

Goodwin Harold Leland

The Blue Ghost Mystery: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story



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A Rick Brant Science- Adventure Story

CHAPTER I

A Spooky Invitation

Rick Brant moved with infinite care. With one hand he adjusted the focus of his microscope, while with the other he brought the sharp glass tip of the pipette into view. He released his thumb for a fraction of a second and let a drop of blue fluid flow into the field of view.

The microscopic monster shot out its defensive weapons, shuddered, and was still. For a moment Rick inspected his work, then sat back with a sigh. Staining microscopic animals was delicate work, but this specimen had turned out perfectly. At the instant the stain hit the animal, it had shot out its trichocysts, or stinging hairs. Rick hoped they would photograph. He needed a good picture for the science project on which he was working.

To rest his eyes he turned in his chair and looked out over the broad horizon of the Atlantic Ocean. It was a calm day, and the

calmness was reflected in the leisurely pace of life on Spindrift Island. The famous island off the New Jersey coast, home of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation, had not always been so peaceful, Rick thought. Many scientific experiments of world importance had taken place, or had begun, in the long, low, gray laboratory buildings on the southeast corner of the island.

Most recently, Rick Brant and his pal Donald Scott, nicknamed Scotty, had taken part in an expedition to the Sulu Sea. The quiet, scientific survey of human and animal life in the area had begun on Spindrift Island, but had ended in a bloody fight on another island, in a far corner of the globe, as told in *The Pirates of Shan*.

Now, though, all was serene. The scientists were at work on reports, or teaching summer sessions at universities. No major experiments were in progress, and no expeditions were being planned.

Rick grinned. If he came right down to it, one reason for the peace and quiet was the absence of his sister Barbara. Barby, a year his junior, was visiting with the Millers, one of the island's scientific families, at their ancestral home in Virginia. Barby and Jan Miller had a way of making life somewhat frenzied, or at least less quiet than at present.

The sound of a fast-moving motorboat intruded on the quiet and Rick cocked an ear. It was one of the Spindrift boats, judging by the sound. That meant Scotty was returning from the mainland with the groceries and the mail.

Rick stood up and stretched luxuriously. He decided to walk down to the cove and meet Scotty. He could help carry the groceries. Besides, he hoped that Scotty would have a package for him from a biological supply house.

Rick's interest in microscopy had begun with Barby's present of a complete microscope set. It was a beauty, with magnifications up to three hundred times. It had its own light source, a substage illuminator, and even an "atomic energy" stage, which was actually a device for viewing the scintillations caused when radioactivity hit a sulfide screen.

Barby's gift was far more than a toy, and Rick promptly put it to work on a science project, in which he planned to compare the life cycles of two common microscopic animals, the paramecium and the rotifer. His laboratory was a table on the front porch of the big Brant house on Spindrift Island, because the ocean breeze made it a comfortable place to work, and because Barby's absence meant the porch wasn't cluttered with half the female population of Whiteside High School.

As Rick came within sight of the cove, Scotty was already docking. The husky ex-Marine threw a hitch over the dock cleat and jumped to the pier, waving excitedly as he saw Rick.

"Hey! Wait until you see what I have!"

Rick let his long legs carry him swiftly to meet the other boy. When Scotty got excited, something unusual was up. He called, "What is it?"

Scotty yelled, "We're going ghost hunting!"

Rick stopped in his tracks. He waited until Scotty was within normal voice range. "Come on into the house," he invited. "We'll get you some aspirin and put a wet towel on your head. The sun's got you, that's all."

The dark-haired boy shook his head vehemently. "Don't jump at conclusions in this heat, brother Brant. You'll get overheated. Just listen to what's in this letter."

Rick squinted against the glare. "Who's it from?"

"Barby and Jan."

Rick groaned. "Don't you know Barby's been gone on ghosts ever since she started watching that TV program on Sunday nights?"

"This is different," Scotty insisted. "But since you're such a skeptic, you can wait until we've hauled in the food. Come on, scientist. And unless you keep an open mind until you hear the evidence, we'll take your Junior Experimenter badge away."

Rick had to grin. There was justice in his pal's comment. "Okay, we'll play it your way. But the evidence had better be good!"

Mrs. Brant was in the kitchen when the boys arrived with the bags of groceries Scotty had brought. She recognized her daughter's handwriting immediately and pointed to the letter sticking out of Scotty's shirt pocket. "What's the news in Virginia?"

"Barby found a haunted house," Rick said with a grin. "Scotty's all excited."

"He's handing out bum dope, as usual," Scotty added. "He hasn't even read the letter." He grinned widely. "But I have. And he'll eat his words before we're through."

Rick fielded a can of tomatoes Scotty tossed at him and put it on the canned-goods shelf. "Never had indigestion from eating my words yet."

"This time," Scotty said happily, "we'll paint them on an oak plank before you start eating."

Mrs. Brant smiled. "Hurry up and get those bundles unpacked, you two. I want to hear about this mysterious business."

In a short time the three of them had stowed the week's supply of food, and Mrs. Brant produced fresh doughnuts and cold milk.

"Now," she said, "suppose you read the letter, Scotty."

Dr. Hartson Brant, Rick's dad and head of the island scientific foundation, came into the kitchen in time to hear the last remark. "Can I listen too?" he asked. "With milk and doughnuts to help, of course."

Rick personally poured the milk for his father and added doughnuts to the plate, just to save time. He couldn't admit it to Scotty, of course, but he was plenty curious in spite of his skepticism. He knew Scotty, and his pal wouldn't get excited over some silly business that Barby might write about.

Scotty produced the letter. "It's addressed to both Rick and me," he began, "and it's from both Barby and Jan. Shall I read?"

"Go on," Rick said impatiently, and had to bear Scotty's knowing grin. Scotty knew that Rick's bump of curiosity was the

largest thing he owned.

"Okay. It starts with 'Dear Rick and Scotty.'"

"Interesting," Rick said. "Unusual."

"Uh-uh. Quiet, please. It goes on, 'You must come at once, both of you, because we have a ghost here. I know Rick will think I'm silly, but it's true.' And Jan put in a sentence in her own handwriting at this point that says, 'Barby is right. It's not only true, it's unbelievable.'"

Scotty continued. "'We heard about the ghost first thing we arrived, from Mr. Belsely, the Millers' tenant farmer. Of course we didn't believe it, but last night we went to a picnic at the Old Mine Campground, and we saw it too! Honestly, we're still both lumpy with goose pimples. It was just ghastly, but it was kind of romantic, too. If Dr. and Mrs. Miller hadn't been along, I don't think we'd have believed we had really experienced such a thing. But they saw it, too, and Dr. Miller says he has never heard of anything like it.'"

Rick waited for more, scarcely breathing for fear of missing a word.

"So you had better come right away," Scotty read on. "'You can fly down and land right at the Millers'. We have shown on the map where to land, and we will put out white towels to make a panel so you can see us from the air. Please hurry. Barby and Jan."

"Sounds pretty urgent," Hartson Brant said with interest. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. There's a postscript from Dr. Miller. He says, 'The girls were pretty excited when they wrote the above, and with excellent reason. Apparently this apparition appears fairly often. A number of townfolk have seen it. I don't know what you can do, unless your ingenuity can produce a super spook catcher, but you will enjoy tackling this problem. It is worthy of your best effort. Mrs. Miller and I heartily endorse the girls' invitation.'"

Rick took a deep breath. "I'll eat my words," he agreed. "Even if you inscribe them in deathless bronze, as the poet says. How about that, Dad? Dr. Miller isn't the excitable type, but he was pretty strong in his statements."

The scientist, who looked like an older version of his tall son, nodded agreement and stoked his pipe thoughtfully. "The letter was obviously written in haste, because neither the girls nor Walter took time for a description. What about it? Think you'll go?"

Scotty spoke emphatically. "I'm going. But I'm not sure Rick can get his nose out of that microscope."

"No need," Rick said, grinning. "I'll just take it with me. Besides, I might pick up a new species or two in Virginia."

Scotty sighed. "Ever since you got that mike from Barby we've seen practically nothing of you but the top of your head."

Rick's mother spoke up. "I agree with Scotty, Rick. I know how anxious you are to do a good job on your project, but you've been at it for weeks now. Your eyes need a rest even if the rest of you doesn't."

"Don't worry, Mom," Rick said. "After that endorsement from Dr. Miller, chains couldn't keep me from going to Virginia. After all, what's a collection of microscopic animals compared to a genuine, one hundred per cent dyed-in-the-ectoplasm spook?"

CHAPTER II

Death at Costin's Creek

Scotty checked the map and examined the terrain below. "That's Manassas," he confirmed. "Swing to the south now, on a bearing of 183 degrees."

Rick banked the Sky Wagon onto a new course, then settled down to locate the landmarks Barby and Jan had noted on the road map enclosed with their letter.

The Sky Wagon had, until recently, been equipped with pontoons for water landing. Rick had outfitted it originally for a skin-diving trip to the Virgin Islands, an adventure now known as *The Wailing Octopus*. The pontoons were so useful that he had left them on, until his new science project had made it necessary to go back and forth between Newark and the island for consultation with a laboratory in the city. He was glad now that he had changed back to wheels. It had made it possible for him and Scotty to leave the morning after Barby's urgent letter arrived.

The four-seater plane was actually Rick's second. The first, his beloved Cub, had been bought and paid for by his own efforts, serving as taxi for the scientists and as the island's shopping service. When the Cub was wrecked, as described in *Stairway to Danger*, the reward for capture of a criminal and his loot had

made it possible to buy a larger and more powerful plane.

Rick consulted his watch. "We must be pretty nearly there."

"We are," Scotty confirmed. He consulted the map again. "There's the cluster of buildings on top of the mountain Barby circled. It's either a weather station or a radar installation. Start losing altitude after we go over it. The town of Lansdale should be in sight by then."

Scotty's navigation proved excellent as usual. Shortly after passing the mountaintop Rick saw the town, obviously a very small one, and immediately swung slightly north again. The glint of water caught his eye and he said excitedly, "There's Costin's Creek. It has to be. No other water in sight."

He lost altitude rapidly, finally leveling off a thousand feet above the creek. Scotty, peering ahead, saw the ground signal first. "There's the panel of white towels, ahead and to the right, on my side. Swing and you'll see it."

Rick did so. He spotted the panel at once, with four figures standing next to it. In a moment they were in plain sight, waving as the plane passed overhead. Rick did a wing over that took the plane back over the area. This time he watched the terrain carefully, while Scotty did the same.

"Looks good," Rick said. "See any rough spots?"

"Nope. It's a hayfield, fresh cut, from the looks of it. Should be okay. The leaves on the trees across the creek aren't moving, so wind shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay. Here we go." Rick turned into his landing pattern,

losing altitude rapidly. The field was a big one, so he had plenty of room. In a moment the Sky Wagon touched down, bumping only a little as it rolled across the field. He taxied to where the girls and the Millers were waiting, and killed the engine.

Barby and Jan were up on the wing before the boys had a chance even to unbuckle seat belts. Both girls were obviously excited, and both started to talk the moment Rick opened the cabin door.

He looked from one to the other trying to make sense out of the stream of words. Barby's blue eyes sparkled, as did Jan's brown ones. Both were intent on having their say, and as a result, the boys understood neither.

Not until hands had been shaken all around did the excited chatter of the girls begin to make sense. Apparently the very field where the boys had just landed was haunted. The ghost had walked this ground on more than one occasion, the latest being last night, with dogs howling and men running from the ghostly sight.

Dr. Miller finally quieted the two down. "Let's tell our tale in good order, or we'll simply confuse our visiting detectives. Come on, boys. Let's go to the house. We have some lunch waiting."

The boys collected their bags, then set up the plane's alarm system. It consisted of an electrified fence that would set off a loud klaxon horn if touched. The plane itself would also trigger the alarm if touched. The alarm could be stopped only by inserting the key in the locked door.

As the group walked from the plane to the Miller house, Rick checked his impressions with the view from the air. The house, and the field on which he had landed, were on the north side of the creek. A half mile below the house, the dirt road leading to the Miller farm crossed the creek on an old military Bailey bridge. Across the creek the road vanished into a forest that came right down to the creek's edge.

Rick knew from his overhead view that the forest was only a hundred yards wide along the creek. Beyond it were more fields, interspersed with patches of trees and a few uncultivated areas that were too rocky for farming.

It was a lovely countryside, and Rick enjoyed it. The Miller house was in an orchard on which a bumper crop of Virginia apples already was in evidence.

The house itself had once been a large farmhouse. The Millers had remodeled it, keeping the charm of the old while adding the convenience of the new. Rick felt at home right away, and he saw that Scotty did, too.

Over an excellent lunch of charcoal-broiled hamburgers, salad, and iced tea, Dr. Miller asked, "Who's going to tell the tale?"

Both girls started talking at once. Mrs. Miller, an attractive, stylish woman, raised her hands. "Please! Jan, suppose you start with the history of the ghost. Then, Barby, you take over and tell what we saw the other night."

"All right, Mother," Jan began. "The ghost isn't new, you see.

We've had a blue ghost here for centuries!"

Rick's eyebrows went up. "A *blue* ghost?"

"Yes. You'll see why in a moment. Anyway, we all knew about the ghost, sort of, and some people were supposed to have seen it. Only it was the kind of story where you never met anyone who had actually seen the ghost. There were only people who knew people who knew people who had seen the ghost. If you follow me?"

Rick grinned. "We do."

Jan's dark eyes sparkled. "Then, just before we came down from Spindrift, over a hundred people saw the ghost, and it was just as the legend tells."

Scotty asked, "So this isn't just any old ghost, it's a legendary one?"

Jan nodded. "We even know its name. It's Seth Costin. He's the one that the creek was named for. But I'm getting ahead of myself. You see, this region was a battleground in the Civil War. Mosby's Raiders spent a lot of time around here. Well, when the war turned against the South, a squadron of Union cavalry came down under Captain Seth Costin, and they got into a battle with some of Jeb Stuart's men right in our orchard and field. They fought up and down the creek, with the South trying to keep the Union from crossing. Finally, Captain Costin crossed, but the creek was red with blood, the story goes."

"A real gory legend," Scotty murmured.

Both Jan and Barby glared at him. "Sorry," he muttered

contritely.

"It's a very romantic story," Barby said tartly.

Rick and the Millers suppressed smiles.

"Anyway," Jan went on, "the creek has been known as Costin's Creek ever since. Well, Captain Costin quartered his men in the town. You know how it was. He stayed at the home of Squire Lansdale, who was by then a Confederate general. The squire had a daughter, whose name was Ellen, and she was perfectly beautiful. The squire also had two sons, who were a little too young for joining the Army, but not too young to cause trouble."

Rick could see where the story led. He asked, "Was Captain Costin a handsome young man, by any chance?"

"He most certainly was," Jan said emphatically. "He was terribly romantic. Wait until you see him."

Rick could hardly wait, but he didn't comment.

"Of course the captain and Ellen fell in love."

Rick could imagine.

"But along came Jeb Stuart's whole cavalry and they pushed Captain Costin's squadron all the way back to Manassas, and then they occupied the area. But Captain Costin couldn't stand not seeing his Ellen, so he somehow got a message to her, to meet him at the mine."

It was the first Rick had heard of a mine. He asked, "Can I ask a question? Where is this mine and what kind is it?"

"The mine is right across the creek, just beyond the bridge," Jan explained. "We could see it from here if the trees weren't

there. Anyway, it's where the town picnic ground is located now, on our property, partly. It used to be a lead mine, and during the Civil War a lot of Southern bullets came from there."

From Jan's tone of voice, Rick suspected that her sympathies were with the lost Southern cause, which was natural enough, since her ancestry was pure Virginian for several generations.

"The mine wasn't worked on Sunday, in those days, and Captain Costin asked Ellen to meet him on a Sunday night at nine o'clock. Well, the Lansdale boys somehow found out where their sister was going, and they went, too. And they shot down Captain Costin in cold blood, right at the mine entrance. Just when he was holding out his arms to greet his sweetheart!"

Jan obviously didn't like this part of the legend, Rick thought.

"So that's how the ghost began," Jan concluded. "After making his way through practically the whole Confederate cavalry, he was shot down at our mine before he could even say hello to her! No wonder he haunts the place!"

"How about all the soldiers killed in the fighting?" Scotty asked, straight-faced. "Don't they haunt the place, too?"

"We've heard that some people have seen more than one ghost," Jan said, "but we don't credit secondhand stories much. We only saw the captain."

Rick must have looked pretty incredulous, he suspected, because Barby gave him an accusing glance and stated flatly, "And we did see the captain, Rick Brant! Didn't we?"

The Millers all nodded. "Tell them," Mrs. Miller suggested.

Barby picked up the tale. "We were all invited to a cook-out the other night. It was given by the Lansdale Garden Club and Mrs. Miller is a member. I guess it's planned long in advance, so they couldn't call it off or go somewhere else, so it was held. There must have been at least fifty people there."

Rick made a mental note to ask for elaboration of Barby's statement about canceling the event or holding it somewhere else.

"The barbecue pits are close to the old mine entrance, where the ghost always appears because that's where the captain was shot. Anyway, everything went well until nearly nine, and that was when we all began to get nervous."

Shot at nine, reappears at nine, Rick guessed. Strange ghost. Usually apparitions are supposed to appear at midnight.

"I didn't really expect anything," Barby went on, "because who believes in ghosts anyway?" She shuddered. "At least I didn't then. But at nine someone let out a scream, and we looked, and there was a white mist rising above the mine, and then the Blue Ghost appeared right in the mist, and it was awful." She ran out of breath and paused.

"It really was," Mrs. Miller said quietly. "Go on, Barby."

"Well, the ghost was a handsome young officer in a blue uniform, the Civil War kind. And he held out his hands, and he looked so ... so appealing. And then he suddenly put his hands on his chest, and when he pulled them away they were all ... all bloody."

Barby gulped. Rick shot a quick glance at the Millers. They

were nodding. So all had seen the same thing, then.

"Anyway, he faded away then, and only the white mist was left. But honestly, it was ... well, it was so real! And the whole thing was blue, sort of, except for the ... the blood. That was red." Barby finished whitely, "It kind of broke up the picnic."

Rick could imagine. Great galloping ghouls! What had happened? He couldn't believe the ghost was real, but Barby and the Millers were obviously convinced.

"Incredible," Scotty muttered. "That's some yarn!"

Rick agreed. "I want to see this Blue Ghost," he stated.

Dr. Miller smiled. "You both look rather doubting. I must admit that I don't believe in ghosts. My entire scientific training rejects the explanation. But let me assure you, we saw a genuine apparition just as Barby described it, and I can offer no reasonable hypothesis. I have thoroughly inspected the area, and there is no physical evidence I have been able to see."

Rick digested this statement. His first thought, of course, had been that the ghost was somehow man-made. He still didn't reject the idea, but Dr. Miller's comments made it clear that the source of the ghost at least wasn't obvious.

"When do we see this ghost?" Rick asked.

Dr. Miller replied, "How about tonight?"

A sudden chill of premonition wormed its icy way up Rick's spine. "That will be fine," he said shakily.

CHAPTER III

The Blue Ghost

Rick, Scotty, Barby, Jan, and the Millers walked leisurely along the slow-moving creek, down the dirt road to the old Bailey bridge. They passed the Sky Wagon and its protecting alarm system, and Rick wondered humorously to himself if the alarm would warn of spirits or only of humans.

The sun had set only minutes before and the sky was still tinged with red. Rick noted that the waters of the creek picked up the color, and for a moment his active imagination peopled the empty fields with blue and gray cavalymen locked in mortal combat. He could almost hear the thunder of hoofs, the excited neighing of the mounts, even the solid sound of a heavy saber meeting yielding flesh. He shivered. After all, it had been like that for a brief period many years ago.

Scotty moved to his side. "This is the oddest ghost-hunting expedition I've ever been on. No equipment but a flashlight. Not even an electronic spook spotter."

Rick nodded agreement. "Too true. But any experienced ghost grabber knows that you can catch a sackful with only a flashlight and a pair of shoestrings."

"Why the shoestrings?"

"You tie their ectoplasm together top and bottom and they're

trapped in it. Like a burlap bag."

The boys had been bringing up the rear of the little procession and the others had not heard the soft-spoken exchange. Rick was just as glad. Weak jokes somehow didn't fit. It was the very lack of preparation, the simple walk after dinner to see the ghost, that made it all somehow very convincing. The Millers, both quiet people, were never much at small talk, but both girls were chatterers. Yet, even the girls were quiet.

"They *know*," Rick thought. "They know what we're going to see. They're awed and a little frightened, but they're leading us to it, even knowing how it will be. Scotty and I are the ignorant ones. The others feel the weirdness and we don't."

He lengthened his stride and joined the Millers. "Sir, how can you be so sure we'll see the apparition tonight?"

"One can't be sure, of course. But so far as we have heard, the apparition hasn't missed a public gathering in a month. There will be one tonight, a service-club outing from over in Manassas."

"They must not be afraid of the ghost," Rick commented.

"They may not have heard of it," Mrs. Miller explained. "I don't believe any newspaper has carried a story, so word of mouth would be the only way of knowing."

"Or perhaps they have heard but couldn't cancel it," Dr. Miller added. "That's the case with most of the affairs now being held at the grounds. A great number have been called off. Only those scheduled far in advance with lots of guests are still going on, simply because it's too difficult to change them."

Scotty asked, "Then the ghost is having an effect?"

"Definitely. At this time of year the grounds are usually one of the most popular places around. Families come for cook-outs, and the kids swim in the creek. Clubs hold their outings almost every night, sometimes two or three groups at once. But since the ghost came people are staying away, except for the affairs that would be difficult or awkward to cancel or change."

That was what Barby had meant, Rick thought. He asked, "Is this a public park of some kind?"

"No indeed," Dr. Miller answered. "We own part of it, and a family named Hilleboe owns part. But it's not used for anything and we've never objected to the public using it. The local Boy Scout troops have taken on the job of keeping it clean as a regular project, and most people are careful. It's no trouble for us."

Rick glanced at his watch. It was getting dark rapidly now, and the apparition was due in fifteen minutes. The bridge was just ahead. They were in plenty of time.

"Strange," he thought. "The ghost of Captain Seth Costin, late of the Union Army, probably the Army of the Potomac, will perform for all comers promptly at nine. 'We regret there can only be one performance each evening.' Or was that true? Had anyone stayed to see? Maybe the obliging phantom performed every hour on the hour during darkness."

He shook his head as though to clear it of cobwebs. This didn't check with any ghost story he had ever heard. No holding hands around a table, no incantations or strange phrases in forgotten

languages, no incense, no nothing. It was bum theater.

The group crossed the bridge and entered the trees, still following the dirt road. Rick saw that the road forked, one branch going to town, the other to the picnic area. The trees around them were huge oaks, and almost certainly most of them had been healthy and along in years when Seth Costin fought among them.

Rick enjoyed the feeling of history, of a definite past. He resolved to do a little reading on the area.

Barby and Jan, who had been walking boldly in the van, dropped back now and the group seemed to huddle more closely together. There were voices among the trees, and here and there the glow of a fire. Then the edge of the tree belt was reached and the group stopped.

There was a clearing beyond the tree belt, and in the clearing were rough-hewn tables and benches. Beyond the clearing a grassy hill rose gently to an upland meadow, except for a section that rose sharply for nearly a hundred feet.

The upthrusting section was barren of grass, and at its base, boards were nailed across what was obviously the opening into the mine.

"Interesting formation, isn't it?" Dr. Miller asked.

It definitely was, and Rick said so. Even to his relatively untrained eye, this was a place where a volcanic fissure had opened ages ago, allowing igneous rock to thrust sharply upward through the sedimentary layers of the older ground. Now the formation had weathered until it was like a barren hill built on

top of a fertile one. On the steep slope of igneous rock no grass had managed to get hold, although a few hardy weeds clung to it.

Barby pointed to a shelf, actually a terrace in the rock structure, above and a few yards to the left of the mine entrance. "He appears there," she said.

"Let's get a good position," Rick urged. "It's almost nine."

The sky was still blue in color, but it was already dark on the ground. Fires flared up brightly, but the picnickers were hushed, as though they knew what was coming. They probably had not seen the ghost, and it was likely few believed they would see anything, but the unknown casts a strong web, and they were feeling its effects.

The Spindrifters moved along through groups of picnickers until they were directly opposite the old mine shaft, and took up positions in the shelter of an oak tree.

"There's a pool of water on top of that shelf," Dr. Miller told the boys. "It's from a spring, actually an artesian well. There's a pipe outlet up there from which water flows constantly. It collects in the pool, which overflows into a natural drainage ditch."

The scientist pointed to where the tiny stream made its way down the hillside and disappeared among the trees. "Over the years it has cut a natural channel to the creek. So far as anyone can remember, it has always been here. The pipe was replaced a few years ago, apparently by driving a new one into the hillside. The original well probably was driven during the Civil War."

Rick examined the terrain. "Odd, water coming out of a

hillside like that, especially when the hillside isn't part of a mountain."

"The water comes off the Blue Ridge, and it develops a pretty good head of pressure in its underground channels. Whoever drove the original well simply tapped that hydrostatic head, although why they didn't drive the well at this level is beyond me."

A sudden scream from nearby brought the conversation to an abrupt end. Rick turned in time to see a spout of water vapor, or something that made a white cloud, rise from the place where Dr. Miller had said the pool was located.

Rick felt a chill run through him and the short hairs on the nape of his neck bristled in a reaction older than the race of man. "You've got to keep calm," he warned himself sternly. "Be objective. Don't miss a thing!"

Scotty let out a low whistle, and Rick suddenly felt Barby's fingers biting into his arm. For, through the white rising mist, there came an officer in Union blue, and from under the broad cavalry hatbrim, piercing eyes looked straight at them.

Rick swallowed hard. He was vaguely aware of the terrified scurry around him as most of the picnickers departed as fast as their legs would carry them.

The apparition extended hands, as though in welcome to a loved one. The youthful, handsome face smiled.

Rick shook his head to clear it. This couldn't be happening! The apparition was faintly blurred, as though by the writhing of the mists in which he appeared, but details were clear enough.

Rick could see the smile vanish suddenly, and shock replace it. He could see the gauntleted hands suddenly clasped to the chest, see red spurt from between the gloved fingers.

Jan Miller let out a long-drawn, soft, shuddering sound from between clenched teeth. Barby's fingers clamped tighter on her brother's arm.

Rick fought to shake off the feeling of horror and dread. "There aren't any ghosts," he tried to tell himself. "This isn't a ghost. There are no ghosts."

Except that he was looking at one!

The apparition began to fade, holding out bloody hands. The phantom officer swayed a little, and the young face was distorted with agony. It grew dimmer and dimmer until only the white mist remained.

Rick was aware of Barby's soft sobs next to him, but his eyes remained riveted on the white mist.

A yell from Scotty snapped him out of his reverie.

"Let's go, boy!"

Without quite knowing how it happened, Rick found himself next to his pal, climbing frantically up the rocky slope to the shelf, hurrying to catch the Blue Ghost before even the mist vanished!

Not even bothering to draw themselves to an upright position, the boys flung themselves forward into the rapidly vanishing mist. Rick felt with horror a thin, icy tendril curl around his face, and he heard a gentle bubbling sound, like phantom laughter.

Scotty's flashlight probed with a bright yellow beam, and Rick saw, in the instant before the mist vanished and all movement ceased, that the surface of the pool boiled gently and then was quiet.

The flashlight beam disclosed solid rock, broken only by the pipe from which water trickled.

There was no ghost.

There was no place he could have gone.

There was no sign of human handiwork.

There was – nothing.

CHAPTER IV

The Old Mine

Rick, Scotty, and the two girls stood in silence and surveyed the scene before them. They stood on the brow of the hill, looking down at the picnic ground, at the trees under which they had stood and watched a hair-raising apparition the night before.

Even in daylight the place somehow seemed eerie to Rick. The sun was shining brightly and birds came and went without fear or interference on their normal business of gathering food. A slight breeze ruffled the foliage of the oak trees.

It was a fine, normal Virginia summer day, with no trace of the supernormal or weird about it. Yet, Rick felt somewhat less than relaxed, and he certainly felt puzzled.

Directly below them the pool created by the flow of spring water glistened in the sunlight. Between their feet and the pool was solid rock, with only a few weeds struggling for life in an occasional crack.

"This is going to be a tough nut to crack," Rick stated. "Look at that rock wall. Obviously, we'd have seen anything living that tried to climb down it, even in the darkness. If anyone had been standing up here, he'd have been silhouetted against the sky."

"There was no one on the hill last night," Scotty said positively. "I looked at every inch of it."

Barby listened to the exchange with an exasperated expression on her face. "Can't you two believe the evidence of your own eyes? The Blue Ghost appeared right under where we're standing. You can see for yourselves that nothing could be hidden by anyone to make a ghost appear. Besides, it was too real to be a trick."

"It was a ghost," Jan Miller said with quiet conviction. "Everyone has always known there was a ghost here."

Scotty shook his head. "Everyone has always known there were ghosts in a hundred places, if you want to consider all the folklore about spooks. A few people have even claimed to have seen one. But who ever heard of a haunt that put on nightly performances?"

"You have now," Barby said flatly.

"Maybe," Rick said. He didn't know why he was still skeptical. The apparition had been really blood-curdling in its apparent realness, but he still wasn't ready to buy a supernatural explanation.

Jan Miller replied with an appropriate quote from William Shakespeare. "There are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamed of in thy philosophy, Horatio Brant!"

Rick grinned. "That's true. No one knows better than I how ignorant I am. I can only say that I'm trying to learn. Let's climb down and look at the pool."

He led the way down the rocky slope to where the rusted iron pipe jutted from the side of the Hill, a thin trickle of water

dripping constantly into the pool below. The pool was actually a catch basin in the rock.

Rick examined the pipe. It was ordinary, rusted but still sound. It held no secrets that he could see. He held his mouth under it and tasted the water. It was cold and good, typical spring water, with the taste of minerals in it. He knew from Dr. Miller that it was good to drink. Picnickers used it regularly.

"Expect evidence to float out with the water?" Barby asked.

"Never can tell," Rick said, unperturbed. His sister, even more than Jan Miller, was an incurable romantic. If the ghost turned out to be something other than the pitiful shade of Captain Costin, she would be bitterly disappointed, Rick knew.

He got down on his knees, Scotty beside him, and they probed in the water of the rocky basin with their hands. There was a layer of brown algae in the bottom, which was to be expected. It looked dead, but when Rick scraped it, there was green underneath the brown.

Scotty took out his jackknife and probed with the largest blade. Clearly, there was nothing in the basin but a solid rock bottom.

The boys' eyes met. "The pool bubbled a little last night," Rick recalled.

Scotty nodded. "I saw it, too. But there's nothing there to make it bubble."

Jan Miller shuddered. "I almost died when you two idiots scrambled up here. You went right into that awful mist!"

Rick remembered the icy tendril that had curled around his face and a little chill went through him. "It was cool," he said. "At least the Blue Ghost isn't warm. Maybe he's blue with cold."

Scotty used his jackknife to probe at cracks in the rocky hillside. It was seamed with them, but he found nothing unusual. "I give up," the dark-haired boy said, his face showing his bewilderment. "There's absolutely nothing here. So where did the ghost come from?"

"Where does any ghost come from?" Rick asked. "Same place." Their inspection should have settled it, but he wasn't ready to quit yet. To give up would mean admitting that the Blue Ghost was really a spook. He might have to admit it eventually, but not until all avenues of investigation were closed.

"Now what?" Scotty asked.

"Let's look around some more."

Barby thought this was nonsense and let them know it. "You two can prowl around all you want to," she said. "But I'm not going to get an overdose of sun spook hunting on the rocks. Coming, Jan?"

"Lunch at noon sharp," Jan reminded the boys. "We'll go help Mother. Good luck."

Rick and Scotty watched them go, then sat down next to the pool.

"What's on your mind?" Scotty asked.

Rick shrugged. "Nothing. I haven't the ghost of an idea about this ghost."

"It was pretty real," Scotty remembered.

"Too true." It was so real that Rick almost believed in it. But he was bothered by a vague feeling that something was wrong.

"Look, Scotty. I've read plenty of ghost stories, and I've read the book by Charles Fort that Dad has in the library. Nothing was ever said about this kind of ghost. I mean, a ghost that went in for public appearances promptly at nine whenever he had an audience. Of course, there's no rule that says a ghost has to behave in any definite way, but this is too ... well, it's too perfect, if you know what I mean."

"I do. It's almost like a show, isn't it?"

"That's it. It's a performance more than an appearance, if there's any distinction. The ghost did exactly what he's been doing. Same act."

Scotty grinned. "Why not? The act is part of the legend, and it's a pretty convincing one."

Rick cocked an eyebrow at him. "Whose side are you on? The ghost's or mine?"

"I have an open mind," Scotty explained.

The phrase rang a bell in Rick's head. Open mind – open *mine*. Could there be some connection between the abandoned mine and the ghost? After all, the shaft was almost under them. He broached the idea to Scotty.

His pal rose. "Nothing like finding out. Are you for it?"

"I'm for it. Can we get in?"

"We'll soon see."

The boys scrambled down the hill and inspected the entrance. Boards had been nailed across the timbered opening, but the nails were rusted and the boards weathered. They could get in simply by pulling the boards loose.

"How about light?" Scotty asked. "We didn't bring a flashlight."

"We can do that later. Right now let's take a look at the entrance. That will tell us if there has been any traffic around."

The boards came off easily with the screech of old nails pulling loose. In a few moments enough boards were pulled away to allow them to enter on hands and knees. A top board was pulled off to admit light, and they went in together, inspecting the ground closely.

"No sign of visitors," Scotty said. "Look at the dust. It hasn't been disturbed for a half century."

Rick thought his pal probably was right about the length of time. The dust was fine, and thick. No human tracks disturbed it, but the boys saw the delicate tracery where a small animal, probably a field mouse or a chipmunk, had left his spoor.

The tunnel was about eight feet high and wide enough for three people to walk abreast. Probably the lead ore had been taken out in carts when the mine was in use.

The shaft went straight in, past the range of light filtering in from the entrance. Nowhere was there a sign of human occupancy or activity, except for the ancient marks on the tunnel walls made by tools in the hands of miners long dead.

"Nothing here," Rick said, and his voice was lost in the emptiness of the shaft.

Scotty grunted. "Another dead end. Okay, where did the ghost come from?"

Rick didn't know. He couldn't even imagine. He puzzled over it as they walked outside, then suddenly snapped his fingers. "Did you see any sign of water in there? Or a pipe?"

"No. It was dry. No pipes. Why?"

"How was the original artesian well driven? Right into the hillside? If so, why didn't the mine tunnel strike water?"

Scotty scratched his chin. "Now that you mention it, I haven't the faintest idea. Have you?"

"Negative. I can't ever remember having so few ideas. But it's strange. We'll have to ask Dr. Miller about it."

"Maybe the answer is deeper in the mine," Scotty replied. "Let's go back and see."

Rick reminded him that they had no lights. "I suppose we could make torches out of junk from the trash cans."

"Easy, if we can find some newspapers."

There were several trash cans spotted around the picnic area, and it was indicative of the kind of neat people in the vicinity that they were used. There was no litter.

The second can yielded two entire newspapers, one a bulky edition of a Washington paper, the other a ten-page local sheet. The boys split the papers evenly, then rolled them tightly. They frayed one end with a jackknife to make the torch.

"Got a match?" Rick asked.

Scotty looked at him blankly, then grinned. "No, have you?"

"No match, no flint or steel, no ... hey, wait! I've got a pocket lens!"

Rick's enthusiasm for microscopy had extended to the purchase of a twelve-power pocket lens to supplement the microscope Barby had given him. The pocket lens was used for examining specimens before taking them home for closer scrutiny under the more powerful instrument. Rick had not yet gotten used to carrying the small lens and had forgotten it until the need for a burning glass arose.

He took the lens from his watch pocket and unfolded it from the protective metal case. It focused the sun's rays to a pinpoint of intense light and heat, and the charred paper then burst into a tiny flame. Rick blew the flame into life, then put his lens back for safekeeping.

"Nothing like the scientific method," he told his pal. "Who needs matches? Come on. Let's burn that ghost out of there."

Scotty grinned. "Nothing like luck," he corrected. "Okay, I'm right behind you."

They retraced their steps into the mine. Rick noted as they went through the entrance that the old mine timbers were pretty well rotted through. He guessed that the mine had been boarded up because it was unsafe. He and Scotty would have to be careful.

In a few moments they were in deep gloom, only the smoky, fitful flicker of Rick's torch giving them light enough to see by.

The newspaper wasn't burning very well, probably because he had rolled it too tightly. They could see only a trace of daylight.

The old shaft turned at nearly right angles where a geological fault had forced the Civil War miners to change directions in order to follow the vein of good ore. The turn cut off most of the light, except for the waning flicker of Rick's torch. Scotty hurriedly held his own torch to the flame to light it.

Rick was never sure what happened at that point, whether Scotty's torch pushed too hard and extinguished his own, or whether a sudden icy wind blew through the mine shaft. He knew only that they were instantly in darkness, while faraway ghostly laughter echoed in their ears!

CHAPTER V

Night Alarm

Rick lathered a hot dog with mustard and took a satisfying bite. It was a down-to-earth hot dog with no mystery, no eeriness about it, for which he was grateful. He hadn't admitted it, but the incident in the mine had shaken him.

Dr. Miller passed the milk pitcher to Rick, then asked, "Are you certain you heard laughter? It wasn't a trick of the wind?"

"I'm sure it was laughter," Barby said solemnly. "Captain Costin was laughing at mortals who dared to enter his tomb."

Rick glanced at his sister, hoping she was joking. She wasn't. "I'm not certain," he admitted. "It all happened at once. I mean, the torch went out, there was a sort of sudden breeze, and we got out of there into the daylight."

He had a mental image of he and Scotty executing that ancient and honorable maneuver known as getting out of there! They had reached the mine entrance in a dead heat, probably breaking several world's records for foot racing.

"We didn't stop to listen," he added with some embarrassment. "We just got."

"Well, I should think so!" Jan Miller said vehemently. "It's a wonder your hair didn't turn white."

Scotty raised a hand and ruffled his dark crewcut. "Didn't it?"

he asked ruefully. "I took it for granted that it had."

Dr. Miller chuckled. "Put on a few more hot dogs," he called to his wife. "These boys need nourishment. They've been through an ordeal." To Rick and Scotty he said seriously, "You needn't be embarrassed. The fear of the unknown, combined with the fears we have of closed places, almost complete darkness, and our own physiological reactions to the unexpected make us do our thinking with our legs instead of our heads in some situations."

It was neatly put. Rick acknowledged the scientist's statement. "It isn't as though we had been scared away for good. We're going back, equipped with lights a ghost can't blow out."

"And I'm certain you'll find nothing but an abandoned shaft," Dr. Miller replied. "After all, the dust showed no sign of human occupancy, you said."

"Ghosts don't leave tracks," Barby murmured.

Scotty accepted another hot dog from Mrs. Miller. "Thank you. Look, everyone, we can make two assumptions. Either that the ghost is real, in which case we call in the Society for Psychic Phenomena, or that the ghost is a man-made thing, in which case we search for the man."

"I'm still not buying assumption number one," Rick stated flatly. "My hair may be white, or close to it, and I'm ready to admit that the apparition is a mighty convincing spook, but I don't really *feel* it's a ghost."

Jan Miller spoke up. "Rick's hunches are pretty good. If he doesn't believe in the ghost, it isn't just because he's a doubting

Thomas. I think the boys should go ahead with their investigation on the assumption that the ghost is caused by someone."

Barby shook her head, more in sorrow than in anger. "I thought you had more faith than that, Jan."

"It isn't a question of faith," Jan explained. "It's a question of where you start. If we start by accepting the ghost as real, there's nothing we can do. Anyway, we invited the boys down to try to solve a mystery, didn't we? I guess that proves we didn't truly believe in the ghost."

Rick grinned at the dark-haired girl. "Okay, Jan. Now, to carry on where Scotty left off, if we assume the ghost is man-caused, we have to assume it isn't a practical joke, or that it is. What's the vote?"

"No evidence," Dr. Miller said thoughtfully. "It could be a practical joke, although it's an elaborate sort of thing. More complicated practical jokes than this have been pulled by expert jokesters. On the whole, however, I'm inclined to vote against the joke assumption on the grounds that it has been going on too long. Jokesters are not noted for their staying power. By this time the secret would be out, or we'd be having variations. The apparition wouldn't have fallen into a routine."

Dr. Miller had spotted exactly the thing that was troubling Rick. It was routine, but ghosts are traditionally far from routine. That was actually the biggest argument for assuming that it was man-made, and that it was not a practical joke.

He voiced his thoughts aloud, then asked, "If man-made, and

not a practical joke, what's the motive?"

No one replied, because no one had a possible answer.

"Find the motive and you find just about everything else," Scotty commented.

"True enough," Rick agreed. "But if we can't guess a motive, let's try another tack. When did the ghost first appear?"

Barby answered. "Right after the Civil War."

Rick was patient. "I know. I mean, when did the ghost start making his recent appearances?"

"About a month ago," Dr. Miller replied. "We first heard about it from our tenant farmer when we arrived here from Spindrifft. He was full of the news, as you can imagine. The ghost first appeared at a Girl Scouts' campfire. An annual event. The girls are supposed to camp overnight. Needless to say, they didn't."

Rick had a quick mental impression of uniformed girls scattering like leaves in a hurricane. "The appearances have been regular since then?"

"Yes. So far as we know, the ghost always appears at nine."

Rick scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I wonder if he appears when there's no audience?"

Scotty chuckled. "That's like the question about does a falling tree make a noise if there's no one to hear it. How can you tell?"

"I just wondered if the ghost would appear for a small audience, like one or two people."

"Meaning us," Scotty said with resignation. "When do we try,

tonight?"

"Could be. Are there any picnics or meetings scheduled for tonight, Dr. Miller?"

"Not that I know of. The next big affair is two days from now. The Sons of the Old Dominion have their annual steak and crab feast. This is the Old Dominion State, you know. It's a major event in this area."

"Then we'll try tonight," Rick stated, with a glance at Scotty. His pal nodded.

Over a second hot dog, then a third, Rick continued his line of questioning. Not until he began to ask more about details of mine ownership did one interesting fact come to light. Dr. Miller had received an offer to buy his property at a price considerably above the going market rates just before the ghostly appearances started.

"The offer wasn't for all the property," Dr. Miller added. "Only for the portion along our eastern line. It includes the field where you landed, the picnic ground, and our part of the mine property. The house and orchard were not included."

"How valuable is the part asked for?" Rick queried.

"Not valuable at all, except that the field could be used for hay or alfalfa. That's why I was rather puzzled."

"Who wanted the land?" Scotty asked.

"I don't know. The offer came through Jethro Collins, a local real-estate man. He said he was acting as agent for out-of-town interests that preferred to remain unknown for political reasons.

It sounded fishy to me, and I refused."

"Because it might be crooked?" Rick asked quickly.

"No. That didn't occur to me. I thought that industrial interests might want the property, and I'm not anxious to have a glue works or something set up as a neighbor. Besides, I don't care for Collins. I'd rather not do business with him."

"Could the old mine have any value?" Rick persisted.

"No. The lead remaining is of such poor grade that it wouldn't be of any use. I'm sure that the mine would have been abandoned even before the Civil War if the South hadn't needed the lead so badly. Of course we're only part owners, anyway. My grandfather owned it jointly with the Hilleboes, our next-door neighbors. They own the property beyond ours, and uphill from the mine. We've never worried over the ownership of the mine itself, because it's worthless for any purpose."

Rick thought it was curious that an offer should be made for worthless property just as the ghost put in an appearance. It required looking into. He wondered how to go about it, and decided perhaps a chat with the real-estate agent might be useful. Dr. Miller readily gave his permission to try.

To Rick's other question, Dr. Miller had no answer – that was the odd location of the pipe from which the spring water trickled. The scientist could make only one suggestion. "Perhaps the hole was drilled vertically, and a horizontal feed put on for convenience. Then, later, the area was covered over by tailings from the mine, leaving only the horizontal pipe. After all, the

pipe is not directly over the mine shaft. It is well to one side, perhaps six or eight feet."

That was a reasonable suggestion, and Rick let it drop for the time being. In fact, the boys let the entire subject drop for the rest of the afternoon, although Rick kept worrying the problem as was his way when confronted with a puzzle.

The Millers had a badminton court in the shade of an enormous old oak, and after a short pause to let the hot dogs digest at least partially, Rick and Scotty let themselves in for a series of trouncings by the girls, who had obviously been playing intensively. It was embarrassing, to say the least, but neither boy begrudged the girls their success.

Not until dinner was ended did the subject of the ghost in Union blue come up again, then Rick started his probing once more.

"The business about an offer for the property may not be connected, but it's a curious coincidence. Now, what else happened about the time the haunting began? Any other facts, even unconnected ones?"

The Millers could think of none, but Mrs. Miller suggested that Belsely, their tenant, would know of anything new or unusual. Rick agreed to talk with him.

At eight o'clock, armed with flashlights, the boys departed for the old mine. They approached the area with caution, on the alert for any possible visitors. But the picnic ground was completely abandoned.

A quick inspection of the mine showed only their own footprints. The boards had been left off the entrance during their earlier inspection, and apparently no one had been there since. Then, at Scotty's suggestion, they looked for a place of concealment from which to hold vigil.

Rick found it, high in an oak. It was an easy climb, and from the huge limb they could look through a screen of foliage and see without being seen. Both boys were satisfied that they were unobserved. No humans knew they were in the vicinity.

The Virginia mosquitoes were not so easily deceived. Both boys were promptly located by a scouting party, and mosquito communications went into fast operation. Within a few minutes the entire local mosquito air force had invaded the tree. Rick waved his hands futilely at the whining swarm and muttered unhappily, "There are so many they have to line up for a bite."

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