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The Caves of Fear: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story



Harold Goodwin

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Brant Science-Adventure Story**

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

John Blaine

The Caves of Fear: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story

CHAPTER I

Changes at Spindrift

The sounds of hammer and saw had disturbed Spindrift Island for several days, and Rick Brant was having a hard time getting used to it. The noise didn't bother him. It was the idea behind the noise – the idea that the close fellowship of the famous island was about to be intruded upon by strangers.

He sat in a comfortable chair on the front porch of the big Brant house and stared morosely at the Atlantic. He was a tall, athletic boy with brown hair and eyes and a face that was usually pleasant.

"What's it going to be like with a mob of strangers galloping all over the place?" he demanded.

Don Scott grinned lazily from the depths of his armchair. He was a husky youth, perhaps an inch taller than Rick, with black hair and dark eyes. "Since when do five people make a mob?" he inquired. "Besides, I think adding more scientists to the staff is a good thing. So does Dad."

"I know it," Rick returned gloomily. "The others do, too. I'm a downtrodden minority. No one sympathizes with me."

Scotty shook his head sadly. "Poor old Rick. Seriously, I don't get it. You should be cheering the loudest. Think of what it means, pal! More fields of science to explore, including one I never heard of before. Maybe more expeditions, of different kinds than the ones we've been on up to now."

"That's what I'm thinking about," Rick returned.

"Then why the gloom?"

"Because..." Rick stopped as the phone rang in the house.

Scotty got to his feet quickly. "I'll get it. Mom and Dad are down watching the builders."

Rick smiled as Scotty went into the house. It pleased him to have Scotty call Mr. and Mrs. Brant "Mom and Dad." It was a symbol of Scotty's permanence in the family. No one had ever questioned Scotty's membership in the Spindrift tribe since the day when the scrappy ex-Marine had rescued Rick from a gang of thugs bent on destroying the Island Foundation's moon rocket, and it was pleasant to think of Scotty as a permanent brother. The two of them had been through some tight places together and they were closer friends than brothers usually are. Like Rick, Scotty was listed on the membership rolls of the Spindrift Foundation as a junior technician.

Hartson W. Brant was listed as president, but it was Rick's pride that he and Scotty had earned places because of their own worth, and not because of their relationship with the scientist. However, their abilities were not the same. Because of Rick's interest in science, particularly electronics, he had become expert in intricate wiring and he was rapidly learning about the design of equipment. Scotty's talent was in the mechanical field. He could repair machinery and he was a whiz with engines.

Thinking about work in the lab reminded Rick that he had an unfinished project of his own on his workbench upstairs. He was half out of his chair, determined to go upstairs and put the rest of the afternoon to good use, when Scotty called.

"Rick! Hurry up."

He ran into the library and found Scotty holding the phone. "Here's a funny one, Rick. The Whiteside telegraph office has a cable for you, but they won't read it over the phone because it's all numbers. And it's from Chahda."

Chahda, the Hindu boy who had been like a member of the family since he joined a Spindrift expedition in Bombay, was back home in India. He had left the boys in New Caledonia after a recent adventure in order to visit his family.

"I'd better talk to them," Rick said. "Who's on the wire?"

"Bill Martin."

Rick took the phone. "Bill? This is Rick. What's up?"

"Got a cable addressed to you," Bill answered. "I'd rather not try to read it over the phone because it's all numbers. Can you or Scotty pick it up?"

"Where's it from?" Rick asked.

"Singapore. And it's signed by your Indian friend."

Singapore! What on earth was Chahda doing in Singapore? Rick couldn't guess. "Bill, what kind of numbers are they?"

"Groups. Seven figures in each group. If you ask me, it's some kind of code."

Rick thought quickly. "Barby's in Whiteside, Bill. She went over to a movie right after lunch, and she should just about be getting out. You can get her next door at the Sugar Shop, because she always stops in there for a fudge sundae after the show. If she's already gone, phone the boat landing. You ought to catch her one place or the other."

"I'll try," Bill promised. "If I don't catch her, I'll call you back."

"Thanks a million." Rick restored the phone to its cradle and looked at Scotty. "What do you make of that?"

Scotty shrugged. "It beats me. I didn't know Chahda was planning to leave Bombay. If it comes to that, I didn't know he knew anything about codes."

"Neither did I," Rick agreed. "Remember he said something about a job in his last letter? There was something secret about it he couldn't tell us. Maybe that's why he's in Singapore."

"Could be. Anyway, we won't know for sure until we get the cable and decipher it. If we *can* decipher it, that is."

"We'll be able to," Rick said confidently. "He wouldn't send us one we couldn't break."

Scotty nodded. "I hope you're right. Well, let's go back and get lazy again."

"Not me." Rick started for the stairs. "I'm going to stop loafing and get busy. The lenses for the camera arrived a week ago and I haven't even looked at them."

"I'll go with you. I got some questions about these new people maybe you can answer."

Upstairs in Rick's bedroom, Scotty sat down in the old leather armchair while Rick opened up the doors that concealed his workbench. On the bench was a camera with an odd-looking searchlight and telescope attached. The searchlight gave off invisible infrared rays instead of ordinary light, and the telescope was equipped with special lenses in order to pick up the infrared. When the camera was loaded with special film, it could take pictures in total darkness, provided the subject was within range of the infrared light rays.

The camera had played a major part in solving the mystery of *Smugglers' Reef*. With the evidence collected from Rick's pictures, the police had broken up a ring of gunrunners. But Rick still was not satisfied with the camera. He was always striving to find the simplest way of doing a thing.

This time, he was planning to eliminate both the spring-driven dynamo that powered the searchlight, and the infrared telescope. A new-type battery in a small metal case already had been mounted under the camera, far enough to one side so it wouldn't interfere with the tripod mount. The battery would give ten hours of service, and it could be replaced in a moment with a spare carried in the pocket.

To take the place of the telescope, Rick had ordered lenses made of the special glass that could "see" infrared. He intended to put the lenses in ordinary sunglasses frames, restore the regular view finder to the camera, and turn the telescope over to Scotty. By using the eyeglasses with special lenses he could see whatever the infrared searchlight was lighting up without the need of looking through

the special telescope. Using the glasses and searchlight on the camera together, he could see perfectly in the darkness, and he could take movies, too, if he wanted to.

He went to work removing the telescope.

"I've checked," Scotty said. "That 'scope will fit the mount on my rifle with no changes."

Scotty already had a telescopic sight on his rifle, and the telescope from the infrared unit could be put in its place with a simple turn of a screw. The infrared 'scope and light originally had been designed for a rifle to be used by soldiers at night. Rick had simply adapted the unit to his own needs.

"We can get in some night skunk hunting," Scotty said. "You put the infrared on 'em and take their pictures and I'll sight in through the special 'scope and shoot 'em."

Rick slipped the telescope out of its mount and handed it to Scotty. "If there's one thing I don't need," he said, "it's a dead skunk. Couldn't we hunt prairie moose instead?"

"What's a prairie moose?" Scotty demanded.

"A field mouse with horns."

Scotty groaned. "All right, scientist. Let's get serious and see if you can answer this one. We have an archeologist, a naturalist, and a cyberneticist coming. I think I know what the first two are, but what in the name of a blue baboon is a cyberneticist?"

Rick put the camera view finder into place and began to adjust it. "A specialist in cybernetics," he said.

Scotty waved his arms. "Now I know!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Any idiot knows what cybernetics is. Or what they are. Ten cents apiece at any hardware counter. No family should be without a handy-dandy cybernetic!"

Rick chuckled. "All right. Cybernetics is a combined study of machines and the human nervous system. It's trying to figure out how machines and humans are related. I don't know much about it myself, but I do know this: the big electronic calculators that do problems in a few hours that it would take humans hundreds of years to finish were the result of cybernetics."

"The big brains!" Scotty looked awed. "I've read about them. And to think we're going to have that kind of expert here!"

"With his wife and two kids," Rick added. "I wonder how Huggins will like a crowd of kids trampling through his garden!"

Scotty laughed outright. "Here we go again! Listen, Rick, start making sense. How can twins less than a year old trample anyone's garden?"

Rick didn't try to answer. He finished the adjustment on the camera and put it back on the shelf, then started to work replacing the lenses in an old pair of sunglasses with the special ones he had ordered. After a moment, he asked, "Scotty, how would you like it if an expedition left Spindrift and we weren't with it?"

Scotty stared. "My sainted aunt! Is that's what's been bothering you?"

Rick admitted it. He knew where he stood with the old gang, Hartson Brant, Hobart Zircon, Julius Weiss, and John Gordon. He was far from sure of how the new staff members would look on him and Scotty. He had learned that some scientists had little patience with people who were unfamiliar with their special fields, and he and Scotty were pretty ignorant about the new sciences that would be represented. That was his only reason for objecting when his father had decided to enlarge the staff.

"I can see it now," he said. "The Foundation will be planning an expedition, maybe to be headed by this new naturalist, and we'll be on the outside looking in. And why? Because Dr. Howard Shannon prefers not to be bothered by a couple of kids who wouldn't know one bug from another."

"You're crossing bridges before you come to 'em," Scotty pointed out. "For all you know, all three of these new scientists might be perfectly swell gents, like Zircon, Weiss, and Gordon. Why borrow trouble in advance?"

"I suppose you're right," Rick had to agree. "But I still can't help thinking about it."

"Think all you like," Scotty said generously. "Me, I'm going to put my little gray brain cells to work on Chahda's cable. Aren't you all fired up with curiosity?"

Rick started to say he was, but no reply was necessary because just then he heard the sound of the motorboat engine for which his ears had been attuned. He put down the sunglasses and ran for the door. Scotty had heard the engine, too, and was halfway down the hall.

It had to be Barby, Rick was sure. The other motorboat – the island had two – was tied up at the pier, and they weren't expecting any visitors. The builders had their own boat, a powered barge, anchored off Pirate's Field.

The boys ran out on the front porch and around the house, then down the long flight of stairs that led to the cove where the motorboat landing was located.

It was Barby, sure enough, and she had the cable! She waved it wildly, then gunned the boat around neatly so that it slid into the dock. Scotty grabbed the bow line and made fast while Rick jumped for the stern line and slipped it around a cleat on the landing.

Barby cut the engine and jumped to the dock, a slim, pretty girl, her face flushed with excitement. "It's from Chahda," she said breathlessly, "and it's in code!"

"We know," Scotty said. "Here, let's take a look at it."

Barby handed it to him. He scanned it wordlessly, then handed it to Rick. "Son, we'll be doing right well if we make any sense out of that!"

"He wouldn't send us anything in a code we couldn't read," Rick objected. "Let's see it. It can't be too hard."

But in the next moment he changed his mind. His lips pursed in a low whistle. This was the cable:

Rick Brant
Spindrift Island
New Jersey, U.S.A.

5213039	6231581	1219456	2768612	2144644	9123299
3970731	6017747	1044914	3327116	6074193	4399693
0531612	1330552	3047171	3193986	8128912	7011716
0762878	3377335	3831075	5371011	3552684	3012963
3532456	8337373	9104476	1605588	2540551	2826677
9513148	3189710	4811223	5202998	5912492	3432174
3302710	7072010	1510108	4423007	3331954	7893623

L. Chahda

CHAPTER II

The Cipher Message

Barby, Rick, and Scotty were in the library when Hartson Brant walked in. They were reduced to the point of staring at each other helplessly because of the magnitude of the task that confronted them.

The famous scientist, who looked like an older version of his son, greeted them with a smile. "What is this, a meeting of the Silent Three? I can't ever remember finding you all together when one of you wasn't talking."

Rick handed him the cable. "What do you make of that, Dad?"

Hartson Brant scanned it quickly. "From Chahda, in Singapore, and in cipher. Am I supposed to gather that you don't have the key to the cipher?"

"That's right," Scotty said. He held up a heavy volume called *Cryptography for the Student*. It was the only book on the subject in the scientist's library. "We've been going through this, trying to find some kind of clue. Honest, it's impossible."

"There are so many codes and ciphers," Barby added. "Dozens. And it says some of them can only be broken by days of work, by experts."

"There's not an expert in the house, either," Rick concluded. "I didn't think, when Bill called us up about it, that Chahda would use a code we couldn't figure out, but I didn't expect a page like that."

Hartson Brant read through the cable again. "How do you know you can't figure it out? Perhaps a little reasoning will clear the air. Chahda must have put a key in the message somewhere. How about this 'L' in front of his name?"

"That's right," Barby said excitedly. "That must mean something, because his name is Chahda Sundararaman. There isn't an L in it anywhere."

The scientist handed the cable back to Rick. "I'm about as curious as I can get," he said, "but I refuse to think any more about it until you hand me the clear version. I agree that Chahda wouldn't send a code you couldn't solve, so my advice is put the code book away. You won't need it, I'm sure. This isn't any code you'll find in there."

He started out of the room, then paused at the door, his eyes twinkling. "Will you have dinner at the table with us, or shall I ask mother to break out some emergency rations so you can stay on the job?"

"We'll eat with the family," Scotty replied. "We can keep on thinking while we eat, can't we?"

Rick watched his father wink at Barby, then walk toward the kitchen. "Dad's right," he announced. "He must be. So let's put the book back and start figuring this out. The answer probably is easy as pie once we find the key."

"How about starting with that odd letter?" Scotty asked. "That has to mean something."

"L is the twelfth letter in the alphabet," Barby offered. "Does that mean anything?"

Rick shook his head. "Not to me. But let's start from there, anyway. Maybe the twelfth group of numbers has a clue."

He counted rapidly across the number groups. "That group is 4399693. Now what?"

Scotty suggested, "Substitute letters for the numbers. That would make it DCIIFIC. That doesn't mean anything."

"Maybe you counted the wrong way," Barby said thoughtfully. "Count down the columns instead of across."

Rick did so. "That's 8337373. Substitute and it comes out ... let's see ... HCCGCGC. Nothing there, either."

Scotty had a pad of paper and a pencil and was making idle doodles. "I'm trying to recall. When did Chahda learn anything about codes?"

Rick thought for a moment. "He never did, that I know of," he said finally.

Barby stood up. "Well, I'm going to shower and change before dinner," she announced. "But I'll keep thinking. I have an idea that talking about it won't help much. If Dad and Rick are right about his using a code we're sure to know, it must be staring us in the face and we're too blind to see it."

"Good idea," Rick agreed. "Let's break this up and each think about it. If we each search our memories, maybe we'll come up with a clue."

Barby went upstairs and Scotty retired to his favorite seat on the porch. But Rick felt that he could think better on his feet. A glance at his watch told him he had over an hour and a half before dinner. He waved at Scotty and walked across the grass toward the gray stone laboratory buildings. Professor Weiss was in his office working on some mathematical theory he was developing. It was away over Rick's head. For a moment he thought of posing the problem to the little professor, then thought better of it and passed by the lab on the south side. He skirted the woods and crossed Pirate's Field, so called because local legend said the famed woman pirate, Anne Bonney, had once landed there with her gang of cutthroats. He paused for a moment and studied the fused sand left by the terrific heat when the first moon rocket was launched, but the barren patch gave him no inspiration.

Staying on the shore path, he walked slowly toward the back of the island and presently came out at the tidal flats. The tide was out, leaving the rocks exposed. He sat down at the edge of the low bluff above the flats and stared into the patches of water.

It was a hard job, trying to recall every detail of his friendship with the little Hindu boy, but he tried. It had started in Bombay when Rick and Scotty were on their way to Tibet with Weiss and Zircon to set up the radar relay station for message transmission via the moon. When their equipment was stolen, it was Chahda who took the lead in finding it again. They had been amused by the beggar boy who had educated himself with an old copy of *The World Almanac*. His ability to quote anything from the "Alm-in-ack," as he called it, in English that was sometimes pretty funny, was really astonishing. Then, at the Lost City, he had more than proved his courage and loyalty, and the Spindrifters had sponsored his visit to America as a reward.

For a while Chahda had attended school in America, then he had gone to the Pacific with the Spindrift expedition to Kwangara Island. After salvaging the remains of an ancient temple from one hundred fathoms of water – not to mention the treasure that was found – the Spindrifters had returned home. But Chahda had elected to remain in Hawaii with Professor Warren of the Pacific Ethnographic Society. Later, he had gone with the Warren scientific expedition to the South Seas, and Barby, Rick, and Scotty had joined the party in New Caledonia. After completing part of the expedition's work, the trawler *Tarpon* had returned to New Caledonia where the young people had solved the mystery of *The Phantom Shark*. When the three Spindrifters returned home, Chahda had taken air passage to Bombay to see his family.

"I can't remember all we talked about," Rick muttered to himself. "We talked about everything and anything. Except codes. I can't remember that we ever talked about codes."

He got up, noticing that the crew of builders were in their barge, returning to the mainland for the night. They were trucking materials to a point on the shore near Spindrift, using an old wood road, then taking the stuff the rest of the way by barge.

It was getting on to dinnertime. He took the woods path back, passing by the new cottages. They were nearing completion, the outsides already finished. Beyond the cottages was the farm run by the Huggins family. Mr. Huggins was just herding the island's milk cows into the barn for milking.

Rick kicked at a near-by tree. "Either I'm dumb or it isn't as simple as we think it ought to be," he said aloud, then went on into the house.

Scotty and Barby had done no better. They gathered at the family table with long faces and Barby placed the disturbing cable in the middle of the table as a centerpiece.

"If we look at it long enough, maybe we'll get inspiration," she said.

Professor Julius Weiss, the only one of the three staff scientists who was at home at the moment, picked up the cable and examined it.

"A cipher, eh?" He adjusted his glasses. "It certainly looks complicated."

"Any ideas?" Rick asked hopefully.

The little mathematician shook his head. "No, Rick. I could give you the cube root of the square of the sum of the numbers, or anything like that, but I'm afraid I wouldn't even know how to start breaking the code." He added, "John probably could. He had some experience with codes while in the Navy, I believe."

John was Professor John Gordon. He was on an extended trip to New Mexico, serving as a consultant to the Navy's guided missiles projects. The third scientist, Professor Hobart Zircon, was giving a five-week series of lectures in nuclear physics at Yale.

"I'm afraid Professor Gordon is too far away to help us on this," Rick said.

Mrs. Brant came in, bringing a heavily laden dish of fresh corn on the cob. Behind her trotted a shaggy little dog.

Rick snapped his fingers. "Here, Diz."

Dismal ran over and barked at his young master, then he rolled over on his back and played dead, his only trick. Rick grinned. "Did you bring him along as an adviser, Mom? I'll bet he'd be as good at solving this as any of us."

Mrs. Brant smiled. "From what your father told me, I think he might at that. But why all the long faces? I think it's exciting getting a code message from Chahda. Why, this is the first time we've had a code problem on the island since the moon rocket."

Mrs. Brant couldn't have caused a more sudden reaction had she tossed a lighted firecracker into the middle of the roast.

Barby knocked over her water glass.

Scotty gasped, "Great grasshoppers! A book code!"

Rick strangled on a sip of milk, and when he could get his breath again, he ran around the table to his mother, kissed her soundly and lifted her hand high in token of victory. "The new champ," he proclaimed. "Mom, you're a genius!"

"But, Rick, I didn't say anything except..."

"You said just enough, dear," Hartson Brant replied. "We all had the answer right in that second, because you gave us a clue. Do you remember the code our former friend used when he was sending messages off the island?"

The "former friend" Hartson Brant referred to was a member of the staff who had turned renegade and helped Manfred Wessel's gang in their efforts to build a moon rocket, using the Spindrifft design, in order to win the Stoneridge Grant of two million dollars. The traitor scientist had used code messages to keep the gang informed of new developments on Spindrifft while he had used the cloak of false friendship to slow up the building of the Spindrifft rocket.

"He used a double code," Rick explained. "Part of it was a regular cipher, but the first step was a book code."

"I do remember!" Mrs. Brant exclaimed. "He used a copy of that book Hartson's friend wrote. What was it? *Psychiatry Simplified*. The code was numbers that gave the page of the book, and the position of the word on the page, and unless you found the book, as Rick and Scotty did, you couldn't break the code!"

Barby jumped up in her excitement. "And I know what book Chahda was using!"

The rest of the group spoke as one. "*The World Almanac!*"

Scotty ran for the library, Rick on his heels.

"We told him about that code," Scotty said. "Now I remember when, too. It was right after we got back from India, when we were showing him around the lab."

"I remember, too," Rick agreed. "We were telling him how the gang used my plane, with me flying it, to smuggle their coded messages, and he asked us about it because he had never heard of codes before!"

They reached the shelf that held the *Almanac* and stopped short. Because of the year-to-year news summaries in the famous annual, Hartson Brant had kept each edition as a reference source. There were over a dozen of them on the shelf.

"They're all different," Rick said. "The pages change each year. Which one did he use?"

Scotty's forehead furrowed. "Which one did he memorize? It was an old one, but I can't remember the date."

"Got it," Rick said. "Remember the letter L? The twelfth letter of the alphabet. It must be the 1912 edition."

Scotty surveyed the shelf. "Which we don't have," he said.

Rick groaned. "No!"

Hartson Brant called from the dining room. "Haven't you solved that cipher yet?"

The boys walked dejectedly back to join the others. Rick explained that the right volume was missing. The Spindrift files just didn't go back that far.

"Sit down and eat your dinner," Hartson Brant said. He sliced roast for them, his eyes thoughtful. "Something's wrong with your reasoning," he said, as he filled Rick's plate. "Would Chahda have a 1912 edition with him in Singapore? I doubt it. More likely he'd have a more recent one."

"But the letter L has to mean something," Barby protested.

"What could it mean but twelve?" Rick asked, and the answer struck him before the words were out. He shouted, "I know! It could mean fifty! L is the Roman numeral fifty."

Barby clapped her hands. Scotty reached over and pounded Rick on the back.

"That's it," Hartson Brant said approvingly. "I'll make a wager on it. Chahda used the 1950 edition."

Rick pushed back his chair, but the scientist's voice stopped him.

"Let's rest on our laurels, Rick. Finish dinner first, then we'll all retire to the library and work it out."

Because they were burning with impatience, the three younger members of the Spindrift family did not enjoy the meal, but they made a pretense of eating. Then, an eternity later, Hartson Brant took the last sip of his coffee and grinned at Rick. "Shall we get to it?"

"Shall we!" Barby led the way, holding the cable high.

The first part was easy. Since most pages in the *Almanac* had three numbers, they assumed that the first three numbers in each code group referred to the page. Similarly, they assumed that the second two numbers referred to the line. That left two numbers for the position of the word on the line.

With nervous fingers Rick turned to Page 521 of the 1950 edition and counted down 30 lines. He hesitated over the subtitles, then decided to count them too. At the proper line, he looked up at Scotty and Barby who were watching over his shoulder.

"But there are two columns."

"Don't worry about the columns," Scotty advised. "I don't think Chahda would pay any attention to the columns, because it would mean extra numbers in each group. Count right across and don't pay any attention to the dividing line."

Rick did so. "It doesn't come out right," he complained. "The number is 39, but there are only 17 words on the whole line."

Barby sighed. "Maybe we're wrong all the way around."

"I don't think so," Hartson Brant said. He was sitting in a comfortable chair, smoking an after-dinner pipe. "The logic of the thing appeals to me. Do you suppose Chahda would know about nulls?"

"What's a null?" Scotty asked.

"In cryptography it's a number, or letter, thrown in for the sake of appearance, or to confuse."

"Chahda might know," Rick said. "That brown head of his is crammed full of more odd chunks of information than you could imagine. But if there's a null in this, which figure is it?"

"Try it both ways," Barby urged. "Here, I'll do it." She counted across the line. "The third word is 'seventeen.'" She wrote it down. "The ninth word is 'come.'"

"Could be either," Scotty mused. "But 'come' sounds more likely. Let's try the next group."

That was 6231581. Rick turned to Page 623 and counted down 15 lines, including the title. However, he didn't count the page heading. The heading was on the same line as the page number. Both were above a line drawn across the top of the page, and it seemed sensible to start below the line.

"There aren't 81 words on the lines," he said. "So that means another null, maybe. The first word is 'both' and the eighth word is 'may.'"

Barby wrote them down. "It all makes sense," she pointed out. "It could be, 'Seventeen may,' or 'come both.'"

"Keep going," Scotty urged. "Try another one."

The third group gave them a choice of "Cheyenne," which seemed unlikely, or "bad."

"He couldn't be talking about Cheyenne," Rick said. "The word must be 'bad.' That means the first figure of the pair is the null, because it's the second figure that stands for 'bad.'"

"Sounds reasonable," Scotty agreed. "Keep plugging."

So far, the probable words were: *Come both bad.*

Page 276 in the fourth group turned out to be a table of atomic weights. Line 86 was the element tantalum. If the first figure of the last pair was assumed to be a null, the word was the symbol for tantalum: "Ta."

Rick stared at it. "Something's wrong. This doesn't make sense."

Barby asked impatiently, "How do we know?"

Rick yielded and moved to the next group. It gave the word "rubles." "That's Russian money," he said.

The trio looked at it in bewilderment, then Scotty suddenly let out a yell of laughter. "I've got it! Can't you see? 'Ta' and 'rubles' go together! 'Tarubles.' Troubles!"

Then they were all howling with joy. Leave it to Chahda to dream up something like that, Rick thought. So far, the message made sense. *Come both, bad troubles.*

He turned the pages and counted feverishly. The sixth group gave "am," the seventh "in."

The eighth group gave the message an ominous tone.

Come both. Bad troubles. Am in danger.

The scientists and Mrs. Brant were looking over Rick's shoulder now, too.

The ninth group stopped them for a moment because the pair of figures standing for the word was 14. If the figure 1 was a null, the word was "the." But there were more than 14 words in the line, and the 14th was "my."

Rick looked at the faces around him. "I think it's 'my' because he must have had a reason for using nulls. If I were making up the code, I'd use them because sometimes there are enough words in a line so you need two figures and sometimes not. But you always have to put down two figures so the groups will be even."

"Good thinking," Rick's father complimented him. "Go ahead on that basis. But hurry up. The suspense is awful."

There was a chorus of agreements.

The next word was "boss."

"He was working, then," Scotty guessed. "That must be it, if he has a boss."

Rick hurried to the next group. It produced "Carl." Page 439, the 96th line, gave "Bradley." Then the boss's name was Carl Bradley.

Hartson Brant gave a muffled exclamation. Scotty turned quickly. "Do you know that name, Dad?"

"Yes. But let's get the rest of the message. Quickly, Rick."

The words appeared in rapid succession, with a pause now and then to solve a new difficulty. Once, the lines across the columns were not even and a ruler had to be laid across to find the word. Again, a null appeared as the first number in the page group. Chahda had used it because the page was 51 and he needed a third figure to round out the group. That was easy to spot because the group read 951 and the book had only 912 pages.

In the last series of groups Rick came across another double word like "tarubles." This time, "be" and "ware" combined to make "beware." Then, the very last word stopped them for a moment. It was "umbra."

"What's that?" Scotty asked.

"The shadow cast by the moon during an eclipse of the sun," Julius Weiss answered. "Or part of it, rather. There are two shadows. The umbra and the penumbra."

Barby ran for a dictionary and leafed through the pages quickly. "I have it," she said. "Listen. It's from the Latin for 'shadow,' and it means 'a shade or shadow.'"

"Shadow it is," Rick said, and wrote it down. Then, slowly, he read the full message to the serious group around him.

COME BOTH. BAD TROUBLES. AM IN DANGER. MY BOSS, CARL
BRADLEY, DISAPPEARED. GOVERNMENT WILL ASK SCIENTIFIC
FATHER DO SPECIAL WORK. MUST TAKE. GET JOBS, MEET ME HONG
KONG GOLDEN MOUSE. WATCH CHINESE WITH GLASS EYE, HE
DANGEROUS. AND BEWARE LONG SHADOW.

CHAPTER III

Heavy Water

Hartson Brant walked swiftly to the telephone and picked it up.

"What's the matter, Dad?" Rick asked quickly. The scientist had a strange look on his face.

"Give me the telegraph office," Hartson Brant said. He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "I'll tell you in a moment. I want to get a wire off immediately." He spoke into the phone again. "Western Union? This is Spindrift, Brant speaking. I want to send a straight telegram. Yes. To Steven Ames."

Rick gasped. Steve Ames was the young intelligence officer of JANIG, the secret Army-Navy group charged with protecting the security of American government secrets. The Spindrift group of scientists had worked with Steve in solving *The Whispering Box Mystery*.

Scotty's fingers bit into Rick's arm.

Hartson Brant gave the address. "Here's the message. 'Have reconsidered your request basis of new information just received here. Urge you come or phone at once.' That's it. Sign it 'Brant, Spindrift.' Yes. Charge to this number."

He waited until the telegraph office had read back the message, then hung up and turned to the waiting group.

"Three days ago I had a phone call from Steve Ames. He asked if I could undertake a special job for the government that would require me to go overseas at once for an indefinite time. I was forced to decline because obviously I can't leave now with these staff changes about to take place."

The scientist knocked the ashes out of his pipe, his face thoughtful.

"Steve wouldn't take no for an answer. He insisted that the job was of the utmost importance, and he added that it concerned an old college chum of mine." He paused. "His name is Carl Bradley."

Rick's eyes met Scotty's.

"He said it was an urgent job, but that he would give me a few days to think it over, to see if I couldn't rearrange my affairs in some way. I assured him it was no use, that I couldn't possibly leave, but he said to take until Saturday to consider it. That's tomorrow."

Rick whistled. "Some timing."

"It's a lot more than mere coincidence," Hartson Brant said. "But I don't know any more about it than what I've told you."

"Who is Carl Bradley?" Weiss asked.

"I'm surprised you haven't heard of him, Julius. He has a considerable reputation as an ethnologist. He and Paul Warren and I were in school together. We lost track of him for a while, then he wrote from China. He had spent several years inland, living with the Chinese, as one of them. He produced some immensely valuable studies. Those, and his rather remarkable ability to speak and act like a Chinese earned him the nickname of 'Chinese Bradley.' He had lived most of his life since school in one part of Asia or another. But I'm sure I can't guess what his connection is with this special job of Steve's, or how he happened to become Chahda's boss."

"Or why he's missing," Barby added.

The cable had created a mystery that demanded a solution, but no amount of discussion answered the questions it raised. Finally, Mrs. Brant broke up the debate by pointedly remarking on the lateness of the hour. Reluctantly, the family started for bed.

As Rick undressed, he continued the discussion through the door connecting his room and Scotty's. "Chahda's pretty sure we'll hurry to Hong Kong."

"Is he wrong?" Scotty demanded.

"I don't know," Rick said. "It depends on a lot of things. We can't go unless we get jobs, and Steve evidently didn't say anything to Dad about the rest of the staff, including us."

"Dad hasn't even said he'll go," Scotty reminded.

"Doesn't saying he has reconsidered mean that he'll go?"

"Could be. Or maybe it just means he's willing to talk some more about it. We should have pinned him down."

"We will," Rick said. "In the morning."

He lay awake for long hours, staring into the darkness and trying to piece together Chahda's references to a golden mouse, a Chinese with a glass eye, and a long shadow. It was no use. But there was no mistaking the urgency of his friend's plea.

Where was Chahda now? At a guess, somewhere between Singapore and Hong Kong. But whether by land or sea or air, Rick couldn't imagine. Nor could he even venture a wild guess at what kind of danger Chahda faced.

After a long time he fell asleep, but it was fitful sleep broken by frequent awakenings.

In the morning, the discussion resumed over breakfast, bringing forth wild speculations from Barby. Rick had to grin at her flights of fancy.

"One thing seems sure," Scotty offered. "Chahda was in a big hurry."

"What makes you think so?" Mrs. Brant asked. "Barby! Please stop feeding Dismal at the table."

Dismal turned beseeching eyes to Rick in a plea for moral support, but his young master was listening to Scotty.

"The words he used. Like putting together an atomic symbol and Russian money to make 'troubles,' and using 'umbra' instead of shadow. I'm sure in a big book like *The World Almanac* troubles and shadows are mentioned somewhere. But he didn't have time to search. He took the first possibilities that came along."

Rick nodded approval. "That figures. But why didn't he have time?"

Scotty shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe better."

Julius Weiss, who had tired of the discussion and started to the lab, ran back into the house. "There's a plane heading this way," he announced. "I'm sure it's coming here, because it's down pretty low."

The conversation ended abruptly. Rick and Scotty were first out on the lawn. The engine noise of the plane was loud.

Rick saw it first, a sleek, four-place cabin job, circling wide out over the water, losing altitude. In a few moments it banked sharply behind the lab building, straightened out, and cut the gun. Rick was running toward the end of the grass strip even before the plane settled smoothly to the ground.

"Steve Ames," he said to himself. "I'll bet it is." The JANIG officer had wasted no time!

Sure enough, Steve was the first out of the plane. Rick saw that he was the only passenger. The pilot got out then, and Rick recognized him as one of the JANIG operatives who had chased the Whispering Box gang across Washington.

Steve and Rick shook hands, grinning at each other, then Rick greeted Mike, the pilot.

"Didn't think we'd be needing Spindrift again so soon," Steve said. He walked to meet the others and shook hands all around. "Let's get busy," he said to Hartson Brant.

Rick, Scotty, and Barby followed the two into the library. Mrs. Brant took the pilot into the dining room for coffee while Professor Weiss excused himself and went on to the laboratory. His apparent lack of interest would have amazed anyone who didn't know him, but Rick knew that when Julius Weiss was wrapped up in one of his theoretical math problems, nothing else on earth could find room in his mind.

Steve looked at the scientist. "What caused you to reconsider?"

"This." Hartson Brant handed him the translation of Chahda's cable, then the original. "We broke the code last night. It was a book code, using *The World Almanac*. Chahda knew we'd be able to puzzle it out."

Steve scanned the number groups briefly. "Clever," he commented. He read through the clear copy twice, and his jaw tightened. "This explains something that has puzzled me."

"A good thing," Rick said. "Because all we got was the puzzlement. No explanations."

Steve tapped the cable thoughtfully. "I hate to ask you to tackle this job, but you must have some ideas about it or you wouldn't have sent that wire."

Hartson Brant nodded. "I explained my situation to you on the phone when you called a few days ago. The situation hasn't changed, but I must admit this cable from Chahda puts a new light on the matter. That boy is a member of the family."

"Then you'll go?"

"I don't want to, quite frankly. I will if there is no alternative. I lost a lot of sleep last night making that decision. But first, I want to propose that some member of my staff go in my stead."

Steve walked to the desk and perched on its edge. "Which one?"

"You know them all. You also know their specialties. Which of them would fit your requirements best?"

"Zircon. He's a nuclear physicist."

Rick held his breath. Steve was continuing:

"Chahda urges Rick and Scotty to get jobs, too. I hadn't considered that, but it's not a bad idea."

Rick closed his eyes and let out his breath in a sigh of relief. Scotty nudged him.

Hartson Brant asked, "Then you will consider Zircon as my substitute? Always on condition that he will go, of course."

Steve nodded. "I'd prefer you, but I'll take Zircon, if I can make a condition of my own, and that is that you'll fly to the Far East on a moment's notice if he and the boys can't handle it."

Rick looked at his father anxiously. Hartson Brant had not given his permission for them to make a trip, but evidently it was all right. The scientist nodded.

"I'll agree to that." He went to the telephone and picked up the instrument. "Operator, I want to place a long-distance call."

Steve winked at the boys. Then, as Hartson Brant placed the call to Zircon in New Haven, Connecticut, the JANIG man said, "Going to be a couple of tourists at government expense, huh? Pretty soft."

"Maybe," Rick said, grinning. "That cable doesn't sound like anything soft."

Steve got serious. "You two proved yourselves in Washington, so far as I'm concerned. You can make yourselves useful, and you'll provide a good cover for Zircon."

"What kind of cover?" Barby asked.

Steve smiled at her. "Women can't keep secrets, I'm told."

"I can," Barby retorted swiftly.

Steve held up his hand for silence. Hartson Brant had Zircon on the line. The scientist outlined Steve's proposal in a few words, and gave Zircon the contents of Chahda's cable. Then he listened to Zircon while Rick fidgeted anxiously. Finally, Hartson Brant said, "All right, Hobart. Tell your people up there that I'll take your lectures. We'll see you later today." He hung up and nodded at Steve.

"Hobart had lectures scheduled for next week, but I can take them for him. He'll be down this afternoon, and, he says, he'll be ready to leave in the morning if necessary."

"Good!" Steve nodded at Barby. "Even if you can't go on the trip, you can make yourself useful. Want to place a call to Washington for me?"

"Yes," Barby said eagerly. "Where to?"

Steve gave her the number. Then, while she was placing the call, he said, "Now, I'll tell you what I know."

Rick's heart beat faster. Now he would learn what was behind Chahda's cable!

"The day before I phoned here," Steve began, "my office received a message from Carl Bradley. It was a top secret message sent to us via the American consulate general's channels from Singapore."

I'd better explain first that Carl is a JANIG man. His knowledge of that part of the world has made him invaluable, and he works for us secretly while doing his routine work as an ethnologist. That is top secret information that must never be repeated outside this room."

"You can depend on us," Hartson Brant assured him.

"I know it. To go on. His job is gathering information about persons who show too much interest in operations within our embassies and consulates. However, the cable we got from him wasn't quite in that line."

Steve paused to see how Barby was getting along. She was trying to listen to him and the operator at the same time.

"This cable," Steve continued, "said he had accidentally made a discovery of something potentially dangerous to America. He asked for a competent nuclear physicist, and he named you, Hartson, to be sent to Singapore at once to check on his finding, and to locate, if possible, the source of the stuff he had discovered. We haven't heard from him since. From Chahda's cable, it's evident something has happened to him. And on the basis of the cable, I think we'll send Zircon and you boys to Hong Kong first."

Scotty put into words the question that was in Rick's mind. "What was it that he discovered?"

Steve's lips tightened, then he said: "*Heavy water!*"

CHAPTER IV

Project X

"Heavy water!" Hartson Brant exclaimed softly.

Rick and Scotty looked at each other blankly.

And at that moment, Barby completed the connection and called to Steve. He strode to the phone and picked it up. "Who's this? All right. Steve Ames here. Take down these names. Hobart Zircon. Richard Brant. Donald Scott. You'll find full data on them in the files. Prepare travel orders and get tickets for all three to Hong Kong via the first plane leaving New York after 7:00 p.m. tomorrow night. Arrange for a letter of credit in the usual amount on the National City Bank of Washington, and have the bank make arrangements with all their Far East branches. Put all three on the pay roll at the same grades they held before. Get passports for them with visitor's visas for the Philippines, Hong Kong, Indo-China, Indonesia, Siam, and China. We don't know where they'll end up. Then put all that stuff in an envelope and get it to me here at Spindrift by special messenger ... wait, never mind that. I'll send Mike back right away, and he can bring it to me. Now read those instructions back."

Steve listened for a moment. "Right. Get going. What? Oh, charge the whole thing to a new case file. Mark it Project X."

He disconnected and turned to the group. "Now," he said grimly, "let's talk turkey."

He nodded at Rick and Scotty. "Zircon said he could leave in the morning, if necessary. That's rushing you a little too much. So I've given you until tomorrow night."

Rick grinned. Once things started to move with Steve Ames, they moved strictly jet-propelled.

"What are we supposed to do?" Scotty asked.

"Find Bradley. If you can. But don't spend too much time searching. Getting all the dope – and I mean *all*– on that heavy water is the reason for your going out there. If you find Bradley, he can help. Maybe Chahda can help, too. But never forget for a minute that tracking down that heavy water is your mission."

"If we don't find Bradley, we won't know how to get started," Rick pointed out.

Steve grunted. "No? If I believed that, I'd have gone somewhere else for help. I came here because I knew Spindrift could give me ingenuity as well as scientific knowledge. And you hadn't better let me down!"

"We won't let you down," Scotty assured him.

Barby chimed in indignantly, "Of course they won't."

Steve smiled. "Don't worry. I'm not afraid of their falling down on the job. But it's a big one. I'll tell Zircon this when he comes, but you can be thinking it over in the meantime. You're to find out who is bringing heavy water to the Asia coast and what they're doing with it. You're to find out where it comes from, and why it is being made. You're to get samples and send them back here. And most important of all, you're to locate and pinpoint for us any industrial plants you find."

Scotty scratched his head. "Fine. Only let's get back to the beginning. What is heavy water? And why are you so excited about it?"

"I don't know, either," Barby added.

Hartson Brant looked at his son. "You do, don't you, Rick?"

"I know what it is, but I don't know why it's so important to Steve," Rick said. He had read a great deal about heavy water in studying elementary physics. It had many uses in physics experiments.

"Let's see how much you know," Steve directed. "Sound off."

Rick searched his memory, trying to marshal all the facts he knew. "Well," he began, "ordinary water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen. In every water molecule there are two atoms of hydrogen

and one of oxygen. The important part, for what we're talking about, are the hydrogen atoms. Hydrogen is the lightest element, and it has the simplest atom. There's just one proton and one electron."

He looked at his father, waiting for a nod to tell him he was on the right track. When the scientist nodded approval, he went on.

"That kind of hydrogen atom has a mass of one, as the scientists say. But there are other kinds of hydrogen atoms, and they are pretty rare, called isotopes. An isotope is just a different variety of the ordinary kind of atom in each element. The thing that makes it different is a change in the nucleus. Well, hydrogen has two isotopes. One kind, which has a mass of two, is found in nature. It is called deuterium. Its nucleus is called a deuteron. Another kind, which can be made in a nuclear reactor, is called tritium. A little of it is found naturally but not enough to count for much."

He took a deep breath. "I hope I know what I'm talking about."

"You're doing fine," Hartson Brant said. "Go on."

"All right. Well, heavy water is made of one atom of oxygen plus two atoms of deuterium, which is the first isotope of hydrogen. In chemistry, there's no difference in the way heavy water acts. You can even drink it. In fact, people do drink it every day, because in ordinary water there is some heavy water. I forget the exact figures, but I think that, by weight, there are five thousand parts of ordinary hydrogen in water and only one part of deuterium."

"That's right." Steve Ames nodded. "Five thousand to one. Now tell us what is peculiar about all isotopes?"

Rick thought furiously and came up with what he hoped was the answer. "I think it's that isotopes aren't as stable as the basic elements. Some are pretty stable, but some are pretty shaky. That's why some of the isotopes of uranium can be split wide open in a chain reaction to make an atomic bomb, and ..."

A chill ran through him. His mouth opened. He knew! He knew why heavy water had Steve Ames all excited. He choked:

"Hydrogen bombs!"

Scotty and Barby gasped. Steve Ames and Hartson Brant smiled.

"It's true that one of the possibilities in building a hydrogen bomb concerns deuterium," the scientist said. "But I scarcely think that's the case here. How about it, Steve?"

"Possible, but extremely improbable," Steve agreed. "What I'm most interested in is a use for heavy water Rick hasn't mentioned. Know what a nuclear reactor is, Rick?"

Rick nodded. "It's what the newspapers usually call an 'atomic pile.' We have quite a few in this country, I think. The Atomic Energy Commission said quite a while ago that they used a nuclear reactor with uranium as a fuel to make plutonium, which is the artificial element that can be used in atomic bombs. Besides uranium itself, that is."

"That's right. What I'm interested in is the fact that heavy water can be used as a neutron moderator in a reactor."

Rick looked blank. Steve was talking way over his head. Hartson Brant saw his son's bewilderment and explained: "You've probably heard that the uranium in a reactor is encased in blocks of graphite, which is simply carbon, Rick. It prevents the neutrons from the uranium from simply running wild. Well, heavy water can be used for the same purpose."

"Exactly," Steve said. "So you see, I'm not afraid of the possibility of hydrogen bombs as much as I am of the possibility that somewhere in Asia is a nuclear reactor. Until we get international agreement on atomic weapons, we simply have to keep track of atomic developments everywhere for our own protection. If there's a new country going in for atomic research, and it can build a reactor, it might also be able to build an atomic bomb. Now, don't forget I said heavy water is a legitimate industrial product. We certainly can't object to a nation's manufacturing it. We wouldn't want to. But

when it turns up in an odd corner of the world, I think we'd better find out why. If it's a peaceful reason, we'll mark it down and then forget it. If not, we'll make a report to the United Nations."

"Why not report it right now?" Barby asked.

"Good question. The answer is, we're not sure. Remember Carl Bradley was unsure enough to ask for help. If we got up before the UN and started hollering and it turned out to be plain water, we'd look pretty foolish."

"I don't even know how we'd begin," Scotty muttered. "How do you start on a job like this?"

"You'll start by being innocent tourists," Steve said. "You and Rick are students on a holiday, with Zircon, your uncle, as guide and tutor. You'll be interested in a number of things, including hunting. That will give you a good excuse for barging around the country if you have to. But you won't be able to decide what you want to hunt." Steve grinned. "You'll decide after you find out where you have to go. And you'd better learn about Asiatic game animals. For instance, if the trail takes you to Indonesia, you may want to hunt the hairy Sumatran rhinoceros. In the Philippines, you'll hunt timarau, which are a special breed of wild water buffalo. In China, around the coast, you can hunt tigers. In Malaya, if the trail does take you down to Singapore, you can hunt tapir. Same for Siam. In Indo-China you can hunt tigers. Inland in China, toward the Tibetan border, you'd better be hunting bharals."

"That's a wonderful name," Barby said quickly. "What are they?"

"Another name for them is blue sheep," Steve told her. "They're bluish-gray, shading to white in the under parts. The horns are unusual, because they curve outward from the sides of the head, then down and backward."

Hartson Brant paused in the act of filling his pipe and asked curiously, "How do you know so much about Asiatic animals, Steve?"

Steve laughed. "Because I used the same gag once myself." He started for the door. "Talk it over, and think up any questions you can. I won't promise to know the answers, but I'll try. I've got to get Mike started back to Washington to pick up that stuff."

When he had gone, Barby looked enviously at the two boys. "In my next reincarnation," she announced, "I'm going to be a boy. I don't see why I couldn't go, too. A girl would make the group look even less suspicious, wouldn't it?" She scanned the three faces eagerly, then sighed. "All right. I knew it wasn't any use."

"Never mind, towhead," Rick said. He always hated to see Barby's wistful expression when he and Scotty were going somewhere. "Maybe next time."

"Not if next time is another job like this," Hartson Brant disagreed. He studied his pipe stem, his forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. "I'm not quite sure why I didn't object to Rick and Scotty going."

Rick demanded swiftly, "You're not going to object, are you, Dad?"

"No, Rick. If we hadn't been on other expeditions and in some tough spots together, I surely would. But I know you two are able to take care of yourselves. And so is Zircon. Only keep in mind that you may be dealing with an entirely new breed of cats, unscrupulous men who wouldn't hesitate to put you out of the way without a moment's hesitation. So be careful. Be very careful. Don't take risks that aren't essential to your job. And do what Zircon tells you to without hesitation. He's knocked around in some pretty rough corners of the world, and I don't know a man who is better equipped for this kind of job, unless it's Carl Bradley."

The warning sobered Rick even more. Apart from what his father had said, he knew it was also what the information could mean to the security of the country that had prevented the scientist from making a single objection to their going.

"We'll take no risks we don't have to," he promised. "We'll move as if we were walking on eggs, Dad."

And Scotty echoed the promise.

Nothing remained but to wait for Zircon and make definite plans. Steve, who had risen early in order to get to Spindrift first thing, walked out to the orchard with Dismal for company and stretched out under a tree for a nap.

Rick and Scotty couldn't possibly have napped, so they went up to Rick's room and began to pack. That took little time, since they would travel by air. Scotty took his rifle out of its protective case and cleaned it, then tried on the infrared telescope. He removed from the 'scope the masking bits of cardboard Rick had used to convert it to a camera view finder, thus making it a telescopic rifle sight once more. It fitted perfectly.

"You taking the movie camera along?" he asked.

Rick thought it over. "Guess I will," he said finally. "Tourists are supposed to have cameras. I'll take the movie instead of the speed graphic. And I can take along infrared film as well as regular color film. If anyone asks, I can say I want movies of the animals you and Zircon shoot. Then all three of us won't have to take guns."

"Better finish putting the lenses into those sunglasses frames then," Scotty said.

"I'll do it right now. It won't take long." A thought struck Rick. "What will Zircon do for a rifle?"

"He'll have to borrow one, and an ordinary one won't do, either. If we're supposed to be hunting big game, he'll need one bigger than my .303." Scotty frowned thoughtfully. "How about Captain Douglas? He used to be quite a hunter. You've seen the African trophies in his office at the barracks."

Captain Douglas was commanding officer of the Whiteside State Police Barracks, and a good friend of the boys. He and his officers had co-operated with them in rounding up the Smugglers' Reef gang.

"Give him a phone call while I finish putting these lenses in," Rick suggested.

"Good idea." Scotty went to phone.

More and more Rick was realizing the magnitude of the job they had undertaken. He hoped fervently that Chahda would know something useful in case they failed to locate Bradley.

In a moment Scotty stuck his head in the door. "I've got the captain on the phone," he said. "He's got a .45-90 we can borrow, and, bless his heart, he didn't ask where we were going. When can we pick it up?"

Rick thought it over. "I'll have to fly to the airport and pick up Zircon in a little while. Tell Captain Douglas I'll buzz the barracks on the way over. Ask if he can possibly deliver it to me at the airport. I hate to bother him, but I won't have a car to go get it." Rick's little cub airplane was the island's fast messenger-passenger service.

"Okay." Scotty disappeared down the hall again for a few moments and then returned. He took a seat in the leather armchair. "He finally did get curious. Wanted to know if we needed that caliber rifle to shoot Jersey mosquitoes. I told him we were going on a trip and that I couldn't say anything more about it. So he said he'd lend us the gun only on condition that we tell him the story when we got back. I said we would, if we could."

"He's the best," Rick said. "But he knows we've done some hush-hush work for the government, and don't forget he's an ex-Marine. He wouldn't embarrass us by asking too many questions."

Scotty nodded. "Wait until you see this rifle. A .45-90 is a regular cannon. It'll knock down anything smaller than an elephant, and it'll knock down one of those, if it hits the right spot."

"That's just Zircon's size," Rick said, grinning. The scientist was a huge man who towered over the rest of the staff.

Later, Zircon dominated the library as Steve issued final instructions. The scientist's booming voice had phrased questions for an hour, until even Steve looked weary.

"This winds up what I have to say," he told them. "Mike should be back with your tickets, passports, and letter of credit in another hour. I'll go back to Washington and issue instructions via the State Department to all of our ambassadors and consuls in the area. They'll know what's happening and why you're there, but no one else on their staffs will. Go in to see each one whose country you

enter. Make a lot of noise. Insist on seeing the chief. Hell know your names and he'll do everything he can. Bradley is supposed to check in with each embassy or consulate in the same way. They'll be your points of contact in case he shows up again. File reports when you can. Hand them to the ambassador or consul of the country and no one else."

Steve stopped for a moment, then his warm grin flashed. "This is going to be tougher than beating the Whispering Box gang. I know you'll come back with the answers, but be sure you have whole skins when you do!"

CHAPTER V

Hong Kong

The four-engine transport had been letting down from its cruising altitude for what seemed like an hour. Rick was watching through the circular window for the first sign of land, and he was getting impatient.

The trip had been a long one. It seemed to Rick that he had been sitting in a plane for most of his life, even though they had been gone from Spindrifft for less than four days. That was because they were making no stop-overs. At San Francisco, Honolulu, Guam, and Manila they had stopped only long enough to refuel, or to change planes.

Scotty, in the seat next to Rick, was sound asleep. Zircon, across the aisle, was engrossed in a book.

Rick looked up as the stewardess walked past him. She smiled and pointed through the window on the opposite side. He caught a glimpse of mountainous country below. Then, in a few seconds, a small island passed underneath on his own side. They were getting close to the ground now. He estimated their altitude at less than two thousand feet. He poked Scotty in the ribs.

"Rise and shine, mighty hunter. We're getting ready to land."

Scotty was wide awake instantly. "About time," he muttered. "Show me this famous Hong Kong."

"Can't yet," Rick replied. "But we've passed a couple of islands. Look, there's another."

They were dropping rapidly now. The big plane suddenly banked, leveled, then banked again. As they rocked up, Rick looked down into a cove, crowded with Chinese junks. The brief glimpse sent a thrill through him, as new scenes always did. They were the first junks he had seen outside of pictures.

The plane banked again, the other way. Rick realized with a sudden feeling of discomfort that they were actually weaving their way through mountain peaks! He had heard that the approach to Hong Kong was crooked as a corkscrew; now he knew the reports didn't exaggerate.

Zircon was leaning across the aisle. He pointed to a strip of curved beach. "Repulse Bay," he boomed. "We're almost in." The scientist had been to the Far East before, and he knew Hong Kong.

They were close to the top of abrupt hills. Rick saw a road curving through the hills and valleys, then they were over water again, and the water was dotted with modern ships as well as junks. The plane rocked far over in a tight bank, and there was a howl as the flaps were lowered. Rick and Scotty buckled safety belts and sat back as the plane leveled off.

In a few moments they were collecting their luggage and walking across a concrete apron to the customs building. Inside, a Chinese clerk, under the supervision of a British officer, gave their effects a cursory glance, stamped their passports, and handed them police forms to fill out. They did so as rapidly as possible, turned them in, and left the customs room. Outside, they picked up the bags they had checked, gave them to a Chinese coolie, who appeared from nowhere, and followed him to a taxi.

It was a small car of English make. Zircon looked at it with disapproval. "Am I supposed to fit into that thing?" he demanded.

Rick hid a grin. The car wasn't much bigger than the scientist. Zircon squeezed in gingerly, Scotty behind him. Rick got into the front seat with the driver.

"Peninsular Hotel," Zircon directed.

"Funny," Scotty said. "I never expected to find an airport on Hong Kong. All the pictures I've seen of it show mountains. It doesn't look as though there were room for an airport."

"There isn't," Zircon said. "We're not on Hong Kong. This is Kowloon. It's a peninsula jutting out from the mainland of China. However, it's a part of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong. We'll get to the island itself, and to Victoria, which is the main city, by ferry-boat or walla-walla."

"What's that?" Rick asked curiously.

"Local name for a water taxi," Zircon explained.

The taxi was leaving the airport now, but there was nothing in sight at the moment to show that this was the Orient. The modern buildings were of stone, brick, and concrete, and the streets were wide and clean. As they got closer to downtown Kowloon, however, Chinese predominated, with only a sprinkling of what were evidently Englishmen. In a short time they pulled up in front of the Peninsular, one of the world's famous hotels. It was an imposing structure, the lobby as vast as an auditorium but broken up by numerous pillars, potted plants, and dusty-looking furniture. They registered and were shown to a very large and comfortable room with a window that opened on a fire escape.

As Zircon tipped the Chinese bearers, Rick asked them, "What time is it?"

The chief "boy" answered, "Maybe thlee time, sor," and closed the door.

"About three?" Rick looked at Zircon and Scotty. "It's early. Let's get started right away. I'd like to find out where and what the Golden Mouse is."

"Good idea," Zircon agreed. He tossed a suitcase on one of the three beds in the big room. "Let's clean up and change quickly. We'll have time to see the consul this afternoon, too. I doubt that the consulate closes before five o'clock."

In less than a half-hour the three of them were walking from the hotel toward the water front. Zircon led the way. "We'll take the ferry," he said. "It's very fast."

The ferry slip was less than a three-minute walk from the hotel, but when they started to get tickets, they remembered that changing money had completely slipped their minds. A scholarly looking Chinese gentleman saw their plight and spoke to Zircon in faultless English with a distinct Oxford accent.

"Perhaps I can be of service, sir? If you have an American dollar bill, I can change it for you. You will need only a little money for tickets, and there is a bank close by the ferry slip on the other side."

"You're very kind," Zircon said. "We'll accept your offer, sir. I do have a dollar bill, I believe."

He found it and handed it to the Chinese, who counted out six Hong Kong dollars and a few tiny paper bills that represented change. "The rate today is six and a fraction to one," he explained.

Rick and Scotty added their thanks to Zircon's. The Chinese bowed. "A pleasure to have been of even such small service." He smiled and continued on his way.

"The Chinese are without a doubt the most polite of all the Eastern peoples," Zircon said. He pushed a Hong Kong dollar through the ticket window, got three tickets and some change in return. They pushed through the gate and walked across the dock to the ferry.

As they did so, Rick got his first look at Hong Kong. He stared, amazed, his mental image of an oriental city vanishing like a burst bubble.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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