

Goodwin Harold Leland

The Wailing Octopus: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story



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Brant Science-Adventure Story**

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CHAPTER I

Destination: Clipper Cay

The Sky Wagon droned through Caribbean skies, following a compass course that led to Charlotte Amalie, capital city of the Virgin Islands. With eager interest, the four people in the small plane watched the blue water below. In a few moments they should pass over the island that was their ultimate destination.

Rick Brant, in the pilot's seat, turned to the husky, black-haired boy next to him. "See anything yet?" he asked.

Don Scott had been surveying the far horizon through binoculars. He took them from his eyes and shook his head. "Nothing but water. You sure there is an island called Clipper Cay?"

Rick let the plane fly itself for a moment while he stretched luxuriously. He was a lean, long-legged boy with brown hair and eyes and a bone-deep tan. He grinned at his friend. "No faith. That's the trouble with you."

"No logic, that's the trouble with you," Scotty countered. "If there were such an island it would be called an island, not a cay. A cay is something that follows an O, as in okay."

The two scientists in the rear seat had been listening with amusement to the boys. Since the start of the expedition Scotty had professed doubt and misgiving, more for the sake of conversation than anything else, Rick was sure.

Dr. Anthony Briotti, archaeologist of the Spindrift staff, leaned forward. "At least pronounce it correctly, Scotty. 'Cay' is pronounced 'key.'"

"See?" Scotty exclaimed triumphantly. "The only place where they have islands called keys is in Florida. We're on a wild-goose chase, I tell you!"

Big Hobart Zircon, a nuclear physicist and long-time friend of the boys, tapped Scotty on the shoulder. "Since you're so certain of that, may I ask why you came?"

Scotty tried to look martyred. "Only because of the buddy system," he said solemnly. "The first rule of underwater safety – or above-water safety, for that matter – is that you have to swim with a buddy. You and Tony swim together, so I had to go along as a buddy for Rick. Somebody has to chase the mermaids away from him, and it might as well be me."

"That's nice of you," Rick said soberly. "There'll probably be a whole horde of mermaids guarding the treasure, not to mention half a dozen sea monsters."

Tony Briotti said, "There's one mermaid I wish were with us, and that's Barby. After all, she started this whole thing. Too bad she has to miss out."

Rick's pretty sister, Barbara Brant, had unwittingly launched the flight to the Virgin Islands by getting into an argument with Tony Briotti about the authenticity of the legend that pirates had once used Spindrift Island as a hangout. Tony had challenged the legend. After that, of course, proof had to be found.

Rick had recalled digging up the remains of a campfire in Pirate's Field during the installation of equipment for the moon rocket, the first great experiment that had put the Spindrift Island scientific group in business as a research foundation headed by Rick's father, Hartson Brant. It was during this experiment that Scotty had joined the staff after rescuing Rick from an unscrupulous gang. The two boys had been on a number of expeditions together since that time and were fast friends. Zircon was

one of the original Spindrift group. Youthful Tony Briotti was one of the new staff members, but he had already earned the loyalty and friendship of the boys by his fine leadership of the expedition to the Philippines, as related in *The Golden Skull*.

Starting with the campfire site, Barby and the boys had excavated Pirate's Field under Tony's direction. They had unearthed positive evidence that pirates had landed there. The most vital evidence was the remains of a logbook, once the log of the bark *Maiden Hand*, sunk by the woman pirate Anne Bonney off the island of Clipper Cay in the Virgin Islands.

Scotty turned and looked at the two scientists. "I'm just kidding, of course. You couldn't have kept me from coming without tossing me into irons. But seriously, do you expect to find treasure, Tony?"

The archaeologist grinned. "Depends on what you mean by treasure. As I recall, one definition is 'something rare or precious.' Well, a chance to go skin diving in the Virgin Islands is certainly that – a rare and precious opportunity. At least I think so."

Hobart Zircon grunted, "And so do I."

"Amen," Rick echoed.

"You're evading the issue," Scotty accused. "You know perfectly well what I mean. Do you expect to find that golden statue mentioned in the logbook?"

"Expect? On a treasure hunt, one hopes; one doesn't expect," Zircon stated in his booming voice.

Rick smiled to himself. Probably no Spindrift expedition ever had started with such a flimsy excuse. According to the log of the *Maiden Hand*, the ship had gone down before the pirates could locate a golden statue of St. Francis, hidden by the bark's captain, Thomas Campion. According to Captain Campion, the statue had weighed "an hundred-weight." Certainly a hundred pounds of gold was worth going after, but there were a few considerations that made finding it rather unlikely.

In Captain Campion's words: "*That we did prevent the boucaniers from fynding the blessedde statue was moste fortunate, yette the bark did go to her deathe in twentye fathomes, and so the statue is loste.*"

Rick and Scotty had become underwater enthusiasts on their return from the Philippines, and both had aqualung equipment that would take them to twenty fathoms without difficulty. However, working time at that depth was sharply limited by the capacity of their tanks. This was assuming that they were able to find the wreck of the *Maiden Hand* in the first place.

Still, there was enough of a chance to provide an excuse for a vacation expedition. The real purpose, so far as Rick was concerned, was to get in some superb swimming in clear water. He also intended getting plenty of underwater movies of the colorful reefs and fish. Scotty planned to do some underwater hunting.

Tony Briotti's interest grew out of his profession. The Virgin Islands had been pretty well worked over by archaeologists, and most of the early Indian middens and mounds explored. But on the west coast, archaeologists equipped with aqualungs had recently found primitive artifacts a half mile offshore, and Tony wanted to do a little underwater artifact hunting of his own.

Hobart Zircon was the only one without a specific objective. He had readily agreed to go along simply because he wanted a vacation. He had said, "Tell you what, I'll go along and do some surface fishing. Rick and Scotty can catch fish underwater and put them on my hook, then signal me to pull up. If the fish aren't heavy enough to ruin my rest, I'll haul them in."

Mr. and Mrs. Brant had already made plans to take a vacation in Canada, and Barby was registered at a summer girl's camp. Weiss, Winston, Gordon, and Shannon, the other staff scientists, were away on various projects. So the four "treasure hunters" had welcomed an excuse to go off on a venture of their own.

They would have a wonderful time, Rick thought, and who knew? They might even find the treasure!

Scotty had been looking through the binoculars again. He gave Rick a grin. "I take it all back," he said. "There's an island ahead."

The scientists leaned forward eagerly, and Rick strained to see. Sure enough, in a few moments they began to make out the island on the horizon ahead. Rick had enough confidence in his navigation to be certain that it was Clipper Cay.

The group had spent the night in Puerto Rico, then departed early in order to fly off the direct route for an advance look at Clipper Cay. Rick didn't intend to land. He would circle the island once or twice, then head again for Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas.

Scotty asked, "Where does the word 'cay' come from, anyway?"

Tony Briotti answered. "It's from the Spanish, Scotty. It means island, or islet. However, the Spanish got it from the Taino people, who were the Indians of the Antilles."

The island was close enough now so that they could discern its shape. Rick saw that it formed a rough crescent, running from north to south. It was about a mile long, perhaps a half mile wide at its greatest width, tapering to the horns of the crescent. He saw also that the color of the water changed gradually from the fathomless blue of the ocean to the green of shallow water.

Inwardly excited, he put the nose of the plane down and let the small craft pick up speed. Scotty grinned his pleasure, and Rick knew that his pal was just as excited in spite of his joking skepticism.

Rick leveled off at an altitude of four thousand feet and put the plane in a wide circle. Zircon leaned over Tony to look out the window, and Rick had to compensate in a hurry because the big scientist's weight threw the plane out of trim. Then Scotty, just as eager, leaned over to Rick's side and the trim had to be corrected again.

The island was a travel agent's wildest dream. The blue water gradually shifted to green, then lighter green, and finally the white of lovely beaches on both sides of the island. Lines of surf marked the position of reefs off both shores.

Somewhere along the western reef was the wreck of the *Maiden Hand*. Rick wondered if they would have diver's luck and locate the ancient bark, and at the same moment he was sure they would.

"Plenty of vegetation," Briotti remarked.

"Probably palms, perhaps some mangrove," Zircon agreed. "Take us down for a closer look, Rick."

Rick obliged by standing the Sky Wagon up on a wing and sliding down as quickly as safe flying allowed. He, too, wanted a closer look. He cast a glance at his gas gauge. There was enough fuel, with a margin of safety, unless he got too enthusiastic about lingering around the island.

He leveled off again at a thousand feet and flew up the east coast, between the outer reef and the beach. This was the Atlantic side of the island, and the surf on the reef was heavy.

"Cottages," Scotty called. "Look!"

They counted seven on the eastern side of the island, most of them near the middle. It was hard to see details among the palms, but they seemed small and unpainted, like fishermen's shacks. Rick reversed course and flew down the western side and they counted five more. One fairly pretentious beach house was near the northern tip of the island. In general, the houses on the western side seemed better kept, and slightly larger. A few houses had small docks. Off the southern tip of the island, on the western side, a boat was trolling. The occupants waved as Rick flew over.

"Wonder which house is ours?" Scotty asked.

They didn't know, of course. Arrangements for a beach house had been made for them by a friend of Zircon's, and not until they landed at Charlotte Amalie would they get the details. The same friend, Dr. Paul Ernst, had also arranged for a boat, to be used as a diving tender.

Rick was tempted to land in the smooth water off the western shore. The Sky Wagon had been equipped with pontoons for that very purpose. They had realized that no landing place would be available on the cay for a wheeled aircraft. But there was little to be gained by landing now when they didn't even know which house would be theirs.

Besides, there were supplies and equipment to be picked up and charts to be obtained, and the Sky Wagon needed to have the tank topped off, since they couldn't very well carry aviation gas to the island.

Reluctantly, Rick asked, "Anyone want to see anything else?"

"Not me," Hobart Zircon said flatly. "I want to get to Charlotte Amalie so we can get started back. That water looks clear enough to drink."

"See any sign of wrecks on the bottom?" Tony inquired.

No one had. No one had looked. They were too interested in getting an over-all view of Clipper Cay.

Rick set his course for St. Thomas. Now that he thought about it, he was rather pleased with himself. The flight from Spindrift was the longest single trip he had ever taken in the Sky Wagon. The party had stopped for fuel as needed and had stayed overnight as darkness overtook them along the way. He had hit every destination on the nose, on time. And now the end of the trip was in sight without a single incident to mar its smoothness.

In a short time the mountains of St. Thomas rose out of the sea, and soon afterward Rick circled high above the colorful roofs of Charlotte Amalie. He switched on his radio and asked for seaplane landing instructions. The airfield directed him to the proper landing place, a beach and pier at the edge of the city. Then Scotty took over the mike and, while Rick started in for a landing, asked the airfield tower to phone Dr. Paul Ernst, Zircon's friend, and notify him of their arrival.

Apparently the tower operator phoned immediately, because as Rick taxied toward the dock, Zircon saw his friend waiting. Following the instructions of a dockman, Rick beached the Sky Wagon and cut the engine. Two husky Virgin Islanders hauled the ship higher onto the beach, and the Spindrifters climbed out.

Dr. Ernst was a small, bespectacled man with a shock of unruly white hair. He looked like a country doctor – which was reasonable enough, Rick thought, because that's just about what he was. Charlotte Amalie, with a population of about 11,500, could not be described as a big city.

The doctor greeted them all cordially, then immediately got down to business. "I'm sorry you are not remaining in Charlotte Amalie. However, Hobart, I have done as you requested. For tonight I have reservations for you at one of our oldest hotels, Alexander's Rest. Named for Alexander Hamilton, of course."

Rick remembered that the Revolutionary hero had been brought up in the Virgin Islands.

"The beach cottage is waiting at Clipper Cay. It is on the western side, the third from the southern tip of the island. You shall have my own boat. I think you will find it ideal for a diving tender. I call it the *Water Witch*. An attractive name, is it not? I have checked on your equipment. It is held at the warehouse in my name. The supplies you wished to buy here have been ordered and are waiting at Andersen's Supply House. I have told them you will be calling."

The group listened, delighted at the obvious efficiency with which Dr. Ernst had taken care of Zircon's requests.

By lunchtime they had picked up their equipment and supplies, Scotty had tested the twin diesel engines on the *Water Witch* and announced himself more than pleased, Rick had checked over the aqualungs and compressor that had come down with his camera and other equipment by freight, the supplies had been stowed, the Sky Wagon refueled, and nothing remained but to check in at the hotel. This, they had decided, could wait until after lunch.

While the scientists drove off in Dr. Ernst's car to pick up the doctor at his office, Rick and Scotty walked into town, headed for "The Danish Pastry" where the group was to meet for lunch.

Rick spoke his amazement. "Look at us," he marveled. "Ready to go. No trouble, no strain, no pain. Ever see an expedition get off to such a smooth start? We can't lose, Scotty. After a beginning like this we couldn't help finding the treasure."

Scotty grinned his agreement. "I didn't ask," he said, "but I wouldn't be surprised if the good Dr. Ernst hasn't done some advance diving and marked the statue's location with a buoy hung around its neck, just to make things easier for us!"

"Twenty fathoms," Rick said reflectively. "That's a lot of water. Besides, we don't know how accurate Captain Campion's guess was. We may be getting into water that's too deep for us."

Which, though unknowing, was one of the most prophetic remarks he had ever made.

CHAPTER II

The Scuba Slip

Charlotte Amalie had color. It was an old community, dating back to Danish ownership of the Virgin Islands, and there was a feeling of antiquity underneath the color of the tropics. There was no sharp lines to buildings; everything had a pleasant weathered look.

"Friendly folks," Scotty observed, after the tenth passer-by had bidden them a good day. "Doesn't seem to matter whether they're rich or poor. They look happy, and they're certainly polite."

"I like it," Rick agreed. "Those colored roofs get me." He stumbled on a cobblestone and added, "But the street could stand improving. Cobbles are fine for horses, maybe, but they're hard on cars."

"What do they do here for a living?" Scotty asked. "Wish we had Chahda along. He could reel off the straight dope from his *Worrol'd Alm-in-ack*." Their Indian friend, Chahda, was at home in Bombay and they hadn't heard from him in some time. His ability to quote from *The World Almanac*, which he had memorized, had caused the boys considerable amusement, even while they appreciated having a kind of walking encyclopedia with them.

They passed a fruit stand where women were shopping for mangoes, soursops, and other delicious-looking things, including sugar cane. "That's part of it," Rick said. "Sugar. This is also the headquarters for bay rum."

Scotty's eyebrows went up. "*Bay rum*?" He stepped out of the way to let an ancient woman on a donkey go by. "What's the bay part of it?"

Rick shrugged. "Search me. Anyway, you don't drink it, you put it on your face. I guess it was originally distilled from bayberry trees or something. Anyway – " He stopped suddenly as Scotty's fingers sank into his arm.

"Look!" Scotty exclaimed.

Rick looked, and let out a yell. "Steve! Steve Ames!" In the next moment he could have bitten his tongue out, because it was entirely possible that Steve wasn't traveling under his own identity.

Ames was an athletic-looking young man in a white suit and Panama hat. He stopped at Rick's hail, turned, and waited for the boys to catch up. His face split in a pleased grin.

Rick breathed his relief. Evidently Steve didn't mind being called by name.

The boys knew Steve as Spindrift's contact with JANIG, the Joint Army-Navy Intelligence Group for which Spindrift had worked in the past, once to solve *The Whispering Box Mystery*, and again to track down the secret of *The Caves of Fear*.

"Wonder what he's doing here?" Scotty muttered.

"We'll soon find out," Rick said.

Steve greeted them cordially. "What brings you two wanderers to these shores?"

"We were about to ask the same of you," Rick returned.

Steve grinned at the obvious curiosity in the boys' faces. "Nothing very exciting. I'm here on a little vacation. Swimming."

"What kind of swimming?" Scotty wanted to know.

"Oh, skin diving, mostly."

"Gosh, that's wonderful!" Rick exclaimed. "Scuba or snorkel?"

There was the barest of hesitations before Steve replied. "Snorkel. There's nothing that's more fun than snorkeling around the reefs. That's the only way to swim in waters like these. You can get right down among the fish."

Rick saw Scotty's mouth open to point out Steve's error, but he stepped on his friend's foot and said quickly, "We're here for the swimming, too. Maybe we can join forces."

He knew the answer would be no. Steve wasn't vacationing; he was on a case. A vacationing skin diver would know that a snorkel is nothing but a tube that allows a swimmer to float face down on the surface of the water while looking for something to dive after. Once the dive starts, the snorkel has no purpose, since its short length only allows it to project a few inches above the surface while a diver is floating face down. On the other hand, the Scuba – Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus, like the boys' aqualungs, really does allow the diver to get down among the fish.

"Thanks for the invitation," Steve said. He smiled. "I don't usually try a cover story unless I have it down cold. Just for my future guidance, where did I slip? Your faces were quite a study."

Rick told him. Steve nodded. "Thanks. I just got here on the morning plane, and I haven't been briefed yet. By tonight I'll be an expert on skin diving."

The statement only whetted further Rick's over-sharp curiosity. If Steve was to be briefed on skin diving, it sounded like a case that would interest him and Scotty.

Steve continued to smile. "I don't want to linger too long. Want to give me a hand?"

Rick refrained from shouting and merely nodded his head. Scotty, with only slightly less restraint, said, "You know we do."

"Fine. Don't look. In the doorway of the tailor shop is a dark-complexioned man in a gray sharkskin suit. He's a tail. He picked me up at the airport. I don't know the town well enough to lose him easily in broad daylight. Never been here before today. Take him out for me?"

Rick and Scotty nodded. Neither looked toward the doorway. "How will we get in touch with you?" Rick asked.

Steve hesitated. "There's no one I'd rather see more of, and no one I'd rather have on my side. But this case is not for you. Just do me this favor, then forget you saw me."

"You never know when you'll need help," Rick pointed out. "We won't horn in, but it won't do any harm to know how we can reach other. Tonight we'll be at a hotel called Alexander's Rest. Tomorrow we take off for an island called Clipper Cay."

"All right. If you really need to reach me, call the duty officer at the UDT base and leave a message. I'll get it."

Rick turned slightly. In a plate-glass window across the street he could see a reflection of the tailor shop Steve had mentioned, and he could make out the form of a man in the shadowed doorway. He estimated that the shop was about fifty feet away.

Scotty was also measuring the situation. He said, "Walk away from us so the tail will have to come by."

Steve nodded. He shook hands, gave them each a grin, and was gone.

Rick said loudly, "Give me your shoulder to lean on. I've got a rock in my shoe."

Scotty obliged, and Rick half turned as he did so. He saw the man in the gray sharkskin suit saunter out of the doorway and start toward them.

Rick balanced on one leg, one hand on Scotty's shoulder, the other hand fumbling with the shoelace on his lifted foot.

The tail walked toward them, unfolding a paper as he did so. He was apparently devoting his full attention to the paper; his actions said he didn't even know the boys existed.

"You ought to get tighter shoes," Scotty observed. "Then you wouldn't get stones in them."

"Save the advice," Rick grunted. "I've got a knot in the lace."

The man came abreast of them, between Rick and the building, and in that moment, clawing wildly for balance, Rick lost his hold on Scotty's shoulder. He fell squarely against the man in the gray suit and crushed him into the building.

"Hey!" the man yelled. "What's the idea?"

Scotty rushed to the rescue, took the fallen shadow by the shoulders, and tried to pull him to his feet. This only made matters worse, since Rick was stretched across his legs.

"I'm so sorry," Scotty said. "Gosh, I'm sorry. He slipped. Here. Let me help you up."

"Get off me," the man yelled.

Rick tried, lost his balance again, and fell against the man's chest, pinning him to the sidewalk. Scotty groaned. "Rick! You clumsy ox. Get off the man!"

"I'm trying to," Rick said plaintively. "My shoe came off. Here. Help me up."

"Help yourself!" Scotty returned sharply. "I'm trying to help this gentleman."

Rick rolled clear and Scotty got the man to his feet. He was something less than spotlessly clean, thanks to the dust of the road, and there was a rip in the arm of his coat.

"Look at that!" Scotty exclaimed. He made ineffectual efforts to dust the man off. "Rick, you ripped his coat."

Rick looked embarrassed. "I'm terribly sorry. Here, sir. Let me take you to this tailor shop. We can have it repaired in a jiffy."

"Forget it!" the man snapped. "And get out of my way. I'm in a hurry."

"It was all my fault, and I refuse to take no for an answer," Rick said firmly. He took the man by the arm. "Come on. It will only take a moment. You can't walk around town like that. I insist on having your suit repaired. I'm sure that the tailor can mend it so no one would ever notice."

"No," the man grated. "Please stand aside." Both boys had managed to block the sidewalk.

"Please," Rick pleaded. "This is terribly upsetting. We really should have the damage to your suit repaired."

The man's dark complexion was turning a grayish pink with rage. Rick estimated quickly. If he knew Steve Ames, the JANIG agent was long gone, and the tail would not catch up with him again. They had delayed the shadow for perhaps two minutes, but for Steve that would be enough.

Rick stepped aside. "Very well. If you insist – "

"I do." The man brushed by and hurried off.

The boys looked at each other and grinned.

"He won't catch Steve," Rick said.

"Not a chance. Well, my clumsy friend, shall we put your shoe back on and go meet the others for lunch?"

"We shall," Rick returned. "Indeed we shall." He slipped his shoe on and tied it quickly. "Wasn't it interesting, where Steve said we could reach him?"

Steve had said at the UDT base. That meant simply at the home of the Navy frogmen – the Underwater Demolition Teams. No wonder Steve had said he would be an expert on skin diving by nightfall. He was going to be with the most expert experts of all.

Rick sighed. "Just our luck he doesn't want us in the case. Wouldn't it be great to work with the Navy frogmen? We could learn plenty."

"Forgetting St. Francis?" Scotty inquired. "There he lies, twenty fathoms down, probably covered with barnacles and waiting to be rescued. And you want to go fogging off with the frogmen."

"All right, all right! Don't rub it in. We'll go back to being interested in the bark *Maiden Hand*. And St. Francis. And pirates. Let's cast off, my hearty."

The Danish Pastry was only a few blocks away, and Dr. Ernst and the Spindrifters were already seated. The boys joined them, with apologies for being late, but without mentioning their meeting with Steve Ames. There was nothing to be gained by bringing the matter up in front of Dr. Ernst. They could tell Zircon and Tony later. Zircon knew Steve, but Tony didn't.

Over dessert, Dr. Ernst reached into his bag and brought forth a chart. "I thought you might need this," he said.

It was a detailed chart of Clipper Cay and the surrounding waters. It showed clearly the position of the reefs, and it gave soundings that showed the depths.

Zircon shook his massive head. "Paul, your thoroughness has never failed to amaze me. What would we have done without you?"

Ernst smiled his pleasure. "Thank you, Hobart. I try to be thorough. Besides, I want you all to have a pleasant recollection of the Virgin Islands. We who live here love them very much."

The boys and Tony echoed Zircon's thanks, then fell to a study of the chart.

It was apparent that the water deepened rapidly beyond the western reef. In a few places, the twenty-fathom line was only a short distance out.

"Have you any idea where this ship went down?" Dr. Ernst asked.

"A bare idea," Tony replied. "It was off the western shore of the island, probably close to the reef, in twenty fathoms. The bark had been hit and was sinking. The captain ran for the island with the hope of beaching the ship on the reef, but he never made it. The bark went down, and Anne Bonney's pirates picked up the survivors."

"We know of Anne Bonney here," Dr. Ernst told them. "You realize that the Virgin Islands were once a hangout for pirates? Oh, we have a dark and bloody history, what with piracy, slave rebellions, even Indian massacres."

"You'd never know it," Rick said. "This is the most peaceful place I've seen in years."

He didn't add that the peace was only apparent. Steve Ames wasn't needed in really peaceful places. Something was stirring under the tropical calm of St. Thomas.

"Tonight you must have a taste of St. Thomas home life," Dr. Ernst said. "You shall be my guests at dinner. Dr. Briotti will be interested in my collection of Indian pottery. And you young men will be interested in my wife's hobby, which is fish. She has an amazing collection."

"Alive?" Scotty asked.

"Yes, indeed. In salt-water aquariums. Our misfortune makes it easy. You see, we have no natural fresh-water supplies on St. Thomas. We depend on catching rain for our drinking water. So our plumbing is operated by sea water, of which we have plenty. As a result, Mrs. Ernst is able to have a constant supply of salt water flowing through her aquariums. I know you'll be interested."

The boys agreed. Mrs. Ernst's hobby sounded like fun.

After lunch Dr. Ernst departed for his office, leaving the Spindrift group to their own devices. Not much remained to be done, except for checking in at their hotel. For now, they were content to walk around town.

As they passed the post office where Alexander Hamilton had once been a clerk, Scotty smiled meaningfully at Rick.

"Steve lost a tail this morning. Remember?"

Rick looked at him doubtfully. "Of course. Why?"

"Somebody loses, somebody gains," Scotty replied cheerfully. "Don't look behind you, but we've found one!"

CHAPTER III

The Shadow

The two scientists had been walking ahead of Rick and Scotty, but Zircon's keen ears had overheard the boys' remarks. However, he was too wise to make his interest obvious. He waited until the group passed a store with a large display, then stopped, as though to examine it.

Rick found himself surveying a collection of tools for the do-it-yourself addict.

"What's this about Steve and a tail?" Zircon asked. He pointed at a power-drill set, as though discussing it. His normally loud voice couldn't have been heard five feet away.

Rick shook his head, then pointed at a different drill set. Anyone watching would have thought the tools were the subject of conversation. Rick quickly outlined what had happened and concluded, "Scotty spotted a tail on us a few minutes ago. Same guy?"

Scotty bent down for a closer look at a series of wood power bits. His voice was scarcely audible. "Not the same one. This one is a Virgin Islander. Looks like a farmer. When we stopped he walked right on by. He's out of sight now. But he'll pick us up as soon as we start."

Tony Briotti, to whom this kind of adventure was new, asked, "What do we do about it?"

"Nothing," Zircon answered. "Steve Ames wanted to get rid of his shadow and the boys helped him out. But we have no particular reason for wanting to get rid of ours. Let him follow. Undoubtedly whoever is tailing Steve got interested when they saw him talking with the boys, but they'll learn nothing by trailing us."

"And it's one less for Steve to contend with," Rick added.

Scotty straightened up. "I have to admit this bunch of tools is beginning to bore me a little. Where are we going?"

Zircon shrugged. "I have nothing in mind. We might check in at the hotel."

"I'd rather swim," Rick said.

"Same here." Scotty made a quick survey of the street without seeming to do so. "No sign of our friend. He's probably in another doorway."

"Then Hobart and I might as well check in," Tony suggested. "I'd like a swim, but frankly I'm a little sleepy from too much lunch."

"How about checking in for us?" Rick asked. "Then we could get right into the water. No need for all of us to go to the hotel."

The scientists agreed, and at Scotty's suggestion hailed a taxi. As the car rolled off toward the boat where their luggage was stored, Scotty grinned. "This was the only taxi in sight. Wonder how our friend will manage to follow us?"

He had his answer at the pier. While Zircon was piling their overnight bags into the taxi, a farmer rode past on a bicycle. He didn't look at them. "There he goes," Scotty said. "Pretty easy after all. Guess the town is small enough so he wasn't worried about finding us."

"We'll give him a choice to make when Tony and I leave." Zircon smiled. "Let's see whether he stays with you, or follows us."

Not until the boys had changed to swimming trunks in the cabin of the *Water Witch* did they find the answer to Zircon's question. The shadow had decided to stay with them. This time it was Rick who spotted him. The shadow was nearly hidden beyond a curve in the shore line. To anyone not aware of being tailed, he would have appeared to be with any of the other casual figures that went unhurriedly about their business in the neighborhood. If Scotty hadn't pointed him out, Rick would not have suspected that the shadow had the slightest interest in the Spindrift party.

"We going to rig the aqualungs?" Scotty asked.

"Let's not bother. Masks, snorkels, and fins. We can swim out and take a look at some of the coral heads."

"How about a gun?"

Rick considered. "I guess not. We don't want to do any hunting. But you might take a hand spear in case something real inviting shows up. And let's take our knives." He had also decided against taking his camera. A leisurely, unencumbered swim was what he wanted. There would be time enough for hunting fish or taking pictures later, when they got to Clipper Cay.

While Scotty went into the cabin to select a spear from their assortment of fishing gear, Rick surveyed the *Water Witch* with satisfaction. It was a thirty-five-foot craft with a small cabin forward and a spacious cockpit aft. It had been used as a diving tender before, apparently, because there was a ladder that could be swung outboard for a diver to use. There was also a small boom that could be rigged quickly for lowering or lifting gear from the water.

The gas tanks were ample for their purposes. One filling would be more than sufficient for a round trip to Clipper Cay plus any cruising they would do while at the island. The tanks were full.

Water capacity, an important consideration on waterless Clipper Cay, was more than adequate. In addition to a built-in fifty-gallon tank in the cabin, there was a rack of five ten-gallon jerry cans in the cockpit.

Scotty emerged from the cabin with a short, low-powered spring gun. "Thought I might as well bring a light gun," he said. "It's just as easy to carry as a spear."

"Okay." Rick led the way down the pier to the beach, carrying his mask, snorkel, and slippers. These he placed carefully on one of the Sky Wagon's pontoons, in order to protect the clear glass of his mask from any possible scratching. Then, with a yell to Scotty to hurry, he bounded through the shallows, threw himself forward, and planed along the surface of the water. Lifting his head for a quick breath, he dove under, feeling the wonderful coolness of the water close over him. He judged its temperature quickly. It was close to eighty degrees, he estimated, and cool only by comparison with the warm air.

He reversed course quickly and stood up. Scotty was also in the water.

"I'm glad we didn't bother with suits," Rick said. "In water like this we'd even be too warm in midseason suits."

Because of the coldness of the water off the New Jersey coast, the boys had equipped themselves with full, waterproof rubber suits under which long under-wear was worn, and with lighter "midseason" suits of foam neoprene. Because of the reported warmth of water in the Virgin Islands they hadn't added the suits to their already heavy load of supplies.

They returned to the beach, picked up their equipment, and took it into the water. Rick sat down and rinsed out his flippers, then carefully removed the last traces of sand from his feet. He pulled the flippers on, adjusting them for maximum comfort. His face mask was next. He spat into it, then rubbed the saliva over the glass. This rather unsanitary-appearing trick was essential, since saliva is an excellent antifogging compound needed to help keep the glass clear underwater. Then he rinsed his mask lightly and adjusted the head straps, leaving the mask on his forehead.

The snorkels used by the boys were plastic tubes curved at both ends. At one end was a mouthpiece; at the other was a cage that held a rubber ball. A dive or rough wave action floated the ball upward, closing the tube and preventing water entry. Rick and Scotty adjusted the rubber bands of their snorkels around their heads above the mask straps.

Scotty was ready. He slipped his mask into place, molded the soft rubber skirt of the mask to the contours of his face, inhaled through his nose to make sure the seal was airtight, then called, "Let's go!" He gripped the mouthpiece of his snorkel between his teeth, the rubber flange under his lips, and slid into the water.

Rick was right behind him. As his mask touched water he saw the white coral sand of the bottom a few inches down. The only sign of life was a hermit crab, perhaps a half inch in length, dragging his home of the moment – a tiny spiral shell.

In one hand, Scotty carried the spear gun by its pistol grip. He swam in the position that suited him best, both arms hanging limply down. Rick, on the other hand, preferred to swim with arms relaxed along his sides, as long as his hands were empty. When carrying a spear gun or his camera, he also swam with arms hanging downward. Neither boy used his arms for swimming. The rhythmic, powerful leg strokes were enough, thanks to the swim fins.

The water deepened rapidly but lost none of its clarity. Even at a depth of a dozen feet, Rick thought, he could have counted every grain of sand. This was unlike anything he had ever experienced. At home, visibility of five feet was considered good. Lost in the enjoyment of really clear water, he completely forgot about the shadow.

Scotty reminded him. He touched Rick's arm and signaled a stop. The boys removed their snorkel mouthpieces and faced each other upright in the water, holding position with easy flipper movements.

"Just pretend we're talking," Scotty said. "Don't look around. I'm trying to spot our friend over your shoulder." After a moment he shook his head. "No sign. Wonder if he ran for a bathing suit?"

"Forget him. Let's swim. See any coral heads?"

"Darker water off yonder. Let's look."

They readjusted their snorkels and headed in the direction Scotty had indicated.

Rick breathed easily through his tube, constantly scanning the bottom. Now and then he saw various kinds of debris on the bottom, including abandoned beer cans and a section of newspaper that had not yet rotted away. Rubbish like this was to be expected in a harbor, he supposed, still it was as unattractive to a swimmer as junk along the roadside is to the motorist.

Suddenly he noticed a fish – the first he had seen. He took a deep breath and dove by letting his head drop and then lifting his legs to a nearly vertical position. He slid underwater without a splash. When his fins were below the surface he started his leg motion again, and the flippers propelled him smoothly downward.

The fish was perhaps a foot long, silvery, with a pointed nose and yellow fins. Rick couldn't identify it. The fish was busily rooting in the sand for morsels of food and paid no attention to the diver until Rick reached out and almost touched it, then it sped just beyond reach and commenced rooting again.

His curiosity satisfied for the moment, Rick surfaced and rejoined Scotty. As he took position at his friend's side, the other boy hooted once, their signal for "attention." The hooting was done by making a kind of "hooty" groan into the snorkel mouthpiece, about the only sound that could be made without letting water pass the lips. Because water conducted sound so well, the hoot could be heard clearly some distance away.

Rick lifted his face from the water and saw that Scotty was pointing to an area a short distance to their right. He followed Scotty's lead and saw the reason for the signal. It was a rocky, coral-covered area about thirty feet square and perhaps fifteen feet below the surface.

The boys swam directly over it, then floated motionless, watching the activity below. At first glance, there appeared to be only a pair of odd-shaped file-fish nibbling at the formation, but as their vision adjusted they made out literally dozens of tiny, colorful fish in clefts, under overhangs, or waiting motionless against a patch of color on the rocks. Rick pointed to a school of about ten vivid little fish of electric-blue color. The largest was less than two inches long. Scotty hooted for attention and pointed in his turn to a section of the rock that held over a dozen sea urchins that looked like black horse chestnuts with exaggerated spines.

Rick watched a pair of brown doctorfish about eight inches long swim by below, then his attention was attracted by a brilliant red squirrelfish peering out of a cleft. He pointed the red fish

out to Scotty, who in turn showed him where a little moray was peering out of a hole near the base of the rock.

Rick was fascinated. If a tiny patch of rock held this amount of life, what must the real reefs be like off Clipper Cay? He was suddenly impatient to get going, to put on his aqualung and explore the reef from top to bottom. And if they should really find the wreck of the *Maiden Hand*, there was every chance that the exploration of the wreck and the sea life it had acquired would more than compensate for the treasure none of them really hoped to find anyway. What a vacation!

He was suddenly conscious of a throb in his ears. He listened and tried to identify it. A motorboat of some kind, but it didn't sound like a very powerful one. He lifted his head and searched for it.

Scotty, too, had heard the boat. He began to tread water, lifting his mask, then rinsing it because it had fogged a little.

Rick spotted the boat. It looked like a large row-boat, powered with an outboard motor, and it was headed in their direction.

Scotty took his snorkel out of his mouth. "Better stay topside and watch. We don't want to start our vacation by getting run over."

"Too true," Rick said. "Isn't this great? I've never seen so many kinds of small fish in one place in my life. Wait until we get out to the reefs where the big ones are."

Scotty patted his spear gun. "I'll keep us supplied with fresh sea food. Wonder if there are any lobsters around?"

But Rick had stopped listening. "Scotty, that guy is heading right for us!"

The boat was getting close, and through his face plate Rick could make out the figure of a single occupant.

Scotty suddenly gripped his arm. "Rick! It's our shadow!"

Rick started. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't like this. What would he come out here for? Get ready to dive." Scotty pulled his mask into place and molded it to his face, then gripped his snorkel between his teeth.

Rick followed suit and leveled off in the water in diving position, but he hesitated, waiting to see what the boat would do.

It didn't take long to find out. The boat stayed on a perfectly straight course, headed directly for them. Rick waited. Perhaps the shadow intended to sheer off when he got close. He might have come out to talk with them.

Scotty hooted four times, their signal for danger! Then he went under. Still Rick hesitated, until it was clear that the boat did not intend to swerve. He saw the shadow's face, set in grim lines, then his legs went up and he slid under, using his hands as well as his legs to pull himself down to safety. He thought incredulously, "He tried to run us down!"

A dozen feet under he turned over on his back and saw the bright circle of the propeller and its trail of foam. The boat was past. He shot to the surface and filled his lungs with air, waiting for the next move.

The boat spun around in a tight turn and headed back.

Scotty surfaced next to Rick, pulled the snorkel from his mouth, and gritted, "Swim away. Let him use you for a target. I'm going to get that son of a spiny sea walrus."

Rick saw from the position of the spear in Scotty's gun that his friend had charged the weapon during the dive. He nodded, then turned and swam away, flippers flailing as though trying to hurry. He watched over his shoulder and saw the boat head for him.

He was breathing hard from the excitement now, but he took a deep breath and got ready to dive. But still he swam, leading the rapidly overtaking boat until it was almost on him. Only then did he shoot downward, twisting as he went. He looked back in time to see Scotty sight the spear gun and fire as the boat went past.

At first Rick thought his pal had missed, then he realized what Scotty had done. The spear shaft was attached to a long wire leader, and the leader to a safety line coiled around a spool just ahead of the pistol grip. Scotty had deliberately fired ahead of the propeller, knowing that the wire leader would be caught and would wrap around the shaft.

Rick saw the spear stop short as the wire caught, saw it hauled back against the propeller and drop free as the prop blades cut it loose. Scotty shot up for a breath, then dove instantly, toward the rapidly falling spear.

Rick had to breathe himself. He surfaced, caught a quick breath, then went under again. Scotty was picking up the spear. Rick saw him place it in the gun barrel, swing the loader over the razor-sharp harpoon head, and shove down on the spring. In a moment the gun was loaded again. Luckily the spear had not bent when the prop blade hit it.

The boat had come to a halt, the engine dead. The propeller could no longer turn against the wrapping of wire and heavy fishline. Scotty hooted twice, their signal to surface, and Rick followed him up. Near the surface they separated, Rick taking the side of the boat away from his friend. He longed for a weapon, even a hand spear. But he was helpless. Scotty would have to get in the first blow with the gun. But, Rick thought, that might give him time to get over the gunwale to grapple with the shadow.

His head broke water. He pulled the snorkel from his mouth and let it hang. As luck would have it, the shadow saw him first. He stood up, oar in hands, poised for a swing at Rick's head.

Scotty's voice stopped the swing. "Don't do it or you'll get three feet of steel through you!"

The man turned and faced the needle point of Scotty's spear. The oar dropped from his hands.

Rick gulped his relief. Apparently the shadow had no weapon.

"Jump overboard!" Scotty ordered.

The man hesitated. Scotty thrust the spear gun forward. "Jump, I said!"

The shadow did, and sank in a flurry of bubbles. When he rose to the surface again, the point of the spear was against his back. "Hang on to the boat with both hands," Scotty directed.

Rick got to his side with a kick of the flippers and ran his hands over the man's clothing. He found a switch knife, which he put in his belt. "He's clean," he said. "No other weapons."

"Take a look in the boat," Scotty suggested.

Rick did so, lifting himself up on the gunwale. There was nothing in the boat but oars and a can of gasoline.

"Want to tell us why you tried to run us down?" Rick asked.

The shadow merely stared.

"Talk," Scotty ordered, "or I'll put this spear through you."

The man spoke, and his accent was the soft speech of the island. "No, you won't. I could explain running down swimmers by accident, but you could never explain putting a spear through a man in a boat. You don't want that kind of trouble."

Scotty grinned at the truth of it. "Okay," he said. "Just one thing. Don't push us too far. Stay in the water until we're ashore, and don't try to overtake us."

"Better heed that advice," Rick warned. "Come on, Scotty. Let's go." He put his snorkel in place.

Scotty moved to his side. "Welcome to the hospitable waters of St. Thomas," he said. "What say we look up some friendly sharks before we go ashore?"

CHAPTER IV

Visitors by Night

Rick and Scotty stood on the pier and watched their erstwhile shadow row slowly toward another pier some distance away.

"We probably should have tied him up and called the police," Rick remarked.

"It wouldn't have gotten us anything," Scotty disagreed. "He could always claim he didn't see us in the water. After all, it wouldn't be the first time divers had been run over by motorboats."

"It's too late now, anyway. Let's dress, then go to the hotel and tell Zircon and Tony about this."

As they dressed in the small cabin of the *Water Witch*, Rick spoke aloud the question that had been bothering him. "What did he have to gain by running us down? That's what puzzles me. It was a stupid thing to try, because he didn't really have much chance of getting both of us, or even one, once he failed to catch us by surprise."

"He wasn't very well prepared for murder, either," Scotty added. "No weapons except a switch knife."

Rick nodded agreement. "He was desperate," he concluded. "Suddenly he had to take a chance on getting us. He must have known it wasn't much of a chance. Either he lost his head, or he wasn't very bright. What could have made him try?"

Scotty had no answer, nor could Rick even hazard a reasonable guess.

They locked the cabin of the *Water Witch*, walked into town, and found a taxi. Their shadow did not show up again, and if a new tail had replaced him, the new one was too good to be spotted. However, the boys doubted that they were being followed.

"I just don't get it," Rick said for the twentieth time. "Our friend must have lost his head. Otherwise he'd have waited on shore and continued to follow us when we came out of the water."

"We'll probably never know," Scotty returned. "After all, we'll be gone in the morning."

"I know. But meanwhile, we'd better have eyes in the back of our heads."

The taxi discharged them in front of Alexander's Rest and they climbed out and surveyed the hotel with interest.

Scotty spoke first. "Alexander's Rest? Which Alexander? The Great, or Hamilton? If it was Hamilton, as Dr. Ernst said, he must have built it personally."

It was a two-story frame structure that had definitely seen better days. On closer inspection Rick decided that the second story had been added as an afterthought. It looked like the second layer of a poorly constructed cake.

Inside, however, the hotel proved to be very comfortable. It was cool, and the rooms were large and clean. The boys learned that they had been registered in a twin bedroom on the second floor, while Zircon and Briotti were on the first floor.

The boys found the scientists attired only in shorts, cooling off over long, cold drinks. They accepted glasses of iced ginger ale and told the scientists of their adventure.

"It's amazing." Tony Briotti shook his head. "Do you realize that you two are a phenomenon? I should write you up for one of the scientific journals."

"You mean because we turned the tables on the shadow?" Scotty asked.

"No. Because you're adventure-prone. Did you ever hear of people who are accident-prone?"

Zircon chuckled. "A good observation of these two. I agree absolutely, Tony. They are adventure-prone."

Rick sighed. "All right. What's the joke?"

"None. I'm quite serious." Tony found more ice for his glass. "Insurance statistics show that certain people are accident-prone. Accidents happen to them. They're going along minding their own

business and bang! A streetcar jumps the tracks and hits them. Or they step into open manholes. They're the kind of people who always manage to be walking under things when workmen drop tools."

"And you," Zircon concluded, "are adventure-prone in the same way. Consider this. Had you walked down the street either a minute earlier or later this morning you would not have seen Steve Ames. It's quite likely that you would never have known of his presence in town. But what happens? You walk right into an adventure. One thing leads to another, and suddenly a stranger is trying to run you down with a motorboat."

"That's what bothers me," Rick replied. "There's no pattern. It just makes no sense."

"It doesn't have to," Tony Briotti said with a grin. "The Golden Skull pattern makes no sense, either. But you got us into more excitement than I knew was possible. You're just adventure-prone."

"And for the sake of my gray hair, stay out of trouble," Zircon pleaded. "Stay close to us until we get to Clipper Cay."

"It will be a pleasure," Rick assured him. "Only let us out of your sight long enough to shower, please. I'm sticky."

"We'll stay in the hotel," Scotty promised.

"Fine. I'll feel better about it if I know where you are. Suppose you come by in an hour and we'll have a quiet dinner at the Ernsts'."

Dinner was quiet but interesting. The Ernsts were excellent hosts, and both Dr. and Mrs. Ernst had many tales of the islands to tell. As the good doctor had promised, the boys enjoyed the wonderful variety of sea life Mrs. Ernst had collected to keep in salt-water tanks. She identified for them a number of the smaller reef fishes, including clowns, demoiselles, and even the deadly scorpion fish.

The party broke up early, since the start for Clipper Cay was to be made at dawn by the scientists. The plan was for Zircon and Tony to make the trip in the *Water Witch*, with the boys flying over in the Sky Wagon. That way, both the plane and boat would be available. Zircon thought that fast trips to St. Thomas might be necessary to replenish supplies, and he added that he would be happier if the plane were available in case of accident. That way, the patient could be in Charlotte Amalie in a short time.

As the boys bade good night to the scientists and started up the stairs to their room, Rick asked, "Any sign of a shadow tonight?"

"Nope. Guess Steve's friends – or enemies – must have lost interest."

"I hope that you're right. As long as Steve ordered us to stay out of the case, I'll be glad when we get to the cay and get underwater. We have to find that precious gadget even if it takes two solid weeks of diving. If we don't, Barby will never let us forget it."

This last was uttered as Rick turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. He flicked on the light, then gave a sudden gasp.

The shadow and a stranger – in their room!

The boys looked into the muzzles of .38-caliber pistols.

"Come on in quietly," the stranger said. "Put your hands on the tops of your heads and sit down on the bed over there."

The boys did so. They had no alternative. Rick's mind raced. Somehow they had to warn the scientists, and they had to get out from under the muzzles of the guns! What could these men want of them?

The stranger sat down on the other bed. His pistol muzzle was centered precisely on Rick's belt buckle. "We want information. Give it to us without any trouble and we'll go away. Give us a hard time and you'll regret it."

Rick studied the stranger. He was of medium height, dressed in tan slacks and sport shirt with a darker jacket. His face was ordinary. He might have been a store clerk, or streetcar conductor, or nearly anything. But Rick saw from the way his jacket fitted that he was powerfully built for his

size, and his hands were lean and strong-looking. He had a heavy tan, as though he had spent many months in the sun.

"What do you want to know?" Scotty asked.

"Let's start with what you were saying when you walked in. Who is Barby?"

"My sister," Rick said. "She's at home, in New Jersey."

The stranger sighed. "I was afraid of this. Give us straight answers or you'll buy plenty of grief. Now, who is Barby? Who does he represent?"

"He told you," Scotty answered. "She's his sister."

The stranger tried a different tack. "How did you know where to swim today? Did Ames tell you?"

"No," Rick replied. "We just swam straight out from the pier looking for coral heads."

"Come on! You must have had some source of information. Who gave it to you?"

"We didn't have any source of information," Scotty protested. "We just went for a swim!"

The stranger lifted the pistol menacingly. "You'd better sing, and it better be straight. I'm warning you!"

"Warn all you like," Rick said angrily. "What do you want us to say?"

The shadow walked over and pulled back his fist.

"Lay off!" the stranger growled. "You've pulled enough stupid stunts for one day. You'll be lucky if the boss doesn't rip the hide off you."

The former tail subsided and glared at the boys.

The stranger rose. "All right. If you won't talk here, we'll take you where you will talk. Get up."

The boys looked at each other. Scotty raised his eyebrows. Rick grinned. He asked calmly, "Suppose we don't go?"

"You'll go!" the stranger snapped.

"I don't think we will," Scotty answered. "Look, mister. You're in a hotel. It's early, and there are people in the lobby. How far do you think you'd get if you tried to march us downstairs with a gun in your hand?"

"We're not going through the lobby," the stranger told them. "We're going the way we came – through the window. And you'll go quietly or we'll take our chances. They might catch us, but you wouldn't care with a couple of slugs in you. Pete, go outside and wait. They'll come down one at a time. Keep them covered, and don't hesitate to shoot if they try anything."

The shadow slipped through the window, hung by his hands, and dropped.

The stranger's gun singled out Rick. "Get going."

Rick shrugged. There was nothing else to do but obey – at least for the moment. He looked at Scotty, and his pal made a small gesture to the right. Rick's forehead wrinkled. This was no signal he recognized, unless Scotty meant to jump to the right.

He swung a leg over the sill and looked down. The shadow was waiting, and the light from the window glinted dully off the gun in his hand. Rick went on out, then holding by his hands he gave a swing to the right and dropped. The gun covered him as he rose to his feet again.

"Against the wall!" the shadow hissed.

Rick dutifully moved back against the wall. The shadow was standing about six feet away.

Overhead, Scotty was climbing through the window now. Rick watched carefully as his pal lowered himself to full length, and swung *to the left*.

Instantly Rick divined Scotty's tactics. If the two boys were apart, the gun couldn't cover both of them at the same moment, and there would be an instant while the stranger jumped when only a single gun would be on them. And the shadow had already shown that he wasn't the smartest man in the world. Rick slipped to the right a step or two while the shadow was distracted by Scotty's jump. Scotty fell to his knees, and in getting up he managed to put a few more feet between himself and Rick.

"Watch 'em!" The stranger's voice floated down. Rick glanced up and saw the stranger with one leg over the sill. He tensed.

Scotty said, "Listen, you mug ..."

The shadow's head turned toward Scotty, and Rick left the ground in a wild spring. He struck the shadow, hand clawing for the gun. He found a wrist, and twisted, falling backward as he did so. The shadow, the entire weight of his own body on his wrist from the throw, screamed!

The gun landed on the ground. Rick let go and scrambled for it, but Scotty was there before him.

In the instant of the struggle the stranger had hesitated on the window sill, hand grabbing for the pistol he had tucked in his belt. He pulled it free and aimed at the struggling figures below, but in the gloom there was no way to distinguish friend from foe. And in that heartbeat, Scotty picked up the shadow's gun and fired one snap shot.

The stranger's gun dropped to the ground and he fell backward into the room.

Scotty thrust the pistol into the shadow's stomach. "Face the wall," he ordered. "Put your hands against it. Now support your weight on your hands."

The shadow did as ordered. Rick took the man's legs and pulled them backward so that the shadow's whole weight was against his hands, his outstretched body forming the hypotenuse of a right triangle. The only way he could move to regain his balance was to lower himself to the ground and then get up.

Rick picked up the stranger's fallen pistol and hefted it. "Better see about the one upstairs," he advised. "I'll watch this one."

"I fired at his hand, but I was high," Scotty told him. "He got it in the shoulder. He won't get far."

Zircon and Briotti charged around the corner of the hotel in pajamas and slippers, followed by other guests and members of the hotel staff.

"We had a little trouble," Rick explained briefly.

The scientists took in the situation at a glance.

"As I said," Tony Briotti muttered. "Adventure-prone. And lucky! How do you beat a combination like that?"

CHAPTER V

The Warning

Steve Ames walked into the hotel dining room accompanied by a young Navy lieutenant. He spotted the boys immediately and waved.

Rick breathed a sigh of relief. "There he is."

"We can turn this whole business over to him and then get out of here," Scotty returned.

The events of the night before had culminated in two phone calls, one by the hotel manager to the police, the other by Rick to Steve Ames. However, the duty officer at the UDT base had replied that Ames was not available. Rick had then asked for intelligence, and his query had gotten fast results. Steve Ames didn't show up, but Navy Shore Patrol officers did. The SP's had conferred with the local police, and the affair had ended with the shadow and the stranger, whom Scotty had potted in the shoulder, being carried off by both groups. First, however, the senior Shore Patrol officer had listened to their story, then instructed the boys, "Wait for Steve Ames. Talk to no one else. The police won't ask any questions."

After conferring, the Spindrifft group decided to go ahead with their plans. The scientists were anxious to transfer their activities to Clipper Cay, not only to get on with their vacation, but to get the boys away from the mysterious danger that dogged their footsteps in Charlotte Amalie.

The scientists had departed at dawn in the *Water Witch*, after extracting a promise from Rick and Scotty that they would not stir from the hotel until Steve Ames contacted them, and that they would then fly at once to Clipper Cay.

The wait had been a long one. It was now nearly noon, and the boys, hungry because their breakfast had been at daybreak, were ordering lunch.

Steve Ames sat down and motioned the lieutenant to a seat. "Jimmy, this is Rick Brant and Don Scott. Boys, Lieutenant Kelly. Have you ordered lunch?"

"We were just looking over the menu," Rick replied.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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