns. It would confuse the machine. If you think of it in terms of teaching just enough English words to a Hottentot for simple directions, you’ll have the idea.”

Scotty laughed. “We not only build it, we teach it to understand English. Why not use Morse code or something?”

Julius Weiss answered that one. “This will have military use, as you know. Suppose a control unit fell into enemy hands, and required only a few simple code impulses? Knowing the military desire for simplification, the code would probably be printed on the outside of the unit. The enemy could use our own machines against us, or at least confuse them. But if we make the commands simple English, it becomes more difficult. We will set the circuits so they will respond only to proper, uninflected pronunciation. Then, even if an enemy speaks English, it won’t help. He must speak English without the slightest accent in order to have the machine obey. We’re choosing words that are pronounced, generally, the same way in all regions of the United States.”

Parnell Winston had been working at the tractor. “Hartson,” he called. “I’m set for the starting command. Want to try it?”

The scientist picked up the control unit Rick and Scotty had built. “All right, Parnell. Say when.”

“Any time,” Winston called.

Rick's father flicked the toggle switch on the unit and spoke one word. "Switch."

Across the room, relays clicked, a solenoid switch rammed home, and the tractor engine coughed into life, raced for a moment, and then idled.

Rick and Scotty looked at each other with amazement. To know how the machine was expected to work was one thing. To actually see a voice start it running with one word was something else.

"I'm snowed!" Rick exclaimed. He noticed that a tiny directional antenna, no larger than a doughnut, had swung as his father spoke and steadied on a direct line with the scientist. He pointed to it. "Dad, what's that antenna for?"

"Directional control. When we give directions, it will be in terms of the position of the control unit. In other words, the word *to* will mean come to me. *Right* will mean to swing ninety degrees to my right."

The scientist stopped as yells rose from across the room and the engine raced. Rick looked up as the tractor started spinning on its caterpillar treads.

Parnell Winston jumped on the thing and did something, and the engine cut out. "Hey," he yelled. "Be careful! Turn off the control unit before you talk."

The machine was working, all right! Hartson Brant had forgotten to throw his switch to the *off* position and the tractor had tried to obey two commands at once!

Rick and Scotty walked over to the machine. Parnell Winston greeted them with a pleased grin. "Some baby, eh?"

"It certainly is," Rick agreed. "But I see one change we have to make in the control unit. We can't have things happening like what just happened. Suppose I put a spring button in it instead of the switch? Then the controller can't forget to shut it off."

"Very good," Winston said. "Go ahead. I'm sure you'll find spring buttons of some kind around."

"It's too late to change this unit," Scotty pointed out. "The switch terminals are set in solid plastic. But we can put spring buttons on the rest."

The boys retired to their bench and started work. Rick cleaned the silk screen with solvent, leaving it ready for use. Scotty cut plastic sheets of the right size for the circuits, then started cutting pieces for the cases. It was fast work because he used the first sheets of plastic he had shaped as patterns to make the original box. There was a piece of plastic for each piece of the case, and Scotty needed only to place his models on sheets of stock, trace, and then cut.

Rick used the silk screen to print four more circuits, then he left them to dry and wandered over to where the scientists were at work.

Hartson Brant was compiling a vocabulary for the machine. Checked off as suitable were the words *switch, off, to, go, stop, right, left, get, round, jump, slow, and ML*

Rick saw the meaning of most of the words at once, but a few puzzled him. He asked Zircon about them.

“*Get* means to lower the bulldozer blade and start pushing dirt,” Zircon explained. “*Round* means to go around something. If the machine strikes an obstacle and gets the command *round*, it will not try to push the obstacle aside. It will go around it. *Jump* means full power. *Slow* means just that. *Kill* means to keep working on the object until no obstacle remains in the way.

“Our toughest job,” the big scientist added, “is finding words that have a uniform pronunciation and still come close to the right meaning. They must be close so the controller can remember them easily. It doesn’t matter to the machine. We could use any combination of sounds.”

Rick went back to work, gluing the parts in place on all four sheets and then starting the precise, tiring work of connecting them into the circuit. Scotty was making good progress in shaping the case parts.

By lunch time the workman who was welding parts of the outer plating had finished.

Sandwiches in hand, Rick and Scotty surveyed the finished product. It was for all the world like a giant turtle’s shell. There was a hole in the top with patent fasteners around the edge. That was an access port through which work could be done when the plating was in place. There were other, smaller holes through which the machine could be filled with gas, oil, and water, the battery filled or checked, and adjustments made in the bulldozer blade. The blade would not be put on until the plating was in place.

On the front of the domed plating were two projections which would take lights like auto head lamps. They gave the thing an odd appearance.

“It will look like a nightmare when they get it finished,” Scotty said. “Sort of a cross between a tractor and a dinosaur.”

“A tractosaur,” Rick agreed. “New variety of beast.”

Parnell Winston had come up behind them in time to hear their comments. “You’ve named it,” he said. “Listen, everybody. Rick and Scotty have come up with a name. It’s the Tractosaur!”

There was a chorus of delighted comment. The boys hadn’t known it, but the scientists had been searching for a descriptive name since the start of the project.

“That calls for another sandwich,” Zircon boomed. “Come on, Rick and Scotty. I’m the cook. Name your sandwich and I’ll make it.”

“I’ll have a hot dog,” Scotty said.

“Sorry. No hot dogs. How about a corned beef sandwich?”

“Just had one. I’ll have roast beef on rye.”

“Sorry. No roast beef. How about corned beef?”

Rick grinned. “In other words, Scotty, you can have any kind of a sandwich you want, as long as it’s corned beef on whole wheat.”

“Not quite,” Zircon corrected. “He can also have a cold bean sandwich. How about it, Scotty?”

“Corned beef,” Scotty said resignedly.

Zircon sawed off a chunk of corned beef that would have strangled an alligator. He stuck it between two slices of bread and handed it to Scotty with a flourish.

“We ate better than this on the trail in China,” Scotty grumbled.

“You had a better cook,” Zircon reminded. “Come, Scotty. Relax and enjoy the benefits of civilization. You’re still a little wild from being in the high hills for so long. Don’t you know corned beef is the ultimate product of modern industry? This fine American product . . .”

Scotty interrupted. He had been reading the label on the corned beef can. “This stuff is from Chile .”

The other scientists laughed. Zircon groaned. “I try to make a fine, patriotic speech and what happens? I’m betrayed by an imported product. All right, Scotty. I’ll admit corned beef is not the only palatable sandwich filling ever invented if you’ll admit that these sandwiches are much better than no sandwiches at all.”

There was something fishy here, Rick thought. Corned beef was only one of several canned varieties in the small store of food.

“Why didn’t you open something else, professor?” he asked. “We could have had soup, anyway.”

Zircon looked embarrassed.

“Say, that’s right!” Winston said. “I just ate what was handed to me without thinking about it. Why didn’t you fix something else, Hobart?”

Zircon waved his huge arms. “Why? I’ll tell you why! I was defeated by a fiendish product of this mechanized civilization. I was frustrated by an invention of a warped mind!”

Suddenly Rick got it. He exploded into laughter while the others looked at him with wonderment. “Don’t you get it?” he howled. “He means he couldn’t figure out how to use the can opener!”

“Confounded device!” Zircon muttered.

The corned beef can opened with a key which came attached to it. The others required a can opener, and the only one available was a new type which had completely baffled the big scientist.

The lunch period broke up on a note of merriment. Zircon went back to work shaking his head, and the boys returned to their bench.

“Every time something like this happens I marvel,” Scotty said. “Look at him. He uses complicated equipment I can’t even begin to understand. He can rap out equations on processes so hard that only a handful of men in the entire country can read them. And he bogs down completely on a can opener!”

Rick had often wondered about peculiar little blind spots of that sort. He had them himself. He could figure out very complex electronic circuits, yet he had found himself stumped on a really simple puzzle that Barby had solved easily.

“Guess we’re all meant to fall short of perfection in our thought processes,” he said. “Even men like

Zircon. Come on, Scotty. Let's roll. We've got a lot to do."

It was sundown before the next break came. Then the work on the control units was interrupted by the placing of the armor plating on the tractor. The boys hurried to help lower the dome into place. All hands but one held it while a workman pushed bolts in through a number of holes, then tightened them.

The Tractosaur looked more like a dinosaur-age turtle than ever. With the aid of the chainfall, the big bulldozer blade was attached to its movable arms.

The Tractosaur was complete, except for closing the top. The lights were in place and they worked. The antenna thrust up like an oddly shaped ruff on an animal.

"Put the top plate on," Rick begged. "Let's see how it looks when finished."

At a nod from Winston, two workmen slid the plate into place. A few twists of their screw drivers locked the patent fastenings.

The Tractosaur was finished, except for testing.

"Going to try it?" Scotty asked.

Hartson Brant shook his head. "No point in taking it outside tonight. It would be dark before we got started. But I do think an inside test would set our minds at ease. I'm sure it will work exactly as planned, but let's try a few commands."

Parnell Winston took the control unit and switched it on. "Switch," he said. There were a few clickings and the engine roared into life. "Go." The Tractosaur's antenna, which had pointed at the scientist on the first command, swiveled briefly. The tractor spun until it was stern-on to the scientist, then started ahead. "Stop!" he said quickly. The door was only a few feet away. Unless stopped, the tractor would go right through it.

"To," Winston commanded. The machine spun until it faced him, then started ahead.

Rick watched, interested. The caterpillar treads enabled the machine to spin in its own length. On the command *to*, the left tread had reversed while the right one went forward, spinning the tractor around.

"That's enough," Winston said. He shut the control unit off. "We can put it through its paces in the morning."

"Off," the scientist added, and the engine stopped.

"Don't you have to throw a switch?" Rick asked. "To shut off the receiver, I mean."

"Not on this one," Hartson Brant explained. "With transistors, the power drain is so low that it's really not of consequence. We didn't bother with a circuit switch. To shut off the electronics portion for repairs or replacement, we remove one battery cable. Rick, how close to done are you?"

"Another two hours' work," he said. "More or less. We'd better stay tonight, Dad. We'll have the units done in time to get a good night's sleep."

Hartson Brant hesitated for a moment. "It's all right, I guess. The highway has more police cars than I've

ever seen. Just don't start hunting Soapy Strade again." After the scientists and technicians had gone, the boys prepared supper, using the can opener that had baffled Zircon. Then they resumed work, completing the assembly of the four control units. The workbench was cluttered with parts. Rick absently put the original unit in his hip pocket to make more room on the bench, then cleared space for the rest of the work. He had intended putting all control units in a single place, but by the time they had finished, he had completely forgotten it.

CHAPTER XIV

A Fine Night for Murder

Rick opened his eyes and stared into darkness. He turned his head and made out the outline of the upstairs room. Next to him Scotty was stirring a little on his canvas cot. He looked at the window and saw a few stars in the sky, but it was still very dark out. The moon had set soon after sundown.

He turned over, punched his pillow into a more comfortable position, and tried to go to sleep again.

Tomorrow they would take the Tractosaur outdoors and really give it a try. That would be exciting. He still couldn't believe that a handful of words from a controller, plus the machine's own thoughts, would enable it to do such things as taking out a tree or moving a big pile of earth.

He tried to concentrate on the basic plan of the machine. Each action caused electrons to gather in a particular pattern on a series of specially made condensers in the thing's "brain." Those condensers were the Tractosaur's "memory." But it wasn't a very long memory.

Within an hour or so the electrons leaked off the condenser plates. Suppose the machine received the order to *go*, and went straight ahead and bumped into something it couldn't move. It would try several times. If it still failed, the electron pattern for that failure would take form on one of the condensers. So long as the pattern persisted, the machine wouldn't try that particular thing again.

Allowing the electrons to leak off after a short time was deliberate. The scientists didn't want too many memory patterns to accumulate. Then the machine, instead of being guided by its memories, would become confused.

It was like teaching a baby, Rick thought.

"You awake?" Scotty whispered.

Rick started. He had been listening intently and hadn't realized it. "Yes. What's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"Can't you?" Scotty countered.

"I guess not," Rick answered. "I feel like the night before Christmas. Too excited to sleep, I guess."

"No," Scotty said softly. "It's not that. Something's happening. I can feel it."

Rick's scalp prickled. Scotty had an uncanny way of sensing things. It had happened before. He thought it was a result of his service in the Marine Corps when night watches had taught him to be aware of every sound or movement. Whatever it was, Rick had a deep respect for the strange talent. He had never known Scotty to be wrong.

He rubbed the bandage on his leg absently, ears straining to hear, and thought he detected a deep, purring sound. "Do you hear anything?"

Scotty moved swiftly from his bed to the window. "Yes, but I'm not sure what."

Rick followed, but more slowly. His leg was a little stiff, and it was itching, a sign that it probably was healing. He joined Scotty at the window, shivering a little in the cool breeze from the sea.

Both boys listened intently and Rick heard it again, clearer now. He whispered, "So it wasn't excitement that woke me up. Scotty, that's a motorboat!"

Scotty was a dim figure at the window beside him. Rick saw him nod.

"Listen."

It was too dark to see. "It's right offshore," Scotty said, "but the engine is just barely idling. What do you make of it?"

Rick didn't know. He said as much.

The engine noise ceased.

For long moments they crouched at the window, scarcely breathing. Once a car sped by on the highway, but that was the only sound.

Rick listened tensely. The boat was still somewhere close by, probably floating in to shore on the slight swell. It had to mean something. People didn't keep engines idling at this time of night just for fun. The boatman was trying hard not to make noise. He couldn't think of any other reason.

He wondered suddenly what time it was and looked at his watch. The luminous dial read 4:25. Dawn couldn't be too long away.

Scotty gripped his arm, and Rick heard the noise at the same moment. Across the fence, at the amusement park, something had grated on sand. It could only be the boat, landing. At the amusement park! He shivered. Soapy Strade or Lefty the Gonif or both! Who else would be entering the amusement park from the sea in the predawn hours?

But why?

There was another long interval of silence, then footsteps rustled in the grass from the direction of the road.

Scotty put his lips close to Rick's ear. "Someone coming. Let's try the other window."

They had been looking out toward the amusement park. Now they made their way carefully to the back

of the building, to the window that faced the Shore Road. This time they kept their faces partially hidden, each peering out from beside the window.

A dark form moved toward the project building on their side of the fence. He moved with caution, and every few moments he stopped to listen. Once, starlight reflected from something metallic, and Rick knew the man carried a gun.

A shiver ran down Rick's spine. Was Soapy Strade coming to finish the job?

He realized that couldn't be the answer. Soapy would have no way of knowing whether or not they were staying overnight. So far as he knew, the gang chief couldn't possibly know whether anyone was in the building. But if the man searched, he would find them.

Rick tried to peer through the darkness, to identify the night prowler. Scotty had good eyes. Rick ducked under the window and moved to his side. In a barely audible whisper, he asked, "What do you think? Is it Soapy or Lefty?"

"Don't know," Scotty answered softly. "Let's hope not. It's real nice and dark. A fine night for murder, if that's what he's after."

The dark figure reached the spot at the fence opposite the corner of the building. His face was a gray blur. Again Rick strained to see details, but it was useless. It could be any of the three who had ambushed Mike.

Whoever the man was, he was connected somehow with the boat that had landed on the amusement park beach. That meant he was one of Soapy's men, if not Soapy himself. What was he after?

The figure left the fence and moved to the building. The boys watched, hardly breathing. The man peered through a ground-floor window, then moved on. The boys followed him as best they could, moving from window to window silently going from room to room.

The dark figure made a complete circuit of the building, stopping to look into every window. Then he returned to the first corner and felt for something against the wall.

Rick wondered what he was searching for, and knew the answer a moment later. There was the gleam of a knife, then a dull sound as the man sawed through the telephone wires!

The boys retired from the window for a hurried conference.

"What's he after?" Rick breathed.

Scotty's voice was hushed. "If you want my guess, he's a guard. They don't know whether anyone is here or not, and they're not taking any chances."

"But he cut the phone wire! Scotty, we've got to get the police somehow. He's probably one of Soapy Strade's men, and that means Strade himself is in the amusement park!"

"There's only one way to get help," Scotty said.

Rick knew what he meant. Unless they wanted to stay trapped in the building, they had to make a run for it. And that meant getting the guard, somehow.

They talked in low whispers, thinking up plans and then rejecting them as unworkable.

“I think I’ve got it,” Scotty said. “Good thing the back window is open, or it wouldn’t work. Didn’t I see some lead blocks under the bench downstairs?”

Rick tried to remember. He thought there had been a couple of lead bars. The scientists had used some for extra counterbalances on the bulldozer arms, in order to lighten the load for the little electric motor that determined the angle of the blade. But had they used them all?

“If there are any, they’re under the bench next to the one where we worked,” he said finally. “Want me to go see?”

“We’ll both go,” Scotty whispered. “If we make a noise and warn him, the chances are better if we’re together. Come on.”

They moved to the stairway, then crowded against the wall. There was less chance of a stair tread creaking that way. Even so, one stair let out a groan and Rick stiffened, sweat breaking out on him. They waited for a long moment but there was no sound from outside. Scotty nudged him and they continued to the ground floor. Scotty put his lips to Rick’s ear and whispered, “Wait.”

Rick did so. Scotty could move better in the dark than he. He saw his pal stepping through the litter on the floor, moving carefully, then vanish under the right bench. Presently Scotty returned, as cautiously as he had gone, and he was carrying something in each hand.

Again he put his lips to Rick’s ear. “Got two. Now get this. You stay downstairs. As soon as I leave, count to a hundred slowly. Then you go close to the window over there, the one under the upstairs window where we’ve been watching. Make a noise. Not much of a noise. Arouse his curiosity, but don’t scare him or get him excited. I want him to look in the window. I’ll do the rest.”

Rick squeezed Scotty’s arm. He guessed what his friend was going to do. He gave him a little push. Scotty vanished into the darkness of the stair well. Rick began to count.

It was the longest hundred he had ever counted. As he neared the end, he picked his way slowly through the litter on the floor, skirted the silent Tractosaur, and made his way to the window. Unless the guard had moved, he was directly on the other side of the wall.

Rick finished his count, then scuffed his foot on the floor, forgetting he had no shoes on. He got a splinter for his trouble, but no sound. He groped around and found a block of wood. A metal case was standing near by. Ready to duck, Rick drew the edge of the block across the metal. It made a small, rasping sound.

He waited, set to duck behind the case, but no face appeared at the window. He tried again, a little harder. The rasp set his teeth on edge. There was faint sound from the other side of the wall.

He did it once more, and then froze as a white face looked in at the window.

The man’s mouth opened, and Rick knew that he had seen the white blur of the boy’s face. Rick started to duck, then there was a sound like a baseball smacking into a catcher’s mitt. Scotty had dropped a lead weight. The face vanished and he heard something thud to the ground outside.

Scotty came down the stairs with a rush. “Got him,” he said. His voice was hushed. “Come on!”

In bare feet they ran to the door, threw it open, and hurried around the corner of the building. The guard was lying in a crumpled heap. “Take his legs,” Scotty whispered. Rick did so, and Scotty slid his hands under the man’s armpits. They rushed him back into the building-

“Got him dead center,” Scotty said. “First shot.” He found wire, turned the man over, and lashed his wrists behind his back. Rick felt his pulse and found it beating threadily . He was alive, but he wouldn’t take much interest in his surroundings for some time. Even in the faint light they could see that he was a stranger.

“Now what?” Rick asked.

“I’m going for help,” Scotty said. “There must be police cars somewhere around, or one will be coming by. Anyway, there are houses within half a mile. I’ll get to one if I don’t find the troopers, and call for help.”

“What do I do meantime?” Rick asked. “I’d better go with you. No, I’ve a better idea. We have to assume Soapy Strade is here, but we don’t know what for, or how long he’ll stay. I don’t think anyone but Strade and his men would come at this time of night. When you get help, have the troopers notify the Coast Guard. Then if the boat takes off we’ll have some hope of picking it up. I’ll mosey around and try to spot Strade. At least I’ll be able to tell what direction he took.”

“Good idea,” Scotty agreed. “But remember your leg won’t take much. Don’t try anything foolish. I’d stay here and you could go for the police if it wasn’t for the leg. Keep under cover. It’s a good idea to get away from the building anyway, in case Strade comes looking for his chum. Wonder if Lefty is with him?”

They ran upstairs and got into their clothes. Then Scotty hurried off with another warning to keep under cover. Rick searched in the grass for a few moments and found the guard’s gun. He thrust it into his belt. It might come in handy.

A thought struck him. It might come in very handy indeed! With the pistol, he could hold the gangster at bay, if necessary, until help came. He didn’t try to kid himself that he could win a gun fight with Strade. But he knew that a shot or two from ambush would at least slow him up.

There was only one way to find out if Soapy was in the park, and that was to take a look. No real danger in it, he assured himself. Not very much, anyway. The gangster would feel secure, knowing that a guard had been posted on the project building, the only building around. Besides, Rick had the cover of darkness, and he knew how to use it.

CHAPTER XV

Stairway to Danger

There was one possibility Rick had overlooked, as he suddenly realized. If the guard came to, he might

yell for help and tip Soapy Strade off that something was wrong.

Rick went back into the building, found a piece of rope, took his handkerchief, and stuffed it into the guard's mouth. With the rope around his head and across his mouth he wouldn't be able to spit out the gag.

That done, Rick hesitated. Which way to go? He debated going over the fence. He could get to the top by rolling a trash can into place for a footrest. But that would mean jumping to the ground on the other side. His leg wouldn't take it without opening up again. That left the hinged board in the fence.

He glanced at his watch. It seemed as though hours had passed since the boat had grounded on the sand, but the luminous hands told him that less than fifteen minutes had elapsed. He and Scotty had moved fast.

There was no way of telling what Soapy wanted at the amusementpark, or how long he would stay. Better get going.

He went along the fence, ears attuned for any unexpected sound, eyes searching the darkness for movement. He rounded the corner of the fence and moved slowly toward the hinged board, more cautious than ever in case someone should come through the fence unexpectedly.

He reached the hinged board, then stiffened suddenly as a strangled yell sounded from the direction of the parking area.

Scotty!

But it couldn't be. The nearest houses were down the road in the other direction. Scotty wouldn't have gone in the direction from which he had heard the yell.

Still . . . Rick bit his lip. He was worried now, worried about Scotty. If he could only be sure!

For a moment he debated hurrying to the parking area, then realized there was nothing there that would give him any kind of cover. If Soapy or Lefty were over there, he would walk right into them.

The yell hadn't sounded like Scotty, now that he thought about it. The voice had been deeper, of a different quality. That, plus doubt that Scotty would have gone in that direction, decided his course of action. He slipped through the board opening into the amusement park.

He knew his way around the park now, thanks to his and Scotty's earlier visits. He cut across lots, moving fairly rapidly, but taking advantage of every bit of cover. He headed straight for the fun house. That was the focus of all Strade's activities. Whatever Soapy Strade wanted would be there.

He wondered about the man they had slugged. He had expected to see Lefty, or the third man who had ambushed Mike Curtis. Probably the stranger was one of Soapy's old gang. Rick was sure he had never seen the man before.

The closer he got to the fun house, the slower he went. He circled to approach it from the rear, alert for any hint of light.

If Soapy was inside, he would be using either a lamp or a flashlight. Either would show through the window. As he got closer and saw no light he began to wonder. Was anyone in the place?

He slipped the pistol from his belt and moved closer to the building, listening. There was no sound. He moved closer still, putting each foot down carefully to avoid making any noise. He kept going until he was at the wall of the building, his ear against it.

If anyone walked around inside, or spoke, he would be able to hear. But the only thing he heard was his own pulse.

He thought it over. There was a possibility that Soapy had already come and gone. There was also a strong possibility that Soapy had something to do with the yell he had heard. If so, he might not have arrived as yet.

The door was around the corner from the wall where he was listening. He moved to the corner and peered around. Nothing moved in the faint starlight.

Rick debated swiftly. The better part of valor was wisdom, which called for a quick retreat into some strategic corner from which he could watch. But he was also curious, and very often his curiosity overcame his wisdom. He wanted to know why Soapy had returned to the amusement park. There was an obvious answer. The escaped gangster had returned to get something.

He tiptoed to the door, opened it, and with pistol extended, stepped inside.

Silence greeted him.

He took a step forward and something scurried across the floor with a scratching of tiny claws. Only a rat, but his nerves made him jump involuntarily. Sweat started out in beads on his face.

The rat could just as well have been Soapy. He realized now that entering the building had been the height of foolishness. Better get out-and quick. He knew just where he could hide, behind a counter in one of the concession buildings. He would have a view-such as it was in the darkness-of the fun house back door. That was all he needed.

He pushed the door open, then stopped with one foot outside, cold sweat bathing him. There were low voices, and they were coming his way!

There wasn't time to run for it. He did the only thing he could do. He stepped back inside, swung the door closed, then felt his way to the inner door that led to the former mirror chamber. Fortunately, he remembered the layout of the place. He avoided obstacles by feeling with each foot before he put it down.

When he gained the shelter of the inner room he was sweating profusely. He didn't know whose voices they were, but he had a very good idea. One thing was certain. They weren't friendly. Friends would have come with lights.

His mind raced. If he was correct in supposing Soapy had come to get something, then he was in real danger. Captain Douglas and the troopers had searched the back room thoroughly. It wasn't likely that whatever Soapy wanted was there. It must be in the main room, perhaps under the sliding stairs, or under the floor. It might even be on the second floor.

Already moving, he planned what he would do. He remembered the upstairs pretty well. He would go to the landing and wait. If Soapy got what he was after in the main room, well and good. He would have an

audience of one. If the reason for Soapy's return was on the upper floor, Rick would go through the roof trap door. From there he could climb down the roller coaster frame to the ground.

It all depended on his not being seen. If he was seen . . . there was only one thing to do. He would have to try to shoot his way clear.

He had to tuck the pistol in his belt now, however, because he needed both hands to feel his way. Even the big main room was pitch dark. As he entered it he heard the voices in the room behind.

He turned and stepped cautiously, feeling his way to the sliding stairs. Then he went up them, careful to keep close to the wall where the stairs were less likely to creak. He paused at the landing and tried to figure the best place to hide. He settled on the little booth where the stair lever was located. He could stand up in there, be reasonably shielded, and he could watch what went on below.

The palms of his hands were wet. He wiped them on his trouser legs. He probably looked like a scared spook, he told himself. And that was how he felt. He was plenty scared. Lefty was bad enough, but it was the thought of Soapy that really made him shudder. The only way to be complete master of a crime ring, as Soapy had been, was to be tougher than the toughest gunslinger in the mob.

He couldn't kid himself. He was courting sudden death. Again he called himself a fool for going inside that door.

He shrank back without thinking as a faint beam of yellow light marked the dark floor below. Then he moved forward again and watched it. It grew larger and larger, until the big room was filled with faint dancing shadows. Then the source of light emerged. It was a lantern, and holding it was Soapy Strade.

Rick held his breath. The next few moments would tell the story.

Strade came out of the mirror room, turned, and in a few strides was at the stairs.

Rick turned to hurry out, and his belt caught on the stair lever. He grabbed for it, trying to free himself, and the tip of the lever thrust further through the belt.

Strade was on the stairs, starting up!

Rick jerked free, and the lever moved.

The gang leader let out a wild yell as the stairs slid from under him!

Rick moved like a streak toward the safety of the roof, struck the booth door frame with his arm and spun around, and his belt, loosened by his sudden jerk for freedom, released the pistol. It clattered to the floor, slid, and spun noisily down the slide!

At that moment Strade struck the floor, the lantern flew from his hand and smashed against something. Darkness flooded in.

Rick didn't waste time in lamenting the loss of his pistol. In two jumps he was at the trap door, forcing it open. His back muscles tensed, waiting for the shock of a bullet.

Compared with the blackness inside the fun house, it was light outside. At least it was light enough to see shapes, and the dirty gray frame of the coaster. Rick hurried across the roof to the first upright and

searched for a way down. He knew he had only seconds. Soapy would be coming up the other stairs, murder on his mind.

A quick survey failed to disclose an upright that led to the ground. Rick leaned over and looked down. A jump would break a leg from that height!

He turned to look for another way down from the roof and realized that there was none.

There was no way at all to get down from the roof! He hadn't seen the significance of the roller coaster tracks on the fun house roof. Now it suddenly dawned upon him that the roller coaster had been constructed so that the fun house itself was a part of the structure, supporting the tracks at that point! He couldn't go down!

He could only go up!

CHAPTER XVI

For Want of a Nickel

When Scotty left Rick at the project building he headed south. The nearest houses were in that direction and he was as apt to run into a police car there as anywhere.

For a few moments he worried about leaving Rick behind, but there had been no other choice. With that injured leg his pal couldn't have run the distance, and speed was imperative. Soapy Strade surely wouldn't be hanging around the amusement park for very long. He had to get into his boat and take off for his hiding place before daylight.

Scotty jogged along at a ground-eating pace that made good time but still conserved his strength. He didn't move onto the highway itself until he was far enough away so his footsteps wouldn't be heard.

He suddenly realized that he hadn't even thought about the guard's gun. Rick would think of it, though. That made Scotty feel better. Rick was more at home with a rifle than a pistol, but he would be able to take care of himself.

He kept turning his head to look back, hoping to see the lights of a car. At any other time, he told himself, there would be at least an occasional car on the highway. But tonight when he needed one desperately, no lights showed.

He had never noticed the exact distance from the project building to the nearest houses, but he estimated it was a little over a half mile. The houses were really nothing but shacks, mostly unpainted and ill-kept. They formed a small settlement for a handful of laborers who made a poor living with occasional work on the railroad, Rick had said.

About half the distance had been covered when he thought he heard something, like a faint yell, from the direction of the amusement park. He stopped short, waiting for more sound. There was none.

Scotty began to worry. Had that been Rick?

For a moment he almost turned back, then he realized he could do nothing against Strade's gun. The best way to help Rick would be to bring the police in a hurry. He started off again, at a full run.

He was in good condition, and he kept running until the first house loomed ahead. He ran up a flight of rickety stairs and hammered at the door.

He paused for a moment, heard nothing, then began hammering again.

The door opened a crack.

"Whatchawant?" a man's voice demanded. "Don't try nothin' because I got a shotgun pointed smack at yer belly."

"I need a phone," Scotty said breathlessly. "Gottacall the police! Please, let me use your phone."

"Ain't got none. And don't want no part of the police, neither. Get goin' and let me alone."

"Where can I find a phone?" Scotty begged. "There must be one around here somewhere."

"None of these houses got one. Yer outta luck unless you get to the store about a mile down. They got one. Sometimes Old Man Yager sleeps in the back."

Scotty jumped from the porch and started running. Now that the man had reminded him, he recalled the store. It was a ramshackle place that dealt in staple groceries. It was plastered with chewing tobacco and snuff signs as weathered as the building itself.

He slowed his pace a little because he didn't want to wear himself out completely before the store even was in sight. He settled down to a long, loping pace that conserved energy but covered ground rapidly. What had happened to all the police cruisers that were supposed to be in the area?

Then he realized he was being a little unreasonable. Only a short time had elapsed since leaving the project. A police car couldn't go by every moment or two. It was a long road and there just weren't that many cruisers.

He tried to assure himself that it hadn't been Rick who yelled, but the distance had been too great to identify the voice. He had to admit that it might have been Rick. He increased his stride a little.

If only a car would come! Any car!

It was harder to breathe now. His chest hurt. He kept on running, knowing that in a short time he would get his second wind.

He passed a clump of trees and realized that he was almost at the store. It was just beyond. In a few moments he saw it, a shabby, lonely place, several hundred feet from the nearest houses.

He reached the low stoop that served as an entrance and looked in through a fly-specked glass panel in the door. There was no light inside, nor did he hear any sound. He hammered on the door, then kicked it violently. The glass panel rattled and he desisted for fear of breaking it.

There must be a back door. He hurried around the building and found it. There was no glass. He pounded it until his hand hurt.

Old Man Yager wasn't sleeping in the store tonight, that was sure. Unless he was stone deaf. Scotty ran back to the front, desperate now. He looked up and down the road, but there was no sign of car headlights.

He made up his mind. There was only one thing he could do. "This is where I become a criminal," he muttered.

A stone made a handy implement. He threw it, and listened to the sound of shattering glass. Then he broke the jagged pieces from the bottom of the door panel and stepped inside.

There were electric lights. He found a switch and turned them on, blinking in the sudden glare. The telephone was in the back of the store, and it was a pay phone!

He felt in his pockets, heart sinking. He knew what the answer would be. He had no change at all.

The cash register stood on the counter. He jumped over the worn top and punched the no sale key. The drawer flew open. It was empty.

Frantically he ransacked drawers, felt in the pocket of a greasy apron that hung from a nail. He looked in every possible place and a few unlikely ones.

At last he stood helpless. The phone was there, but without a nickel it was no good to him at all!

He had to do something-and quick! He had to get a nickel, or he had to find another phone. Either way, he had to get out of the store. He stepped through the broken door panel and looked around.

The nearest houses were in sight. He started running again, praying that he would find a reception with no shotgun.

Somewhere down the road a dog began to bark excitedly. Scotty stooped and found a rock, just in case, then he hurried on again. These houses were no better than the ones farther back. Would any of them have phones? He looked overhead at the phone wires and decided to follow them until he came to a house lead-in. That way, he was sure of finding a phone.

The fourth house had a lead-in. That was the house with the dog. Scotty listened to the wild yapping and decided the dog was chained behind the house. That was good. He went up the front steps in one leap and hammered at the door.

The barking had already awakened the occupant, or perhaps he was an early riser. He pulled back a curtain from the porch window and called, "What do you want?"

Scotty yelled back, "I need the police! Open up, mister, please!"

The man responded by raising the window. "Police, you say?"

"Yes. I have to use your phone, mister. Honestly, I'm not a burglar or anything. I've got to call the state troopers."

“Haven’t got a phone,” the man said. “Had it taken out. Don’t know where you’ll find one.”

“Then have you got a nickel? The store has a phone. But I don’t have change.”

“The store’s closed,” the man said suspiciously.

“I know it,” Scotty said desperately. “I broke in. But it’s a pay phone, and I haven’t got a nickel.”

“Wait there.” The window slammed shut.

Scotty danced on one foot and then the other, burning with impatience. But he could do nothing to hurry the man.

Fortunately, he didn’t take long. In a very few moments the barking of the dog grew nearer, and the man’s voice snapped, “Shut up, Hortense. Keep still.”

He came around the corner, holding tightly to a leash. On the other end of the leash was a big dog of uncertain ancestry. She was part collie, part hound, and, to Scotty’s nervous glance, part wolf.

“Don’t know who or what you are,” the man said shortly, “but don’t try anything. Hortense is pretty fast on her feet and she’ll get you if I say so.”

“I won’t try anything, Scotty said pleadingly, “I just want to get the police. Have you got a nickel?”

“Got one,” the man agreed. “And I’m going to be right with you when you use it. Old Man Yager is a friend of mine. You better have a good reason for busting into his store.”

“Come on,” Scotty said impatiently. “Honestly, this is urgent.” He started off at a trot, the man and dog behind him.

At the store the man motioned to the broken glass in the door. “Get inside.”

Scotty did so, and waited.

Hortense was handed through the broken panel but the man kept a hold on her leash. Hortense was not a pretty dog and she looked at Scotty with the same hopeful expression with which she would have regarded a rare steak.

The man came through the panel. He was about sixty, with a pleasant but weather-beaten face. He handed Scotty a nickel.

Scotty almost choked with relief. He lifted the receiver and dropped in the nickel. There was a clang and the operator’s voice answered sleepily.

“Number pi . . .”

Scotty couldn’t wait. “Emergency,” he yelled. “Get me the police barracks at Whiteside. State Police. Hurry, please!”

The operator’s voice was no longer sleepy. “Yes, sir!”

There was a long ring on the line and a male voice answered. "State Police."

"Captain Douglas," Scotty said urgently. "I've got to talk with him."

"He's asleep," the voice growled. "What do you want?"

"This is Don Scott," he said urgently, "from Spindrift. You've got to call him! It's about Soapy Strade!"

There was a gasp from the man with the dog.

"Hold the line!" The receiver clattered on the police desk at Whiteside. Within ten seconds Captain Douglas was barking into the phone. "Talk, Scotty!"

"Soapy Strade is at the amusement park," Scotty said quickly. "He put a guard on the project building. Rick and I slugged the guard and tied him up."

"How long ago?"

Scotty couldn't be sure. "Maybe ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"Where's Rick?"

"I don't know. Captain, I heard someone yell while I was running down the road. If it was Rick . . ."

"Quick! Where are you?"

"Yager's store. It's below the amusement park on the Shore Road ."

"Stay there. Scotty, didn't you see one of my cruisers?"

"No, sir!"

"There was one guarding the amusement park. Something's very wrong. Stay put and I'll have a car there in minutes."

The connection was broken. Scotty turned to the man who had helped him. "Thank you, sir. The police will be here in a few minutes."

"It's all right, boy. Soapy Strade you said? He the one who escaped a few days ago?"

"That's the joker."

"I'm staying right with you." The man added hastily,

"I believe your story, all right. But I want to see what happens when the troopers try to get this man. Killer, from what I hear."

"He's that, all right." Scotty's mind wasn't on the conversation. He was worried sick about Rick. And he wondered-if a cruiser had been guarding the amusement park, where was it? He and Rick hadn't known about a cruiser. He walked to the door and saw that the eastern sky was growing pink. It was almost dawn.

And from far down the road came the welcome sound of a police siren.

CHAPTER XVII

Trap in the Sky

Rick went up. He had no choice. He leaped for a cross brace and pulled himself up on it just as Soapy Strade burst through the door to the roof.

Rick didn't even think about watching for handholds. Pushed by sudden fear, he went up the upright to the next brace as though jet propelled. His skin crawled, expecting the shock of a bullet.

The track was right above him. He swung himself up and then took time for a look downward.

Strade was staring up at him. Rick saw the pale blur of his face.

"Come down," Strade grated.

Rick's voice shook slightly, but it was loud enough. He said politely, "No, thank you."

"Don't make me come after you," Strade said. His voice was surprisingly calm. "Don't make me, kid."

Rick didn't answer. Why didn't Strade shoot? Then he thought he knew. A pistol shot would be very loud- loud enough to be heard for some distance. There was every chance that someone would hear it and phone for the police.

Strade waited a moment while Rick inched upward, then he walked to the edge of the roof, reached upward for a handhold and came upward with astonishing speed.

Rick stifled a groan. In his terrified haste to climb to safety he had completely forgotten that one upright had cleats nailed to it to make a ladder. He increased his speed as best he could.

Climbing the track was much more difficult than working up the frame. His body was parallel with the track, because of its steep angle. This was where the roller coaster had gained speed in its downward plunge, passing a short distance above the fun house roof before dipping to the ground.

He had to move on hands and knees, holding fast to every handhold. It was hard going because there were open spaces between the crosspieces that served as ties. His leg made it even worse. It constantly bumped as he moved, and it hurt.

Soapy Strade, however, was having equal trouble. He was perhaps twenty feet behind Rick, and when the boy looked back he couldn't see that the gangster had gained after the first rush up the ladder.

Rick reached a space where a tie was missing. He had to cross about four feet of open air, a foot sliding precariously on each track, his hands gripping the rails until his fingers hurt. The crossing made him

conscious of his height aboveground, because he was beyond the fun house roof now. He looked down, and down, and down, his eye following an upright, and had to grit his teeth to keep from getting dizzy. He turned his eyes away resolutely and kept going. One foot slipped, and for an awful moment he thought the other would be pulled from the track, too, but he kept his balance and inched ahead to comparative safety.

The highest point in the track was only a dozen feet ahead. He took a quick look behind and saw the gangster, still coming.

The silence was more ominous than yells of rage or threats would have been. It was as though the gangster was telegraphing a mental message. "Don't worry kid. Keep climbing. I'll get you when I'm ready. Nothing you can do about it."

Rick stood it as long as he could, then he asked, just to hear his own voice, "Where's Lefty?"

Strade's reply seemed cordial enough. "I sent him to the road gate to keep an eye open for cops. How did you know his name?"

So Lefty was with Strade, There was no point in concealing the answer. "Saw it on a police file card, along with his picture."

Strade was silent for a moment, then he said pleasantly, "So you put the finger on Lefty for the cops, huh? For that, maybe I won't cut your throat before I push you off. Maybe I'll just stick you lightly a couple of times before I shove. Just enough so you won't hang on."

Rick's mouth dried up and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He swallowed hard.

When he tried to speak again his voice wouldn't work properly. He had to clear his throat. "No sticking until you catch me. And you can't go any faster than I can."

He was talking just to hear himself, and he knew it. He tried to speed up his slow progress, grabbing for handholds, trying to keep his feet from slipping. The ties were just too far apart to be used as long ladder rungs.

Strade was cheerful about it. He chuckled. "That's right, kid. I can't go any faster than you. But I don't need to. I been up here before, and I know what's on the other side of the hump. Do you?"

Rick started to reply that he didn't, then changed his mind. He had better save his breath.

Strade continued, "I'll tell you. Seems that a short time before they closed the park, a coaster car jumped the track. Ever hear about it?"

The gangster was trying to bluff. "I didn't," Rick replied, "because it never happened. I live around here and I would have read about it."

"Not this accident," Strade said. "It wasn't in the papers. Because it happened during the day when the coaster was being tested. Matter of fact, that's what really killed the park. The coaster was the big attraction, and the frame was so rotten it had to be replaced. There wasn't enough money to replace it."

He fell silent, and Rick looked back. The gangster was making his way over the break in the ties.

Once across the gap, Strade continued, “So the park closed, and the track where the car jumped was never fixed. It tore the tracks loose and broke the ties. You can’t tell it from the ground, but there are eight feet of broken track that won’t hold a man’s weight.”

Rick had a horrible feeling that the gangster was telling the truth. He was almost at the top now, and he would soon know. He realized suddenly that he could see an end of broken track against the sky. He swiveled his head around to the east and saw that the sky was definitely lighter. Clouds near the horizon were taking on a pinkish look. It was almost dawn.

He planned what he would do if Soapy had told the truth. If the track wouldn’t hold him, the uprights would. He would swing down, then slide for his life.

It wasn’t as easy as that, though. The track was slightly wider than the frame, and there was a little overhang. If he hung by his hands, he could wrap his legs around the upright. Then would come the bad moment when he had to let go and grab for a handhold on the heavy beam.

During that moment his legs would have to hold him. Normally, that would be no problem. But with his injured leg, there were bad possibilities. The strain of gripping the upright would pop the wound open again, and if the pain were too great, he might lose co-ordination for a fatal second. One second or less would be enough.

The ground was a long way below.

His hands were damp as he inched his way to the very top of the coaster. It was level for a few feet and he moved quickly. The sky was lighter now, light enough to see that the gang leader had told him the exact truth.

The ties were in place. So were the rails that supported the tracks. But the tracks themselves were lying slightly askew, and the ties and supports were held together only by rusty nails. He couldn’t see the nails, but he could see the breaks at the places where the frame had been joined.

He moved back quickly, intent on finding an upright down which he could go, and something ground into his hip. He shifted position and looked back.

Soapy Strade was closing in, and he was smiling. As Rick watched, the gang chief reached into his pocket and pulled something out. There was a click as a spring-blade knife snapped open.

The early light gleamed from a blade six inches long.

CHAPTER XVIII

Proof of the Pudding!

Even as Rick saw the knife snap open he realized that he was completely trapped.

There was no upright directly under the top of the coaster!

To reach an upright he had to go back toward the gangster, or go forward into the broken frame. There was death either way.

He had to fight as best he could!

If only he had a weapon . . . any kind. That bump on his hip! He groped for it and realized that it was the original Tractosaur control unit. He had completely forgotten it. He pulled it out and hefted it. It wasn't heavy enough to throw.

A wild thought struck him. If it worked!

Soapy Strade paused. He stuck the knife into a tie and pulled the pistol from his pocket. "What's that?"

"Nothing," Rick said hurriedly. "Nothing." He snapped the toggle switch with a finger, his mind racing. What were the command words?

"Switch," he said. "Switch!"

As though from far away he heard the muffled sound of a motor roaring into life. "Go," he said, and hope rose in him like a tide. At the same moment he realized he had used the wrong command. "To!" he called. "To!"

Strade was puzzled, and a little worried. "What're you doing?" he demanded. "What is that thing?" He half lifted the pistol, pointing it at Rick. "I don't want to shoot. Don't make me!"

"Don't kill me," Rick pleaded, and he emphasized the word *kill*. That word would register on the machine's electronic brain. The other words wouldn't.

Rick had done all he could. He snapped off the switch and put the little unit back into his pocket. "I'm not doing anything," he protested.

He backed up until he was at the very edge of the break, then felt for a loose board. The nearest tie was wobbly. He cast a quick look at Strade.

The gangster grinned. "Thanks, kid. I didn't want to shoot." The pistol disappeared and was replaced by the knife. Strade began to move forward, more rapidly now because he was at the top of the curve.

There was a faraway splintering sound. Rick's hopes leaped high. The Tractosaur was coming! It was coming right through the closed door and it would come through the fence. He slipped the little unit from his pocket and added one word he had forgotten. "Jump," he said. "Jump!"

Soapy growled. "Put that thing away! What is it?"

Rick thrust the unit into his pocket and wrenched with all his strength at the loose board. He nearly toppled off the coaster. He fought to regain his balance and tried again. The board came loose in his hands just as the Tractosaur plowed through the fence with a mighty crash, lights boring a pair of white beams through the pale dawn.

The gangster turned and his eyes widened at the sight. "What is it, kid?" His voice was shaky.

Rick didn't reply.

From below a voice yelled. "Soapy!Soapy!"

Lefty was below the roller coaster, looking up.

"Up here," Soapy called. "Lefty! Find out what that machine is and stop it!"

The Tractosaur crashed through a concession stand as though it didn't exist. It was headed directly for the spot underneath Rick.

Strade snarled, "I'm through fooling, kid. Start praying." He closed the knife and drew the pistol from his pocket, and as he got it halfway out of the cloth, Rick jumped. He swung the board like a flail, directly at Strade's hand. It connected solidly. The gangster screamed. The gun slipped out of his nerveless hand and fell to the ground.

Rick lifted the board for a blow at Strade's head and the gangster grabbed his ankle, dumping him. He clawed frantically at the track and his hands found a grip. He lashed out with his free foot and caught the gang chief in the chest. Strade grunted and let go.

The board had fallen on the very edge of the track. Rick grabbed for it desperately as he pulled away, barely touched it, and saw it tilt and fall. His only weapon was gone.

Strade's teeth were bared. He held his wounded hand up, reaching for his knife with the other.

The Tractosaur roared across the park blindly, then smashed into the fun house. The roller coaster rocked with the blow. The uncanny machine backed off, smashed again. It backed off once more, swung slightly left, and came on again. This time it missed the corner of the building and plowed head on into an upright. Rick reached frantically for a handhold as the coaster swayed.

Down the Shore Road a siren wailed.

Rick had lost sight of Lefty. He emerged from behind the fun house, pistol in hand. He fired at the Tractosaur. He fired again. The Tractosaur circled. Rick didn't realize it then, but when he had added the command *jump*, he had forgotten to snap off the toggle switch on the control unit. It was the most fortunate error he had ever made. With the unit off, the Tractosaur would simply have plowed ahead in a straight line, breaking or avoiding everything in its path. With the unit on but no commands forthcoming, the Tractosaur reached the spot directly under the controlling radio beam and began circling, confused by the lack of orders.

Lefty fired again as the Tractosaur spun. Its lights picked out the thug momentarily, and Lefty ran, apparently under the impression that the thing would come after him!

The rapidly turning Tractosaur, motor roaring, picked off another upright as though it had been a matchstick. The coaster tilted, farther, farther, then stopped at an angle of 60 degrees. Another upright gone would send the whole thing toppling!

Strade was definitely shaken. He stared at Rick fixedly, trying simultaneously to hold on and crawl ahead. He didn't make very good progress.

"Throw your knife to the ground," Rick said calmly.

“No!” Strade sounded strangely peevish.

“Throw it,” Rick said, “or I’ll command the machine to take out another upright.”

He lifted the control unit to his lips.

The gang leader looked at the ground far below. “No,” he said again. “No!”

“One more upright and we’re both cooked,” Rick said. “Better both of us than just me. How about it?”

“Will you send it away?” Strade asked.

“Yes.” Rick had to be careful of his words for fear of giving the machine a command.

Strade took the knife and tossed it away.

Rick looked down and saw that the machine was still circling. He waited until it was pointed at the highway gate, then said, “Go.”

The Tractosaur took off in a straight line. Rick watched, saw that it would hit the fence a little to the right of the gate, and said, “Left.” When the Tractosaur had corrected enough, he added again, “Go.”

The way was open and the engine still was roaring at high speed. The Tractosaur covered the ground in a few seconds and battered into the gate. That portion of the fence dissolved into kindling. Rick waited until the machine was completely through the fence, then said, “To. Get.”

The Tractosaur whirled and came back through the opening, its blade plowing the rubble aside as it did so. Rick grinned with sheer delight. It worked! It really worked!

Something made him look at Strade. The gangster was almost on him, hands out and teeth bared. “You’re going to get it,” he grated.

This was it. At least they were about matched in size and weight. Rick spoke into his control unit. “Stop.”

The Tractosaur engine coughed and died. Rick threw the control unit with all his strength straight into Soapy’s face. The lightweight transmitter glanced off the gang chief’s forehead. He shook his head and kept coming, hands reaching.

There was no room for judo, or Rick could have grabbed Strade’s hands and fallen backward, flipping the gangster over him. He did the next best thing. Holding with one hand to the tilted track, he swung with the other, keeping his fingers stiff and striking with the side of his hand. He picked the gangster’s injured hand, the one he had hit with the board.

Strade saw the blow coming and pulled his hand back, but not quite in time. Rick’s judo blow caught him across bleeding knuckles. He groaned with pain, but he kept coming.

It was much lighter now. Rick could see his eyes as faint, mad shadows. He realized that Soapy Strade would keep coming, no matter what.

One or both of them would plummet to the ground before this was over.

The siren reached a crescendo and the police car swung through the break in the fence, but Rick didn't see it. He didn't dare take his eyes from Strade.

Somehow, he had to keep the gangster from getting a grip on him. He realized that the man would take both of them to the ground and never regret it. Strade knew he was done, anyway. He had known it from the moment the siren sounded.

There was another sound, too. Rick had heard it for several seconds without realizing its meaning.

The motorboat! Lefty was saving his own skin.

Strade was only a foot beyond reach. He covered the distance with deliberation, and he was grinning. Rick waited until he was within reach and launched another judo blow, his fingers grouped together in a pointed bunch, straight at Soapy Strade's eyes.

The gangster jerked his head to one side and the fingers slid past. Rick recovered quickly, pulling his hand around so that the edge connected with the gangster's ear. But there had been no chance to put any force into the blow. Strade ignored it and reached for Rick's jacket.

Rick writhed to one side and brought his knee up, and the motion unbalanced him. He felt himself slipping and yelled. His hands scratched frantically, slipped past handholds, and finally caught on the downside track. His fingers tightened convulsively as his body went over and dangled in mid-air.

Strade was pleased. He sat back for a moment and looked into Rick's helpless, agonized face.

"Now," Strade said, "I have a choice. Do I kick you and get it over with in a hurry? Or do I pry your fingers loose one at a time?"

He appeared to think it over. Finally he made a decision. Balancing delicately on the tilted track, he got to his feet. He placed one foot between Rick's hands, bracing his shoe against the track. Then, knees bent, crouching to keep his balance, he lifted the other foot and poised it over Rick's head!

CHAPTER XIX

Strade Imitates a Bird

Rick closed his eyes. He was helpless. There was nothing he could do but take it. He let his body go limp, let his knees flex. He would fall relaxed. It was his only chance.

Just the same, he wasn't giving up. He tightened his grip on the rail. He wouldn't fall easily! He opened his eyes and saw Strade's foot descending, saw the gangster's cruel grin.

It was the grin that did it. Anger boiled up in Rick. He might drop, but he would take Soapy Strade with him!

With a mighty pull he swung, shifting his entire weight to his left hand, freeing his right. His right reached high and grabbed the gangster's descending foot. He pulled!

Strade screamed! The gangster jerked forward, flying through the air over Rick's head.

The force of the pull almost broke Rick's grip. His shoulder wrenched violently, and he felt something give. But he held on desperately, teeth gritted together.

Strade writhed in mid-air like a cat and landed with knees flexed. The force of the fall drove him forward on his face. He sprawled for a moment, then tried to get to his feet. With a groan he pitched forward again and tried to crawl.

Then, suddenly, Scotty and a trooper were standing over him. The police car had arrived unnoticed by the two on the roller coaster.

"Hang on, Rick!" Scotty called. "I'm coming!"

Rick's left arm had been strained almost to the point where he had no strength left. He had managed to regain a grip with his right hand, but with his left growing numb he was actually hanging on with only his right hand.

"You'd better hurry!" he gasped.

Scotty surveyed the leaning structure, crossed under it so that he would not be climbing against the overhang, and went up an upright to the first crossbar. He sized up the situation and planned what he would do. Then, realizing that Rick couldn't hang on long, he went right up to the track itself.

This was the bad part. Rick was hanging free between two uprights, but too far away to reach either. Scotty did a handwalk along the track, his own body hanging free, until he was directly opposite Rick.

"How much strength have you?" he asked.

"Not much," Rick said faintly. Both hands were aching and his left was practically useless. "Better hurry."

"Can you keep your arms down if I get my feet under your armpits?"

Rick knew he could do that much. "Yes."

The track was about five feet wide. Scotty gauged the distance. "I'm going to swing my legs over and wrap them around your chest. When I give the word, let go and clamp your arms down over my legs."

Rick realized the strain that would come suddenly on Scotty's hands as he let go and jolted down. "Can you do it?"

"Yes."

Two troopers had been in the car with Scotty. One of them had started climbing after Scotty almost instantly. The other had put handcuffs on Soapy Strade and was examining him for broken bones. He was finding a few.

The trooper who had climbed was holding to the upright, waiting. "I'm standing by," he called.

"Okay," Scotty said. "Here goes!"

He swung slightly to gain momentum, then made a big swing that brought his legs up around Rick's waist. He moved his legs until they were around Rick's chest, but to do it he had to put the weight of his legs, one at a time, on Rick.

It was almost too much. Rick was within an ace of dropping when Scotty called, "Now!"

Rick let go and dropped. He brought his arms down sharply and locked them to his sides over Scotty's legs, and he held his breath. The drop set him to swinging like a giant pendulum. Scotty groaned with the sheer effort of hanging on. Somehow he flexed his knees to stop the swing. In a moment both boys were motionless, only the grip of Scotty's hands keeping them aloft.

Scotty began to move his hands, one at a time, an inch at a time, toward where the trooper waited.

The trooper wrapped his legs around the upright and leaned far out. "Keep coming," he said. "Two feet more and I can get him."

Two feet was like a mile to Scotty with Rick's weight added to his own. He moved slowly, carefully, covering the distance.

The trooper called, "I've got my arms around him now."

He had, too. Rick welcomed the firm grip. Scotty let go and the trooper pulled Rick against the upright.

Rick was out of danger for the moment, but he was still a long way from the ground. Scotty swung to the track over the trooper's head and called down, "Any strength left, Rick?"

"Some. Not much. I can get down the upright if someone supports me. I've only got one arm. The other is numb."

Scotty took his belt off, then tucked it into his pocket and examined the track carefully. Satisfied, he turned so that he was sitting with his back to the track's edge. He hooked both feet under a tie and tried to swing backward. It didn't work. He tried another plan. Lying on his stomach across the track, he slid forward a little at a time. As his stomach reached the edge of the track, he hooked his heels under the ties, legs spread wide. He inched forward a little, then swung down, hanging headfirst with hands free.

Rick was within reach. Scotty inched forward a little more and removed Rick's belt. Then he took his own belt and buckled the two together.

"I'm going to lash you to the upright," he said.

"Trooper, can you support him from below? He won't be able to fall away from the post if he's tied."

The trooper replied, "I can do it. Hold him when you have the belt in place. I'll get under him. Rick, put your knees on my shoulders. Support yourself all you can. I'll do the rest."

"Got it," Rick said.

Scotty looped the belt around his chest, under the arms, then brought it around the upright and tied it securely. It was too long to buckle. Then he took Rick's wrists in his hands and called, "Got him. Go ahead down."

The trooper let go of Rick and lowered himself, then moved around the upright to a spot directly under the boy. He climbed until Rick could rest his knees on the trooper's shoulders.

"Now," the trooper said.

Rick had his arms around the upright. He supported himself as best he could, slipping down as the trooper moved. They reached the first crosspiece easily.

Scotty came down the upright and took up a position on the crosspiece. The next stage was easier, since Scotty could hold to Rick's upstretched hands part of the way.

At the crosspiece nearest the ground, Scotty did the same thing. Then the trooper's feet touched and he lowered Rick to the solid earth.

Scotty came down and untied the belt and Rick took a deep breath, feet spread wide to keep his balance. He was a little wobbly.

He grinned at Scotty and the trooper. "Thanks, both of you. Any time you need jobs as circus acrobats, I'll write you a letter of recommendation."

Scotty grinned back. "All right?"

"All but my arm. There's some life coming back into it, but it's still numb." He tried to move the arm and felt something grate painfully.

"Might be dislocated," Scotty advised. "Take it easy."

"I will." Rick put his hand into his shirt front to support the arm. It felt better that way. Then he walked over to where Soapy Strade lay outstretched on his back, hands handcuffed on his chest.

The gangster glared up at him.

"I'm probably selfish," Rick stated, "but I'm glad you're the one who took the fall. And I'm glad it didn't kill you."

"It's a miracle it didn't," said the trooper who was guarding Strade. "He has a couple of broken bones, but that's all. Nothing very serious."

The gangster bared his teeth in a painful grin. "Think you've got the last laugh, kid? Well, think different. Ever hear of a private eye named Curtis? Pal of yours."

"What about him?" Scotty asked quickly.

"What do you know about Mike?" Rick demanded. He suddenly realized they had heard nothing from the private detective.

"He found me," Strade said. He grinned. "He was looking for me and he found me. Only I saw him

coming. That's all I'm going to tell you. Figure out the rest for yourselves!"

CHAPTER XX

Find Mike Curtis!

Rick and Scotty stared at each other, speechless.

One of the troopers knelt at Strade's side. "Come on, give! What about this Curtis?"

Strade grinned painfully. "That's all you'll get out of me, Trooper. Don't waste your time."

Rick knew the gangster meant it. He had nothing to lose by keeping quiet. A sentence for attempted murder added to the sentence he had been serving, plus extra time for breaking out, meant more time waiting for him in prison than one man's lifetime. Attempted murder would be easy to prove, too.

"I'll bargain with you," Rick said quickly. "Tell us about Mike and I won't press charges for what you tried to do to me."

The gangster just chuckled.

A siren wailed down the road. The trooper who had guarded Strade said, "That should be Captain Douglas. Or maybe an ambulance. I told the barracks to send one while you were on the roller coaster. Now we can find out what happened to the troopers who were supposed to be watching the amusement park."

That was the first Rick had heard of any troopers. Scotty told him about Captain Douglas' question, then they compared notes on the yell from the parking area. That yell didn't sound so good for the troopers, now that they knew a patrol car had been hidden there.

In a moment Captain Douglas was listening to Rick's story. He turned to the troopers who had brought him. "Morton, you and Clark get over to the trees behind the parking lot. See if there's a cruiser there. Find out what happened to Patterson and Kosuski. I don't like what the boys say about a yell. Make it snappy."

"Now we have to find Mike," Rick said urgently. "Soapy won't tell us anything."

"One thing first." Captain Douglas looked grim. "I want to know what happened to my troopers. And where's Lefty?"

Rick had forgotten the phony caretaker. "Golly! I forgot about him. He took off in the motorboat, Captain. I don't know exactly how long ago, but it can't be more than a few minutes."

"You have a boat?" Douglas asked quickly.

"Yes, sir."

Scotty spoke up. "Captain, we don't want to pick up Lefty! Can't you see? He's the one who can lead us to Mike Curtis. If we just keep an eye on him, he might lead us right to Mike."

Captain Douglas frowned thoughtfully. "It's a possibility. But to keep an eye on him, we have to find him. How do we do that without letting him know we're on his trail? It's daylight, and a boat following him could be seen easily."

Before the boys could think of an answer, an ambulance came through the broken fence. A white-clad intern got out. "What's up? We got a call from the barracks to report here."

A trooper pointed to the gang leader's recumbent form. "Meet Soapy Strade. He's a little banged up. Seems he had a little war with Rick Brant and got thrown from up there." He pointed to the track overhead.

The intern whistled. "How come he's still alive?"

"Takes more than that to damage Soapy Strade," the trooper said. "He's a tough customer. Fix him up, Doc. I'll stick with you until we get him to the hospital."

The intern got to work. The ambulance driver brought splints and a first-aid kit from the back of the ambulance.

Scotty said regretfully, "We could locate Lefty easily if we had your plane, Rick."

Captain Douglas snapped his fingers. "That's it." He strode to the cruiser that had brought Scotty, leaned in, and picked up the microphone. When he had contacted the barracks, he said, "Rout Gus out of bed. You have his number in the files." He turned to Rick. "Can he land here?"

"Yes, when it gets a little lighter. By the time he could fly down here it would be all right."

Captain Douglas spoke to the barracks again. "Tell him I need him in a hurry. He can land between the highway and the amusement park. Rick Brant has landed here before. Tell him that. And call the nearest patrol car and have it report to me."

As he spoke, two patrol cars came through the gate. In a moment they saw that one was Captain Douglas' cruiser. The other was apparently the one that had been watching the amusement park.

Trooper Morton, Captain Douglas' driver, saw the intern and called, "Doc! Forget Strade for a minute and take a look at Patterson. He's in the back seat."

The boys and the captain hurried over as Trooper Clark, who had gone with Morton, helped the other missing trooper from the second car.

The doctor quickly examined Patterson, then climbed from the back seat. "Let's get him out of there. He's okay, but weak from loss of blood. He's been slugged and knifed."

Willing hands lifted the trooper to the ground.

Kosuski limped up, helped by Trooper Clark. "Sorry, sir. We got taken like a couple of amateurs."

“What happened?” Captain Douglas asked quietly.

The trooper grimaced. “We were sitting in the car, Joe had just come back after making a quick trip on foot around the area. Suddenly we heard a hissing. It was air coming out of a back tire. I said, ‘Hey! There goes a tire.’ I got out my side and Joe got out on his. He walked right into a knife. He let out a yell, and then they slugged him. I grabbed for my gun and started around to help him, then someone let me have it from behind. It didn’t knock me out, but it almost did. I turned and grappled with the guy that hit me and we wrestled for a minute. He had a knife, and I got it in the thigh. Not serious. Then someone gave him a hand.”

“Both of them were trussed up and gagged,” Morton reported. “It’s lucky for Patterson that he got tied. They cut the blanket from the first-aid kit into strips and used that, and it was thick enough to stop Patterson’s bleed- ing.”

Kosuski added, “I figure they came in from behind the car, took the valve cap off a rear tire, and then poked in a matchstick or something to let a little air out.”

Captain Douglas nodded. “All right. I’m glad you’re both alive. What I want to know is, how did Soapy and Lefty know the park was being watched? They must have known just where you were in order to sneak up on you like that.”

“I don’t know, sir,” the trooper said.

“We’ll try to find out. Meanwhile, we have work to do.” The captain started issuing orders. He dispatched a car north and another south with instructions to watch for Lefty and to exercise caution so the fleeing thug wouldn’t know he was being watched. One trooper went in each car, leaving two troopers behind in addition to the two wounded men.

Captain Douglas ordered one of them to go with Scotty and to bring back the guard the boys had captured. The radio in the remaining cruiser sounded, calling the captain. He answered and was told that another car would arrive within five minutes.

“What’s the plan, Captain?” Rick asked.

“I’ll fly with Gus. When we spot Lefty, I’ll drop a note to the barracks and they can relay instructions. We’ll keep high enough and far inland enough so Lefty won’t know the plane is interested in him. We’ll keep the cars tracking him, and when he lands, there will be a big enough reception committee to take care of him without trouble.”

“How about Scotty and me?” Rick demanded.

“You’re going home.”

Rick shook his head. “Not on your life! We have to see this through to the end. Can’t we ride in one of the cars?”

Douglas smiled. “I don’t suppose I can stop you. If I try, you’ll probably flag a stranger and talk him into trailing my cruisers. All right. I’ll tell Morton you can ride with him.”

“Thanks a million!” Rick grinned widely. He didn’t want to be left out now.

Captain Douglas walked over to where the intern was working on the two troopers and Soapy. Patterson was neatly bandaged now. He smiled up at the captain. "Sorry, skipper."

"Forget it. That tire gag was pretty cute. I'd have fallen for it myself."

Kosuski was getting a bandage on his thigh wound. "I doubt that, Captain. But we sure fell for it."

Strade lay on the ground and watched silently. Rick looked down at his enemy. "Know what tripped you up, Strade? It was passing a red light. Isn't that a howl? You run a racket for years and commit murder and kidnaping and every other crime invented, and then you go through a red light and end up back in jail."

Soapy's eyes narrowed. "You mean when I bumped that jalopy?"

"My sister was in it," Rick told him. "You hurt her, Strade. It wasn't your fault that you didn't kill her. If you hadn't run that light, Captain Douglas wouldn't have asked me to fly around and locate you. Of course we didn't know who was in the hit-and-run car. But since my sister had been hurt, I wasn't going to give up until I found the man responsible."

The gang leader muttered under his breath.

Captain Douglas asked, "Who thought up that rattrap idea, Soapy? Lefty isn't smart enough, but you are. And didn't you have a pilot's license once?"

Soapy sneered. "What rattrap? Never heard of it."

"You watched us setting up the plane alarm," Rick told him. "That's why it wasn't hard for you to disconnect it."

He knew they could never prove that Soapy had sabotaged the plane, but it wasn't necessary. The fight on the roller coaster was proof enough of attempted murder.

A call came in for Captain Douglas. The trooper who had gone north reported that Lefty's boat was nearing Seaford and heading out toward the ocean, probably getting out of sight of land.

"Do you think he's trying to get out of the area by boat?" Rick asked. "I mean, will he try to reach Staten Island or something like that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Douglas retorted. "What do you think?"

Rick had a theory. "Look, Captain. Soapy and company never got by the road blocks, so far as we know. It's doubtful that they did, because that would mean they left and re-entered the area at least twice. I have a hunch they found a hide-out close by, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was one of the summer colonies. No one would think anything of strangers living in one of the cottages."

"Makes sense," the officer agreed.

Scotty and the trooper who had gone to the project came through the gate leading the guard, who was handcuffed to the trooper. At the same moment, Rick heard the drone of Gus's plane. Before Scotty reached the roller coaster, Gus was in sight.

Things happened rapidly. Another cruiser arrived. The guard was put into it and dispatched to jail. Soapy and Patterson were loaded into the ambulance on stretchers and Kosuski climbed in as both patient and guard. The ambulance got on its way.

Captain Douglas took off in Gus's plane, and the two boys got into the back seat of the remaining cruiser.

As they left the amusement park, Scotty suddenly remembered. "Hey! Our motorboat is still there."

Rick grinned, trying to adjust his arm more comfortably. "So is the Tractosaur. Wait until Dad and the others find it in the middle of the amusement park!"

The cruiser rolled northward. As it passed the Seaford turnoff, the radio broke the silence. "Calling Car 28."

The trooper in front acknowledged. "Go ahead."

"Captain Douglas just dropped a message. Boat spotted, going north, staying well out to sea. It is now just south of Spindrift. All cars head for Whiteside and await further instructions."

Scotty smiled. "Lefty probably thinks he's safe as can be. If he only knew!"

Rick pictured the coast line. If his guess about a summer colony was correct, it must be one of those north of Whiteside. He hoped that Lefty would lead them to Mike, but more than that he hoped that Mike was all right. Somehow, he wasn't afraid that any real harm had come to the detective. Strade hadn't given that impression.

There were only two summer colonies to which Lefty might be going. Either of them was nearly a half hour away from Lefty's present position.

"Let's stop at Whiteside for a few minutes," Rick suggested to Trooper Morton. "We can get to any point on the coast ahead of Lefty. And I need some breakfast. Besides, if the doctor is handy, I'd like to have him take a look at this arm."

The trooper nodded. "We can do that. The radio will keep us posted." He stepped on the gas.

Within a short time they had eaten a quick breakfast and the doctor, aroused from sleep, was examining Rick's arm with grumpy impatience.

"Miracle you haven't broken your neck before this," he muttered. "Confounded idiot! Walking around with a dislocated shoulder as though it were nothing!"

Rick gritted his teeth as the doctor, aided by Scotty, set the shoulder, then bandaged Rick's arm to his chest with heavy linen strips.

"That's to keep you from trying to use the arm," the doctor stated. "If I didn't strap it down you'd try to climb a tree or something. Now sit down and let me take a look at that leg."

He rolled up Rick's trouser leg and exposed a bloodstained bandage. Sometime during the fight on the roller coaster, Rick had scraped the leg. He didn't remember when or how. As the doctor rebandaged it, he said sourly, "You'd better study medicine this fall to learn how to bandage yourself. Now go on out

and tear that leg open again.”

“I’m sorry,” Rick said contritely. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Humph,” the doctor said.

The cruiser had waited outside the door. As Rick and Scotty got in, Morton said, “Lefty is opposite Whiteside. He’s moving in toward land.”

“We’ll get a line on where he’s heading pretty soon,” Scotty commented. “If he’s coming in to shore that means he’s not trying for any points north.”

Scotty’s surmise was correct. As the prowl car moved back to the Shore Road and headed north from White-side, the radio suddenly called, “Captain Douglas is landing at Whiteside airport. Car 31 pick him up. Other cars proceed at once to the summer colony at Beaman’s Point. Boat has passed the colony nearer Whiteside. Proceed with caution. Park cars out of sight and go in on foot. Captain Douglas will take command personally.”

“Pretty soon,” Rick muttered. He was getting excited now. From all around the area, police cars were closing in. Lefty didn’t know it, but he didn’t have a chance. He would walk right into a solid fence of police guns.

Their car was the first on the scene. The troopers parked across the road from the summer colony, hiding their car behind a large clump of willow. Scotty looked at Rick. “You’d better not get too near the shooting if there’s going to be any. You’re not as spry as you were, with that arm strapped and a leg bandaged.”

“Don’t think I’m going to miss it,” Rick said flatly. “Come on.”

Lefty was in sight, south of the colony. People were beginning to stir, and occasionally a car went by on the road. It was still too early for any but the very early birds, however.

One of the troopers knocked on the back door of a cottage. He had seen the family inside, having breakfast. A man came to the door. “What’s up, Officer?”

The trooper explained briefly. “Get under cover and stay there. We’re waiting for a thug to arrive in a motor-boat. May be some shooting.”

The man disappeared, consulted hastily with his family, and then led them to an inner room.

Another squad car appeared and vanished behind a screen of trees. Captain Douglas got out with two troopers, joined Rick and Scotty, and issued quick orders. “Get behind houses, on the edges of the colony. As other cars arrive I’ll fill in the gaps. Rick, get under cover. We don’t want a soul in sight when Lefty arrives. Scotty, you go down the road a little way to warn any patrol cars to take cover before they reach the colony.”

Scotty hurried off. Rick and Captain Douglas put a house between them and the oncoming boat. Rick estimated that Lefty was still about ten minutes from shore.

Another police car arrived and the captain dispersed its troopers. A local prowl car came and four Whiteside officers—practically the whole force—joined the troopers. “That’s plenty,” Captain Douglas said,

grinning. "I've fought battles with less men than this."

The police had found good cover. Rick looked around and couldn't see even one. Scotty joined him and the captain.

"He's practically here," Scotty said.

The colony seemed to hold its breath as Lefty reached the small dock and cut his motor.

The gangster took a hurried look around, saw no one, and ran for a small cottage on the far side of the colony. Rick watched, peering around a corner. The cottage, a two-room affair, was painted green. A sign over the back door announced *Yule-Ike-It*. Rick found time to wonder why people strained so hard to give summer cottages such elaborately cute names. He thought that Lefty would probably change the name from you'll-like-it to something quite different in the next few minutes.

Lefty reached the door of the cottage and froze with his hand on the knob as a trooper barked, "Get 'em high. Quick!"

The gangster's hands flew into the air. He turned, a look of astonishment on his face.

Troopers and policemen seemed to spring from the ground. In a moment Lefty was handcuffed, and a trooper was handing his gun to Captain Douglas.

Rick was on the heels of the troopers who barged into the cottage.

A man, who had been asleep on a couch, reached for a gun. One of the troopers jumped forward and thrust a police baton into his face. "Reach," he invited. The man did. He was the third man who had been with Soapy and Lefty at the Whiteside pier.

In an inner room they found Mike Curtis. He was awake. He was lying on his side, hands and feet roped together behind him, a gag in his mouth.

A trooper knelt and removed the gag. Mike coughed, then rubbed his tongue over his lips. He looked up at Rick and grinned.

"What kept you?" Mike asked.

CHAPTER XXI

Soapy Strade's Secret

Rick leaned back in the comfortable chair Barby had once occupied as an invalid and let his sister bring him a cup of coffee and a freshly made doughnut.

"Think you'll live?" she asked brightly.

Now that the excitement was over, the reaction had set in. Rick felt as though he had been hauled by force through a very small coffee grinder. Every bone ached a little, and his shoulder ached unmercifully. His leg throbbed. His eyes had a hard time remaining open. He wanted above all else to go to bed, but he couldn't. He had company.

In a semicircle on the porch sat Mike Curtis, Captain Douglas, Jerry Webster, Mrs. Brant, Briotti, Shannon, and Scotty. The others were at work, at the project. Barby served them all with coffee and doughnuts, then took a footstool and sat next to Rick.

"I'm going to turn in my badge," Mike was saying. "And hand my license to the nearest desk sergeant. I'm a fine detective, all right. I'm like the lion hunter who got into trouble because he succeeded in finding a lion and wasn't ready for the next step."

"I can see why you're a little red in the face," Captain Douglas said genially. "But don't blame yourself too much."

Mike smiled. "I don't. Not too much. How was I to know that Jimmy the Dip would be there?"

Jimmy the Dip, a noted pickpocket, was the man they had surprised asleep. He had known Mike.

"I took my case of brush samples and walked right into the cottage," Mike said. "I carried a brush in my hand. I waved it. I said, 'Gentlemen, here's just the thing for washing your car, scrubbing out your fishing boat, or washing windows. And no matter how hard you scrub, you won't hurt this brush. No, sir. It's made of Nylon, the new synthetic fabric.' I held it out to Strade, and I said, 'Feel those bristles?' He grinned and said, 'Feel that heater in your back?' And I did. Jimmy was behind me with a rod shoved against my spine. He had seen me coming, and tipped off the others. The rest is history."

"You're lucky," Scotty commented.

Mike laughed. "He's telling me! But why did Lefty come back to the cottage after he got away from the amusement park in the boat?"

Rick thought he had the answer. "I think Lefty didn't know we had him nicely taped. He probably figured he could get under cover and lay low, and then he and Jimmy could slip out when the heat was off."

"I think Rick's right," Captain Douglas agreed. "Lefty felt safe once he reached the boat and got out to sea."

After all, no one had found the cottage except Mike, and he had been taken care of. What's more, if anyone had been working with Mike, he would have shown up. Or something would have happened. Lefty wouldn't figure on trouble once a night had passed."

"He might have just gone to the cottage to warn Jimmy," Scotty speculated.

Captain Douglas shook his head. "I doubt it. Lefty wouldn't care about Jimmy's skin. He'd worry only about his own."

Barby sighed. "Such names! Soapy, Lefty the Gonif, and Jimmy the Dip. What's a dip?"

"Pickpocket," Mike told her.

“I see, He dips into pockets!”

“Exactly.” Captain Douglas added, “But the other man’s name will disappoint you. I mean the guard that Back and Scotty captured. His name turns out to be Willis Montgomery Jones.”

Rick remembered the tough face and broke into laughter. “Call him Willis and get shot, I’ll bet!”

Mrs. Brant spoke up. “There’s one thing I don’t understand. Why were these men at the amusement park?”

“That was Soapy’s original hide-out,” Captain Douglas explained. “I’m sure of it. He and Lefty probably reached it before we had time to set up the road blocks. Rick and Scotty spoiled it as a hiding place. But we had a complete road-block system thrown around the area by then, so Soapy couldn’t just move on. Instead—I’m speculating, of course—he phoned one of his gang. Maybe this Willis Jones. He gave instructions. Willis and Jimmy simply drove to Whiteside and rented a cottage. There was no reason to suspect them. They had a legally registered car and we had no way of knowing they were connected with Soapy.

“We can assume they picked up Soapy and Lefty at the amusement park and took them to the rented cottage. After all, this is pretty late in the season and cottages are plentiful. Furthermore, four men in a cottage in good fishing country attracts no attention.”

“The cottage had a phone,” Mike added. “Probably one left in by the owner and charged for with the rent. We also found the car parked across the street. A registration in Willis’ name was in the glove compartment.”

“But why did Soapy and Lefty go back to the amusement park?” Barby persisted. “I agree with Mother. There’s one thing you haven’t answered.”

“And why did they go by boat?” Jerry added.

Rick remembered something. “Listen, gang! I went up the stairs in the fun house, because I thought Soapy had come back to look for something. I didn’t think he would come upstairs, but he did! Whatever is hidden must be upstairs in the fun house.”

“Wait!” Scotty jumped to his feet. “How do you know he was just going to the second floor? Remember the light on top of the roller coaster? He might have been climbing to the top, anyway, and you just happened to get in the way!”

“Whatever the answer is, I know the reason they went by boat,” Mike Curtis said. “Jimmy the Dip is a thief, but no killer. He belonged to Strade’s gang, but no one ever called him a gunman. After the other three had left, he told me. He said they were going to be picked up by a boat which was waiting offshore. That was Soapy Strade’s real getaway. I think he went to the amusement park originally expecting to be picked up in a few hours, and maybe taken to Cuba or something. Maybe the boat was delayed. I don’t know.

“Anyway,” Mike went on, “Jimmy made a bargain with me. He pointed out that I knew him, and if he turned me loose, he’d end up in the clink. That was true enough. So, he said, he would have to get rid of me. I didn’t think much of that idea, and I told him so. Well, he made me some compliments about being a square guy who kept his promise, and said if I’d swear not to turn him in, he’d release me as soon as Strade got a good start. I did the only thing I could do, not wanting to depart from this world at my

tender age. I made a bargain with him to keep quiet. As it happened, it wasn't necessary."

"That sort of knocks my theory in the head," Scotty complained. "Soapy must have been signaling for the boat he was to catch."

Rick didn't think so. "A boat could have picked him up off the colony. No, he went to the amusement park for something. I vote we call the project and ask the people there to search the fun house."

"Good idea," Captain Douglas agreed. "If I may use your phone, I'll fix that right now."

As the captain went into the library, Rick looked at his watch. They must be testing the Tractosaur by this time. He wished he could see the test. But, he consoled himself, he knew the machine worked. It had certainly obeyed his instructions!

Captain Douglas came back and sat down. "I got your dad. He'll drop everything for a few minutes and ransack the fun house. I told him he could wreck the roller coaster if he needed to."

"By the way," Scotty said, "where's the Coast Guard? Didn't you call them?"

"Yes. Then, as soon as Gus and I located Lefty's boat, we dropped a message to the barracks and ordered them to call off the Coast Guard. We didn't want a cutter or anything else tipping Lefty off that we were after him."

Captain Douglas accepted another cup of coffee from Barby. "While we're waiting for a call, suppose I try to sum up what happened?"

"Swell," Rick agreed. "I'm a little hazy on a few things."

"Okay. We'll start with Strade breaking out of jail. He didn't do it alone, obviously. It was a well-organized escape. He got out in a grocery truck, all trussed up in a burlap bag. His gang was waiting for him in a fast car. They got across the river, probably before we were able to put men on all bridges and tunnels."

"Then Jerry and I got hit," Barby put in.

"Yes. At that time, Soapy and Lefty were on their way to the amusement park. From the looks of the fun house, I'd say that Lefty had everything planned. There were cots, and enough food for several days."

"If they hadn't left a track in the grass, it would have worked," Scotty said.

"But it didn't." Captain Douglas smiled grimly. "The track put the Spindrift twins on their trail, and that was the beginning of the end. The first time you got in the park, Soapy and Lefty were taken in. They thought you were only looking around, as you said. But when you showed up at night, and they were sure from the wreckage of the crosspiece that you had seen Strade, that forced their hand. Probably they were already suspicious, because one or both of them spied on you while you were connecting the plane alarm."

"If I get another plane, the alarm will be a foolproof one," Rick promised.

"It better be. Well, they disconnected the alarm, rigged the rattrap, and fixed the board you had broken.

Then Lefty probably got to a phone, perhaps in Seaford, and called one of the gang. We'll be able to check up on this later. It may be that Jimmy the Dip and Willis Jones had already rented the cottage and were living there, just in case of trouble. I rather think that was the case. We know that Soapy lays his plans carefully, and he wouldn't have failed to make some alternate plan. Anyway, we can assume that Jimmy and Willis picked up Soapy and Lefty at the amusement park and hid them out. Am I making sense to you all?"

"You're doing fine," Mike Curtis assured him. "Let me pick up. Meanwhile, my secretary got in touch with me. I located the real-estate office which controlled the amusement park, and got the dope that Soapy's brother-in-law owned the place. I phoned Spindrift. Then after I left, the girl in the office phoned Soapy's hide-out. That's the only solution to what happened later, and that makes me agree with Captain Douglas that Jimmy and Willis were already in the cottage, since she had a number to call. She must be tied right in with Strade's"

"We'll ask the New York police to look into that," Douglas assured him. "Go on."

"Well, Soapy and his pals didn't want their connection with the amusement park known. We don't know why. But the reason was strong enough so that Soapy risked bringing his boys to the Whiteside pier to get me - because I knew about his connection with the park."

"There were only three of them at the pier," Scotty recalled. "Willis Jones wasn't there."

"He may have been," Mike pointed out. "He might have waited in the car, ready for a getaway. We drove them off, and we pinked Jimmy in the arm. Just grazed him. His arm was bandaged while I was with him at the cottage. In fact, I changed the bandage once. Rick and Scotty nailed the other two with rocks. Not hard enough for real damage, but they left some marks to pay back for Rick's black eyes."

Rick grinned. His eyes were almost normal now, but they still had faintly colored rings around them.

"After that, Rick and Scotty identified Soapy and Lefty, and I got the idea of going after the reward money. Rick will get the reward now, I hope. He certainly earned it - with blood!"

Rick hadn't thought of that!

"He'll get it," Douglas agreed. "It will buy you two new planes if you want them, Rick. No one will argue that you, and you alone, got Soapy Strade. Even if Scotty and my troopers hadn't arrived, Strade couldn't have gotten away. He was too badly hurt."

Mike Curtis continued, "I narrowed the search down to that one summer colony after talking with the phone operator. She had a record of the call, but there was no exact address because the cottages don't have them. She couldn't tell me which house, but she did tell me the colony. I think that Jimmy saw me going from house to house and recognized me. I met him while I was working on a case in New York some time ago. So when I knocked on their door, they were waiting for me."

Captain Douglas picked up the thread of speculation. "One of them must have reconnoitered the amusement park. Mike, did any of them leave the cottage yesterday?"

Mike snapped his fingers. "Yes! Jones took the car out late yesterday afternoon. He was gone for about two hours."

"That must have been when my troopers were spotted," Douglas said. "I can't figure anything else."

Probably Jones went to see if the coast was clear and spotted the patrol car among the trees behind the parking lot. That's why Strade and Lefty were prepared."

"And that's why I got to the fun house before they did," Rick added. "They took their time sneaking up on the troopers. They had to be dead sure of getting them the first try. I wish you'd told us you'd placed a guard on the park, Captain."

"I should have," Douglas admitted. "To be frank, I didn't think about it."

"It all adds up," Tony Briotti said. He had been listening with great interest. "But there are still a couple of questions. Did Strade expect to have a boat pick him up? If so, what delayed it? Why wasn't he picked up the first night he arrived?"

That was an answer they didn't get until much later. The boat scheduled to pick Soapy Strade up and take him out of the country had indeed tried to sail on schedule, but had been picked up by customs authorities who had been watching it for some time. The customs men had impounded the craft pending further investigation into narcotics smuggling.

Strade's New York contacts had learned that their boat was impounded and had been forced to make other arrangements to get Soapy out of the country. While the group on the Spindrift porch were talking, a Coast Guard plane was at that very moment circling low over an expensive yacht belonging to a well-known gambler. The Coast Guard couldn't know, of course, that the yacht had stood off the coast near the amusement park all night, waiting for a boat that never came. Lefty had tried to reach the yacht but had turned too far north. Missing it, he had run in desperation for the cottage hide-out.

Briotti continued, "The other question, which you have already stated, is what is the real answer to Soapy's connection with the amusement park?"

At that moment the phone rang. Scotty ran to answer, Captain Douglas with him.

They were gone a long time. The group on the porch waited anxiously, not talking. Finally the two came back, and they had very strange expressions on their faces.

"That was Dad," Scotty said. "They searched the fun house and found nothing. So they turned the Tractosaur loose and knocked down the roller coaster. It was a public menace, leaning over that way, so they didn't hesitate. Rick, remember that the very top of the coaster was boarded solid instead of having open ties like the rest?"

Rick nodded. "I remember."

Scotty continued, "The boards came loose while the machine was battering away, and it started raining money!"

"Big money," Captain Douglas interjected. "There was a tar-paper lined space about an inch deep, three feet wide, and four feet long. It was jammed with money."

Scotty added in a hushed voice, "They're still counting it. So far, they have more than four hundred thousand dollars!"

There was a chorus of gasps. Rick saw in a flash the reason for Soapy Strade's actions. The light on the coaster had been Soapy, looking to see if his cache was still there. He had left it, knowing it would

remain safe until his getaway was fixed. Then he had returned to collect it, to take it with him out of the country. No wonder he had been willing to commit murder or anything else to keep anyone from suspecting his real association with the amusement park! The money must have been there since before Soapy was sent to jail!

“Soapy only made one haul that big,” Mike Curtis told them. “The pay-roll robbery that was never proved against him. Rick, looks like you and Scotty can split another reward. The insurance company that insured the pay roll has a standing offer of twenty thousand for information leading to recovery of the money, or arrest and conviction of the men responsible.”

Rick sank back in his chair, openmouthed. Why, he was rich!

“Incidentally,” Scotty said to Rick, “the men from Washington thought the Tractosaur was terrific. Dad said it worked even better than they had hoped.”

Howard Shannon turned to Rick. “Did I hear you intend getting a bigger plane? This reward money will make it possible.”

Rick nodded. “I’ll get a four-seater flying station wagon.”

“Good! This will solve a transportation problem . . . if you and Scotty will go on an expedition with Tony and me.”

“Will we!” Rick exclaimed. “Where?” He was amused when he realized Shannon had remained silent until he saw that the reward money would help him to solve a problem connected with his work. Not that the scientist cared about the money. It was just that he was completely absorbed in his work.

Tony Briotti smiled at the boys. “Howard has a good idea. We’re sailing in about two weeks, and we can take you and your new plane with us. You can get one in that time, I’m sure. We’re off to a place called Banaue, pronounced *Ban-ow-ee*. ”

Rick had no idea where that was. He said so.

“It’s in the northern part of the island of Luzon, in the Philippines,” Shannon told them. “It’s the home of the Ifugaos, primitive people who were head-hunters not so long ago.”

Even as he spoke, an Ifugao woman, clad in a red skirt decorated with yellow yarn balls, was stirring up a fire over which a clay rice bowl bubbled. The woman couldn’t know that a few feet beyond, in a secret place hidden for centuries, lay an object which would plunge four Americans into terrible danger, a story to be told in the next book of Rick’s adventures: THE GOLDEN SKULL

THE END

STAIRWAY TO DANGER

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY, No. 9

BY JOHN BLAINE