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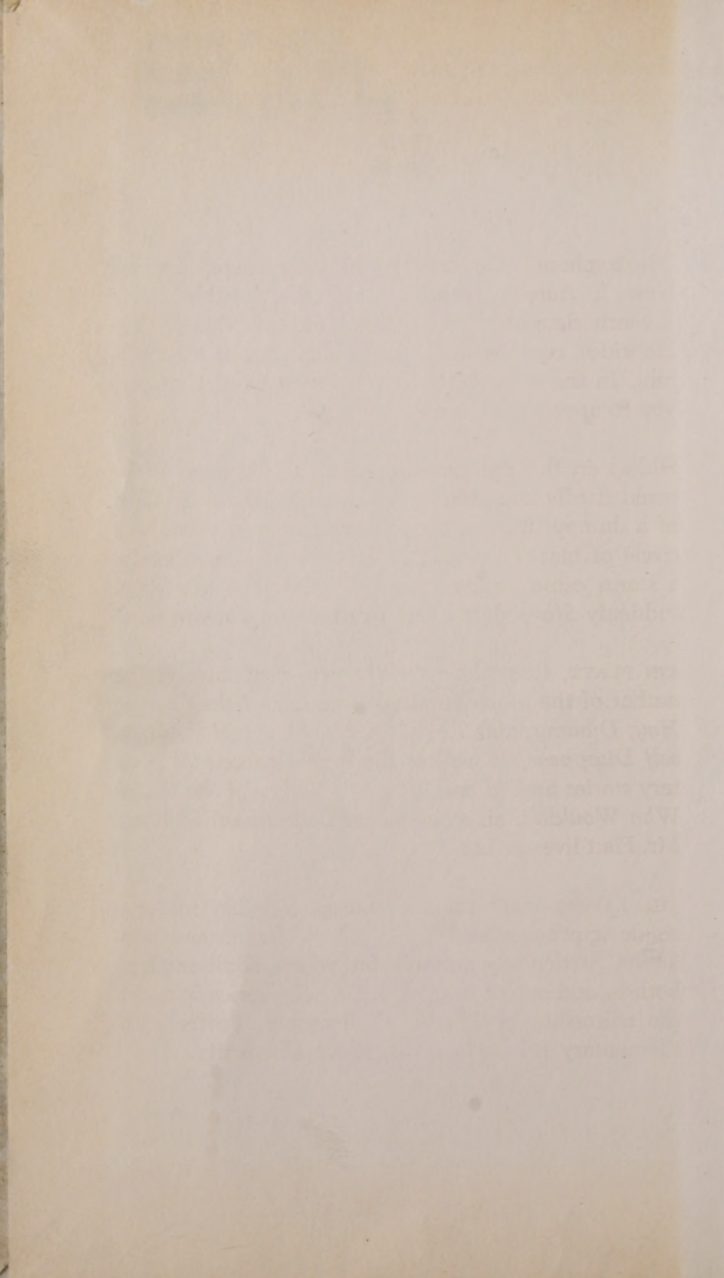
**Kin
Platt**



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"Baalzaphon!" she cried. "Are you there, demon? Now I, Aurelia Hepburn, seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, from the island of Mull in the Hebrides, conjure you, demon and spirit of wind and rain. In the name of the great living God, I conjure you to appear before me."

Hiding in the tall grass of Mucker's Swamp, Steve could hardly keep himself from laughing at the sight of a dumpy little woman dancing around a fire in a circle of black stones. But then almost immediately, a storm came raging out of a calm blue sky—and suddenly Steve didn't feel like laughing anymore.

KIN PLATT, formerly a well-known cartoonist, is the author of the much admired *Chloris and the Creeps*; *Hey, Dummy*; and *The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear*, as well as the highly successful mystery stories *Sinbad and Me* and *Mystery of the Witch Who Wouldn't*, all available in Laurel-Leaf editions. Mr. Platt lives in Los Angeles.

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MYSTERY OF THE WITCH WHO WOULDN'T

F
Platt
Kin Platt



FOR
PHYLLIS A. WHITNEY

Published by
Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, New York 10017

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For information, address Chilton Book Company,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106.
Laurel-Leaf Library ® TM 766734, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

ISBN: 0-440-96231-5

Reprinted by arrangement with Chilton Book Company
Printed in the United States of America
First Laurel printing—March 1973
Second Laurel printing—April 1978

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Part One

1. Looking for Trouble

The night wind ruffled the water as we crossed Jonah's Bay toward the island, dark and forbidding. The moon came out full and bright just long enough to show me a landing, then the dark cloud drifted back, giving us the cover we needed to keep this trip a surprise.

I shipped the oars to let the tide bring us in, and when the keel scraped sand I scrambled out. Sink stayed braced athwart the gunwale on those powerful forelegs, sniffing the air, his dark face questing over the bow, his eyes shining. When I leaned to beach the dinghy, he quickly kissed me.

"Kiss me when it's all over. If we're still healthy. Now let's keep it quiet, for Pete's sake."

Herky's hands were wet and cold handing me the loop end of the steel leash, his thin face pale, his dark eyes glittering with excitement too. I wrapped the loop a few times around my wrist, bringing Sink up short. He gave me his opinion of that—the strangled parrot rumbling in his thick white neck and a questioning look for not trusting him.

"We're all in this together," I explained. "I might need your help so I want you close. Okay?" Sink sneezed, thrust forward his lower jaw, and let his lower tooth hook outside his lip in that familiar frightening bulldog grin. I patted his big chest. "Let me move it now. Nice and quiet." And to impress the idea, I picked him up, setting him gently down on the sand. He knows he weighs a ton.

We climbed to a grassy knoll from where we could see the old house with the windmill sweeps jutting up behind it, a huge spidery shadow in the distance.

"That's it," I said. "Tucker's Mill. That's where they've got the witch, and maybe Minerva too."

I let Sinbad have his lead back and, head down, he chugged close to the ground like a tank, pulling us along and very happy at being invited to this midnight adventure. We made good time, the grass thick enough to muffle the sound of our footsteps. When we were close enough, I pulled up short, snapped the leash twice for Sinbad to halt and listened. There wasn't a sound. Quiet and menacing, the big gray ghostlike shape of the old house held its own secrets.

I licked my lips, took a deep breath and started forward again, a little voice inside me asking: "Steve, you dope, how did you ever get involved in something like this? What are you, the FBI or something?"

Before I could think of a good answer to that one, the man stepped out of the shadow of a wall, in his hand an object shining like metal. I sucked in my breath.

Then I felt a terrible shooting pain, my arm seemed torn from its socket, and Sinbad was free . . .

I heard the rush of his charging feet, the crunching sound, the gasp of the man being hit by sixty pounds of tough English bulldog.

I knew we'd found what we came for . . .

2. Minerva Landry, Girl Trouble-maker

It all started the day Minerva said she saw the witch of Mucker's Swamp.

On a Saturday in August, Sinbad was chugging along Steamboat Road near the point just off the sound, his big ugly head close to the ground sniffing and sneezing at all available scents, pulling hard on

the leash. He has a real onetrack mind. I guess all bulldogs have.

He's three years old and stubborn like his old man Prince Charles, so I guess it's hereditary. I'm twelve and not like my Pop at all.

He heard the wheels humming around the bend long before I did. His face twisted into an expression you have to be a bulldog fancier to appreciate—one meant to be a happy smile but, because it's on the kind of face that looks like the result of an accident, it comes out more of a fearful grimace and scares an awful lot of people.

What made him so happy was the Sheriff's daughter, Minerva Landry, racing around the turn bent over the bike bars, her long blonde hair full in the breeze like a sail. Her wheels locked when she braked, her bike skidded, and for one long moment it appeared this great girl bike rider was going to wipe out Sinbad and me in one fell swoop.

Sinbad stood his ground. He trusts everybody. Also he's built without fear. I didn't move for other reasons. My mind locked as tight as Minerva's wheels and I just stood there paralyzed like the next statistic for the town's highway accident toll.

I'll say one thing for Minerva. She has great reflexes. She rode the skid out, fighting her bike to a standstill. She ran back toward us, her face paler than I'd ever seen it.

"Steve!" she yelled. "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

"Yeah," I said. "Too bad you missed."

Sinbad moaned deliriously. He's absolutely crazy about Minerva. She bent and whacked him heartily on his barrel chest, a good solid belt, the way he likes to be hit.

"I'm glad to see you too, Sinbad," Minerva told him, whacking and thumping him a few more times, as he wiggled his delight. When she straightened up her face had a lot of its color back, and her blue eyes were dark with excitement.

"It's about this witch I just saw," she began casually.

"What witch?" I said suspiciously.

"The one in Mucker's Swamp. Her name is Aurelia Hepburn."

I wondered whether that little skid had unbalanced her mind. If there were still witches around today, not even a witch would live in Mucker's Swamp. Although nobody cares to admit it, especially the Chamber of Commerce, Mucker's Swamp is part of our town. A lot of towns have what they call urban blights. One of the biggest any place is Mucker's Swamp, and we're stuck with it.

It's very bleak and desolate, separated from the rest of the town by geography and a lot of superstition. A network of twisting narrow tarry creeks connecting eventually with the sea behind it. It's covered by weeds ten feet high, and you could spend the rest of your life trying to get out of Mucker's Swamp. Nobody would see you. Even stray dogs avoid it, for fear of getting lost in its brackish maze.

Talk about a lapse of Nature—Mucker's Swamp is the living end.

I grinned at Minerva. She's got the wildest imagination, and facts don't mean very much, especially if they get in her way. I knew I had her this time.

"Maybe you oughtta stick to your riddles," I told her. She had some great ones.

Minerva tossed back her hair and put her fists on her hips, ready for an argument. "I'm not kidding, Steve," she said. "I just came from there."

She looked nervously over her shoulder, then frowned up at the sky. I looked too and didn't see any witches, only a lot of trees along Steamboat Road and old Mrs. Teska's house and general store. There was a big fat puffy cloud in the sky, but nobody zipping in and out on a broomstick.

"That's what started it," Minerva said glumly. "She was blowing clouds away when I first saw her."

I just looked at her.

"I was out riding the back roads looking for new

customers for my newspaper route," Minerva said. "I didn't have any luck and started back. Then I realized I was right at the edge of Mucker's Swamp."

I saw the canvas cover for the Hampton Observer on Minerva's bike, so that part could be true. But you couldn't be sure of anything with Minerva.

"I knew I wouldn't find anybody in there," she said. "But I saw a little lane, and figured what the heck—I'd never been in there before and I'd try it. The first thing I saw was this old white goat tied to a tree."

"Goats are crazy about newspapers. Eating, that is. Did he buy a subscription?"

"Don't be funny." Minerva gave me a good punch in the arm. She hits harder than a lot of fellows. "I kept going and saw this little cottage, and then right out in the middle of a field I saw her—the witch, I mean."

"How did you know she was a witch?" I asked, "Was there some kind of a sign on her?"

"I didn't know it then, dummy," Minerva said, glaring. "She admitted it later after I guessed."

Sinbad was watching her intently, liking the sound of her voice, as he always does.

"Maybe she runs a Rent-a-Broomstick place." I thought that was funnier than Minerva did.

"She was breathing very hard and staring up at a little puff-ball cloud. Her face got red. Then all of a sudden the cloud had a hole in the middle, the edges melted away, and in a second it was gone."

I said, "I could do that myself with the help of a little ocean breeze."

"There wasn't any," Minerva said. "No breeze. No wind at all. She had a watch on a chain around her neck. She looked at it and yelled: 'Ha! A minute and a half for that one!' Then she took a fix on another cloud, throwing her head back, putting her hands on her hips and starting this real deep breathing. Like this."

Minerva started sucking in wind and breathing it out like a bellows.

"This cloud was bigger. Shaped like a dragon without a tail. She got rid of that dragon cloud in three minutes."

"Maybe she's got bad breath," I said.

Minerva shot me a dirty look.

"I still wasn't sure what was going on," she said. "I happened to think—just *think*—I didn't say it—'It looks to me like that old woman is blowing clouds out of the sky!'—and guess what?"

I'm not so hot at guessing. "I give up," I said.

Minerva's lip curled. "Well, the old lady looked at me, and nodded as if she had heard. 'Yes, my dear,' she said, 'I can blow practically any cloud away in less than five minutes!' How could she read my mind?"

"I think she blew your mind too," I told her.

"I guess it does sound like it," Minerva admitted, surprising me. "But then she asked me to pick one out myself so there wouldn't be any question about it. There were a lot of clouds around then so I picked one that was in the middle. It looked like an ice cream sundae."

"What flavor?" I asked and got a punch in the arm.

Minerva mimicked an old lady talking. "'Very well, my dear. You want the one that looks like an ice cream sundae.'" Minerva looked at me intently. "I didn't tell her what I thought it looked like either, I swear."

"Okay," I said. "So then what?"

Minerva backed up a step and started that weird imitating of the woman huffing and puffing.

"She got so red in the face I thought she'd bust, but the cloud began to show a hole right in the center, the edges loosened, and in another minute it all dissolved and disappeared. She clocked it again. Three minutes."

"All right," I said. "I take your word for it. She's good at blowing away clouds. It still doesn't make her

a witch. She just knows some sort of an anti-cloud trick."

"It's not a trick," Minerva said. "I asked her how she did it. She said all it took was concentration and will power."

I shrugged. "Okay. So that's another way."

Minerva nodded and licked her lips. Her face began to get a lost frightened look and her voice sounded weak and tired, not like her at all.

"Here's where it gets important," she said, "and why I need your help. I thought it was all over, but the old woman looked at me and said: 'Your father is some sort of policeman, isn't he?' I figured maybe she'd seen Pop and me someplace, but then she said, 'No, it's a larger sort of star'—as if she could see it. So I admitted Pop was Chief of Police and Sheriff of the county. The old lady nodded and said, 'That accounts for it. That's a larger than ordinary star.' It was spooky. I even looked around to see if Pop's badge was stuck to me somewhere."

Minerva's eyes were shining and her face got very pale again. "Then she reached out her hand. I thought she was going to just shake hands with me and say goodbye. But she just held it out and then drew it back all of a sudden and said: 'Oh, no, that's much too hot!'"

"Too hot?" I repeated.

"I didn't get it either. I just felt spooky. So I asked her *what* was too hot? She just looked at me and said, 'Well, my dear, you look like a sensible child. You'll just have to see your father doesn't open any strange boxes.' I was scared, she was so serious all of a sudden. Only a minute before she'd been blowing clouds away and jumping up and down and laughing like it was great fun. Then she said this:

'Because one of them is going to explode, my dear!'"

"Holy mackerel!" I said. "You mean, a bomb?"

Minerva tried to act cool but she was scared and we both knew it. I was scared too. I like Sheriff Lan-

dry even though he's always threatening to put me in the cooler if I don't marry his daughter some day. Something about breach of affections.

Minerva tried to smile, like she got word every day that her old man was going to have a bomb happening. "That's when I really got spooked, Steve. 'What are you, some kind of a witch?' I asked her. She just gave me a little smile and patted my hand and said: 'I'm afraid so, my dear. But you needn't worry. Aurelia Hepburn is the good kind.'"

"Oh, boy," I said. "Anything else? Did she tell you where or when this was going to happen?"

Minerva shook her head. "I asked that, too. She just pulled her old red shawl around her as if she got cold all of a sudden.

"All she said was: 'No strange boxes! I believe this one will be tied up with string but I'm not certain. I can't see it too clearly.'"

"That's a big help," I said.

"That's why I was racing home like mad," Minerva said. "All I could think of was my pop opening some dumb package that turned out to be a bomb!"

"Sure. Who wouldn't?" I knew how she felt.

"Steve, what'll we do? You know, if I told him, he'd only laugh. He'd never believe that kind of a story. And even if he did believe it, he'd still open any package he thought had to be opened, bomb or not."

Sheriff Landry was tall, heavy-shouldered, and mean-looking and real tough, but not a bad guy when you got to know him. I guess he's got to be tough to stay alive and take care of all that law and order everybody talks about but nobody really wants. I've known Sheriff Landry all my life, and I think he sort of likes me too, but he wouldn't let me get away with anything for that reason. Not if I did anything seriously wrong. Not him.

Minerva was still waiting for me to come up with some brilliant solution.

"Maybe she's better at blowing away clouds than

she is at guessing the future," I said finally.

"She read my mind. She knew what I was thinking about the cloud," Minerva said.

"That's the present," I reminded her. "Like telepathy."

"She knew my pop was more than an ordinary policeman."

"Well, that's the present too," I said. "Maybe what they call clairvoyance. Feeling the truth about a person."

"What about seeing the package—feeling the heat—even almost knowing for sure it would be tied with string? What about that?"

"I don't like that part," I said. I scratched my head and frowned. "Boy, Minerva, you sure got a problem."

"Yeah," she said, looking at me, her blue eyes wide and unblinking, "We sure do."

I knew what I should have known right from the beginning. When Minerva found trouble she always shared it with me. This time there looked to be enough for us both. We were in this together.

She was already frightened.

I was catching up.

3. Bombs Away!

Back at my house Sinbad made a dash for the kitchen, anxious to give my mom one of his enthusiastic greetings, as if he hadn't seen her in five years. He took the turn too fast and skidded against the back door, making the house shake.

"Mom's not here," I told him. "She went to New York for that class at the New School—that investment course—in case Pop ever strikes it rich."

I always tell Sinbad what's going on and he lets me know what's on his mind too. We don't have any of

those language barriers. I showed Sinbad Mom's note.

"She'll be back around seven. Complain all you want, but nobody eats till then. Not even a dog biscuit."

He gave me the half-hearted parrot sound which meant he'd like it if I relaxed the rules just this time, but didn't waste another breath on me and went into the living room hoping he'd get some TV. Sinbad forgets he's a dog because he's always treated as part of the family. I'm an only child except for him.

I followed and found him looking up at my pop's chair.

"Pop's doing that colonial job for Mr. Weyburn out at Watermill," I told him. "The one with the modified roof. He told me to remind you his chair was off limits to bulldogs."

Sinbad sighed and settled himself down on the floor in his favorite position, stretched out so he looks like a grounded flying squirrel.

My old man is very good with houses. An artist now, a painter, he once studied to be an architect. When pickings are thin and his canvases pile up he'll make a buck fixing up a house for somebody who appreciates how good the old ones were, and wants the one he got stuck with brought back to its original style and character.

We've got a lot of history behind us in Hampton and neighboring towns. Houses that date back to pre-Revolutionary days, old colonials and garrison houses from around 1650. Back then we had Indians, pirates and smugglers and the early settlers, liking what they found here, had to be tough and fight for it.

Things are different now; mostly sailing or fishing or golf. The only fights are at the supermarket when they try to raise prices. Or at the PTA meetings with parents.

When the phone rang I wondered if it was my mom changing her mind or my pop saying he fell off a ladder trying to make both ends meet, his usual excuse. It was Minerva.

"It's here already," she said. "The box."

"What box?" I asked, and then remembered. "Holy mackerel, the bomb like the old lady said? Is it ticking?"

There was a moment's silence. I guess she went over to check it. "No," she said.

"Then how do you know it's a bomb? What does it look like?"

"It looks like a box. Kind of long and flat, with a blue cover."

"Why would they put a bomb in a long blue box?"

"How should I know?"

"Maybe it's just laundry. Your pop's shirts or something."

"Maybe," Minerva admitted. "The trouble is, it's got string around it. You know."

I remembered the prediction. Tied with string. *Maybe.*

"It's come," I told Sinbad, who was listening. He didn't get excited, just kept lying there all loose.

"Dump the box in a rain barrel," I told Minerva. "That's what these bomb demolition experts do all the time. It soaks the mechanism, the timer or something, and keeps it from exploding." There was a lot of silence from the phone. "Hello! Did you hear me?"

Minerva's voice wasn't thin and shaking when she answered. "Are you for real? Rain barrel! What do you think we are, early settlers or something?"

She had a point there. They show a lot of old stuff on TV. "Okay, okay," I said. "I'll be right over."

"It sure took you long enough. Thanks," she said.

Sinbad looked up when I put the phone back. "That was Minerva. She thinks somebody planted the bomb there already. I'm going over to take a look." He stretched, got up and followed me to the door. "Sorry," I told him. "This is for people only." His sad-looking face became even sadder. "You might make it explode by accident," I explained and beat it out the house before he could think of an answer.

As I ran through the woods on the short cut to Mi-

nerva's house, I wondered who had it in for Sheriff Langwell Otis Landry enough to want to bomb him, or even why it had to be a bomb. Despite all the talk, guns haven't gone out of style. I figured it had to be one of those mechanical wizards who likes to put things together for the sake of making them go off.

Minerva had the box on the top step just outside the door and was walking up and down looking at it, half-scared, half-curious.

I had to laugh. "That's no bomb. That's laundry."

She tossed her blonde loose hair. "How can you tell from there?"

I didn't feel obliged to tell her my old man's comes back in the same kind of oblong box tied with white string. I ripped the string away, slid the top lid off, and showed her the contents.

"Shirts," I said.

She took it from me. "It's a good thing we don't have a rain barrel, like you suggested. You and your dopey ideas."

It had slipped my mind that when you try to help Minerva Landry you stick your neck way out.

She took the box upstairs to her pop's room. I waited in the entry. When she came running down, I pointed to a small carton near the foot of the steps. "Now that's more the kind of box they'd use for sending a bomb."

Minerva's eyes widened and she clapped her hand to her mouth. "I didn't see that. Mrs. Wood must have taken it in after Pop left this morning."

Minerva doesn't have a mother any more. This Mrs. Wood comes in from outside of town and cleans for them and does the cooking several times a week.

"Steve, look! It has string on it."

I sort of wished I hadn't seen the box in the first place. This one wasn't laundry. "Okay. Don't get excited. It still looks like just a box," I told her.

I bent over it and listened. No sound of ticking. But I had an idea the start of ticking depended on the

setting of a bomb's timing device. The box was about a foot and a half high, half as wide, and a foot thick, sealed at the ends with tape and tied with heavy cord. Sheriff Landry's name and address were scrawled in handwriting even worse than mine, the return smeared and torn away like a label somebody got mad at.

I got down on my knees and pushed it gently. It pushed hard. I frowned over at Minerva.

"Look out," I said, feeling foolish. I braced myself, got my fingers under the corners, swallowed hard, and eased the box off the floor, trying to keep it level so it wouldn't start any mechanism going inside. It was sort of heavy but I got it tight against my chest and straightened up so I could walk. Minerva was dead white.

"Now what?" she asked me.

I should have thought about that before picking it up. It weighed about ten pounds. "How about the bathtub?" I suggested.

"No good. Mrs. Wood is taking a bath."

I wondered if the FBI would have the authority to order somebody out of a tub. A drop of perspiration stung my eye and I blinked.

"Okay," I said, and holding the box close walked slowly out the door. "I'll drop it in the Sound. I think I can make it."

There's a long jetty from the Landry house to their end of the Sound. Farther out it becomes Jonah's Bay. As I went down the three outside steps something rattled. I stopped, took a breath and started again. Something slid inside the box, like it was packed tight but not too tight. It's crazy the way your mind works. At first I didn't think it was really a bomb. Now when I got to thinking it might be, I shook and rattled along with the box, my muscles tightening against taking a fast step or running or doing anything foolish.

I have to give Minerva credit. She walked right

alongside me, only holding her hands ready to close her ears because she doesn't like loud noises.

It was a long hundred yards. I sweated every step but wasn't really paralyzed with fear because a small part of me still wasn't convinced the box held a bomb.

My whole life didn't pass in review before me either, maybe because I hadn't lived very much of a life so far in only twelve years. I was wishing we could have done this in a more normal way: call the police to investigate a suspicious looking package. But because of Minerva's connection with her father, and mine with her, we couldn't drag him away from his important police work to tell him we found this bomb meant for him, and maybe he ought to have those demo-suicide experts look it over. If it turned out a dud, we'd look awfully silly, and maybe worse. The way Sheriff Landry passed out orders with his mean wolf-eyed look, he'd have Minerva off limits for me forever.

I got to the end of the pier where there was enough deep water and eased the box gently into the water. Throwing seems to set them off sometimes, so I let go like it was something I was attached to. We watched it sink slowly out of sight. I let out the breath I'd been holding, and took in a new one, got Minerva's hand and started to back her off. When we got far enough away we ran like crazy. Minerva covered her ears. Nothing happened.

"Maybe it was a dud," I said. "Or else the soaking cooled it."

"Or else it never was a bomb at all," Minerva said.

I thought about that before I said, "That's another good possibility."

On the way back, when I got out of Minerva's sight, I started running to work off the chills that came on suddenly.

Sinbad was waiting still stretched out on the floor, not moving a muscle, just lying there, his pink tongue sticking out a little, his big head resting on his white

paws, pretending he didn't even see me when all the time he was dying to know what happened. What a ham actor!

"It looked like a bomb from the size of the package," I told him, "and felt like one, too. I dropped it off in the Sound. It didn't go off." Sinbad blinked and lay there. "I just thought you wanted to know," I finished.

None of Pop's books had anything on bombs. I guess he's got more important things to interest him. When my mom called to say she was making the next train, and was everything okay, I said yes.

I got the table set, and the phone rang again.

"That wasn't a bomb, stupid," Minerva said right off. "It was my pop's golf shoes."

"What?"

"Pop's new golf shoes. He just ordered them from Oddmeyer's department store. They had a sale. I saw him looking all over for something. So I finally told him about that package. He says you owe him fifty-six bucks plus tax."

"I owe him?"

"Well, sure. It was your dumb idea to dump it in the water, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but that's the best thing to do with a suspicious looking package that might be a bomb. Ask him yourself."

"I know. That's what you told me. But it's not good for golf shoes."

"What if they're waterproof?"

"Hold it," she said. I heard her voice asking about that. "He says quote no shoes are *that* waterproof and you owe him fifty-six plus the tax and you better stay undercover so he won't see you for a while unquote."

"But, gosh—didn't you explain I was only doing it to save him? Also maybe you and your house?"

"Oh, that," she said. "Pop didn't think it was worth two pairs of new golf shoes. He said if you want to

practice being a demolition bomb expert to use your own father's brand new golf shoes."

I started yelling a little. "Well, gosh, didn't you tell him it was all because of that dopey story you had me believing about your witch from Mucker's Swamp?"

"I told you he wouldn't believe that kind of story," she said. "I guess that's why he's Sheriff and you're not."

"They don't elect any kids Sheriff," I pointed out, "and besides I'm not running for office. How about that keen way she blew away clouds? Did he go for that part?"

"Oh," she said, "I forgot to tell him that part."

"But isn't it important?"

"Not as important as your ruining his new shoes."

"But, Minerva," I yelled, "you're making it look like it was all my fault!"

"It's a good thing you were smarter about the box of shirts," she said. "When I told him about nearly putting them in the rain barrel like you suggested, he nearly had a heart attack."

"Well, thanks a lot," I said and hung up. Sinbad rolled his eyes up to me. "It wasn't a bomb, it only felt like one. It was Sheriff Landry's new golf shoes that he just bought at a sale. I owe him fifty-six bucks now plus tax."

Sinbad sneezed and wagged his tail. Then he came over and put his big head on my knee and gave me that shining love-light look, which he does whenever he thinks I need encouragement. He's smart but not smart enough to know how much money fifty-six bucks is, even without the tax.

I had a feeling Minerva was reluctant to tell her father the whole story about the witch of Mucker's Swamp because if her old man knew she was fooling around there he'd really throw the book at her. So naturally she had to make it seem mostly all my fault.

I was sure burned up. But that's what I mean, about never being sure about Minerva, and why she's always so interesting.

4. The Witch Who Wasn't Exactly

I decided to call a friend of mine.

Herky Krakower is my age but an authentic genius. He has total recall on anything he's ever read, is a human computer and rates over 200 on the Terman index for Intelligence Quotients, which is 50 over the genius level, so you don't have to take my word for it.

When he was very young, polio affected his body but not his brain or personality. He has to walk sort of lopsided and he's not a very good athlete, of course, but he never complains. He's shy and modest with more brains than most college graduates.

When he answered the phone, I said, "Herky, what do you know about witches?"

"Gosh, Steve, not very much."

That didn't throw me too much because I know Herky hates to act or sound like a big brain.

"Well, are there any living today? I mean real ones."

"Oh, sure," he said. "As a matter of fact witchcraft is bigger today than ever before. Even though the witch hunters have killed hundreds of thousands of them. You'll find practicing witches, men and women, in almost every country in the world. Ours, too, of course. Do you have to know how many?"

He had that information, too, if I wanted it.

"No, thanks, Herk. Only this. I heard of a person blowing away clouds. Supposedly by concentration. Is that possible? Without tricks, I mean, like no wind."

"I've never seen it done but it *is* possible, Steve. I don't know if you mean the two questions to be related but one has nothing to do with the other. You don't need to be a witch or have magic power to dissolve a cloud."

"You don't?"

"No. You mentioned concentration. Actually it's

pranic energy. An energy force that creates enough heat to vaporize a cloud. We're like the atmosphere, you know, with magnetic fields of our own."

I didn't know that any more than a lot of other things Herky could always mention so casually.

Then he asked me if there was anything else I wanted to know. I felt like asking him how you could tell a bomb from a golf-shoe box but I didn't feel like advertising how dumb I was. It was too late now anyway. I told him, no, thanks.

"What's it about, Steve?"

"Well, Minerva thinks she saw a woman blowing away clouds in Mucker's Swamp."

"Mucker's Swamp? I didn't know anybody lived there."

I always feel better whenever Herky agrees with me.

"According to Minerva, she does. One thing more, Herk, just so I'll know how to handle Minerva. What about looking at a person and being able to tell things about them that you're not supposed to know?"

"Past, present or future?" he asked.

"Any of those."

"You don't have to be a witch for that either. Psychics do it. Clairvoyants. They're called sensitives. Paragnosts if they do all three. Is that Minerva's witch?"

"So far, it is."

"I'm very interested in that kind of thing, Steve. I'd like to meet her."

"Me, too, Herky. Her name is Aurelia Hepburn. Unless Minerva made that up too."

"Nice name for a witch," he said.

I thought so, too. I told Herky that maybe it would be a good idea if we went over there to Mucker's Swamp sometime soon and met this Aurelia Hepburn. He was crazy about the idea because this would be his first opportunity to study psychic phenomena first-hand. I promised I wouldn't forget him when I went and he thanked me all over again. That was

very typical of Herky too, helping me out with my problem and then thanking me for calling.

Sinbad didn't wait to hear what Herky said. He started to bark, and ran to the front door where he hopped on the window seat to look out through the curtains, wiggling all over.

A car zoomed down the hill in front of my house and screeched to a stop, burning rubber and scattering gravel like gunshot. I recognized that kind of driving and the black sedan with POLICE on it. My heart hit bottom and thumped.

"It's Sheriff Landry," I told Sinbad, who wiggled some more.

He came up the walk long-legged and deliberate, no expression at all on his face and not carrying his gun. He knows me too well to try to scare me that way. I got the door open, holding Sinbad's big studded collar so he wouldn't knock down the Sheriff with one of his exuberant welcomes. .

I got a cool nod and Sinbad was allowed to bang him a few times with his hard head to show his love before being thumped with those hard hands.

"All right, Sinbad, that's all for now. I have to talk to Steve."

It was funny, him talking to Sinbad like I did, but Sheriff Landry knew him since he was born.

"If it's about your golf shoes, Sheriff, I'm awful sorry." I was, too. Fifty-six bucks worth.

"Oh, that," he said. "That's not too important."

"Huh?"

Sheriff Landry straightened up and looked over my head at the living room. "Where's Dad?"

I told him about the Watermill Colonial job.

"Mother not home yet?"

I explained about the New School class in finance.

"Good idea," he said. He didn't add any cracks about how it might help me with my fifty-six dollar problem.

I waited. He didn't come screaming down my road

burning up all that rubber just to pass the time. He ran a big hand over his lean face and stared at the ceiling with those hot yellow eyes that remind me of a hungry wolf.

"As I understand it, you thought you were removing a bomb from my house. That correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any particular reason why you thought it was a bomb?"

I swallowed. "Didn't Minerva tell you?"

"I'm asking you," he said sharply.

"Do I have to answer that one, Sheriff?"

He surprised me. "Not if you don't want to. You're not on trial. I'm just trying to get to the bottom of this. I know you're not stupid, so you must have had good reason for doing what you did." His hot eyes raked mine. "Did you think it was a bomb?"

I nodded. So far he was being nice and calm and not bearing down, like when he's really being the law.

"A bomb meant for me?"

"Yes."

"And you took it upon yourself to move what might have been triggered to explode any moment?"

"I was pretty careful," I said.

He gave me a hard look. "If it was timed to go off then, you know of course that being careful wouldn't be enough? I'd call that rotten thinking, Steve, wouldn't you?"

I shrugged, embarrassed. "I sort of hoped it wasn't."

His lips twisted. "Then you picked it up and carried it out to the water. A hundred yards. And dropped it in?"

"You didn't have a rain barrel," I grinned.

He smacked his hand across his forehead, then balled his hands into fists and looked like he was going to take a poke at me. I saw Sinbad watching everything, not the least bit worried because he knew the Sheriff and I were friends. He didn't understand friendship was wearing thin at the moment.

"We have a bomb squad, you know."

"I know," I admitted. "But I'd have felt real goofy if they came all the way out and found it was a big nothing. And then we didn't want to take advantage of the fact you were Sheriff."

A look almost human flickered briefly in his eyes. Then he became Sheriff again.

"Are you trying to tell me you risked your life for me?" His voice was cold and challenging now.

"No, sir," I said. "I just threw away that box. I admit it was dumb. I'll make up the money somehow, Sheriff. Honest." I didn't know exactly how at the moment. Some part-time summer job, or maybe I might find some insurance to cash in, like my folks did sometimes.

He didn't accept it. "You're not getting off the hook that easily. I'll have to know a little more about your motives, Steve."

"Ask Minerva."

"I'd rather hear your side of it."

I still didn't want to get her into trouble about Mucker's Swamp. "It's about the same as hers. I mean, if she told you the truth," I added.

"That's why I better hear your story," he said. "Then I can make comparisons. Come on, Steve. Talk. Did you think somebody was out to get me?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Any idea who?"

"No."

"Any idea why?"

I shrugged. "I figured maybe somebody had a grudge."

His eyes stayed on mine. "There are other ways of settling grudges. There are guns."

"I thought of that."

He made a wry grimace. The Sheriff never likes it when we think the same way.

"It's an ordinary looking box. Yet you thought it might have contained a bomb. Why?"

He looked down at me, impatiently.

"It was tied up with string," I said, knowing how stupid it sounded.

He paced off a few steps, then swung around, angry.

"Tied with string? What kind of a ridiculous answer is that?" he snorted.

"She said it would go off and might be tied with string . . ." I stopped, but too late.

"Who—Minerva?"

My head felt wobbly from all those questions bouncing off it.

"Who?" he persisted. "For reasons I still don't understand, it appears that you risked your life for me. I want to know why. Who said what?"

I couldn't weasel out of it now. "The witch."

"What witch?" He was glaring, mad enough to talk without moving his lips, like a ventriloquist. Only I was the dummy.

"The one Minerva said she met."

"Oh, yes, that one. Where was that again?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"I'll make a deal with you," he said harshly. "I never heard it from you. And that's my word."

That was the first time in all my life Sheriff Landry ever made a deal with me. Usually he twisted me up so much I had to try to make a deal with him so he wouldn't send me up the river, or wherever.

"Mucker's Swamp," I said. "Minerva rode around there to drum up some subscriptions for her paper route."

He stared coldly. "That's a good place to get them."

"I think maybe she got lost a little," I said.

"All right," he said flatly. "Let's hear it all."

After he gave me his word about not punishing her, I had to tell him everything, the cloud business and all, still feeling like a dope for throwing out a harmless shoebox but knowing I had to do it.

"There wasn't any other choice I could think of. The witch guessed you were more than the average officer, even saw your star as bigger than most. She

said Minerva shouldn't let you open a strange box, maybe tied with string, because it might explode. That scared Minerva as well as me."

He was staring out the window.

"Minerva thought you wouldn't believe her story, that nothing would stop you from opening any box that came along, if you felt like it. So—somebody had to do it for you. I admit it was dumb."

"It wasn't," he said, sure surprising me. "If the old lady's guess was right and you did what you felt you had to—and it actually was a bomb, then it wouldn't have been dumb at all. Would it?"

I shrugged. That was always safer to do when the Sheriff wheeled around you with all those questions.

"I guess not," I mumbled.

He smiled. "The trouble is, circumstances aren't always the way you want them to be. When you stick your neck out you have to be prepared to pay for taking the risk. In this case, we're both lucky that all you got rid of was a box of shoes."

"How do you figure I'm lucky?" I asked.

"You're still alive. It could have been a booby trap and gone off when you touched it. It could have been a spring bomb or a scatter bomb. It could have been the kind that responds to any pressure, even that of water. There are the kind that respond to sound. Even your footsteps might have triggered that kind." His eyes levelled to mine. "Do you understand?"

I nodded and gulped.

"But I guess I owe you the fifty-six bucks anyway, huh?"

His lips loosened into that wolfish grin. "That's right. That's the price you've got to pay for sticking your nose in where it didn't belong."

"Okay. I'll get it. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. Maybe tomorrow there'll be some other box at my house. This time perhaps you'll think about it."

"Okay," I said. "I already did. From now on you can take care of your own bombs."

"That's the idea," He clapped his big mitt on my shoulder, only crushing a bone or two. "If somebody is trying to get rid of me, that's my lookout."

"Sure," I said. "But that was the whole idea anyway. Just so you *would* look out."

Sheriff Landry straightened up, took a deep breath and let it go out slowly. "All right, Steve. I'll watch it. And just because you've been straight with me and answered all my questions, I'll give you a break on what you owe me."

"Wow!" I said. "You mean you're going to forget the fifty-six bucks?"

He shook his head. "No. Not that. Just the tax."

Then he leaned down and ruffled Sinbad's head before he left, saying, "That's a saving of four percent. Maybe your mother could explain how much that is after her course in high finance."

He slammed the door, got into his squad car, zoomed up the hill, braking suddenly at the top when he came to Steamboat Road, then he took a right and was gone. A second later another car came over the crest and roaring down the hill. My mom can cowboy a car too.

Sinbad nearly shook himself out of his skin to show how he missed her. She petted him, then looked at me, a slight vertical frown line between her dark blue eyes.

"Wasn't that Sheriff Landry just going up the hill?"

I said it was.

"From here? Is anything wrong?"

"Not exactly. He left a problem for you, Mom. What's four percent of fifty-six bucks?"

She thought briefly. "Two dollars and twenty-four cents. Why?"

I snorted. "Big deal."

She didn't get it. "Somebody ought to tell him not to drive so fast. I nearly ran into him."

That made me grin.

After dinner Sinbad and I watched TV, but my

mind was far away. At Mucker's Swamp. With the witch. I wondered if a witch could make a wrong prediction. Or was it possible Minerva had misinterpreted the message? If I saw somebody blowing clouds out of the sky I'd be a little unbalanced too.

Minerva would be calling me about every box or package arriving at their house, and how could I guess right? If this witch was so sure about an exploding package coming, perhaps she could be more exact, have a better mental image now, or be more definite about when it was coming. She might even have discovered her supernatural powers and wires were mixed up, and this bomb was coming for somebody else I never even heard of.

I thought about it a lot, weighing it from every angle. The more I thought about it, the more I knew I had to pay that witch a visit and the sooner the better.

5. The Demon of the Witch

I told my mom I had to see this witch about something. In her slightly-distracted funny way, she said that would be nice, and find out if the witch sold some kind of a charm that might keep my pop from falling off ladders. She calls it his occupational disease.

I thought about phoning Herky Krakower but it seemed a risk for him in Mucker's Swamp at night, because of his condition.

Sinbad wasn't happy about my explanation that this mission was strictly for people on bikes. He keeps forgetting he's a dog.

It was a quiet night, the moon quartered; a slight westerly breeze at my back made pedalling easier. I was the only one on the back road.

In less than half an hour my nose told me I was near Mucker's Swamp. I realized too late I should

have asked Minerva exactly where she had seen the witch, for the swamp covers a large area and it would be easy to spend the rest of your life there wandering about, but I wasn't nervous or scared. It was early in the evening and most of the rot you hear about Mucker's Swamp has to do with being caught in it around midnight.

I never would have found the place if it hadn't been for the goat. Already lost in the thick undergrowth edging the swamp, I heard a thin bleating and followed it around a curving lane.

I like animals but goats, looking at you with chalk-like eyes as if you're not really there, leave me cold. I've never met one yet the least bit warm or outgoing, but there was good reason for trying to like this one. It belonged to the witch. He ignored my soft hello, his pink-rimmed eyes regarding me without expression.

"I love you, too," I told him.

He lowered his head, looking meaner. A rope around his scrawny neck tethered him to a thin pine, so I knew he couldn't butt me. As I went by, he made another bleating sound.

The tall weeds providing thick cover from the road thinned. In a clearing, set far back, was a small white cottage, its windows warm with light flickering like candles or kerosene lamps. Somebody *was* living in Mucker's Swamp. I had to find out if that person was a witch, and if she could give me the kind of information I needed.

I had taken a few steps when a noise made me duck back to the trees. A car came slowly up a lane, its headlights curving toward the cottage. It pulled up at the front door. The motor died, the lights went off, and a man got out—big, bulky and bald-headed. This unexpected other visitor breathed heavily as he looked carefully about. I leaned close back against the trees.

The little lady who opened the door and stood peering out didn't look at all like a witch. She was

short and a little round, almost plump, like anybody's grandma.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Barker," she said, in a voice with a Scotch burr. "I was expecting you."

For anybody as good at predicting as this woman was supposed to be, a lot of fun in life was spoiled by always knowing who was dropping in on you and why.

This Barker nodded. "Well," he said in a low hoarse voice, "have you made up your mind?"

"Aye, the answer's the same. I thought I made it quite clear I wouldn't be a party to this. Come in and we'll talk about it, mon, if you like. But don't expect me to be changing my mind."

His shoulders hunched, his hands clenched and for a second I thought he was going to clout her. He must have known she was a witch because he got control of himself, even making his voice smooth and silky.

"Very well; we'll talk then." He followed her inside and the door closed.

Very unfair to eavesdroppers. I hadn't meant to be one, but ducking back into the undergrowth when the big black car came up the narrow lane settled my position. I still wanted to talk with her, yet didn't feel now like announcing my presence. Standing only ten yards away from the little white house with its windows open and shutters back, I could see their shadows high on the wall inside and, because it was a warm quiet night, hear their voices.

The hoarse-voiced Mr. Barker asked if she'd considered everything before making up her mind. She said she had and the whole idea was preposterous, immoral and maybe illegal. He let out a nasty kind of what I have to call a hoarse laugh and said maybe, but she could do it if she wanted to, couldn't she? She said perhaps.

"You realize, of course, I could make it very difficult for you to stay on here if you refuse," he said.

"I've had to endure threats all my life, my dear mon. It's perfectly useless for you to threaten me. I'm not afraid of you."

Attagirl, I said.

"I have a good deal of influence with the city council," he said. "I could have your property condemned with one little phone call."

"By all means then make it, mon. If I had one here, I'd invite you to use it."

By this time, very curious, I had somehow drifted over to the side of the cottage, not wanting to miss anything.

Barker's shadow swept up the wall and hit the ceiling, to match his temper. "You're a fool," he snarled. "These superstitious villagers would ride you out of town in a moment if I told them what you are."

She was sitting in an old Carver rocking-chair, looking up at him, her shadow moving up the wall and down as she swayed back and forth. She looked very calm, not the least bit afraid.

"And just what am I, Mr. Barker?" I could swear she was smiling, her blue eyes twinkling.

"A witch."

I didn't say it. Barker did.

She nodded very pleasantly at that, as if he'd just told her she made the best brownies at the annual cookout championship they hold at the park.

"Perhaps I am," she said gently. "I wouldn't deny it. At any rate, I'm the only one who knows for certain."

"I know," Barker said stubbornly. "I've seen some of the things you do. I've spoken to a few people who say they've seen more."

"Balderdash," the old lady said. "Bilge," she added.

"Look, I know you've got this power. You knew what I was thinking the day you came to me at the bank to secure that loan. That's the kind of power I'm talking about."

She laughed. "Aye. That was careless of me. Some-

times I do say the things that pop right into my head. I might add that yours is an easy mind to read. So uncluttered."

"What?"

"It's so empty in there," she said merrily. "Just a lot of dollar signs chasing themselves around."

Barker pounded his fists together. He looked as happy as a butcher when the customers find out most of the meat on the scale comes from his elbow.

"Let's get one thing straight," he said. "You borrowed a considerable amount of money from my bank. Three thousand dollars. You're behind in your payments. Do you have any way of meeting them?"

"Not at the moment. But I'm not the least worried. It will turn up somehow."

"That's not good enough. Don't you realize I'm giving you an opportunity to have your complete obligation cancelled? Three thousand dollars for a few minutes of your concentration. Call it work, if you will. All I want is an inkling of what the man is doing."

"That's the way it always begins," the little lady sniffed. "In no time at all you'd be back wanting the rest of it: how he does this, how he does that. What you're actually proposing, mon, is criminal."

"I don't see it that way," he said, striding up and down, making me duck under the windowsill. "The man has an invention I'm certain he's going to sell to a foreign power. It's up to us to stop him. For the common good of the country."

"My, but you really are ridiculous," she said.

"You won't find it so when you're run out of town."

She stood up. "I'll thank you to be leaving now, and don't bother to come back. We've settled the matter."

"That's your answer? Well, we'll see about that." He wheeled toward the front door. "I'll give you until tomorrow noon to change your mind. If I don't hear from you by then, I guarantee you'll be sorry."

She threw the door open contemptuously. "That will be the day," she said.

I ducked around the side of her cottage, then remembered the lane didn't extend past her front door. His lights would pick me out as he backed the way he had come. So when he stepped on his starter I made a dash for the tall weeds only a few feet away, and threw myself into them, trying to disappear fast. I did a good job. Those Mucker's Swamp weeds swallowed me up, the brackish marsh did the rest. My feet slipped, and I was up to my hips in ooze, with eyes stinging from the salt water, and my mouth full of the tarry gook.

The headlights swung around the curve, making me glad to be hidden and half sunk. When the big car straightened out on the black top road it shot ahead, burning rubber, and in ten seconds tail lights were blinking as it braked and then swung left on the road back to town.

It was easier getting into the swamp than out. I wallowed in the muck trying to pull myself out by grabbing the weeds, or find a firm purchase in the slimy bottom, weaving around in half-circles, and losing direction. When finally I fought my way back through the muck to the cottage I came to an abrupt halt.

A small fire was going now outside the door, and she stooped over fanning the flame with a high-crowned wide-brimmed black hat. It looked like the hat the Pilgrims wore but we hadn't had any Pilgrims in our neighborhood for over 300 years. It also looked like the sort seen in pictures of witches. The tongues of flame twitched and licked at her feet, and smoke curled on her dark skirt. She was singing—a simple chant, hummed under her breath, the cadence similar to the old nursery rhyme about Simple Simon meeting a pieman.

"Xilka, Xilka, Besa, Besa!"

She straightened up, standing firm in the light of

her fire, her red shawl glowing, her hair silver, her face pink in the reflected light. She jammed both hands on her hips and her feet stamped the ground.

"Come to me with threats, will he?" she muttered, fanning the fire with her black hat. The flames leaped higher. "That's it, my children. Burn, burn. There's work to be done." She looked off in the direction Barker had gone. "Better a witch, Aurelia, than a weak defenseless woman!"

She made a quick rotary motion with her hands, and the flames leaped higher, crackling fiercely. She threw her head back and laughed shrilly, then reached down and picked up a long stick, putting its pointed end to the ground.

"If it's magic he wants, we'll have to see to it that it's magic he gets!"

Humming softly again, she stooped over and traced a large circle on the ground with the stick, staying inside its edge. She raised the stick with a flourish, then threw it down.

"A fair start for my kind of demons." She put one hand into her skirt pocket, drew it out and shook it briskly. The sound was like bones rattling. She bent, moving along the inner part of her circle, dropping things at intervals.

"Stones of Knellar! Uther Pendragon's best," she chanted. I saw little black stones dotting the outline of her circle before she began to dance around the inside of the circular arrangement, looking at each stone. Then she nodded as if satisfied. "Well, that looks to be the lot," she said softly. "Now let's get on with it."

What was she going to do now? Soaked and cold, I still didn't think it a good idea to step out of the cane-brake to ask her any dumb questions. Like, was she really a witch? She appeared to be answering that one for me.

She bowed toward the dancing flames of the fire, then lifted her arms and looked at the sky. I fol-

lowed her glance. It was a clear night, the moon a silvery crescent, with about a million stars. Up there, where everything seemed so orderly and peaceful, made what was going on down here kind of crazy.

Clapping her hands together, she stretched up, reaching out wide as if to hug the whole universe. Her voice became louder and stronger.

"Baalzaphon!" she cried. "Are you there, demon? Now I, Aurelia Hepburn, seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, from the island of Mull in the Hebrides, conjure you, demon and spirit of wind and rain. In the name of the great living God, I conjure you to appear before me. If not, Saint Michael the archangel invisible will strike you to the bottom-most depths of hell. Come then, Baalzaphon, to do my bidding!"

It was all I could do to keep from laughing. Here was this pleasant-faced dumpy little woman talking to the sky, asking this demon of the wind and rain she called Baalzaphon to appear before her, or else! I looked up at the sky again. Everything clear as a bell. If she was going to get any rain tonight she and this Baalzaphon demon would sure have to do a mighty good trick.

I heard a low rumble far away. The sky over the eastern horizon flickered and lit up. So what? I told myself. Big deal. Heat lightning. Then there was a sudden thunderclap, a lot closer. It rolled and rolled, rumbling in the sky, making my hair prickle at the back of my neck.

It had been quiet and still before, but now with a sigh the tall spearlike weeds were shifting, rustling, beginning to bend. I felt a soft breath of the wind and looked up. A cloud moved swiftly across the moon, the stars that had been dancing and twinkling had disappeared. The wind behind me rose. There was a sudden flash of lightning. I jumped, thinking: real crazy. Something reached out and touched me and I jumped again: it was the tall weeds of Mucker's

Swamp, bent almost to the ground. I heard a pattering sound. It came closer and I could feel it. Soft and wet.

Rain!

The moon was banished by dark leaden clouds blanketing the sky. The shutters banged on the cottage walls as the wind became sharper, its heavy gusts blowing the tall weeds down all around, making it almost impossible for me to stand up. Salt spray splattered my eyes, burning, blurring my sight until I could only dimly see the woman in the clearing, dancing up and down in her magic circle. Her fire hissed and the rain only seemed to make the flames dance higher. That seemed incredible. The sing-song chanting changed to a happy keening, then to a rising shriek of triumph.

"He's coming! He's coming! My demon—Baalzaphon!"

Maybe he was. She had me convinced, but I wasn't ready to see a demon yet. I stumbled out of the thick wet cane and ran, tripping and falling a few times until I found my bike, ran with it and jumped on, pedalling madly away from Mucker's Swamp.

6. Witch Magic

I must have very good nerves. Either that or I didn't believe what I'd seen with my own eyes. I slept all through that night without a single nightmare.

Minerva called me early the next morning.

"Steve, I've got a riddle for you. I thought maybe you'd like to solve it over here in person."

Minerva usually had great riddles. I never guess any of them.

"I'll try it from here," I told her, glad she had her mind off exploding boxes with string on them.

"What's yellow and extremely noisy and hostile?"

I thought a while, then, "I give up," I said.

"A picketing bunch of anti-draft bananas."

"That's pretty good."

She followed up with several more of her fruity ones, until I said, "I'm rotten at riddles."

"Just one more," she said. "I promise it's not a fruit."

"Okay."

"What's long and blue and has scales, goes uk-uk-uk, weighs 3000 pounds and has sharp claws?"

I gave up quickly.

"Nothing," she said. "But if you see it, start running."

Well, this last riddle reminded me of the witch and that demon Baalzaphon.

"I nearly did last night," I told her. "I ran *without* even seeing it, over at Mucker's Swamp."

"What?" She yelled so loud my ears hurt.

I figured it was only fair to keep Minerva up to date, so I told her everything and she listened without even interrupting once. "So maybe she's a witch, after all," I concluded. "I still can't say for sure. I didn't see her demon, but she sure seemed to know how to go about calling him up. And when that rain came down, and wind came up, that convinced me she was practicing something like witchcraft."

"It didn't rain here," Minerva said.

"Maybe you were sleeping and missed it," I said, remembering what I'd been through. "It was a real downpour."

"Not here it wasn't," Minerva insisted. "If you don't believe me, come on over. You'll see the grounds are dry."

Mucker's Swamp is only about ten miles away. Last night's sky had rain clouds everywhere, so how could the rain have been limited to just the witch's neighborhood? Then I remembered something that struck me as very odd at the time: once I hit the back road

a little over a mile away from Mucker's Swamp it had stopped raining. Soaked and scared, I hadn't paid it much thought. Just looking outside my own house now told me that it had only rained over the witch's house, where she was expecting this demon.

That thought cheered me up some. Maybe he wasn't such a big demon after all. Maybe he just had enough wind and rain in his system to go a little way, just for the general effect, and not enough to go around.

"By the way," Minerva said. "Mr. Barker's been hurt."

"What?" I yelled. "How?"

"Some kind of auto accident. I think his car skidded and he broke his leg. I know because I heard my pop talking to somebody who phoned the report in."

Well, that could have been a coincidence. But maybe the witch's demon had enough rain left in him to take care of Mr. Barker, especially if it didn't rain any place else. I saw Barker leave before the witch started her witchery, before it rained anywhere.

"Do you think she did it?" I asked Minerva.

"I don't know. Don't forget I saw her blowing clouds away. And that was on her own, without any demon."

The Sheriff hadn't put too much stock in that story. But I had a feeling that this was different, Mr. Barker being hurt after seeing the witch. If he complained, and he seemed the type, he might cause her some trouble. I remembered what Herky told me about witch hunts.

"Is your pop still home?" I asked Minerva.

"He's just leaving. And I don't think he'll wait around just for you to ask him for my hand in marriage." That was an old gag between Minerva and me and the Sheriff.

"I'm coming over anyway, on a different matter. See if you can hold him."

"I'll tell you all about it later," I said to Sinbad at

the door. "Right now I got to make time."

He let me go without a whimper, very understanding of him. I pedalled like mad through the woods until I got a sneaking suspicion that Sheriff Landry wouldn't wait for me this morning. I cut short the shortcut and went up the hill to Steamboat Road, where he'd come if he was in a big hurry, as usual.

Sure enough. His big black Plymouth cruised down the wide street breaking all speed limits except those for police chiefs. I waved, but he didn't appear to be slowing down so I cut my bike over a little to attract his attention. He jammed on his brakes and stopped about an inch away from me. Maybe I cut over a little too much.

His eyes were cold and hostile, looking through me like he'd never seen me before.

"Thanks for stopping, Sheriff," I told him. "I got to talk to you."

"That's a good way to do it," he said, his voice harsh. "Next time why not just throw yourself under the wheels?"

Sheriff Landry isn't just law and order. He's also very strong for staying alert at all times, obeying the rules of the road, and avoiding accidents.

"I didn't mean to be that close," I said. "You were driving too fast."

"What do you mean 'too fast'?"

"Well, like this is a thirty mile zone, isn't it?"

He looked at me without smiling, something that comes very easy to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "It slipped my mind."

"Okay. I just wanted to talk to you about that fellow Barker's accident."

"You sure you don't want to swear out a complaint about my driving or make a citizen's arrest?"

"But you said you were sorry and it slipped your mind. So it's okay, I guess."

He shook his head, his lips twisting. "I guess it's just as well you're going to be an architect. You'd make a rotten cop."

I already knew that.

"Now how do you know Mr. Barker had an accident?" he asked me.

"Minerva just told me."

"Well, what about it?"

"I just wanted you to know the witch didn't do it."

"Oh, her again. What didn't she do this time?"

"She didn't make Mr. Barker break his leg when his car skidded in that accident."

He nodded. "That so? Well, I guess we can always use a good impartial witness. Were you there at the time, at the scene of the accident?"

"N-no. Not exactly, I mean. I was at Mucker's Swamp."

He nodded without changing expression. "Only about fifteen miles away. Not too bad. I guess you were able to see it from there, eh?"

"Of course not. I mean, I was at Mucker's when this Mr. Barker came in there to see the witch. And also when he left. So that proves she didn't do it."

He rubbed his chin. "What were you doing in Mucker's Swamp?"

"I had to ask the witch a few questions."

"Stop referring to that woman as a witch. Do you know for sure, with positive certainty, without reasonable doubt, with absolute and direct evidence and demonstrable proof that she's a witch?" He waited till I shook my head. "Forget it, then," he said. "She's no witch."

"I only said it because Mr. Barker said she was and she more or less admitted it. Also with the evidence of Minerva, about the cloud blowing and the box coming."

The Sheriff let out a long sigh.

"Blowing clouds away isn't witchcraft, except to superstitious and ignorant people. It's merely a manifestation of pranic energy." That sure surprised me, him knowing as much as Herky Krakower about it. "And so far as that box coming, in the first place it hasn't come yet, to my knowledge. And in the second,

any clairvoyant, or seer, **or** psychic can do things like that almost any day of **their** lives. Tell what's going to happen, or what happened that they weren't supposed to know about. That doesn't make them witches either. Okay? Do we have our facts straight now?"

"Yes, sir," I said. The kind of logic the Sheriff has always interferes with my story.

"Fine," he said. "Now I suppose you're dying to tell me what Barker was doing there. Right?"

"Right," I said. "He wanted her to read somebody's mind, somebody who had an important invention, so he could get control of it before the other person did something dangerous with it, like selling it to another country."

"Now that's what I call ridiculous," Sheriff Landry said.

"The witch—I mean, the woman said the same thing. Only she added *bilge*," I said.

"Good for her," the Sheriff said. "I suppose you got the name of the inventor?"

"Nope."

"Maybe where he lives?"

"They didn't mention it."

"Well, then, perhaps you found out what kind of invention it is that's so important."

I shook my head. He stared at me.

"I've got to hand it to you. You do know how to come up with evidence." He rubbed his chin some more. "Then what happened? I suppose I'm a fool for asking. But I've got nothing to do except run a police department of about five hundred men. That's not too important when I've got a witness with a story that will save lives and money and insure justice." He shook his head gloomily. "Where were we?"

"Mr. Barker was getting mad at the woman for not wanting to read the inventor's mind. Besides ridiculous, she said it was immoral and illegal, like that. And he got mad and reminded her she borrowed three thousand dollars from his bank for her house and it

was due and could she pay it. She said she couldn't but she wasn't worried. And he said he *was* and he'd forget the three thousand if she read the man's mind instead. And she told him like forget it, Jack, and would he please leave? That was for him threatening her if she didn't come through."

"What kind of threats?"

"Like she was a witch and he knew it, and so did a lot of other people. And he had a lot of influence with the City Council, and one word from him would see her thrown out, also stir up a lot of people in the village superstitious enough to drive her out soon as he spread the word."

The Sheriff didn't say anything for a moment, just kept drumming on the steering wheel with his strong tan fingers. "Sounds like a nice character," he said at last. "A real working liberal."

"Yeah," I said. "So then he got mad and left when she showed him the door. When he got into his car and drove away, he was still in one piece. So like I said, she didn't do it."

"Okay," he said. "What did she do?"

"Well, first she got mad and stamped her foot."

"That's a good start," he said.

"Then she said something about how it was 'better to be a witch, Aurelia, than a weak defenseless woman.'"

"Where were you at the time?"

"In Mucker's Swamp. But *really*. I fell in."

"Good boy," he said.

It wasn't hard remembering it all.

"When I started coming out, she had a fire going and was saying those magic words. Then she drew a magic circle on the ground and laid out the stones . . ."

"Hold it! Hold it! What magic words?"

"It sounded like Xilka, xilka, besa, besa."

He shook his head and chewed on his lower lip. "No doubt about it. Those are magic words, all right."

"Then she drew a magic circle all around her on

the ground with a long pointed stick and . . .”

“Hold it!” he yelled again. “What makes it a magic circle?”

“Well,” I explained, “she put a lot of stones all around the circle and said a chant. That’s what witches are supposed to do. That’s why I called it a magic circle.”

He sighed and grimaced and rolled his eyes. He put his hand over his mouth and rubbed his lips. Then he pulled at his ear a little. I expected smoke to come out.

“It’s a circle,” he said at last, very patiently, like he was dealing with a two-month-old idiot. “An ordinary circle. Traced on the ground with a stick. You or I could do the same thing. That doesn’t make it a magic circle. It’s only magic if it works.” He shot a fierce glance at me. “Did it work?”

“There’s more,” I said. “She called for her demon of wind and rain, somebody called Baalzaphon.”

The Sheriff took out his black notebook. “Now we’re getting someplace. Baalzaphon, eh? How do you spell it?”

I spelled it out the way it sounded to me.

“Fine,” he said. “Demon of wind and rain, eh? Swell. Now you’re talking. Can you describe him?”

I shook my head.

“Come on,” he urged. “What did he look like? Was he tall, short, roly-poly, thin?”

I opened my mouth, and closed it again.

“Oh?” he said. “Average height maybe?”

I kept giving him the same silent answer.

“Not average? Hmm. How about outstanding features? Did he have horns, maybe?”

I did my head bit again.

“No horns. How about scales? Maybe a long bushy tail?”

My tongue felt too big for my mouth somehow. But I told him finally, “I don’t know.”

He frowned momentarily, then smacked his head.

"Oh, I get it! He must have been invisible! I forgot he was a demon. Was it some misty outline? Maybe he kept changing shape. Those demons are pretty tricky."

"I don't know," I said glumly. "I didn't see him."

"How come?" he asked. "You were right there. You heard and saw everything else."

"I got scared," I told him. "And ran away."

"No kidding," he said. "Well, maybe he didn't come. Maybe he couldn't make it. Or maybe that circle wasn't quite as magic as you thought."

"I guess not," I said. "I panicked when it began to thunder in the east. The wind came up, real hard, nearly blowing me down. Then it started to rain. I saw the old lady dancing around her fire. 'He's coming, he's coming,' she said, 'my demon Baalzaphon!' So I figured if *she* was so sure, he was coming all right. I chickened out. I didn't feel like seeing a real demon of wind and rain. So naturally I don't know if he ever came or not."

Sheriff Landry nodded. "Understandable. I'd have run myself."

"You would?" I couldn't believe it.

He glared hotly at me. "Of course! Don't you think I was ever a kid myself? Or do you think I happened to be born a cop?"

"Okay, okay," I said. Even if he wasn't born a cop, he sure must have had a head start on it.

"Let's get back to your story," he said. "If nothing happened, we can assume she isn't a real witch after all. Just a badgered old woman going through some silly motions. Okay?"

"I guess so."

"But then we have the thunder and lightning and the wind and rain. You think the old lady did that?"

"Sort of," I said. "Either she or her demon did. I don't think it rained any place else."

The Sheriff raised a finger. "Thinking doesn't count," he said sharply. "We want facts. For that,

we'll have to check the weather all around the area. Then we'll know. However, almost immediately afterward, we have this man Barker involved in a car accident. His car skidded, he wrecked it against a tree and wound up with a broken leg. Did the old lady, your witch, do that? Or her demon? She called for him because she was mad, right? Barker threatened her. Isn't that right?"

"Sure, she was mad," I said. "But that doesn't mean her demon did it."

Sheriff Landry shook his head. "No, sir. You can't have it both ways. Make up your mind. Either she's an innocent harmless woman far removed from the scene of the accident. Or she has so-called magical powers, calls for a demon of wind and rain, has him go after Barker and cause his car to skid and crack up. Well, which is it?"

"I don't know," I said, pretty confused now.

"Fine," he said, putting away his black notebook. "Now then, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I forget."

"Me, too," he said, favoring me with a grin.

I looked down at my feet. That was all I could be really sure of: that I had two feet, one my left, the other my right. I wondered if I could still tell time or count over ten. Once you start feeling dumb, you've had it.

"I bet you're getting to think I'm a real dope," I said.

"Not at all," he said.

Well, that was *some* good news.

"You've just let emotion color your judgment," he said in his dry, level voice. "Emotion is *feeling* not thinking. I'm a cop. I can only deal with the facts. It's not just a question of being tough. It means tough thinking. Everything else is ruled out. Now, somehow you've let yourself become emotionally involved over this woman in Mucker's Swamp. I don't have any-

thing to say about that except when it interferes with ordinary common sense, and of course, the simple truth. You can't twist that to suit yourself. And if you do, you're only kidding yourself. Got it?"

I nodded. "I got it."

"Fine," he said. "Try to remember it for about five minutes."

He flipped his hand in salute, turned his ignition back on, and eased away from the curb. Then his big black patrol car took off with all those horses under the hood working for him. He roared down Steamboat Road like he was late for work or something.

Our conversation did me a lot of good, making my story sound weird even to me. I could see now why Sheriff Landry was so highly regarded. He didn't just bust you up to make himself feel better. He wanted you to think. It appeared I had nothing to worry about. If her demon never appeared, then he couldn't have done anything and she wasn't a witch. If he did appear after I left she knew enough magic to call for a particular demon to protect her. The fact that Mr. Barker got his so fast was proof enough. I wished I hadn't been such a lunkhead and run away. Now I didn't know for sure whether there had been a demon.

Sheriff Landry was right about my being emotionally involved. I still was. Even after admitting I had no evidence I had a feeling I couldn't shake: that the witch of Mucker's Swamp was going to be in real trouble soon.

7. Prediction of the Witch

Sinbad gave me a big hello when I got home. To keep him from staring at me hoping for some real information, I had to take him for a walk in the woods. That usually breaks the spell.

When I got back home the phone was ringing. It was Sheriff Landry.

"I'm down at the hospital, Steve. Mr. Barker's story doesn't quite jell with yours. Can you come down here?"

"Sure Sheriff," I said, wondering why it didn't jell. I knew I wasn't lying.

"Fine. I'll be waiting for you. Third floor."

I hung up, and looked down at Sinbad lying flat in his favorite listening position, and told him what the Sheriff said.

"I guess I'm going to be a witness after all." Sinbad grunted and closed his eyes, so he must have understood what jell meant though I'd never used that word before with him. "I'll fill you in on it all later," I told him.

I made good time on my bike. The hospital's new and a compromise between our new village and the old one. I felt a little guilty, not being dressed up in something neat and clean. Everything about a hospital smells so antiseptic, even the elevator.

I got off at the third floor where the corridors intersect. A tough-looking nurse was sitting at a big desk in the center, behind a lot of charts, bottles and telephones. I heard my name and turned to see Sheriff Landry walking toward me down the long corridor.

He took my arm and drew me aside. "The main reason I wanted you down here is what you told me about Barker's threat to the old lady. I don't like to hear that kind of talk, or have it aired in court. It's inflammatory. And it might possibly ruin him. I figured this way would be better. You'll have a chance to repeat it in my presence and his. Okay?"

It seemed reasonable. I wondered *what* Mr. Barker's story was.

"Sure," I said. "Is he hurt bad?"

"A few broken bones. Leg's in a cast and arm's in a sling. Nothing serious. He's able to talk and I want you to hear what he's got to say. After that, it's your

turn. Then we'll see how your story stacks up with his."

That was okay with me. I didn't have anything to hide. If his story was different he must have made it up. What I couldn't understand was Sheriff Landry wanting the whole story kept quiet. My feeling was that anybody who talked like Mr. Barker ought to be ruined. Then maybe he'd learn to keep his big mouth shut and not try to bully people.

The long corridor was wide and covered with linoleum that deadened our footsteps. The Sheriff stopped near the end, Room 321. The door, slightly open, had Mr. Barker's name on it, on a white card.

The Sheriff's big hand gripped my shoulder and he leaned down to whisper, "I'm going in first to talk to him. I want you behind me. There's a large screen as you come in. You wait there. I'll call you when I'm ready."

I nodded, my throat feeling tight for no particular reason. Down the hall a lot of young pretty nurses were carrying trays in and out of rooms, and for a second I wished I was sick or something.

The Sheriff signalled with his hand and I slunk in behind him. I could see the foot of a bed. I sat down on a little white stool near a table behind the high portable screen, in the shadow of the room, wondering what all the mystery was about.

A young nurse with long brown hair came away from the other side of the room carrying a tray with some small bottles on it.

"All right, Sheriff," she said. "You can speak to Mr. Barker now. I'm all through," and she went out the door without noticing me, leaving the door open. The room was cool and large, its big window at the end exposed to the north.

I heard Sheriff Landry's voice from beyond the screen. He was standing this side of the bed, asking, "Well, Mr. Barker, how are you feeling now?" He sounded more cheerful than usual.

"Rotten," Barker said.

That will teach you, I thought.

"I'd like to go over your story of the accident again," Sheriff Landry said. "Perhaps you've got it all straight in your mind now. Exactly how it happened."

He gave it to everybody about *exactly*.

Mr. Barker didn't like it. "I'll tell you what happened. I've got a broken leg, one arm in a sling, scalp contusions and a wrenched shoulder. You can call that an accident but I don't. Somebody did this to me! It was deliberate, I tell you."

Wow! That was some demon!

"The report said your car skidded and hit a tree," Sheriff Landry said calmly. "You mean you ran into it on purpose?"

"No!" Barker shouted. "I skidded, turning into my driveway. My car hit a tree. Nothing serious. Only creased a fender. After I parked my car in the garage and got out, that's when it happened."

"What happened?"

"My garage door fell on me."

"Maybe you'd better explain that," the Sheriff said.

"After skidding into the tree, I backed off and drove into my garage. I've got one of those vertical overhang suspension doors. It works on an electronic beam impulse. It swung up, as usual, for me to drive in and park. I got out and walked under the overhanging door. I didn't have time to pull it down manually. It came crashing down, pinning me to the ground. I didn't have a chance and it wasn't any accident."

"Are you suggesting somebody tampered with your garage door?" asked Sheriff Landry.

"I'm not only suggesting it, I'm telling you. It may sound like an accident but it was rigged."

"Now that's a serious charge," said the Sheriff. "Can you prove it?"

"Not yet I can't. You're supposed to be running a police department here, aren't you? Well, I want that door examined. You'll see."

"It could have been a mechanical fault," said Sheriff Landry. "A loose pulley or loose connection."

"That door's worked perfectly since I had it installed."

The Sheriff suggested, "Possibly stress in the steel—metal fatigue. It could be the manufacturer's fault. Not necessarily willful and premeditated as you claim."

"This was planned, I tell you. Somebody's out to get me!"

"Any idea who?"

"Not yet I don't. I'm thinking, don't worry."

"Do you have enemies, Mr. Barker?"

"Who doesn't? If you're asking do I know who might have done this, I don't. I'm trying to guess."

I couldn't figure the witch's demon knowing enough about suspension doors to drop one on Mr. Barker. Besides, he could have taken care of him without doing that.

"A suspension door working on an electric eye principle?" asked the Sheriff.

"Yes. But this one worked differently."

"Differently? How?"

"On sound. It was tuned and keyed to the sound of my car, responding only to that particular vibration. A special job."

It sounded like a keen idea, I thought.

Sheriff Landry must have thought so, too.

"I didn't know we had anything like that in our town. Who dreamed it up for you?"

"Friend of mine," Barker mumbled.

"Let's have his name. Just in case he wanted his door to fall on you some day."

Barker snorted. "Ridiculous. The man's a friend."

"Even friends have names. I'm waiting."

"Van Noord."

"Mynheer Van Noord? I've heard of him. Famous mathematician, isn't he? Living here a short time. Left the Netherlands to teach and do research at one of

our big-brain institutes. Right?"

Barker's reply was a grunt.

"I didn't know he was an inventor," said Sheriff Landry. "I thought he just dealt in theories and abstractions."

"That's true," Barker said. "This is his first practical invention. I got to know Van Noord when he dropped in at my bank for advice about financial holdings back in Amsterdam. Not fluid enough. Some political pressure. I managed to get him all of it without taking a loss."

"And to show his appreciation he designed a far out gimmicky door for your garage?"

"Right," Barker said. "He got a big kick out of seeing one of his ideas actually work for once. Not just in theory, but up and down, swish-swish—perfectly calibrated to the sound of my engine."

"Well, maybe that explains it," said the Sheriff. "He probably didn't put it to the same exhaustive tests that would have been necessary had it been manufactured and put on the market. Perhaps his invention had a flaw. Unfortunately that's how accidents happen."

"I don't believe it. Nothing is left to chance with Van Noord. He didn't have to make exhaustive tests. The man is a genius!"

The Sheriff said he wasn't denying that, but if it wasn't Van Noord's fault, then whose was it?

"Maybe somebody followed you home," suggested the Sheriff.

"Now that you mention it, I think a big car, like a station wagon."

"Could you see who was driving?"

"No."

"Maybe it was somebody waiting inside your garage."

Mr. Barker didn't think that was possible because of this special vibration needed to get his gimmicky garage door open.

"Not impossible," said the Sheriff. "All you'd have to do is match the decibel value of the sound of your engine. For anybody really out to get you, that wouldn't be too much trouble."

I was so wrapped up in listening that I practically never saw the nurse until she walked into the room with the package.

Under her starched white cap her hair was platinum-blonde, reaching her shoulders in a long curled bob. Pretty hair; only her face looked too old for it. She didn't see me sitting on the low white stool behind the screen, until I moved my feet. She hesitated, hearing Mr. Barker's angry voice on the other side of the screen, then shrugged and handed me the package.

"This is for Mr. Barker," she said quietly.

She turned and went out quickly, like she had a lot of other important deliveries. I wondered why she looked familiar. Her soft voice sounded familiar, too. I didn't know any nurses. She walked with a slight limp, as if she'd pulled a muscle playing touch football.

Sheriff Landry came suddenly around the screen. "What was that?" he asked.

I told him. "A nurse just delivered this. For Mr. Barker, she said."

He nodded, half smiling. "Guess it's some goodies from a friend." He bent to take it, backed off a step and stopped. "He'll have trouble opening it with one arm in a sling. I might as well do it for him."

He braced the box against his chest and with strong fingers ripped off the string. He tossed that to me. We both heard it ticking then. He whistled softly.

"I reckon this is what you were trying to warn me about." The expressionless way he looked down at it he might have been holding a box of doughnuts. "Hit the deck," he told me.

I sat there stupefied. He lashed one arm in a flailing backhand that knocked me off the stool. I hit the

floor hard, my mouth open. He moved easily across the big room, walking on a straight diagonal toward the windows at the far end, not rushing, his close-cropped head up straight and high. He passed Barker and nodded pleasantly.

"Lie down and stay under cover," he said.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Barker said.

The Sheriff was at the window now. All he had to do was throw it. Get rid of it and duck. But not him. He had to first see what might be out there. He wasn't in any hurry to unload this just to save his own neck.

"Throw it, throw it!" I urged silently from under the bed. If I'd screamed it wouldn't have made any difference. He had to be sure first.

There was a blinding flash at the instant he threw it and a deafening roar. The whole room rocked. My eyes and ears hurt and I saw him go down, slowly, in a shower of shattered glass, his hands over his face.

Mr. Barker was screaming, other screams came from down the hall, then a lot of bells and the sound of people running.

"Get up, dummy," I yelled at myself. "Do something!" He was still lying by the window when I got there, stretched out in a red sea of sparkling glass. I kicked some of it away and knelt down. There was a terrible burning smell. I put my hand on his shoulder and yelled.

"Sheriff Landry, are you all right?"

He didn't bother answering. Some white-suited men came into the room, and their mouths opened and closed. Somebody wheeled in a long stretcher, and laid him on it.

"He'll be all right," a moon-faced young fellow in a white coat said, patting my shoulder.

"Yeah. Sure," I mumbled, kneeling there on the glass-covered floor.

They started wheeling Sheriff Landry out of the room and I got up, weak and wobbly, my head feeling like a ton, my stomach like somebody kicked me. I put my hand in my mouth to keep my teeth from

chattering, and gagged. When I took it out I saw I was still holding the string Sheriff Landry had tossed to me.

Something exploded in my head. I heard Minerva's voice, only it seemed to be the voice of the old woman who lived in Mucker's Swamp: Minerva parroting the woman.

"'You'll just have to see that your father doesn't open any strange boxes,'" she said. "'No strange boxes! I believe this one will be tied with string but I'm not certain. I can't see it too clearly.

"'Because it's going to explode, my dear.'"

I ran to the open elevator doors. The Sheriff was on the stretcher, his face blackened and streaked with blood. His shirt had been ripped off by the blast, his chest blackened too with a lot of red stripes, and his flesh smelled scorched.

I dangled the string in front of his closed eyes, an idiot playing with a yo-yo.

"She was right, don't you see? She said it would explode! She's a witch! I told you!"

The group of doctors and nurses and busybodies looked at me like I just flew down from Mars. An intern pushed me aside with his arm and nodded to the others. They started to push the long stretcher into the car.

"Hold it," Sheriff Landry said.

They stopped. He beckoned me with a bloody hand. I came closer, trying not to cry. His chest heaved and his neck cords swelled out with the effort to find breath and words for me.

"No proof," he said through bared teeth, in a hoarse strained voice.

His arm fell back limp and his mouth sagged open. They got him into the elevator car then and the steel-gray door slid shut. Then I heard the whining sound as it started down. I noticed when I brushed my eyes that I was still holding the long piece of string from the package.

Then I started walking down the long smooth cor-

ridor to see if I could find the middle-aged nurse with the shoulder-length platinum-blond hair, the softly familiar voice and the peculiar catch to her walk.

I checked both sides of the intersecting corridors on the third floor taking a fast look through every open door. Some were closed, either private rooms or wards, and I couldn't go in. I went down the stairs to the second floor and started checking it. I saw a lot of nurses. Some even had the platinum hair but turned out to be the young ones who looked right in it.

I had a feeling I was going about it wrong. She could have been coming in one end of a hall while I was looking for her at the other, or been behind any of the closed doors. I gave up the second floor fast and headed for the first, passing the operating rooms and emergency wards, and wondering how I was going to break the news to Minerva. I reached the main entrance, where there was a small cafeteria and a gift shop. She wasn't in either. Outside the front glass doors was the Emergency Delivery area where the ambulances parked. Nothing. I swung back to circle the main floor. A sign on a double-door exit said DELIVERY AREA next to a big open supply room. Through the big doors was a rear ramp landing where there were a lot of parked trucks and men loading boxes on dollies, like any warehouse delivery point. The supplies came into the hospital here: tanks of oxygen, laundry, surgical supplies, drugs and medicines, x-ray equipment, and food. It was very interesting but I wasn't looking for anything coming in.

I saw her at the far end stepping into a car.

The ramp loading area was clogged with cases of stacked supplies. I got around some and over others before being cut off by a wide moving conveyor belt. But with that car starting to move out I had to jump—up and over, scrambling among boxes, hopping off before being carried inside. A man yelled at me but I kept going.

The car backed out just as I got there—not a sta-

tion wagon, not a panel truck, but long and big with glass windows all around curtained so you couldn't see inside. It was a hearse. Though I couldn't see her sitting in it I got a good look at the driver and my mouth flapped open.

He was the perfect driver for this wagon, almost too perfect, looking more like a corpse himself than human, his face thin, cadaverous, so pale it seemed bloodless. His cheeks were sunken, just skin coating his skull, with a thin pale gash of a mouth, and eyebrows thick and black coming almost together between the blackest eyes I'd ever seen. If he wasn't Dracula, he had to be related.

With siren screaming and red light flashing, a police squad car swung into the loading area. Then another right behind it. I'd forgotten they would be checking out the bomb blast.

Dracula's cousin hadn't. He backed his hearse out fast, swept around and between the two patrol cars in a tight fast arc, then straightened his wheels, shifted his gears and zoomed out. It didn't bother the police, all too busy hopping out of their cars and running into the hospital.

I noticed two words lettered in black on the wood panelling of the hearse—HAPPY HILLS—and caught the license plate number: HH 6g1.

One of the policemen thundering up the ramp looked familiar. I'd seen him at our school crossing.

"It's Sheriff Landry," I said.

He stopped dead and came back frowning.

"What?"

"Sheriff Landry got it. A bomb. They took him down to the emergency operating room. Somebody said he'd be all right. I got to go tell Minerva now."

He shook his head, patted me on the head, said, "Tough," and started away looking awfully upset.

"What's Happy Hills?" I asked.

"Huh?" He looked back, startled and a little angry. "Happy Hills? What d'ya think it is?"

"I don't know," I said. "I saw it on the hearse."

"Naturally; that's where it's going. A cemetery."

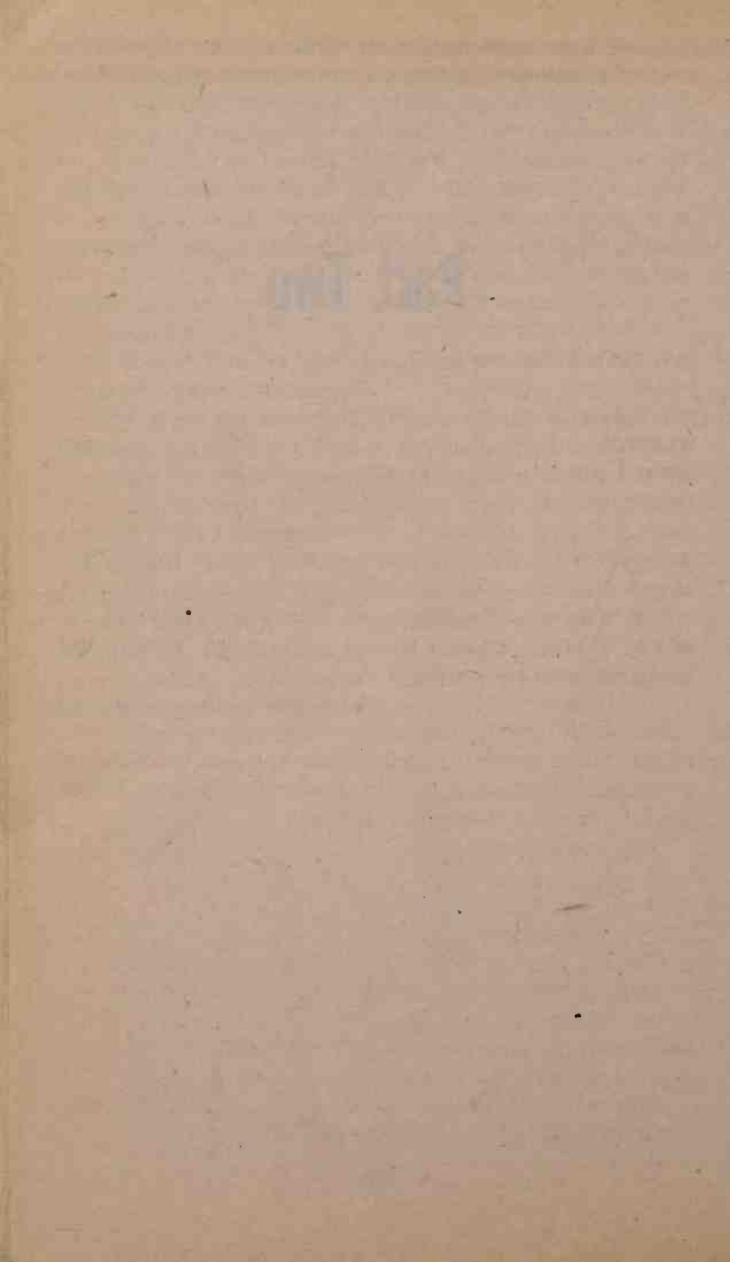
I didn't have anything more to say. I couldn't send him or his buddies off on a wild goose chase, even if the hearse driver looked like he'd just come out of an old TV horror movie on the late-late show. I'd caught only a glimpse of the nurse stepping in. It could have been anybody at that distance. I hadn't seen the face too old for that kind of hair, or the trick walk, or heard the soft voice that I couldn't exactly place in my memory.

As Sheriff Landry would remind me, what were the facts? Where was the proof?

All I knew for sure was, despite all the talk and the warning, I'd held the box in my own arms and didn't recognize it. Even worse, I'd practically handed it to him. Those were the facts. And it all proved I was dumber than I thought.

I started to go back up to the third floor. Then I remembered Sheriff Landry's police force had detectives to trace the nurse who delivered the package to Mr. Barker. I reminded myself I had a delivery of my own to make. To Minerva. The news of how I helped her old man blow himself up.

Part Two



8. The Ugly Head of My Suspicion

Mrs. Wood opened the door and stood quietly, without inviting me inside. Since she took over the job of housekeeper from Mrs. Carleton she never seemed to get it that I was like one of the family and always welcome, just as Minerva was at my house. At first I figured she was new and would catch on in time, but the weeks went past and she didn't change. I guess she was trying to impress everybody with how reliable and protective she was. She had an easy job and probably just didn't want to lose it.

She brushed back her smooth black hair and stared at me. "Yes?" she said, almost whispering. She always spoke like everybody was asleep.

"Is Minerva in? I got to tell her something."

She didn't jump or roll out the red carpet then, either. For a second it looked like she was even going to ask me what about. Minerva saved us both an argument by running down the stairs.

"That you, Steve?"

"Yeah."

"Well, come on in."

"No, you come out."

I looked at Mrs. Wood who sniffed and moved slowly away with what I could have sworn was one of those triumphant gleams in her eye. I didn't get it. Maybe she'd just waxed the floors and didn't want anybody to walk on them.

Minerva came bouncing out, her usual merry self. Evidently she didn't have the news yet.

"What's up?"

I shrugged without answering and moved down the two front steps and along the walk, heading for the water.

"Mrs. Wood doesn't like you," Minerva said, catching up to me.

"Yeah, I notice." I wondered how to start telling her.

"I've got another riddle," she said. "Want to hear it?"

"Not now. I got something to tell you."

"Well, come on. Why so mysterious?"

She looked so happy. Her blue eyes actually sparkled. I kept walking toward the water like a zombie. I kicked up a few stones on the beach and scaled them in, kicked some driftwood, walked out on the pier and stared across the water. It looked like it always does: wide and glassy, still and deep, only a few surface ripples. Somehow without thinking I reached the spot where I had dowsed the first bomb threat.

"You going to dive for the shoes?" she asked.

I shook my head and kept staring at the water.

She said, "I bet you still think it was a bomb."

"No," I said automatically. "That just came."

"What do you mean?"

And I told her.

She didn't cry or shriek or wave her hands or jump up and down. She just sat there staring at her sneakers like she'd never seen them before. Then she looked over the laces and checked them carefully and tied the knots all over again. I'll say one thing about Minerva Landry. She sure is cool. If I ever have to fall in love with some girl, she better be that way.

"It's okay if you want to cry," I said.

She got up and walked out to the end of the wooden pier. She stayed there for a while. When she came back her face was pale.

"I'd like to go down there now. Come with me?"

"Sure," I said.

"I better tell Mrs. Wood first. She was preparing dinner."

When she came out again Mrs. Wood was right behind her, demanding, "What's all this about a bomb?"

"Didn't Minerva tell you?"

Her eyes didn't get any friendlier. "Yes, she did. How do you know about it?"

"I was there."

"What do you mean you were there?"

"In the room," I said. "Waiting behind the screen while Sheriff Landry was questioning Mr. Barker about his accident. The nurse came in and handed me the box. Then she left and Sheriff Landry took it from me. Mr. Barker had his arm in a sling. The Sheriff untied it for him as a favor."

Her mouth opened. She stared at me, shook her head as if horrified, but finally she got her wits together. "What happened to Mr. Barker?"

I shrugged. "Nothing much. The Sheriff told him to get under cover. Then it went off."

"Perhaps he was hurt too," she said.

"I don't think so. He kept hollering, 'What happened, what happened?' after it was all over. I didn't tell him. I figured maybe he could guess."

She kept shaking her head. "A bomb in a hospital," she murmured. "What will they be thinking of next?"

"Maybe the next one will be here," said Minerva.

"What? What are you talking about, child?"

"Let's face it," Minerva said kind of cheerfully. "I think somebody's out to get us."

"Hush. That's no way to talk." Even when Mrs. Wood was shocked she liked to keep it low.

"Well, anyway, now you know what kind of a job you've got. I guess if you want to quit, Pop will understand."

Mrs. Wood waved her hands. They were long and white and looked pretty strong—from all that housework, I guess.

"I'll be here as long as you folks need me. Now you go on down and see your poor father. I hope he'll be all right. Tell him I can stay over during this emergency, if he wants me to." She let a little crease of

worry come between her eyes. "This is *so* unexpected. I *did* have some things to do."

"That's okay, Mrs. Wood," Minerva said. "You can take off whenever you want. I don't feel like having dinner anyway. And tonight I can stay with Steve's family. They're used to me."

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Wood asked me.

"Sure," I said. "Minerva's always welcome at my house." I wanted to add I was always welcome at Minerva's house too, but figured maybe she would get the idea.

"Well, all right then," she said nervously. "I'll just prepare a few things in case you change your mind. And I'll be here early tomorrow, prepared to stay if you want me."

Minerva said she'd know more about that after she visited her father. I turned around when we'd gone about fifty yards and saw Mrs. Wood still standing in the doorway looking after us, anxious and worried.

A bus leaves the Point every half hour and we were lucky. I still had enough left over from my allowance to take care of the fifteen cent fare.

The bus was practically empty when we got on at Steamboat Road and took seats in the back, but it stopped every few blocks to pick up passengers, some of them other housekeepers who just worked days. A few nodded to me. They'd worked for my own mom at different times when the place got too much for her, or when she and my pop took off on a fast trip.

"Too bad you had to get rid of Mrs. Carleton," I told Minerva. "I liked her a lot better than this Mrs. Wood. She acts like I'm gonna steal the silverware."

"We didn't get rid of her. She quit," Minerva said, "She wasn't even able to give two weeks notice. Her health was bad, I think. That's why we had to take this one in such a hurry."

I remembered Mrs. Carleton. A big strapping woman, who had pink cheeks and was always laughing.

"What was wrong with her health? She looked strong as a truck."

"I think it was some kind of a nervous breakdown."

"Her? Nervous?"

"Well, how should I know?" Minerva said. "That's what she told us. I guess she ought to know." Then she looked at me. "How come you let him open it, dummy?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't expect it there. I didn't realize it was the one. Even when he ripped off the string. Right in front of me."

"It's okay," she said. "Don't feel bad. I don't think I would have guessed it either. Did you say it was meant for Mr. Barker?"

"That's what the nurse said when she gave it to me."

"Was his name on it?"

"I didn't notice. She handed it to me and I sat there with it on my lap holding it and not doing anything about it for a couple of seconds. Then your pop came out from the other side of the screen where he was talking to Mr. Barker. He said something about how it must be goodies."

"Some goodies. Why would anyone want to bomb Mr. Barker?"

"Maybe they figured it was a better idea than just having his garage door fall on him."

"What door?"

I explained. Then I added that I didn't think the demon had anything to do with that, nor the witch of Mucker's Swamp either. Minerva agreed.

"But why a bomb at a hospital? That's sure a pretty dumb thing to do. Look at all the people that could have been hurt."

"I don't know. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless whoever sent the bomb knew your pop was going to be in the room then with Barker."

Minerva sucked in her breath. Her eyes narrowed. "You think somebody's out to get him?"

"Maybe. Who else knew? He called up and told me. So I knew. I didn't tell anybody. Except Sinbad."

"I knew too. He told me before he left. I sure didn't tell anybody either."

"I just wish I could have caught up with that nurse who brought it," I said. "I bet she knew."

"Don't be stupid," Minerva said. "Who would ever give a nurse a bomb to deliver? And even if she knew it was a bomb, she certainly wouldn't deliver it. Not in a crowded hospital anyway."

"Maybe she wasn't a real nurse," I said.

Minerva looked at me and her lip curled. "Was she dressed like a nurse?"

I nodded. "She looked just like all the other nurses except for one thing. Her hair. She had platinum-blond hair but she was old. Usually only young girls wear that."

Minerva looked out the bus window and pointed, jabbing me with her elbow. "That kind?"

A woman past middle-age was stepping out of a big expensive chauffeured Lincoln. She had the kind of hair I was talking about.

"You just don't know anything about women," Minerva said.

The bus moved along the main street in our village and she pointed out two more in the next few blocks, all as old as the nurse, or older. So that took care of that theory.

"Maybe there was something else about her that you remember," Minerva suggested.

"She had a funny walk. Sort of a limp."

"How do you mean?"

I got up to walk up and down the aisle and show her. Some of the other passengers looked at me when I sat down again. Minerva shrugged.

"So she limped. Big deal. Nurses don't have to be in perfect shape to give you your medicine."

"I know," I said. "I meant that's one way we could find her. It ought to be easier to find a nurse with that platinum-blond hair who limps."

"What if she's not walking around and limping?"

What if she's just sitting someplace like having a cup of coffee?"

I remembered. "There's one other way. If she's talking. She had a very soft voice."

"Soft? What do you mean—soft?"

It came without thinking, "Like Mrs. Wood talks."

Minerva looked at me. "Oh, brother! Are you for real?"

"I didn't say she did it," I said. "I was talking about her voice. That's the way that nurse talked when she handed me the package."

I closed my eyes, remembering it perfectly.

Minerva was silent. "I know you don't like her because she never asks you in. I don't know why she does that either. I've tried telling her but she only looks at me like she's going to cry."

"Maybe she takes her housework too seriously," I said. "Maybe I'd cry too if somebody walked all over my housework."

"You think she did it, don't you?"

I honestly hadn't thought that before, but somehow suddenly now I did. I nodded. "I got two clues. She's got the same voice. And also if she was in your house at the time, she could have heard your father say he was going down to talk to Mr. Barker at the hospital."

"She was there, all right," Minerva said. "Wearing her usual black hair and walking around with her usual no-limp walk. Also not wearing her nurse's uniform because she's a housekeeper not a nurse."

"I know," I said. "That's what makes it so tough."

The driver tapped his horn. Minerva looked out the window and got up. "We're here."

I followed her. The bus jerked as the driver stopped to let us off and Minerva grabbed my arm. Something slid against my wrist. I don't know why, but I jumped.

"What's that?" I asked, rubbing my wrist. It seemed to tingle.

"My new bracelet," Minerva said. She rolled it back up her arm. "Do you like it?"

I don't know anything about girls' bracelets. It was silver, smooth and slightly discolored. It had a musty smell. "It's okay, I guess. When did you get it?"

"This morning. Mrs. Wood gave it to me. For my birthday."

I stared at her. "Your birthday was two months ago!"

"Mrs. Wood said she was sorry she didn't know me then and missed it."

I glanced at the bracelet again. "It doesn't look new."

"Of course not, dumbbell. Don't you know antique jewelry when you see it? She said it's been in her family for generations."

"Well, good luck and happy birthday again," I said.

We didn't talk at all the remaining two blocks to the hospital. Inside, the woman at the desk marked INFORMATION kept looking down at some papers and said to take the elevator to the second floor and he was in the recovery room.

I breathed a sigh of relief. The elevator came up from the basement, and Minerva jabbed the proper button. The car went very slowly.

Minerva glanced at me. "Now you're probably even madder at her than before. Because she gave me the bracelet."

I nodded. She read my mind.

Minerva sniffed, "Boy, how stupid can you get?"

On the second floor I let Minerva get a little ahead of me walking to the nurse's desk at the intersection in the halls. I wanted to keep from saying I didn't like the bracelet because it had seemed to burn when it touched me. That would have told Minerva for sure how stupid I *could* get.

Not liking Mrs. Wood was one thing.

But a *bracelet*?

9. Two Heads Are Better than None

The Sheriff was sitting up in bed, bandages around his chest, over his hands and his eyes. I didn't like that last part.

A nurse got up when we came in. "Are you his daughter?" she asked Minerva. Minerva nodded, her eyes not moving from her pop's bandages. "He's been expecting you. I wouldn't stay too long. He's doing well but . . ." She made an open-mouthed motion hugging herself, as if to show he was in pain. "A couple of visitors for you, Mr. Landry," she said, waving us over, and closing the door behind her."

"Hi, Pop," said Minerva cheerfully. "I hear you had an accident."

Sheriff Landry smiled. She ran to hug him and he winced a little but kept smiling. I could hardly believe he was still in one piece and alive after that bomb went off practically in his hands. He was tough, all right.

"Steve's here too, Pop. He told me how it happened."

"Are you all right, Steve?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I was under the bed. That was some clout you gave me."

"Sorry about that. It wasn't the right place to try to defuse it. I had to get rid of it fast."

I nodded then remembered he couldn't see. "What's with your eyes?"

"We don't know yet. I'll have to keep these bandages on a few weeks. They ought to be all right by that time."

"Sure they will, Sheriff," I said.

His voice sounded slower than usual and a little tired. There were a lot of little jars and bottles on a tray near his bed. I guess they had him doped up for the pain of the burns.

"I guess I'll stay with Steve's family till you get well and come home," Minerva said. "It's kind of dumb to stay in that big house all by myself."

"That's fine," Sheriff Landry said. "Or, if you like, I can have Aunt Rachel come over."

"From Oyster Bay?"

"Yes."

"The sister that's a school teacher?"

"Librarian," he corrected.

"Forget it," Minerva said.

"We've got the spare room, Sheriff. And my pop's still away on that remodelling job so we got enough food and all."

"Okay, Steve. Thanks." He hesitated a moment. "Was Mr. Barker hurt?"

"No, sir," I said. "He went under the covers like you said. Then after it went off he started yelling, wanting to know what happened."

"That's a good question," said the Sheriff. "I've got a few for you too."

"Yes, sir," I said. "She had platinum-blond hair, was kind of middle-aged, and walked with a funny limp. I'd show you only you can't see now. She also had a very soft voice."

"Like Mrs. Wood," Minerva said. "He says."

"Anything else?" he asked.

"I was sitting in the shadows. She didn't seem to know I was there, and I didn't see her either until the last second. Then she saw me, stopped when she heard Mr. Barker's voice—he was yelling to you about something—handed me the box and said it was for him, and went out fast. That's the only time I took a good look and saw her walking funny."

"How?"

"Like somebody kicked her in the knee. It seemed to buckle a little under her with each step."

"Steve thinks it was Mrs. Wood," Minerva said.

"That's nice," he said.

"I'm not saying for sure yet, Sheriff." I didn't want

Minerva breaking the news to him that fast before I had more evidence.

"Platinum-blond hair, I believe you said," Sheriff Landry said.

Minerva looked at me and sniffed.

"I know," I said. "Mrs. Wood has black. Also Mrs. Wood doesn't limp. Also Mrs. Wood is a housekeeper, not a nurse. All Mrs. Wood has that matches is the same kind of soft voice. I know you're going to say I don't have enough evidence or any real proof yet."

"Thanks," he said.

"I think I saw her downstairs in the loading area getting into a hearse, only I'm not sure it was the same one. I only got a flash, sort of out of the corner of my eye. I saw something white."

He licked his lips, not saying anything.

"I know you always tell me thinking doesn't count, so I'm not saying for sure. But she went into a hearse, whoever she was, and it was marked Happy Hills."

"Happy Hills," he repeated drowsily.

"That's a cemetery," I told him. "The license plate was HH 691. That's all I know for sure."

"Did you get a look at the driver?"

I wondered how I could have forgotten that. "Yeah. Dracula's cousin. Or maybe his son. Anyway he was perfect for that job."

"Dracula's cousin driving a hearse and Mrs. Wood, my housekeeper," the Sheriff said dreamily. "Now that's what I'd call a good team. Any idea how they did it?"

"Not yet," I said. "Probably an inside job from outside."

"Oh, brother," Minerva said.

His lips twitched. "There's a good angle."

"I'm still trying to figure if the bomb was meant for you. Not just Mr. Barker. Maybe somebody knew you were going to be there with him then."

"Never thought of that," he said. "What did the nurse say when she gave it to you?"

"She said it was for Mr. Barker." He shook his head slowly and groaned. "I'm sorry, Sheriff. I forgot all about your condition. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"Only when you play detective."

"Don't worry," I told him. "I'll have some real good facts for you soon. First I have to find out why somebody wanted to get rid of that Mr. Barker."

"Oh, yeah. We haven't cleared that one up yet, have we?"

"Just the two of you were there. If they weren't after you, then it had to be him. Right?"

"There's another possibility you might want to check on."

"Sure, Sheriff. Like what?" I was glad he was depending more on me now that he was laid up.

"You were there, too," he said.

"Me? Why would anybody want to get rid of me?"

He didn't answer. He lay back, his long teeth bared, and seemed to breathe heavier.

"I think you put him to sleep with all your hot clues and smart deductions," Minerva said.

"Maybe," I said. "But you also got to remember he's just been through a very trying experience."

"I know," she said. "I heard every word you said."

It was always tough arguing with Minerva because she always had the last word and knew where to put it.

"Anyway," I said. "It proves that woman Aurelia Hepburn was right. It happened just the way she said it would. The string on the box and all."

"Of course," Minerva said. "But that was my story, not yours. My things happen. You just come up with a lot of impossibilities. Like Mrs. Wood and all those other things that don't match. All you have is the soft voice of the nurse. That's not enough to pin it on Mrs. Wood. And all that junk about her getting into the hearse from Happy Hills when you're not even sure *who* it was."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll get it." I don't know

why I felt so positive. Maybe it was because I didn't know anything.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Minerva said.

The nurse came back in then with the young moon-faced fellow in the white coat who had told me Sheriff Landry was going to be all right.

"This is Dr. Downey," she said. "He's taking care of your father."

"He just fell asleep," Minerva said. "What's with his eyes, doc?" She didn't waste any time.

"They're scorched from the heat, like a good deal of the rest of him," he said in an even voice. "We're hoping they'll respond to rest and treatment."

"They better," Minerva said.

He patted her shoulder. "We'll have a better idea in a few weeks. Eyes are very sensitive, you know."

"I know," Minerva said. "But he's *got* to see. He's the Sheriff of this dopey town."

He smiled. "I'll do everything I can. Don't worry." He turned his head to look at me. "Not a scratch on you. I suppose you realize how lucky you were."

"He knocked me aside to make sure of it," I said. "He got it all."

I could still see the Sheriff walking slowly across the room carrying that box without the slightest bit of expression, like it was something he did every day just for the exercise. "How come he's still living? I thought when a bomb blew up practically in your face, that was it—the end!"

Dr. Downey put his hands in his pockets and looked out the window. "I guess he was lucky," he said thoughtfully.

I looked over at Sheriff Landry lying there wrapped up in about a mile of bandages, maybe crippled or blinded for life. That was sure lucky, all right.

"Nothing is broken," the young doctor said. "He knew what he was doing and had his hands over his eyes when it exploded. That saved his sight, in my opinion. His hands got the worst but they'll heal. He

must have fallen away from it at exactly the instant it went off. That saved him from the force of the explosive charge and the metal fragments. The intense heat caught him. He couldn't very well avoid that nor the shattered glass recoiling from the shock wave. He's alive and recovering. That's what I mean by saying he was lucky. It could have been a lot worse."

I nodded. "I watched him. It was about like you guessed. He walked way across the room with it, to make sure Mr. Barker would be safe too, before he got rid of it. He could have got rid of it sooner and hardly be hurt at all."

"I imagine so," the doctor said, "but then he wouldn't be the Sheriff Landry you know, would he?"

My throat was dry.

"Come on," Minerva told me, punching my arm. "Let's go home. I feel like crying too."

We took the bus back, this time getting off near the hill to my house. Sinbad gave Minerva a better reception than he gave me but then he has me around all the time. I didn't mind. She stopped banging him on the chest when my mom came out of the kitchen.

"Hello, Mrs. Forrester," Minerva said. "My pop opened a package that turned out to be a bomb. He'll be in the hospital for a while. How would you like some company?"

My mom told her she was always welcome and Minerva went back to wrestling with Sinbad.

My mom looked at me. "A bomb?"

I told her all about how it happened.

"And you were there when it went off?"

"Sure, but I'm okay. Even the doc there was surprised. Not a scratch on me."

"What about him?"

I explained about the bandages all over him.

"And it happened at the hospital? Remind me not to have your tonsils out. I've changed my mind."

I felt the same way about it.

Minerva got up off the floor then and said she'd

better go to her house and get some things. My mother said fine, she'd drive her.

"What things?" I asked Minerva.

"Well, I have to sleep here, don't I? I'll need some pajamas."

"I've got extras you can borrow."

Minerva tossed her long blonde hair. "Mine are prettier," she said, as if that made any difference.

After they went I brought Sinbad up to date. He lay stretched out on the floor in his favorite grounded flying-squirrel listening position. He seemed to agree with my suspicions about Mrs. Wood because he growled. I couldn't tell if that was because of my facts or because she never invited him into the Landry house either.

"You better think it over," I told him. "All we got so far is the soft voice and that she works part-time, so she could be in different places."

Sinbad stared at me without blinking. I was lying on the floor nose-to-nose with him, so to speak. He made a quick move and licked my face.

"Okay," I said. "I don't know how we're going to prove it. If you think of anything let me know."

Sinbad grunted, closed his eyes, and in a second was fast asleep. That usually means we've got nothing to worry about.

10. Mystery of the Willing Wheelchair

The following morning I went down to the hospital again with Minerva, but I left her outside the door to Sheriff Landry's room and told her I'd drop back in a while. That gave them a chance for a private visit and me a chance to find out a few things.

There were a few blonde nurses, but no platinums on the second floor. Nobody limped, and I didn't

bother to find out what kind of voices they had.

It had happened on the third floor. Perhaps that nurse's usual station. I had to eliminate Mrs. Wood if I could. Otherwise even I knew I would look like a dummy.

I stopped at the main desk and asked the Supervisor if she had any nurses with platinum-blond hair. She said to repeat the question please, and I did, and she could tell that I wasn't looking for a date, I guess, for after thinking about it she nodded.

"Mrs. Somers," she said finally, looking out over my shoulder, narrowing her eyes, and pointing. "That's her just going past the elevators pushing that cart."

I thanked her and wheeled. The nurse had the right kind of hair but the wrong kind of walk. I figured there was a chance she could have recovered from whatever caused the limp. Just as I caught up to her she ducked into a small room that had shelves and boxes instead of patients.

"Mrs. Somers," I called

"Yes?" She turned and faced me.

The voice was enough. Just that one word. But this Mrs. Somers also had a very pleasant face with a lot of animation.

"Excuse me," I mumbled. "I guess I got you mixed up."

"I don't feel mixed up," she said smiling, her voice as pleasant as the rest of her. Not soft, not hard, a nice voice with a lot of warmth. I felt glad she wasn't the one.

"I mean, with the other one who looks something like you. Except that she limps."

"Limps?"

"The one who delivered that package yesterday. You know, the one that went off."

"I'm sorry but yesterday was my day off. And I can't think of any nurses here who limp. You say she looks like me?"

"Sort of. Her hair, that's all."

"I'm sorry," she said, looking as if she really was. "It could be a nurse from outside."

"Huh? Do they have those?"

"Sometimes," she said. "For special cases."

"What do they call them?"

"Special nurses," she said smiling.

"What's so special about them?"

"Well, for one thing, they get more money than we do." She saw I was waiting for the other thing. "And, of course they're usually hired to take care of one particular patient."

"Wow," I said. "I mean, thanks."

I turned around and headed back for the main nurse whose eyes were like flint.

"You again," she said.

"It wasn't Mrs. Somers," I told her. "I think it's a special nurse. You know, the one who delivered that package to Mr. Barker yesterday. The one that exploded."

"Oh, that one." Her eyes drilled into me again. "We don't seem to have a record of that one."

"How come?" I asked. "Didn't you hire her?"

"No," she said. "Special nurses are hired sometimes by the patient at his own expense. As a rule, the doctor will recommend one."

I nodded. This was all news to me. "Who was his doctor?"

"Mr. Barker's? Are you working for the police on this?"

"Of course not," I said. "Sheriff Landry just happens to be a friend of our family. Also I happened to be in the room when it happened. I could have been blown up too." Actually I hadn't thought too much about that.

I figured that would get me some special attention but she went back to reading her charts, like I'd not only been blown up but completely disappeared. "Who did you say his doctor was?" I asked her again.

She wet her lips with her tongue, flicked a page

over on a large ledger, and ran her finger down. "That would be Dr. Downey," she said.

I thanked her and walked away, feeling sure I'd uncovered something real important now, but not certain exactly what.

If Dr. Downey had hired her, then he had probably told the Sheriff all about it already. And if it was Mrs. Wood, then it wasn't such a big secret any more. If it wasn't, the Sheriff had better detectives working for him than I was.

With all this going on in my mind, I had wandered halfway down the corridor, near the end where Mr. Barker's room was. I decided I might as well drop in and see how he was; also, to tell the morbid truth, get another look at that room where the bomb had gone off. It had to be a shambles. You don't always get a chance for an experience like that and live to tell about it.

The room had changed all right. There was no bed. No screen. No Mr. Barker. Except for a painter at the far end putting some plaster and paint on the wall, it was completely empty, all the broken glass cleared out and the floor nice and clean and tidy. Not even a single bloodstain. Like they were removing all the evidence.

"Where's Mr. Barker?" I asked the man.

"The fellow that was in here?" The painter flicked his hand to where the bed had been. "I think he went home."

"I'm sorry to trouble you again," I said to the flinty-eyed nurse. "Did Mr. Barker go home?"

She nodded, resting her chin on her folded hands and sighing. "Is he a friend of the family too?"

"No," I said. "I just dropped in to see him and say hello. The man working there—the painter said he went home. Did he?"

She held on to information like it was money or her last breath. "Would you like me to check?"

"Yeah. Please. Would you do that?"

She looked down at the page—right under her nose all the time. "Mr. Barker was discharged at 8:45 this morning."

"Huh? But how could he go home with a broken leg?" I seemed to remember a lot of other things wrong that he complained about.

She almost broke her record and smiled. "The doctor in charge must have thought Mr. Barker had made sufficient progress to leave."

"You mean he left all by himself?"

"Certainly not," she snapped. "His wife called for him." She looked at me as if she was getting pretty tired of the sight. "Anything else you want to know?"

There were a few things more. It didn't make sense that a special nurse hired to take special care of a particular special patient would bring him a special package like a bomb. Of course she might not have known what was in the package. But she had also left in a hurry so she wouldn't exactly find out. Anybody who hired that kind of special nurse was either a nut or couldn't tell a special nurse from a special assassin. Maybe Mr. Barker didn't know much about nurses but it seemed to me that Doctor Downey should have.

This all went through my mind as I stood there at the nurse's desk. I had the idea that if I told her what else I wanted to know she'd snap my head off, so I just shook my head and said no, no thanks, that was all. She looked as if she didn't believe it, and seemed about as happy as the captain of a sinking ship. I waved goodbye and gave her a chance to cheer up when I walked away.

I went back to Mr. Barker's old room. The painter seemed to be finished, and had just stepped back to admire his work when he saw me.

"Was I right or was I right?" he winked.

I told him he was. "Were you working on the room when he left?" I asked.

He grinned, "I started real early. About five this

morning. How do ya think I got so much done?"

I didn't know the answer to that one, but I wondered if he'd seen Mrs. Barker. A lot of movies on late TV had the criminals remove the person they originally put in the hospital, doing it right under the eyes of the police guards. A painter wouldn't bother them.

"They had him in this wheelchair," the painter was saying. "Only they couldn't push him out with my paint buckets all over the place. I thought the guy in the chair would blow his stack but he didn't. He just sat there nice and quiet."

That didn't sound like Mr. Barker.

"But she made up for him."

"She?" I asked stupidly.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing some paint off the window. "His wife that came for him. The redhead."

"Redhead? Are you sure she wasn't a platinum-blonde?"

The painter threw down his rag and started to bundle it up with a big spotted tarpaulin, squatting on his haunches and looking up at me. He made a quick motion toward his eyes with one hand.

"Who ever heard of a color-blind painter?" he said.

He started wrapping up his brushes and I left.

Two big policemen were leaving Sheriff Landry's room when I got down there, but stopped when they saw me.

"It's Fu Manchu again," the heavy one said. That was Clancy. He had hands like shovels.

The other one shook his head. "No. Your eyes are bad. It's Dick Tracy." That was Finnegan. I'd known them since I was a little kid. They were always good-natured and always ribbing me.

"Hi," I said. "How's Sheriff Landry?"

"Not too bad, what you can see of him," said Clancy. "You going in, Fu?"

I nodded and Finnegan stopped my forward progress with a finger on my chest. "He's got no finger-

prints on him. We checked." I tried again. This time he lifted the finger to my nose. "Maybe we oughtta check him. Are you clean?" he asked me.

"Aw, c'mon," I said, showing them my teeth.

"He's clean," Finnegan said, dropping his hand.

"I hear you're working on this one now," Clancy said. "Don't forget to call upon us, your local police, if you should happen to catch anybody red-handed."

"Not red-handed. Red-headed," I said. That stopped them and I walked inside, grinning from ear to ear.

"You look like a slice of watermelon," Minerva said. "Too bad Pop can't see you."

I kept my voice low. With those bandages over his eyes you couldn't tell if he was sleeping. "How is he?"

"He's fine," Sheriff Landry said. "That is, he was until you came in. Care to tell me what you've been up to? I understand you've been driving the head nurse nuts."

"I had to ask her some questions, Sheriff."

"Sure you did. And what were some of the answers?"

"Like Mr. Barker's been discharged," I said.

"So what?" he growled. "I wasn't holding him for anything. He was here because he had an accident."

"Don't you think it was an awful fast recovery?"

"How do I know?" he said. "I'm no doctor. If you want to know, I wouldn't mind doing the same myself."

"According to the head nurse up there, his wife signed him out. According to that, it wasn't whoever put him in here in the first place."

"And according to you?"

"Well," I said. "She didn't have platinum-blond hair, if that's what you think I was thinking."

"You guessed it," he said. "Any more front page news?"

I told him about the nurse who had brought the bomb in being some kind of a special nurse. "According to the head nurse again, your Dr. Downey recom-

mended her." I waited but he didn't show any excitement. Maybe he was hurt too bad to react.

"So what does that prove, dumbbell?" Minerva asked.

"So if he knew her enough to recommend her, he must know her. Her name and everything. He'd know for sure if it was Mrs. Wood or not."

"He's got it in for Mrs. Wood because she never invites him into the house, Pop."

"I can't blame him for that," Sheriff Landry said. "Steve's as welcome at our house as you are at his. I'll talk to her about it when I get out of here."

"Thanks, Sheriff," I said. "I kind of understand it, but Sinbad doesn't."

"What *do* you understand about it?" he growled.

"Well, like either she wants the house to stay clean after she does it, or she wants to protect Minerva from strangers."

"You're not a stranger," he pointed out. "And I don't think Minerva needs any protection from you. Also it happens to be my house, and I don't care about friends dropping in and maybe leaving it not as clean as it was. You got that?"

"Sure I got it," I said. "But why tell me? She's *your* housekeeper."

"I was telling you because I wanted you to get your facts straight. Like you didn't about Dr. Downey and the special nurse. He doesn't know her name any more than you or I do. He didn't recommend her."

"Then Mr. Barker must have hired her."

The Sheriff said, "Far as I can find out, he didn't."

"Well, then Mrs. Barker did," I said. "You know, his wife."

"That's a good guess," Sheriff Landry said, his long teeth bared, his chin thrust out. "The only trouble with it is—Barker doesn't have a wife."

I thought that one over, my head spinning.

"Then who signed him out? Who was that red-headed woman?" I asked.

"I was hoping you'd tell me," he said glumly. "That's another mystery."

11. A Touch of the Devil

It would have been a good time for one of Minerva's riddles but she didn't have any to offer. She kept fiddling with that dumb bracelet Mrs. Wood had given her, sliding it up her arm because it was too wide for her wrist. It got me nervous watching her. And for some reason I still didn't like that bracelet.

I was trying to think of some good excuse for getting out of there when some of Sheriff Landry's plainclothesmen came into the room, evidently for a lot of orders on department business. They were both big men, the way the police like them to be; very serious and not inclined to kid around like the goodnatured policemen I'd grown up to know in the town. I didn't want Sheriff Landry to think I was hanging around to snoop on whatever plans he had for his investigation of the Barker case. So I told him I was going and hoped he'd get better and all that junk.

"Thanks, Steve," he said. "And thank your mother for putting up Minerva. If she gives you any trouble send her home."

"Oh, she's no trouble, Sheriff. And anyway Sinbad likes her around."

He grinned at that. He waved his bandaged hands toward the two quiet detectives. "You know Detective Lieutenant Tarsh and Detective Sergeant Hare, don't you?"

I told him I did slightly, and they looked as if they wondered how. Then he introduced me to them and they both nodded curtly, no smile, nothing. They took their work pretty seriously.

"I want you to remember their names," he told

me. "It appears I'm going to be out of operation for a while. If you dig up something important and I'm not available, pass it on to them. You got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure we'll be needing it," one of them said. That was Lieutenant Tarsh letting me know what he thought of kid detectives.

"Does he carry a gun?" the other one said.

Sheriff Landry didn't let it pass. He kept his voice low and calm but somehow it comes out more forceful that way. Even with his eyes covered you knew he wasn't kidding.

"Very funny," he said. "Sure he's a kid. He also happens to be the only one who saw the nurse who delivered the bomb. He has three clues to help us trace her. That's not bad for a kid. What's more, he told me it would happen and even how. I just didn't believe him. He also found out Barker was discharged from the hospital in an irregular way and followed up by getting a description of the woman who managed it. I'd say for a kid that wasn't bad detective work. What would you say?"

They didn't say anything. They stood there, two big glum globs looking very uncomfortable. Their eyes flicked to me, together, as if they did everything as a team.

"Okay," the Sheriff said. "Now everything is straight and we don't have to be so patronizing. Besides he might be my son-in-law some day and I might have to live with them, so let's be nice. Okay, Steve. Don't fall in this time."

He guessed I was going back to Mucker's Swamp. Minerva did too.

"While you're doing that, I'll hang around here with Pop. I'll see you later at your house."

The detectives nodded. I waved goodbye. Sheriff Landry couldn't see but waved a bandaged hand. "Tell Baalzaphon I'm ready any time to take a statement from him," he said as I went out the door.

"Who?" I heard them asking.

I ran down the stairs grinning all the way. On the main floor I headed for the rear loading area. There wasn't anything like a hearse around, especially one from Happy Hills, but I hung around awhile, then headed back inside and poked around the main floor. No red-headed or platinum-haired nurses except one in the downstairs cafeteria who smiled and waved me over to the counter where she was having a cup of coffee.

"Any luck?" Mrs. Somers asked and I told her not yet. "Would you like anything? My treat." I told her no thanks. "How about some ice cream?"

That did it. Ice cream is very hard for me to resist. I ordered chocolate, and when the waitress asked if I wanted whipped cream on top I couldn't resist that either. Sometimes I have very little will power, become just a glob and say yes to everything. It tasted even better than it looked with a red cherry on top. That reminded me of what happened upstairs. I told Mrs. Somers about the mysterious red-headed woman and Mr. Barker in his wheelchair.

"It is rather unusual but not uncommon," she said smiling, her friendly blue eyes wide. "When you've been around hospitals as long as I have, you're constantly aware of the almost amazing recuperative powers of the human body. People with the most frightening symptoms recover almost overnight."

I took some more ice cream in my mouth to soften the blow.

"We had almost a similar case about a month ago," Mrs. Somers said.

"The same red-headed woman?"

"No. This one had brown hair. Mrs. Dow was her name. A special night nurse, called in from outside. I happened to be on night duty myself that week, that's how I can see the similarity."

I asked what was so similar about it.

"The same miraculous recovery. This woman came

in suffering from shock. Hysterical, screaming, hallucinatory. The whole breakdown syndrome. She was given a sedative and put to bed. We figured she'd be there for a few weeks, perhaps a month. She really had the heebie-jeebies. Frightened, crying, trembling so she couldn't lift a finger."

That didn't sound like Barker's case. I wondered what made it so similar.

"This nurse came in just one night. She must have had something doctors need to know about—strange homeopathic powers. Almost magical, I feel like saying. It worked better than morphine. In a few hours Mrs. Carleton had recovered completely."

I strangled on my ice cream. "Did you say her name was Carleton?"

She nodded. "I did her room, a few special things for her. That was her name. Why?"

"A big husky red-faced woman?"

"She was big and husky, all right. But hardly red-faced when you're in that condition. Pale is more like it, for shock."

That coincided with what Minerva had told me, when I couldn't believe Mrs. Carleton had one of those nervous breakdowns. "A month ago, did you say?"

"Just about."

"Wow," I said. I pushed the ice cream plate away. "Do you remember anything else about the nurse, the Mrs. Dow who took care of her? Did she limp?"

Mrs. Somers narrowed her eyes trying to remember. "No limp," she said finally. "And her face was so plain and ordinary I couldn't even describe it. All I can remember really is her soft voice."

"How soft?"

"Very soft," she said in a low whisper. "Just like this."

I knew somebody else with a soft whispering voice, and a face so plain you couldn't describe the features. In fact, I knew two of them.

One had platinum-blonde hair and a limp and delivered bombs in her spare time. The other had black hair and no limp and worked for Sheriff Landry as his housekeeper in *her* spare time.

I wished I'd thought of asking the painter what that red-headed woman sounded like. The fact that all he could recollect was her red hair must be some kind of a clue. He didn't mention anything else; just that one feature. I looked at Mrs. Somers. She had platinum-blonde hair, a friendly smile, white even teeth, a short flat nose, a nice warm voice, cornflower blue eyes. She was very alive and alert and looked a lot like my mom, except that she was more plump and had lighter hair. When there was something to a face or a person, you remembered it.

"Do you know where this Mrs. Dow took Mrs. Carleton?"

Mrs. Somers shrugged. "They usually go straight home when they're able to leave here." She glanced at her wrist watch—she had nice hands with long fingers—and smiled regretfully. "I've got to go back on duty," she said. "Can I leave you with another ice cream? You seem to have enjoyed that one."

It took real will power but I managed my no, thanks. We walked out together.

"So you see, these sudden recoveries aren't too surprising," she said. "Other nurses have told me of similar cases, and doctors, too." She smiled ruefully. "Although I certainly wish I had that Dow woman's touch. It worked like magic. Or did I already say that?"

I hadn't mentioned the red-headed woman passing herself off as Barker's wife to get him out of the hospital, a more important fact to me than his sudden recovery. I didn't want Mrs. Somers to get involved with all my problems. I thanked her again for the ice cream and all the information, and she said it was nothing, waved, and walked toward the elevators with a light quick step, the way a person walks who is always cheerful.

I wanted to call Sheriff Landry to ask who recommended Mrs. Wood for his housekeeper, but I still didn't have enough facts. Only suspicions. He might really blow his stack at me this time, becoming riled up and excited when he was supposed to be recovering. Instead, I decided to dig up some more facts. Sheriff Landry liked facts even more than I liked ice cream.

I left the hospital and headed for the village a few blocks away. My mom had driven Mrs. Carleton home several times. Remembering, I took a left at Maple Street and counted the trees. She lived the third tree after the second street light, halfway down a long wide street.

The house never was anything to begin with, a clapboard cottage running out its time like a lot of other old houses on Maple. We have real good houses in Hampton dating back to Colonial days, beautiful old Georgians, saltboxes and Garrison Colonials, still standing straight and strong after two hundred years. But for some reason, whoever built on Maple Street either didn't know or care anything about architecture, just slapped a lot of wood and shingles together, put on some doors, fitted some windows, and called them houses. The only good thing to be said for them was that people without much money, like Mrs. Carleton, and not too fussy, could live there and have a house instead of an apartment.

There was a small neglected lawn outside the front and the walk was dirty. The steps needed sweeping and the windows needed washing. That sure surprised me because Mrs. Carleton had kept Sheriff Landry's house immaculate, and although I'd never been inside hers, I couldn't remember it looking so neglected.

The mail box had lost one of its screw supports and hung lopsided. The bell I pressed was dusty and dirty as if it hadn't been used lately. I didn't hear it ring so I knocked on the door. Nobody answered and I knocked louder, this time hearing the high bark of a small dog.

"Mrs. Carleton," I yelled. "Open up. It's me. Steve Forrester."

The barking dog inside came closer and I could hear him sniffing near the sill, then a faint voice muttering and slow heavy footsteps. The door opened slowly and she stood there blinking at the light and me. I blinked back.

"Mrs. Carleton, is that you?" It was a dumb question considering that I'd seen her a couple of hundred times in the years she worked for the Landrys. But she had changed so! "Remember me? Steve Forrester."

She nodded slowly, a curious vacant expression on her face, her eyes dull and filmy.

"Stevie," she said in a cracked voice I could hardly believe was hers. She had been such a big hearty woman, always laughing, proud of her size and strength—the real washer-woman type she always called herself. Now she looked like she couldn't wash a dishrag. She had aged twenty years, and looked half her former size. It was unbelievable.

The little dog sniffed around my feet and made little snuffling noises. It looked half blind.

"It's all right, Poopsie," Mrs. Carleton said, pushing it back gently with her foot until it came to rest between her bedroom slippers beneath her long skirt, looking up at me with cocked head, not quite in my direction. It was some kind of a mix of poodle and Yorky and probably as old as Mrs. Carleton's bedroom slippers.

Like the village idiot I kept staring. Her face was haggard, the flesh once firm and red now pale and sagging. She was wearing an old sweater that seemed much too large for her. The hand that rested on the side of the open door was white and wrinkled and covered with veins, the hand of an old weak woman.

I finally found my voice.

"Mrs. Carleton, what's happened to you? You look like the wrath of God hit you."

Pupils dilated, filling her eyes, she stared at me a moment without expression, then nodded slowly,

and bit her lip. It quivered. Her hand found my arm and clutched it.

"Not God," she said, shaking her head. "Not God, Stevie. More like a touch of the Devil."

"Huh?" I said. "What do you mean?"

She was shuffling back inside the darkened room, and I followed her, letting the door close behind me.

12. Secret of the Harried Housekeeper

An hour later I came out blinking like a mole kicked out of his burrow, my head feeling like it wore a bucket, my chest two sizes too small. I stood taking deep breaths, as greedy for oxygen as a skin diver with an empty cylinder on his back. Having inhaled so much of the musty stale rot and dust inside Mrs. Carleton's house I knew my lungs would never forgive me if I didn't do something about it.

After several quick gulps of air, my chest felt better but the rest of me—beyond repair. I had the kind of headache they spend a million dollars advertising in TV commercials. In addition, I was scared stiff. Nothing lately on the tube guaranteed to take care of that. I wasn't quite as scared as Mrs. Carleton but she had a head start. I was a late entry in the race.

I had asked her a lot of questions. She had been so evasive answering she could have been running for President of the United States. As far as I was concerned, she was even good enough to get elected.

It was apparent she was hiding something, also that her faculties were extremely dulled and limited. She didn't respond much to anything and when she did nothing made sense.

Something hung over her head, reducing her from a healthy glowing robust woman to a frowzy and quivering haggard hulk. Something made her quit her

job, put her in the hospital and got her out again, and somehow in the process had taken all the heart and spirit out of her. Something made her live in a dirty house, looking and acting like a zombie.

What?

Who?

Why?

I didn't have too much experience with nervous breakdowns, but knowing Mrs. Carleton hers didn't seem possible. It wasn't just because of her strength and vigor but of her spirit. She had always been so cheerful, so happy, with never a sign of self-pity. The change was pitiful. Perhaps there had been some sudden serious shock.

She might have recovered quickly at the hospital, as Mrs. Somers had said. But her condition now didn't say much either for sudden recoveries or for the magical treatment given by Mrs. Dow. One more miraculous recovery like that and Mrs. Carleton would be good and dead. Her mind seemed numb, her smile tentative and vacant, and she couldn't think or speak clearly. I was sure these were symptoms of something, but I didn't have any medical degree.

I didn't do too well as an amateur detective either. I asked her if she was worried about anything. She just stared at me. Money? She seemed to understand that and shook her head slightly. Perhaps somebody she loved, near or far away, that she was concerned about? No, she didn't have any family that she remembered. Was she worried about her health, a sudden flare-up of something serious that sometimes scared people so they started dying right away? She shook her head. Like cancer? She shook her head. Heart trouble? No, she didn't think so.

"So what's wrong with you then? I asked. "Something sure has happened to change you."

"Him," she said, looking fearfully over her shoulder.

There wasn't anybody there, naturally. In a small corner alcove a light burned dim-red on a narrow

table, a few small statues or figurines behind it, some pictures pinned to the wall. I saw a thin swirl of smoke from pungent incense burning in a brass bowl. It wasn't a pleasant smell. Musky, and mixed as it was with the rotten moldy smell of the house, it was so awful it gave me a headache.

If that wasn't the cause of my headache, getting nowhere with Mrs. Carleton was. I asked who *he* was or had *he* a name and she just looked at me as if I was something familiar inside a glass case. How had she happened to meet *him*?

"*Her*," she said, and bit her lip as if she was sorry. She couldn't or wouldn't say who "her" was, either. It was very frustrating.

I tried higher mathematics. "Was it two of them?"

"Them," she said.

Now I had a "him," a "her," a "them," and was going around in circles.

She sat on the worn sofa holding her little dog, who whimpered and shook and snuggled while being comforted with strokings and petting. "There, there, Poopsie. It's all right. Mama is here now," she said.

It was very sad. All they had was each other: A half-blind dog. A scared-sick woman. Not much of a threat to anybody.

"What did you mean when you said 'a touch of the Devil'?"

Her eyes opened wider, she looked fearful and began to tremble, clutching her little dog so tightly it whimpered protestingly.

"I heard a nurse called Mrs. Dow took care of you at the hospital," I said, "and cured you so fast you left the next day." She stared vacantly at me. "Who is this Mrs. Dow? Does she live here in town?"

"Mrs. Dow," she said slowly. "Is that her?"

"How should I know?" I said. "Don't you know her?"

"*Her*," she said slowly, almost purring.

"She must be a very good nurse. Maybe we ought

to have her take care of Sheriff Landry. He's in the hospital."

She started rocking sideways. "No," she said. "Not her."

"Why? What's wrong with her? Is she too expensive?" She didn't react or answer. "I heard she had some kind of magic touch to make you recover so soon."

Tears slowly dropped down Mrs. Carleton's face.

"I still don't get it," I said, after waiting a few seconds for her to recover. "It sounds like you've been having some bad luck and ill health. Where does the Devil come in?"

I was very interested in that, mostly because of Aurelia Hepburn, the witch of Mucker's Swamp who might fit into this somehow.

"Him," she said, looking over her shoulder.

"You know somebody who's a Devil?" I asked her. "Does he have horns and those cloven hooves and a long tail?"

"You mustn't joke about him. He'll hear." She twisted her head again.

"You mean he's a real Devil? You've seen him?"

Did that Baalzaphon get loose and scare Mrs. Carleton, who might not be able to tell the difference between a demon and a devil? Not that I was such a great one for compiling evidence either. She made a strangling sound in her throat and gasped for breath.

"Maybe we ought to open a door or window in here, Mrs. Carleton," I said. "I don't know if you know it, but this room is kind of stuffy. At school they tell us we need lots of fresh air."

I started to do it but she stopped me with a raised hand, caught her breath and said not to worry, she would be all right. I sat down again in the old rose-colored club chair, opposite Mrs. Carleton on the sofa, and looked around the room trying to think of how to get her to talk sense.

It was a dark dreary unkempt room, with that rotten smell. The drawn curtains let in only a few fin-

gers of light. The wallpaper was dark and discolored, the rug old and worn and faded, with a floral pattern. There were a few hard chairs, a wall desk, a table lamp and another old fringed one near my chair. There was a glass cupboard with a lot of dishes inside against one wall and opposite it a fireplace that looked real. Steps with a railing off the small entry hall led to the upstairs bedroom. A little more light came from the kitchen at the far end. Near Mrs. Carleton was a low table, on top of it some old tattered magazines labelled Health, Nature and Sunning. They made as little sense as everything else so far. All in all, I had to admit, if I needed a housekeeper I certainly wouldn't hire a woman who lived like this. It wasn't so much that everything in the house was old and cheap, as the general air of neglect. The windows were so dirty I could hardly see through them. I tapped the arm of my chair and stirred up a cloud of dust. I stopped tapping.

"Maybe you ought to see a doctor," I said. "Sometimes a good examination finds what's wrong. My mom knows a few good ones. They got all those new miracle drugs and you might be as fit as you used to be in no time."

She smiled sadly. "No doctor for this," she said, under her breath.

I asked if she had been working and she shook her head. "Then what do you do for money? How do you eat?"

"Oh, he gives us money sometimes," she said.

"Who does?" I asked. "Who gives you money, Mrs. Carleton?"

She looked straight at me but didn't appear to see me. "He gives us money, doesn't he, Poopsie?"

The little woolly dog she was stroking bared his teeth, as discolored and unhealthy-looking as everything else in the house.

"Did you recommend Mrs. Wood to Sheriff Landry? I mean, did you tell her you were leaving?"

She surprised me by giggling.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I thought you could tell," she said, staring at me with almost a trace of intelligence, and yet her look held something crafty.

"I can't tell anything," I complained. "For all I can figure out, maybe she decided to take over somehow and told you *you* were leaving."

Her hand stopped stroking her little dog and hung stiffly over his head. The room became so quiet I could hear a clock ticking in the kitchen. Then I heard a rumbling sound from outside, and a loud thunderclap that made me jump. The air in the room became heavy, closer, somehow filled with menace, the little lamp in front of the corner wall alcove flickered and the incense bowl swirled smoke, its smell becoming stronger, almost sickeningly sweet. Although the room had been warm and stuffy I felt a chill, as if something passing had touched me and drawn an icy finger across my neck. My hair bristled.

I looked across at Mrs. Carleton and now it was my turn to stare open-mouthed.

She hadn't noticed a thing. Either that, or she was used to it.

She looked at me and her eyes had some intelligence behind them again.

"You'll be leaving now," she said.

"You guessed it," I said.

She didn't get out of the chair. She didn't say good-bye or send regards to Sheriff Landry and Minerva, or hope he would get better soon. She didn't say anything. She just sat there, staring across the room, looking at nothing. Her hand came down again and started stroking her dog.

"It's all right, Poopsie," she said. "He's gone now."

I closed the door behind me to make it official.

13. The Witch Who Came In Out of the Cold

Mucker's Swamp looked like it always did—the most in urban blights. A place you wouldn't care to visit, much less live in. I only came back because I had to. What I had to know could come from a person who knew the answers to everything, who could read the future and the past like anybody else would read the daily newspaper. That was Aurelia Hepburn. The witch.

The old goat was still tethered outside, no happier to see me than the first time. We exchanged sneers and he won by a nose. To try to pet him or become friends would have been a waste of time. That goat hated everything.

She was kneeling in a small herb garden. She didn't jump when she saw my shadow or turn around, but kept picking the tiny leaves and dropping them in her apron.

I came closer.

"You're late," she said. That wasn't too bad for a start.

"I was here once before but you had company," I said.

She got up off her haunches then. "Haven't I seen you before?"

I shook my head. "It was too dark that night. Maybe you saw me in one of your clairvoyant periods."

"Aye," she said, pleased. "That could be it." She tapped the side of her head. "So much goes on in there. So many pictures. Sometimes I get them confused with what's happening outside in the real world." She dusted off her hands and put the leaves she had cut into a pocket of her apron. "Well, what brings you here, young mon?" She rolled all her *r*'s.

I shrugged. "I thought maybe you could tell me."

She smiled. "That was very clever of you. If there's telling to be done, Aurelia Hepburn's the one for the telling. What's your name, laddie?"

I told her, and asked, "Are you Scottish?"

"Och, aye, laddie," she said, "from a long line of Druids in the Scottish Hebrides. We all have the gift, you know."

"The gift?"

"Seeing the future," she explained. "As plain as the hand before you. Others have it, of course, but it's quite common to the Scots. It's in our blood."

I asked her the million-dollar question. "Are you a witch, too?"

Her white head bobbed. "A white witch. There's a difference, you know."

"What's the difference?"

"The white witches do good. They worship the Great Mother, the earth mother, the oldest of the ancient gods. In some cases, they have a dual deity which includes the Horned God. That's pagan and very primitive, of course. He's like Pan to some of us. God of fertility and power."

That seemed like religion to me, not magic. There must be more to it than she let on. "Okay," I said. "Now tell me about the bad ones."

"There's black and there's white. It's an unfortunate thing really about the labels, but there it is, and always has been. The black witches line up with Satan. They worship the Devil and do evil."

"What kind of evil?"

"Casting spells, charms, and hexes for a selfish end. So the sorcerer can become more powerful, or richer, or have more pleasure. They'll make a pact with the Devil, even sell their souls. To gain revenge or accomplish their ends they'll send demons to possess a person."

"No kidding? What happens then?"

"The possessing demon enters the person's body

and makes the victim act and speak as it wishes. The demon has complete control."

"You mean the person can't do anything about it?" I wondered if this was what had happened to Mrs. Carleton.

"Not alone," she said. "There are counter measures. Ways known to a witch. We can help sometimes."

"How about *your* demon, the one you called Baalzaphon?"

She laughed. "So that's the night you were here! The night I invoked Baalzaphon! Oh, he's quite a demon. A higher grade than most. One of the rulers actually, in the infernal regions." She made him sound like an officer in the army.

"Which magic is better," I asked. "Black or white?"

"That depends on the witch or magician," she said. "Also on how important the need is, how much care and concentration is put into the spell. Magic is an illusion. It's also a science and an art. Every force in the Universe is capable of being transformed into any other kind of force by using suitable means. And Magic is the science of causing change to occur in conformity with will."

"You can change things? From what they are?"

"Or what they *seem* to be," she said. "Those that have it in their nature to be changed. It's very hard work, and requires faith and the absolute conviction that what you want done will be done. You must concentrate all your powers, applying the proper kind and degree of Force in the proper manner through the proper medium to the proper object."

I asked her if that was how she brought Baalzaphon.

"You were there," she said. "Didn't you see him?"

"I got scared and didn't wait to see. The way you brought on all that lightning and thunder when you asked for your demon. I panicked."

"Nothing to be ashamed of, laddie. Nobody sensible wants to encounter a demon."

"Did he come?"

She winked. "Who's to know if he did or not? You'd not be able to see him even if he were about. And if he took on some visible shape, then he'd have no reflection in a mirror. That's one way of knowing for certain."

"You mean, *you* can't see them either?"

She tapped her forehead. "Magic is all in the mind, lad. If you believe strongly enough, and want it to happen with every ounce of your being, then you'll have it. Very much like real life, you see. And if you've invoked him properly, you'll be talking to your demon, or spirit, or whatever configuration you conjured up."

"It sounds like you might be talking to yourself too."

She nodded agreeably. "Yes, but you know when they're there. There's no mistaking the feeling of a presence from the other world. And of course if your wish and command is carried out and done, exactly as specified, then it's just as reasonable to say you weren't alone, and not talking merely to yourself."

I decided to break the news. "That Mr. Barker who was here had an accident. His car skidded, he broke his leg, and his garage door fell on him. Did your demon do that?"

She stamped her foot sharply on the ground. "Not a bit," she said indignantly. "In the first place, do you think I'd be silly enough to call up a demon from the outermost point just to do a fool thing like that? Skidding his car? Breaking his leg? A garage door falling? Why that sounds like an ordinary accident."

My hands felt sweaty. "Well, what kind did you have in mind for him?"

She frowned and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Well, that's the trouble," she said. "I was mad enough to want something done to him, and that's a fact. But as I told you, lad, it's all concentration. I hadn't quite made up my mind what his punishment should be. And that's why I'm not convinced Baalza-phon was here."

"Well, it rained and thundered," I reminded her. "You brought that on, didn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I did," she said with no undue pride. "But then that's the one thing we Scots can almost always do to put on a show. We're very good at producing thunderstorms, squalls, hurricanes at sea. That sort of thing. The Druids have always had that gift."

I smiled. "What would you have done to him if you really concentrated? I mean, what kind of punishment?"

"It would have to be something remarkable," she said. "Something that he couldn't mistake for an accident." She thought a moment, then smiled. "I'd probably have him simply disappear!"

I looked at her. She seemed as affable and innocent as if she had just given me the recipe for a cake. Her soft Scotch burr, so pleasant to hear, made it very difficult to believe she could so easily and casually pull off these things. She spoke of making a man disappear the way some people discuss the weather. I'd read some about the old Druids, their altars and rites, but I always figured that was a combination of religion and superstition. I knew they had bloody sacrifices too and weird dance ceremonies, but thought that due to their being a primitive people; besides it all happened a long time ago when people had their own private gods and worshipped idols because that was all they knew. It was kind of a shock to realize such things were still going on in the 20th Century, along with the atom bomb, electronics, the space probes and all the scientific progress.

"You did a better job than you think," I said. "Maybe you were even concentrating when you didn't know it." Her eyes drilled into mine; a strange sensation. We didn't just exchange glances. I felt an effect—like being hit. She didn't have to ask me what I meant. "Mr. Barker's disappeared all right."

She shot another glance into my system, and I told her about it.

She heard it all without changing expression, her eyes shifting past my shoulder and staring into space as if she were at the hospital back in town where it all happened. She nodded twice. Then she slapped her thigh, throwing her head back, laughing again as if she really enjoyed the experience. Finally she stopped and wiped her eyes.

"No," she said. "That wasn't my doing, and you can rest your mind about Baalzaphon. That wasn't his work either. That was a human endeavor. A clever plan and perhaps we'll have more to say about that later."

I wasn't so sure it was human. I remembered the state of Mrs. Carleton, the feeling of the icy finger touching me in her house, the whole suffocating sensation of something heavy and menacing there.

"You told my friend Minerva about the package coming," I said, "with the string and all. You said not to let her father open it. I was there when it happened and in a way it's my fault. I just didn't recognize it in time. It was meant for Mr. Barker but Sheriff Landry got it. Maybe you have an idea of who sent it." I told her about the nurse with the light hair and soft voice and limp. "The one who took Barker out was red-headed." Then I told her about Mrs. Carleton and all that happened to her, and Mrs. Wood and my crazy suspicion that wasn't founded on anything logical.

"Very interesting, laddie," she said. She pursed her lips, frowned, and threw her head up and down a few times, her hands on her wide hips. She muttered to herself, nodded, cocked her head as if listening, then said: "Indeed; yes; indeed. Not impossible, at all. Yes, something will have to be done."

"You said the white witches do good," I told her. "What kind of good do you do?"

She brushed back her silvery hair. "I'm glad you asked, laddie. Not as much, I'm afraid, as you might like. Back in the old country we did work much like your doctors or veterinarians do here today. There

might be a sick child with a fever on whom we would lay hands and make him well. Cast out the fever with a spell. That order of thing. Or there would be a farmer with a horse turned lame, or a sick cow, and we knew where to find the root or the herb that would bring them back to health. It could be a poultice applied to the injured part or a medicine to swallow."

"There aren't many cows or horses around here," I said, beginning to think I had come to the wrong person. That kind of magic wasn't much.

"Sometimes a baby's teething," she offered. "What we do there is hang a tooth from a live mouse around the child's neck. That's very helpful at easing the pain."

I wondered if she would recommend a tooth from a real live wolf for Sheriff Landry to wear like a locket, but said, "That's great," not wanting her to know I felt let down. "But suppose you had a black witch working against you? Who would win?"

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "There are some ordinary black magicians. I wouldn't worry too much about that kind. Then there are the powerful ruthless ones, rooted in evil from the past. They can be very dangerous."

"Well, you cast spells and have demons, too. You mean theirs are meaner or stronger?"

"No," she said quietly. "We're pretty evenly matched that way. I don't think their demons are stronger. Perhaps their purpose is. It's how important a thing is. That's where the will of the witch comes into it."

"You don't sound too confident," I said.

She nodded agreeably. "The trouble is, I haven't done anything in that line for a long time. Gone into other fields, you might say. I've come to this country and I plant herbs and sell them, and I've some chickens for fresh eggs. You've got to stay in practice and do the rituals properly. You can't evoke a demon or

spirit without the proper procedure. I don't say that I've lost the knack but then I must admit I'm more than a bit rusty at it now."

She made it sound like playing the violin or piano for a concert.

"But how about that spell you made the other night and the big storm, even if Baalzaphon didn't show up?"

"I'm not quite sure," she said, "Possibly I got it right by accident, or the demon wasn't doing anything special and humored me. But it could have been a coincidence. Just a change in the weather."

I looked at her. "Are you kidding?"

She shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "Well, perhaps I did it. But then, as I told you, that's very easy for a Druidess. We're very good at controlling atmospheric conditions, bringing down snow, storm, and darkness, casting mist over landscapes. That sort of thing."

I was more impressed now. "Anything else?"

"Let me see." She rubbed her nose, then spoke as if reciting from memory. "We can produce visual illusions, induce forgetfulness by secret potions, walk unharmed and barefoot over burning beds of coal, understand animal language, and we can cast mist over landscapes."

"You already said that," I told her.

"It's all in the book," she said. "All the spells and formulas one needs to know. Wait."

She suddenly darted into her cottage. There was the sound of things being thrown about and her voice raised in muttered scolding. Then she sounded a cheery note and came out again holding a big fat book twice as thick as the telephone directory and a little older than Methusaleh, its page ends yellow and tattered. She smacked the top of it and sent up a cloud of dust.

"There we are!" she said cheerily. "The Red Grimoire! The witches' bible, you might say. Been in our family for over five hundred years."

She opened it. The book was so old I expected moths to fly out. Old ones. The pages were wrinkled and soiled, covered with faded writing in different colors of ink, some with strange designs of circles, triangles and five- and six-pointed stars. There were alphabets and writing in languages I'd never heard of. She was very happy, as if she had found an old friend.

"I haven't looked inside this for years," she said. "Mama would be furious if she knew. I had the greatest potential, you know. Seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. That's the best you can hope for in my line. Born a witch and blessed with magic." A loose page fluttered out. I caught it and she put it back, flipped to a page at random and ran her finger down it, squinting, peering with her eyes close over it.

"Now here's a good one. Can't read it too clearly—ah, yes—'OF THE CHARGE TO THE SPIRIT WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE CONSTRAINTS AND CURSES OCCASIONALLY NECESSARY' . . . Hm . . . not bad . . . not bad . . . what's this word here?"

She beckoned me over and I looked and squinted too.

"Ofano, Oblamo, Ospergo," I said. "I think."

"Ah, yes." She bent closer to the faded writing. "That's a magic formula from Albertus Magnus, the great magician of the Middle Ages, an alchemist said to have possession of the Philosopher's Stone, something magicians have searched for throughout history."

"How come? What did it do?"

"It contained the secret for the transmutation of metals. The alchemist's dream come true. Turning base metal into gold!"

"Not bad," I said.

"He could change atmospheric conditions, even the seasons, at will."

"That's pretty good, too," I said.

"Among other things, Magnus created an android!"

"Huh?"

"A bronze automaton that he endowed with speech!"

I had to admit for those days that was pretty good. She was muttering words with her eyes closed. "I wonder if I remember it—it's been so long." She kept her eyes closed, reciting from memory:

"Ofano, Oblamo, Ospergo.
Hola Noa Massa.
Light, Beff, Cletamati, Adonai,
Cleona, Florit."

I was following the lines in the book. "Perfect," I said.

Her eyes were still closed. "There's more. Turn the page."

I did. The formula or spell or whatever it was, continued. So did the witch:

"Pax Sax Sarax
Afa Afca Nostra.
Cerum, Heaium, Lada Frium."

She opened her eyes. "Did I get it right?" I told her she did and that made her very happy. "Why, that's wonderful. It shows I haven't forgotten everything. Just a bit out of practice, that's all."

"What's the one you read *for*?" I asked, suddenly remembering it came out of a magic book, words from a famous magician.

"It's a form of banishment to be used in certain emergencies." I looked down at my feet, expecting them to take off for parts unknown. The witch laughed. "Don't worry. Merely saying the words isn't enough. You have to do it in the proper ritual. In this case it means standing inside a pentagram. That's a five pointed star," she explained.

I looked at her magic book and pointed to the diagram drawn in it. "This one has six points. It says hexagram."

She thrust out her chin. "What?" she said angrily.

"Let me see that." I showed her the page, and she shook her head sadly. "Terribly out of practice," she said. Then, "Are you *sure* that's a hexagram there?"

"That's what's printed there," I told her. I counted the points of the star again. "It's got six."

Her white hair bounced as she shook her head. "Must remember that. Six for hexagram." She looked around the area. "Where's that fool wand?" she asked, then suddenly stooped and dragged a long pointed stick out from under a bench. She brushed some dirt off it. "Been using it for planting tomatoes. Just the right height."

She wiped it on her apron, looked it over carefully, rubbed the point between her fingertips, and nodded as if satisfied. She looked up into the sky, hesitated, then moved her feet a quarter turn.

"ARARITA!" she said.

She traced a triangle on the ground, all its sides equal, the apex pointing upward. Then she traced one like it underneath, making sure the top of the lower one was exactly under the central point of the upper triangle. "ARARITA," she said once more. She looked at it admiringly. "It's coming back. There's the hexagram of Fire in the East."

"East is the other way," I said. "You're facing west."

She bit her lips, vexed, and thrust her hands to her hips. "Are you sure?" she asked, looking up at the sun. "Of course. You're right. There was a time I could tell east from west in the dark. Just felt it. I've been a year in your country. Can't get the hang of it."

"That word you said. ARARITA. What does that do?"

"It's a magic word—a preliminary invocation," she said. "Part of a banishing ritual. But I think I need the *earth* hexagram for that." She rubbed out the outlines of the triangles with her foot. "I've got to get my figures right," she said.

This time she traced two more triangles. These were pointing opposite each other, the apex of the

lower one pointing downward, extending below the base of the upper, with its apex upward. It formed a six-pointed star.

"ARARITA!" she said again. Then she stood upright, her left arm at her side, her right across her body and holding her wand, which still looked like an ordinary stick, as upright as her body. She looked at me. "East is that way?" I nodded and she sighed, shuffled her feet again until she faced east, then started to chant:

"Yod, Nun, Resh, Yod.
Virgo, Isis, Mighty Mother.
Scorpio, Apophis, Destroyer.
Sol, Osiris, Slain and Risen.
Isis, Apophis, Osiris."

She smiled happily at me. "That was a good one."

"Those crazy words. What language is that?"

"Some Hebrew, Latin, Egyptian. Some made-up magical words. Now AUMGN equals one hundred. That's a very good magical word. So is Tetragrammaton, and of course, Abrahadabra."

I always thought it was *abracadabra*. She left out the *c* and put in an *h*.

I could hardly keep from laughing. Made up magic words. All that mumbo-jumbo.

"Well, you said it. Now what will happen?"

She straightened one of her lines on the ground that was slightly crooked. "Nothing. That was only practice."

I guess she had to warm up first, like an atomic scientist exploding a toy firecracker.

"I'm not dressed properly," she explained. Her hands plucked at her sweater, fingered her apron and dropped to her skirt. "It's all ceremony and ritual. The correct preparation and then the proper procedure. You have to use the right magical words exactly and say them with the required force and intensity.

Why, when I was a young girl, I once spent an entire year just on intonation alone. Breath control, that sort of thing."

"No kidding!"

"You must bear in mind the miracle of the magic that's to be done," she said. "It's not just scratching geometric designs on the ground, or mouthing a lot of meaningless mumbo-jumbo . . ." She looked intently at me and smiled. I'd forgotten she could read minds even if she wasn't such a hot witch any more. "If it were that easy, anybody could do it. It's no simple matter to call up a spirit from the other world. They won't come if they don't respect you. And if they don't fear you, they can be most obstinate. Very difficult to manage. They're so wild, you see. Properly called demons."

I couldn't help smiling. "The demons are afraid of you?"

"Certainly. They're not anxious to come, leaving their revels in the Half World. They're hardly obliging, ever, or willing to please. They're a lazy lot, the whole seven odd million of them. Vicious too."

"There are seven million demons?"

"Seven and a quarter, exactly," she said. "And you have to show them you mean business. That you're boss. You've got to make them hop to it and obey you."

"What if they won't?"

She smiled and tapped the wand she'd used for tomato plants. "Oh, there are ways," she said mysteriously, "to make them. When they act up, or refuse to cooperate, then you threaten them. They're afraid of severe punishment, and that's what they'd get, of course."

"How do you do that?"

It sounded crazy but I was interested. I guess Barker never knew that seven and a quarter million demons were afraid of this little old lady. You sure couldn't tell by looking at her. And *she* seemed to believe it, even if it seemed impossible.

"Banishment," she said. "That's what they fear. Chained to a rock in the Infernal Regions. To be there beyond call or mercy for as many thousands of years as you wish to declare for their punishment. With Satan's permission, of course. But that's usually automatic."

"The Devil? He takes your side against his demons?" I couldn't believe that any more than I could the rest of it. But she was a nice old lady and I had to be polite.

She nodded. "Yes. The Old One himself. Satan Mekatrig. He's got his staff running things, pretty much like government any place else. The seventy-nine princes, the higher echelon, arch-demons like Lucifer, his prime minister, and Beelzebub and Leviathan, his secretaries of state. Then there's Ashtoreth, Abaddon, Asmodeus, Incubus, the lot of them. They respect the witch or magician who knows his rights under the law. And they're reliable to deal with, when you have a legitimate claim. That's what I meant by ritual. You can't be sloppy or ignorant and command respect. You've got to show them who you are and what you can do. Then they're only too anxious to please."

I blinked. She talked about the Devil, his demons and the fiends as if she'd been doing business with them for a long time. And with the same conviction as if she'd been discussing peace or trade treaties with any of the European or Asian powers. It was weird.

She brushed dirt off the tip of her long stick. "Everything must be clean and new. That's purification. It insures a nice clean ceremony. Even this wand is not a wand if it has something sticking to it which is not an essential part of itself. If you wanted to invoke Venus, you couldn't have traces of Saturn mixed up with it. You see?"

I didn't nod. It was too much for me, a crazy rigmarole, like children playing their games on a sidewalk with chalked squares and numbered boxes, hopping inside them in the right sequence, and not

touching any of the lines with their toes or any part of their bodies or they were out.

I couldn't take her seriously enough now to ask her help. I just didn't believe in her witchery. Then I heard the flutter of wings, the chatter of chickens, the loud *a-a-a-agh* of her goat. I noticed her standing stiffly erect and alert, hardly breathing, her head up, her nostrils flared. Her blue eyes darted to the left and right.

"Don't move," she said in a very low voice. "Something is here."

I was about to laugh out loud when something seemed to brush past me, an icy breath chilling my back. I didn't move.

It had been a warm day, the sun out, not a cloud in the sky. I didn't have to look up to realize the sun was gone, the day suddenly become misty, the air heavy. A smell came to my nostrils that I couldn't define, at first. It smelled rotten. And familiar. Something like the oppressive odor at Mrs. Carleton's. But Mrs. Carleton's door and windows were closed. This was different. I was standing outside in supposedly fresh air.

The old lady moved quickly. Bending low, she whirled, her long stick tracing a line on the ground. She moved with it, keeping her feet inside. It was amazing how spry she was for her years. Before I knew quite what she was doing, she had traced a large circle all around us. It was about eight feet in diameter.

She stood close to me, facing outward. "It's a demon," she said in my ear. "Not one of mine. You're safe now. No harm will come to you as long as you stay with me inside this circle."

I gulped and nodded, glad to hear I was safe. That's always good to know. It was kind of a surprise to learn somebody else's demon was around, but even more surprising was the fact that suddenly and with no reservations whatsoever I believed in magic, I believed in demons, and what was even more important I be-

lieved in this little old lady. If there was any evil going on around, I figured I couldn't be better off than having the little old white witch Aurelia Hepburn on my side.

14. The Circle of Fear

She started writing furiously in the dirt inside the circle, going completely around me three times. She drew a lot of things: horseshoes, a script Z, a Maltese cross, little circles with arcs like horns on top, and shorthand signs or Chinese. She quickly added little figure 8's lying on their sides, a few H's with their sides curving inwards so they looked like inverted parentheses, a lot of curling V's and some curved arrows attached to W's. She made several double circles and wrote inside them: YIN, YAN, YANG, and TUI. Finally she made a crescent, shaped like a fish with larger circles at each side, Roman numerals over the tops and bottom written inside the circles but not inside the crescent-joined long oval.

She straightened up. "That ought to do it."

I looked down at that assortment of jumbled signs and writing. It seemed that she had gone to an awful lot of trouble if something really wasn't out there.

"Quickly," she whispered in my ear. "Point me West."

I looked up and turned her by her elbows a little to the right. "Over there." I whispered too.

She nodded, then raised her wand and bowed in that direction.

"Before me the powers of LA," she said. She whirled, did a little dance and faced the opposite side. "Behind me the power of AL." She bowed again, whirled, extended her wand. "On my right hand the powers of LA," she said to the North, then turned again, put

out the wand, bowed: "On my left hand the powers of AL," for the South.

"Above me the powers of ShT," she sang out, leaping in the air, "beneath me the powers of ShT," and she struck the ground.

Then she stood erect, feet together, holding her wand exactly vertical. "Within me the Magic Powers of AILERUA NRUBPEH!"

I thought I heard a hissing spitting sound from outside the magic circle. "Wow! What was that last one?"

"A very magical word," she said. "My name backwards."

I nearly fell out of the circle.

A little more high-powered magic like that, and that spitting hissing rotten-smelling demon, or whatever it was, outside our circle would have me and the little old lady for dinner.

Aurelia Hepburn, the witch who could talk backwards, must have known I could worry enough for both of us. She reached out over the outline of our large circle and traced a smaller one on the ground, a foot away and about a foot across, which she tapped with her tomato-stick-wand three times.

"I'm waiting," she said sharply. The spitting sound came closer, chilling me with the realization that she was talking to *it!* She tapped the small circle again. "Hurry it up," she said. "I don't have all day."

I felt like telling her to take it easy. That didn't seem the proper way to be talking to things you couldn't see that hissed and spit and smelled awful.

I smelled that rotten-egg odor closer now; the air about my face felt heavy and hard to breathe. I thought I heard the soft rustle of wings. I drew back a step, my knees feeling no softer than jelly.

The little old lady beside me tapped her foot impatiently. "Keep me waiting, will you?" she muttered. She reached into her apron pocket for some of the leaves she had picked, rubbed them quickly in her hands until they formed a coarse powder, and threw

this into the air outside the circle. There came the sound of a rasping breath, sucking intake, a sneeze, then a series of sneezes. She turned to me, a slight smile on her face.

"Sage, wormwood, and veronica," she said lightly. "Clears out the nasal passages."

She leaned out in the direction of the last gasping sneeze and lashed with her wand. At a guttural groan, she bent and struck out downward. The groan became a whimper. Maybe there were sensitive scales on its toes.

"They're very clumsy creatures," she told me. "All bluster and no brains. This one wouldn't know enough to come in out of the rain."

"Is it a demon?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking me right out of that circle.

"Technically yes," she said, "but a very incompetent one, I'm quite sure. He could have had us easily if he knew his business." She kept giving these little bits of good news like she didn't want me to choke to death all at once.

She tapped the smaller circle again. "It's your last chance. I'm warning you." There was another sputter of hissing sound, a muffled sneeze, and she withdrew the wand, folding her arms across her chest. "That's better. Now tell me. Who sent you and why are you here?"

She cocked her head, apparently listening to some conversation from the cone of the smaller circle. I didn't hear anything but then you have to remember I'm no witch, white or any other kind. After a few seconds she frowned and held up her hand.

"That's ridiculous," she said angrily. "I don't believe any such thing. There's nobody here like that." Then she put her hands upon her hips and appeared to listen again. "Just a moment," she said finally, and turned to me. "There's something you haven't told me. Think hard. I have to know everything that happened. Everything. Concentrate now."

I didn't know what I'd left out, or even remember what I'd told her. But with her continuing to look at me so very intently my mind started hopping around: to Minerva, to the Sheriff, to the hospital, to Mrs. Wood, to Mrs. Carleton, back to the hospital, to Mrs. Somers, to the bomb going off, to the platinum-haired nurse, to the loading area, to the hearse marked Happy Hills.

"Hold it right there," she said, stopping me.

I hadn't said a word so far. I was just thinking, wondering what I'd left out. Now, to my mind's eye, came once again the flash of white that I thought was the nurse with the limp getting into the front seat of the hearse. Then I saw the driver as he started to back out: the dark eyes, dead-white skin, the pale thin gash for a mouth, the man who reminded me of Dracula.

"So that's who it is," I heard the little white witch beside me saying. "Well, no wonder!"

She looked into my eyes again as if she were watching TV, and nodded. Then she put her hand in front of my face and moved it up and down. She must have been shutting off the set because I lost the picture. My mind went blank—which was nothing unusual for me, but surprising at that time when I thought I was concentrating.

"I know your party," she said briskly, facing the small circle outside us. "We've had dealings before. At other times and other places. He has no authority here." She listened for a moment and shook her head. "No. Now *you* listen. I want this lad left alone. And here's a message for your master."

Her voice suddenly became unintelligible, trilling liquid sounds, like a bird, sounds you couldn't put into words. She stopped once to face me.

"You're not afraid, are you?" I didn't want to be a wet blanket so I lied and said no, of course not.

She leaned again toward whatever she was talking to out there. "We'll do no such thing. I've said what

I have to say. Now be gone at once." She raised her wand and then opened her mouth, surprised. "Oh, really? You don't tell me. You're getting too big for your bat-wings." She swung the wand quickly back and forth in a lashing motion. "Your mouth needs washing with soap." She put her hand to her apron pocket and brought it to her mouth and then blew. There was a strangulated coughing hissing from above my head, then I swear I heard sneezing. I felt it too, a cold wetness on my hair.

The old lady's eyes were large and very dark now, her voice firm and strong. She didn't sound or even look like an old lady any more.

"I'll put you on report to Lucifuge Rofocale if you're not gone at once, rubbed with the spittle of Bayard and roasted in fire! You'd like that, wouldn't you? I thought as much. Very well, then. Next time have a civil tongue! And remember who are your betters!" She raised her hand. A ring I hadn't noticed before suddenly flashed green fire. There was a hissing sound from beyond our circle. She raised her long stick, and chanted:

"Ochnotinos
Chnotinos
Notinos
Tinos
Inos
Nos
Os!"

The fetid breath from outside our circle drifted down to envelope me in a fog of depressive gloom. My head was nodding like a yo-yo on a short string and I wasn't frightened any more. I wasn't anything any more, having been drained of everything that was me, or important. I felt hollow and numb and useless. "What's the use?" a small voice said inside me. "It doesn't matter, does it? It doesn't matter at all."

A sudden stinging sensation on the side of my face made my eyes smart and tears come. She had slapped me!

"Stay inside the circle!" Her voice whispered harshly in my ear. I looked down and saw that one of my feet had strayed outside. To bring it back inside was too much of an effort. It weighed too much. I didn't need that foot anyway. Her wand suddenly cracked across my ankle. I looked down and saw the foot was inside, felt pressure on my elbow as she yanked me back. Her eyes angrily bored into mine and her voice was commanding. "Stay inside and don't move!" I nodded dumbly and she said, "It's almost over. That was his last trick." She made a quick movement with her feet and whirled her stick like a drum major. "Demon of fever, demon of forgetfulness! Ochnotinos, be gone! *Aft! Afast! AUMGN!*"

Her whirling wand was a blur of blue flame.

"All spirits are subject unto me," she said in a loud clear voice. "Of the firmament and the ether; upon the earth and under; on dry land and in the water; of whirling air, and of rushing fire—and every spell and scourge may be obedient unto me!" She might have drifted out of her line, as she said, but she certainly hadn't developed an inferiority complex. She did a little dance and crossed her feet. Then she raised herself high on her toes and flung both her arms outward. "Kothal!" she said shrilly. Then a couple of jawbreakers. "AR-O-GO-GO-RU-ABRAO-OOO! SAB-AF!"

She stamped her foot hard on the ground. "Be gone now or be bornless!"

I don't know which one did it. Maybe she had spelled backwards again something that had frightened him when he was only a little baby demon. Or these were real magic words that made him shape up or ship out. All I know is that one moment I was enveloped by mist, and almost in the next instant I felt moving air, heard the slow rustling sound of heavy

wings, and something brushed the top of my head. I ducked and sprawled to the ground. The air smelled fresh and clean again, the mist dissolved, and I saw my shadow on the ground.

I blinked.

There wasn't any funny writing any more. No horseshoes. No weird numbers in Roman, Greek, or Egyptian. No crazy arrows hooked up to letters of the alphabet. I crawled on my hands and knees looking for the great circle she had traced. Nothing remained. I shook my head, knowing I hadn't imagined all those signs and symbols. Or had I?

I turned to ask her what had happened to all the strange magic used to keep us out of reach of that demon Ochnotinos. But she wasn't there!

I wondered if I had possibly fallen on my head lately or suddenly taken up drinking? Then I heard behind me a low strange note becoming louder, shriller, a long sustained whistle. It sounded almost like a scream.

I hated to look but I did. From the cottage of the white witch a thin vaporous transparent cloud floated out of the window, and behind it the full shriek of the whistling note.

There was still enough fear left in me to make me feel I'd swallowed a bucket of sand. My tongue felt no bigger than a shoehorn. I stumbled toward the cottage door, sweating and trying to run on spaghetti legs.

"Mrs. Hepburn," I yelled. "Are you all right?"

She came suddenly from around the side of the house to rush past me without even a nod, throw open the door and dart inside. I heard her loud muttering. The shrill whistling dropped in volume, then suddenly stopped. She came back to the doorway and stood there erect and serene, holding something that had thin wisps of smoke coming from its gleaming metal spout.

My jaw sagged. The day's magic period was over.

The little white witch said, "I was out in the back yard. Like a fool, I forgot I had the kettle on. Would you care to join me in a cup of tea, laddie?"

15. The Sky Belongs to Witches

At 7 o'clock that evening I was watching TV with Minerva and Sinbad. One of the shows coming up was new—about witches. Considering that I was getting involved with witchcraft, I felt it would be a good idea to learn as much about it as I could. Experience at first hand, though better, could also blow your mind.

I'd had the cup of tea with Aurelia Hepburn, the white witch of Mucker's Swamp. She threw in some cookies she'd made herself, and they were very good; ordinary cookies, no magic to them, proving that witches have to learn to cook and bake like everyone else.

"If it wasn't your demon, then somebody else sent him. Was it some other witch?" I'd asked.

"No witch, lad, that I know. A warlock, more likely. A very powerful magician."

"What's the difference?"

"This one is evil and we'll be dealing with black magic."

That wasn't a comforting thought.

"Any idea who it is?" For all I knew, they had their own clubs and associations, and knew everybody in the field.

She nodded. "Aye. If it's who I think it is, we can expect real trouble. This one is evil with a bad history behind him. But I'm not certain yet and will have to look into the matter. When I know for certain, I'll get in touch with you."

I wondered how, without a telephone or a car.

She smiled. "I'll find you."

"Okay. If you know by tonight, I'll be home watching TV."

She asked what that was. Incredible as it might seem, she not only didn't have a set but didn't know what TV was. I explained it as best I could.

"Signals and pictures passing through the air, with voice patterns? How very interesting, laddie. They've appropriated our methods."

"How do you mean?"

"We've always sent our messages through the air," she said. "It doesn't belong to those people who run your TV business."

I didn't like to contradict, but I explained a little more about TV, telling her about the commercials.

"You mean, they have people showing you things, and trying to get you to buy them?"

I nodded. "That's how it works. Maybe you witches used to own the air, but not any more. They got it all tied up now."

"Well," she said finally, "if what you're saying is so, then they've overstepped their authority. Something will have to be done. Using the air to sell things! That's not what it was meant for at all."

"Well, right now I've got other problems," I said. "Worrying if that Mrs. Wood the Sheriff's housekeeper did anything, or is it all in my dumb mind. Also, that platinum-blond nurse with the limp and soft voice, and the red-headed one who got Mr. Barker out, not to mention the one with brown hair, Mrs. Dow, who first cured Mrs. Carleton. And I'm worried about Mrs. Carleton, too. You're supposed to read the future. Can't you tell me what's going on?"

She smiled gently and reached out to touch my hand. "The future is the past and the past is the future."

"That sounds good but what does it mean?"

"It means everything comes together eventually," she said. "You'll see. And as for your worries, they may not be over too soon, but I'm sure you'll have a

clear insight into what's causing them very shortly."

"Like when?" I asked.

"Tonight," she said. "Your little lassie with blonde hair. She reminds me very much of myself, by the way, at her age. She'll tell you."

I was astonished. "Huh? Minerva knows?"

"No. She'll put it to you in the form of a riddle. And when you solve the riddle, then you'll know."

That sounded fairly mysterious but as long as she felt so sure I couldn't argue.

"What about that demon you chased away? That Ochnotinos, or whatever you called him. Is he liable to pop in on me too?" That was something I knew I could do without.

"No. He won't trouble you. I've warned him."

I remembered how easily he'd drained me of my will.

"Are you sure he's afraid of you?" I asked. "What if he was only kidding? Making believe, and then coming at you when you're not ready."

"That's not very likely. I chanted a spell to cut Ochnotinos down to size, the spell of diminution. He'll feel glad enough to know there's something left of him at all."

I shook my head admiringly. "What a neat trick! I wish I could do something like that."

"You do it all the time." When I looked at her speechless, she added: "We all have our demons. Some that we control, some that we can't. You have a very strong one working for you. You want to save the world. That's a very popular one. Many of our greatest men have had that one."

"Huh? Me?" I was surprised to hear that.

She hopped out of her chair. "Let the demon become too important and your dreams become obsessions. Let him gain control, then you'll be a proper fanatic," she warned, picking up the cups and saucers and putting them in the sink, no magic waves or spells or anything to clean the table. She did it all by hand.

"That sounds like a different kind of demon," I said. I didn't want to save the world, just find out what happened to Mrs. Carleton, and who sent the bomb that exploded and hurt Sheriff Landry. "You're talking about inside ones."

"Aye," she nodded. "Inside and outside. There's not too much difference between."

"This one today was outside," I said, remembering the chill and the sweat and the smell. "You even traced that magic circle to keep him away from us. You make it sound like I imagined it all."

"Witch or not, I'm human," she said, "and we all have our influences. There are spells and magic words and superstitious rituals we all use when we're afraid. It all started a long time ago, lad, when the first frightened man needed somebody to drive away his fears. There was your first witch doctor and the beginning of magic. You might call us specialists in the field."

She guessed I had other questions. "You'll know the answers soon enough, laddie. I've work to do now."

That was it. We said goodbye. I walked past her goat, who didn't look any happier to see me go than come in. That goat didn't like me any more than I liked him. And that was genuine, and definite, and positively no illusion.

I told Sinbad all about it when I got home. He merely lay there and listened, having no opinion at all this time, being as baffled as I was. He liked the part about the demon being chased away by the little old lady and even got up off the floor, stretched, and pattered over to the window to look out. When he came back, he settled into his usual position, looked at me, blinked, closed his eyes and in another moment was snoring. Of course he's a very strong and good-natured dog, like most English bulls, and doesn't have too much imagination.

Minerva got home around 5. Her pop was a little better, she said, but would have the bandages another week or two, when they'd know what the situation

was. His body burns were coming along pretty well, considering, and though painful he was recovering as well as could be expected.

Then she asked me what I'd been doing. I skipped the part about the demon, not wanting to scare her. I didn't think she'd believe it either. She listened very attentively and didn't interrupt too much. Then I remembered what Aurelia Hepburn had said at the end.

"Do you have a riddle for me?" I asked.

Minerva's blue eyes opened wide. "Are you going into the witch business too? I was just going to ask you one. You must be getting psychic."

I grinned. I never can guess Minerva's riddles, they're so far out. But the witch seemed to think I would, this one. That is, if she said anything. I mean, if I ever was really there in the first place. It's not too difficult to lose your mind. I think I blew it all in just a few hours that morning.

Minerva said, "Here it is. What's yellow and then purple and then yellow and then purple and then yellow?"

I wanted to guess that one, especially if it was going to solve all my problems. I thought and thought, then finally looked at Minerva, helpless and mad.

"A banana who works at night pressing grapes," she said. "Here's another. What's big and strong, weighs 5000 pounds, breathes fire and is very frightening, and can fit into a two-inch hole?"

I was sure I wouldn't like the answer. I was right.

"A mouse at a cook-out," Minerva said.

I blew my stack. "A mouse isn't big and strong, and doesn't weigh 5000 pounds," I yelled. "And what's so frightening about it?"

"The fact that something that size can fit into a little two-inch hole," she answered.

I wasn't satisfied with that one. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Finally when I was about as mad as I could get, one of those little electric bulbs

that cartoonists use in comic strips exploded in my head.

"It's Mrs. Wood," I yelled. "I was right all the time."

Minerva looked at me as if I'd gone stark raving staring mad. Sinbad looked too, but without much expression, being the kind that waits to see what it's all about first.

I explained, "I know it doesn't make sense. No more than your riddles do. But that's what makes it work, the fact that it doesn't make sense." Minerva was looking at me with that oh-boy-this-kid-is-really-gone look. "Mrs. Wood is the mouse. She's not really that big. You just add things to make her. She doesn't limp. She added that. She has black hair, not any of the others. Not platinum-blonde, or red, or brown. How could she do that?"

"A wig?" Minerva suggested.

I nodded. "Wigs."

"You think she has three of them?" Minerva asked. I nodded. "Do you know how much wigs cost, dumb-bell?" I shook my head. "A lot. Fifty to a hundred dollars a piece, and sometimes more."

"So what?"

"So where does a housekeeper get that kind of money?"

"No problem," I said. "Whoever is in on the plot probably gives it to her."

"What plot?"

"You know," I said, sure there was one though difficult to describe in words. "Like Mrs. Carleton taking sick suddenly, when she was always so healthy, and Mrs. Wood taking her place at your house."

"What good did that do? The bomb went off at the hospital, not at our house where she could have dropped it any time she wanted, if that's what you think she was there for. As for Mrs. Carleton being healthy and then getting sick—isn't everybody healthy before they get sick?" She gave me a look that would have chased a rattler.

"Well, there are the other things, too," I said. "Like Mr. Barker wanting the witch to read somebody's mind. Then threatening her. Then having his accident. Then being spirited out of the hospital by the red-headed woman who wasn't his wife."

"What if he had a red-headed girl friend, stupid?" Minerva said. "He's not married, remember."

I hadn't thought about that.

"How about the Mrs. Dow who took Mrs. Carleton out after supposedly curing her, and she looks worse than before?"

Minerva kicked me on the shin. "So she was a rotten nurse. Besides, it's the doctor who is supposed to cure people."

"Okay," I admitted, rubbing my leg and shin-bone. "How come you hired Mrs. Wood in the first place?"

"We needed somebody to cook and clean, that's how come. Does your leg hurt?"

"Well, how did you find out about her?"

"Mrs. Carleton recommended her."

That shook me up some. "Just wait," I said. "You'll see. It's like your riddle. It all adds up and there's nothing there. You just added things to make it confusing."

"Somebody ought to add up your brains. I'm willing to bet they'd find a lot of them missing."

Sinbad said something in his parrot growl. I looked up. The TV screen was announcing the new witch show coming up: POOR LITTLE WITCH GIRL. After that title, how funny could it be? It was about a girl who didn't know she was a witch until an aunt of hers, who was one, showed her how to do the magic tricks that would drive her husband and everybody else crazy.

"Why are we watching such a rotten show?"

"I thought maybe we might learn something about witches."

"So far all I'm learning is not to watch it again," she said.

The aunt witch had the young girl up in the air, sitting on a broomstick, explaining how it worked. Their images faded off the screen suddenly and there was Aurelia Hepburn, the little white witch of Mucker's Swamp right in the middle of my TV set.

"Holy mackerel!" Minerva said. "Look who's there."

The little old lady turned her head this way and that, saying, "Now where is he?" Until she looked directly at me and smiled. "Ah! There you are, laddie."

"Wow!" I told Minerva. "She said she'd be getting in touch with me. I never guessed she could do it this way."

The network didn't either. Very upset over the interruption, the announcer apologized for their losing the picture, and begged, "Please stand by," then tried playing music. "I'm afraid we've lost our video and audio, too. Our engineers are working on it now. Please stand by."

Aurelia Hepburn grimaced. "Ye've lost nothing at all," she said sharply. "Ye never had it in the first place, so how could ye lose it? The air belongs to those who live in it, laddie."

The network engineer tried to get her off, making her image flicker and slide slowly up and then down. The white witch became annoyed. She held out her hand. The one with the ring on it.

"Stop that, young mon, or you'll be sorry," she warned. Her TV image settled and became still again. "That's better," she said. "I don't like to be jiggled about." She looked at me directly a moment and then blinked. "Sorry, lad. It'll be just a moment. I've got to see that again."

She faded off the screen and the original picture came back: the aunt giving the young girl her riding lesson in the sky on a broomstick. Then Aurelia Hepburn floated back into the scene. Without a broomstick.

"Ridiculous," she said, pointing to theirs. "You're riding it backward. No proper witch ever rode her

broom, handle forward and brush trailing." She made a gesture and the broomstick dropped away and turned in the air under them. "Make a note. We can't have people pretending to be witches and not doing it proper. You'll be making laughing-stocks of us all."

She snapped her fingers and they faded off the set, leaving her alone in a close-up. "Now where was I?" She looked very intently at me, making me feel she was actually in the room. "You'll have had your riddle by now, lad, and I'll give you another. It's as I feared, and we'll both have to be careful." She raised her hand. "Here's your message."

There was a flash and she disappeared. Only the gray blank TV screen remained. Then it faded to black.

"I don't get it," Minerva said after a while. "What kind of a message is that? There's nothing there but a black screen."

"That's it. That's what she was trying to tell me," I said. "I think." I pointed to the set. "It means we're facing black magic."

Minerva didn't hoot or punch or kick me. She sat there numbly looking at the screen, her mouth slightly open.

Like me.

Then there was a brief flicker. We heard the station announcer, relieved and cheerful, saying everything was all right now, picture and audio restored. The set lit up. The two TV stars were where Aurelia Hepburn had left them, suspended in space, their broomstick still in the position the white witch said was the proper one. They sat immovable in the air a foot over it.

The announcer almost strangled. He cut the picture off saying something about "due to circumstances beyond our control . . ." And the screen went black again.

Minerva flipped the dial to other stations. They had fine clear pictures with normal sounds. She flipped

back to this station. They were still there, stuck.

Aurelia Hepburn was a better witch than she pretended. She left them stuck that way for exactly an hour.

A little later all the stations went off. The announcers tried to reassure everybody, saying they would have the difficulties straightened out soon. But they didn't. I figured Aurelia was using all the practice she could get, to get back into shape real fast.

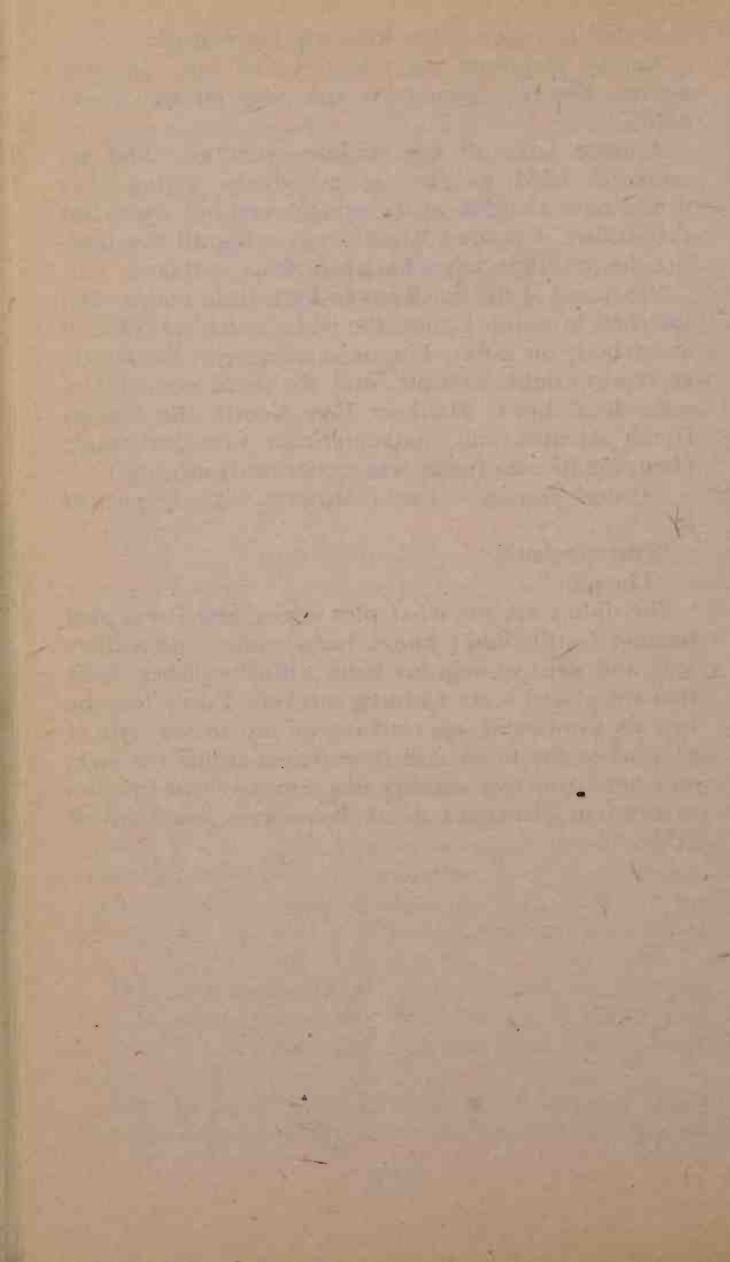
We stared at the black screen for a little longer then switched to radio. I guess the white witch wasn't mad at anybody on radio. The news came with the weather report, right on time, and the local station had some local news: Mynheer Van Noord, the famous Dutch scientist and mathematician who had made Hampton his new home, was mysteriously missing!

"There! You see?" I told Minerva. "That's part of it."

"Part of what?"

"The plot."

She didn't ask me what plot again, and I was glad because I still didn't know, but she shot me a dirty look and went to help my mom with the dishes. After that we played some Chinese checkers. I only lost the first six games and was catching on fast to her style of play when my mom said it was time to hit the sack, and tomorrow was another day. Sinbad went upstairs to sleep in Minerva's room. Sometimes he's kind of fickle.



Part Three

16. Mystery at Midnight

I lay in bed trying to figure things out. Aurelia Hepburn had already hinted at black magic and something evil brewing, so the TV message hadn't been too big a shock. Assuming it was a message, of course, and not just her being cut off the air suddenly. The white witch had a better idea of what all the strange events meant than she let on, I realized. Hadn't she asked me what I'd left out, when the demon was close to us, fastening her mind on the brief scene where my mind recalled seeing the man in the hearse from Happy Hills?

"So *that's who it is!*" she had said.

There was a clue, if I'd ever heard one. All I had to find out now was who that *who* was. The one who had sent us the demon? It didn't make sense. Driving a hearse for a cemetery didn't seem like such a hot job for somebody who was supposed to be such a fearsome black magician. Or was he?

Even if I were sure about seeing that nurse get into his car, I still couldn't be sure if she were really Mrs. Wood. If it *was* Mrs. Wood, and she *did* get into his car, and he *was* a black magician, and she also *was* the one who took Mrs. Carleton home, *and* made her sick, then it all seemed to tie up. I had to admit there were too many "ifs," even for me.

Had I only imagined feeling strangely helpless when I stepped outside her magic circle? My hair still bristled when I thought of it. That was real. For even though the white witch had cut him down to size, as

she claimed, there wasn't any question in my mind about feeling some kind of strange power over me.

Okay, I said to myself, so somebody sent this demon Ochnotinos after us. Maybe the man from Happy Hills, fun-loving Dracula. But why? Then I remembered something she had said: The demon wasn't after her. It was me!

She called it a demon of fever and forgetfulness. I didn't have a fever. I felt fine. Was I supposed to forget something dangerous?

What?

By the time I got close to figuring it out I was asleep, dreaming of flying in the sky looking for Aurelia Hepburn who, for some reason, I had to find. Everything I saw seemed to repeat itself, going around and around and around. Then I discovered I was stuck to a large blade of a windmill, revolving in a big circle, slowly, in the air. I heard Sinbad whining and thought, great, he'll get me off.

Sinbad kept whining, his dark muzzle in my face, the weight of him on my chest. I opened my eyes, and it was real. He was licking my face and whining. As soon as he saw I was awake, he jumped off my bed and ran into the upstairs hall, then ducked his head back again and whined at me, this time making his deep-throated parrot sound. That was a message. I got out of bed.

"What's up?" I asked, figuring maybe my pop had finished his job and come home sooner than expected. "Is it Pop?"

He retreated again and growled. That meant it wasn't Pop, or he would have raced down the stairs and banged himself against the door. By this time I was out looking across the hall to the room where Minerva was spending the night. Her door was open and she was standing still and quiet at the head of the stairs, arms stretched out in front as if she were going to do a dive.

"Come on, Minerva," I said, kind of annoyed. "It's

too late for swimming. Besides, we don't have a pool. You have. You're at *our* house now."

She didn't answer and remained poised, eyes wide open, staring straight ahead. I put my hand in front of her, moved it up and down. She didn't blink.

Sinbad snuffled around her bare feet, looking up at me with a worried expression, and whined again.

I told him, "It looks like she's walking in her sleep." In all the years I've known her, never once had this habit been mentioned.

She looked pale and white standing about a foot from the head of the stairs in a shaft of moonlight, wearing short-sleeved pajamas and still that crazy old bracelet that Mrs. Wood had given her. Now she extended one leg stiffly in front of her, ready to walk downstairs. I didn't know where she was going after that. All I knew was that you weren't supposed to wake up people who were sleep-walking.

I got a good look at her face and my stomach tied into a knot. For the first time I realized what a trance was. Minerva looked carved out of stone.

Our house is an old late Georgian, built well, and reconditioned by my pop. They made staircases wide and generous in those days. I got past Minerva easily without her noticing. Sinbad was still on the top landing, his dark head and ears cocked, looking down curiously. I could see he was trembling, dying to rush down after her.

"Just watch it with your big feet, or you'll trip her," I warned, keeping my voice low, not wanting to jolt her. It didn't make any difference. I could just as well have been on the moon. She took another slow step, then another. I went down backward, facing her, one step at a time too, my arms ready to catch her in case she collapsed or something. But as usual she had very good balance, walking better in sleep than I did wide awake. I missed the next riser and took the next three all at once on my chest and stomach.

This was too much for Sinbad. He came clattering

down, smart enough to give her a wide berth, but having built up so much momentum that he was skidding past me and crashed into the heavy door, after sliding on the scatter rug at the bottom of the steps. It made an awfully loud noise but not to Minerva.

"Boy, that was great. Only we're not supposed to try to wake her up. She has to do it herself."

I got on my feet and backed down again, in step with her until my foot touched the floor. She kept on, so I backed across the small entry hall. When I touched the cold outer door, she still kept on coming, only a few feet away from me, her outstretched hands almost brushing my chest. Now I was really scared. Would she try to get out and should I let her?

I heard a door open on the upper landing and then my mother's voice. "What's going on?"

She came to the head of the stairs and looked down. Afraid to talk, I gestured toward Minerva and with my hands pantomimed sleeping. She got the message and started walking slowly down.

Sinbad ducked to the living room, hopped on the window seat and stuck his head through the curtains, a deep growl rumbling in his throat, the kind that would scare anybody in his right mind. He didn't bark. He hardly ever does.

Then I heard a humming sound outside.

At that exact moment Minerva's fingertips brushed my face, stayed there a second, and wavered in the air. Her eyes were straight on mine but unseeing. I could still smell the chocolate milk and cookies she'd had for a late snack. Then she turned around in one sweeping motion and headed back upstairs, with me breathing a sigh of relief and following two steps behind. Sinbad jumped off the window seat with a final growl and went up with me, a step at a time. We had her surrounded.

The humming seemed to have stopped.

Minerva walked straight up the fifteen steps without faltering. It was weird, uncanny. She didn't look

down once. On the upper landing my mom stepped out of her way, and like an automaton she headed into the spare bedroom we had given her. The bed was directly ahead of her. She took two, three steps. Then she stopped, made a half turn and started walking slowly toward the large window. I looked blankly at my mom.

Our house was built originally around 1780, about the time they started making windows larger, and ours were typical: 12-over-12 lights with the upper sash fixed, and of full height. Our roof is wide, the short-sided gambrel shingled with short upper slope and long lower sweep. If Minerva decided to raise the lower sash and go out, she would have a nice drop to the ground two stories below. If she decided instead to go up she would find out too late we didn't have the Captain's walk on top.

My mom moved quietly to one side and I stepped to the other. Minerva dropped her arms and leaned forward and I held my breath. Sinbad whined softly again, not understanding what it was all about. Then before I could stop him, he trotted over to Minerva, grabbed her pajama leg in his mouth, shook his head, and started pulling her back.

A step away from the window, he braced his hind quarters, shook his big head again, and suddenly released his powerful grip. It was as if he had used a flail; he swung her around in an arc, forcing her to pivot. She did it quite naturally even in her sleep. Momentum carried her forward two more steps, then another, and one more until she was touching the bed. She stood there another moment, framed perfectly in the moonlight. Suddenly she shivered, clutched her arms as if cold and, leaning over the bed, fell softly into it. Her hands reached for the covers and she pulled them up over her. I could hear her breathing now. I tiptoed over to get a closer look. Her eyes were closed.

"Nice work," I told Sinbad, leaning over to pet him.

Instead of accepting the compliment with his usual conceited fanny waving, he growled.

"What's with you, you big ape?"

He didn't bother answering and growled again, the sound deep in his chest rumbling like far-off thunder. Then I noticed he was looking out the window. For some reason he was mad at something outside.

Suddenly I heard that humming sound again. I turned and ran down the steps to the front door. Behind me Sinbad clattered, coming down like a 10-ton truck with no brakes. I tried to grab him and he knocked me down, hitting so hard I crashed into and nearly through the entry wall.

"Take it easy," I told him when I got my breath back. "I want to see what's outside too."

I got one hand on his thick-studded collar and the other around his great barrel chest, then had to wrestle him close to me, using all my strength, before I dared take off one hand to open the door. When Sinbad is that excited his strength is incredible.

I kept one leg against the door so that he wouldn't break away. He growled at what was outside, shaking his hard head and banging me in the chest, almost fighting me to get loose. We both heard the hum.

Then a dim black outline moved slowly up the hill. It was dark outside and the lights were kept off as it picked up speed slowly and silently, but it looked like a very long car.

"Nothing to get excited about," I told Sinbad. "It's only a hearse."

17. The Foolproof Point

The next morning the sun was out and warming, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the salt breeze sweeping across town from the ocean was fresh and

fragrant. I couldn't help thinking we had about the finest air around, useful as well as bracing. My mind needed all the fresh air circulating through that it could get.

Minerva and I were standing on Steamboat Road in front of old Mrs. Teska's general store, waiting for the next bus from the point to town. I hadn't yet brought up the subject of the night before, but it occupied almost all of my mind. My mom had suggested that I forget about it. I probably would have kept my mouth shut but when you're with Minerva that's not easy.

She was fiddling with her birthday bracelet again, not sliding it up and down her arm any more but rubbing it, turning it around and around her wrist.

"Why don't you get rid of that thing?" I said.

"Why should I?" she asked. "It's a present, isn't it?"

"So what? You don't have to wear it all the time."

"I like it," she answered, toying with it some more.

I looked at it again. It made my nose wrinkle and my lip curl. I just didn't like it, nor the thin red line around her wrist, probably from the rubbing. The other day it had been sliding up and down her arm.

"It must be a cheap one," I said. "It seems to be shrinking."

"What do you mean?"

I pointed to the line on her wrist. "The other day it flopped all over your arm. Now it seems to fit your wrist perfectly."

"I guess I'm growing into it."

"How can you do that? It's metal, isn't it?"

"Of course, dumbbell. Silver or something. How else would it last these hundreds of years Mrs. Wood said it's been in her family?"

I touched her wrist, then shook my head. "It couldn't be silver. Silver wouldn't shrink."

"Who says it did?" she said. "My arm probably got fatter with all the food I've been putting away at your house."

I hadn't noticed her eating that much. "Turn around," I said. She looked at me wonderingly, then revolved slowly. "The rest of you looks the same. How come only your arm got fatter?"

Minerva shrugged. "How should I know? Just natural, I guess."

I'm no weight specialist. Maybe she *was* putting on weight and girls did it differently. "It's probably some cheap imitation metal or alloy," I said irritated. "If it gets any smaller you'll have to wear it as a ring."

"You're just jealous, because you didn't give it to me. Honestly, I never heard of a person carrying on like you over a girl's bracelet."

"I never heard of you sleep-walking before either," I said.

Minerva has a nice clear laugh, almost like a bell. "That's because I never do, dummy."

"Ho ho," I said. "You sure did last night."

"What?" Her look was genuinely incredulous. "*Me?*"

"You tried to walk out the front door," I said. "Then when Sinbad and me blocked it, you walked back upstairs and tried to go out the window. Sinbad turned you around so you went back to bed."

"Me? Walk in my sleep?"

"Ask Sinbad. Ask my mom. She'll tell you."

Minerva couldn't believe it. The bus came along at that point and we both got on. It was almost empty and we chose seats in the rear.

"Did I say anything?"

Minerva was kind of shook up about it now and I was sorry to have brought it up. That's one of the troubles with shooting off your mouth.

"No," I told her. "You only took that little walk. Downstairs and up again."

"In my sleep?"

"You had your eyes open. But I'm pretty sure that's what they call sleep-walking. It looked like you were in some kind of a trance. Don't you remember anything about it?"

She shook her long blonde hair. Then she frowned. "Some kind of a crazy dream. Like I was supposed to meet somebody. That's all."

I didn't want to mention the hearse waiting outside. That would have scared her too much. Anyway I wasn't exactly certain that it was the same hearse I had seen before, it could have been another. Sure, I thought. That's why it was waiting in front of my house while Minerva was in that trance. And why it went up the hill with its lights out.

I told Minerva, "My dream was like that, in a way, too. Except that I remember more about it. I was trying to find the white witch, Aurelia Hepburn. I got the feeling she was lost and calling me."

"Did you find her?"

"All I remember is flying around and around in the sky. Then I noticed I was stuck on the blade of a windmill. I couldn't get off. Then I heard Sinbad whining. That part was real. He woke me up and got me out of bed because you were standing there at the top of the stairs in your bare feet, not moving, stiff as a board."

"I seem to remember music," Minerva said. She tried thinking about it, screwing up her nose, pounding her head, but it didn't come. "That's all. Only it wasn't really music. Some kind of a beat. Like a drum, I guess."

Or a hum, I thought. A hum from a hearse.

Minerva suddenly clapped her hands together. "I know what happened," she said excitedly, giving me a good punch on the arm. Walking in her sleep hadn't weakened her any. "It was watching that witch show. And then having the one from Mucker's Swamp show up and all that. She probably affected us both."

I rubbed my arm, nodding. "It's a good guess."

If Aurelia Hepburn could do what she had on television, enough magic might have been left in the air to upset us some. That would account for my wild dream and Minerva's nightmare.

"That guy Van Noord disappeared too," I said, remembering the newscast. "Do you think she had anything to do with that?"

Minerva scoffed, "You mean because he's supposed to be some great scientist and she's a witch?"

"Something like that. Don't forget Barker disappeared too after having a run-in with her. Not that I'm saying she had anything to do with that." I had a red-headed mystery woman for that one. Then I remembered Barker's proposition to the witch, about reading somebody's mind to get hold of his invention. I reminded Minerva.

"Van Noord is supposed to be a scientist not an inventor," she said. I mentioned the garage door Barker said he had invented for him. "So what? It didn't work so good. It fell on Barker, didn't it?"

I decided it was time to bring Minerva up to date, not sure she took seriously that story of the white witch calling up her demon Baalzaphon, the night of Mr. Barker's accident. I told her what had happened the day before while I was at Mucker's Swamp visiting.

Minerva looked at me. "Another demon? Groovy!"

"Yeah. Only this one worked for the other side."

She laughed. "You probably imagined it."

I told her I thought I had. "Only I could practically feel him. I heard him sneezing when she threw the powder at him. I swear. And I could smell him."

She laughed again. "What did he smell like?"

"Like a rotten egg," I said, remembering. "Real bad. Like your bracelet, too. That kind of old rotten smell."

Minerva brought her wrist up to her nose. "I don't smell anything old and rotten. It only proves you're out of your mind about it."

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm willing to bet I didn't imagine that demon. If I imagined it, why was she talking to it? Giving it orders and so on. Asking who sent it."

"Who *did*? Did she tell you yet?"

"She didn't say for sure. Only that it's probably black magic behind it, some kind of black magician. The kind she says go in league with the Devil. Out of greed, and for power. I think it's that hearse-from-Happy Hills guy."

"The one you saw after the bomb exploded? Why him?"

"He's got that kind of face. Like Dracula."

"You mean like the actor who plays Dracula in the movies? That Bela Lugosi?"

"Yeah. That one."

Minerva laughed. "That proves what a dope you are. According to what you're saying, the man who looks like him is some kind of black magician and in league with the Devil, right?" I nodded. "Well, Bela Lugosi isn't and he's got the same face. He's an *actor*."

"Well, anyway, he looks awful suspicious."

"If he looks so suspicious, how come he's got a job driving a hearse? Somebody had to hire him, didn't they?"

"But maybe it's his own business. Maybe he owns the whole Happy Hills cemetery."

"So what?" Minerva said. "He still has to do business with people. He still has to bury the dead for the living. If he looks like such a creep who would hire him?"

I couldn't think of an answer.

Minerva looked out the window. "Last stop. We're here," she said. "Do me a favor and don't tell Pop I was walking in my sleep last night. I don't want to worry him."

"Sure," I said. "Okay." I didn't want to worry him either. I was hoping somebody would feel the same about me.

Dr. Downey had just finished changing the bandages when we got up to the Sheriff's room. He still had the one on over his eyes, but the others seemed less bulky. So he was making progress.

"How come you let that red-headed woman take Mr. Barker out of the hospital by saying she was his wife?" I asked the doc.

He looked at me. "That's not very surprising," he said pleasantly. "If a woman says she's somebody's wife, we tend to believe her. There's no test, so far as I know, for determining the truth by looking at a person. Short of a lie detector, or an injection of truth serum, we assume she's telling the truth. Mr. Barker was conscious. He didn't contradict her. Again we had no reason to suspect otherwise." His brown eyes were bright and friendly. "I like your directness. Any other questions?"

"I don't know if you'll like this one. There was another woman here. A Mrs. Carleton. She came in with hysteria and shock and went out cured with a nurse named Mrs. Dow."

"Yes, I believe I recall that," the doctor said. "What's your question?"

"I saw Mrs. Carleton yesterday and she looks terrible. I've never seen her looking so sick. What could have happened?"

"Obviously she left the hospital and proper medical care too soon," he said dryly. "We can't insist that patients stay. Hospitals are expensive. Does that answer it?"

"Do you know this nurse, Mrs. Dow?"

"Frankly I've never heard of her. Perhaps she's a private nurse."

"Like the one who took care of Mr. Barker. I guess you didn't know her either."

He snapped his black case shut and picked it up. He looked at me again, still pleasantly, but with a curious glint in his eyes.

"As a matter of fact, no, I didn't. There's a lot of hospital procedure you evidently know nothing about. I don't have time to go into it with you. But you appear to be a young man pursuing strange unexplainable occurrences. I think I can recommend a man

better able to answer your questions and satisfy your curiosity."

"Great," I said. "Who?"

He flicked his white hand to the bed behind him. "Sheriff Landry," he said. "I believe he's our Chief of Police."

"*Touché!*" the Sheriff growled, as the doctor smiled and walked out. "Come over here," Sheriff Landry said. "I can't see you but I hear you well enough. When are you going to stop trying to take over my job?"

I went over to his bed and patted his bandages. "Hi, Sheriff. How are you feeling?"

"Worse and worse."

"Gee, that's too bad," I said. "Isn't the doc doing you any good?"

"Oh, him," he said sourly. "Downey's okay. He says I'm coming along."

"So what's wrong?"

"Hearing all about how you're sticking your nose into everything. I feel terrible with all these bandages on." He raised his arms. He was taped from hands to his elbows.

"Well, if you're making progress like he said, then you'll have them off soon."

"That's when I'll feel better," he said. "Because that's when I'll be able to take a poke at you."

I knew he didn't mean it. "I'm sorry, Sheriff. I was only trying to get to the bottom of things. And since you were laid up, I didn't want to put you to any trouble."

"Oh, boy," he said. "Now you're sounding like a politician. Tell me, Steve, what's eating you? Maybe, helpless as I am, I'll know the answer and can help you. What's bugging you now?"

"That hearse from Happy Hills."

"He doesn't let up on that one, Pop. You'd better put two men on it right away," Minerva said. "If you don't, he'll probably get himself killed and buried

there so he can find out what it's all about."

"Thanks a lot, Minerva," I said. She sure knew how to get me in more trouble.

"Okay," Sheriff Landry said. "You're interested in the hearse marked Happy Hills. You're suspicious of the driver because you think you saw the nurse who delivered the bomb that day get into it and drive away."

"Among other things."

"What other things?" he growled. "I thought I gave you enough rope right there."

"I was talking to that woman out at Mucker's Swamp yesterday," I said. "You know, the witch. The one who predicted you would open the box that was hot and would explode."

"Fine," he said. "She did pretty well on that one. But she never told me about you, and you're a lot more trouble."

"Well," I said. "Anyway, she read my mind while there was a demon out there trying to get at me . . ."

"Oh, brother," Sheriff Landry said. "Somebody get me to a hospital. I think I'm going to be ill."

"Okay, Sheriff," I told him. "You can kid if you want to. But the witch looked into my mind when I recalled that incident. And she said: 'So that's who it is. Well, no wonder!' Then she turned to the demon outside our circle. They're invisible, like she says, but you could tell he was there. And she said: 'I know your party. We've had dealings before. At other times and other places. He has no authority here.'"

"Oh, *brother!*" Minerva said.

The Sheriff raised his bandaged arms. "She said that to this demon there that you couldn't see?"

"That's right," I said. "His name was Ochnotinos."

"What happened to that other one? That Baalzaphon."

"I don't know," I said. "She's not sure if he ever came either. But Baalzaphon was one of hers. This one I'm telling you about works for the other guy, the

one she said was his master. The one in the hearse from Happy Hills."

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Yeah. She chased the demon away with a funny kind of spell, saying his name shorter and shorter until he disappeared."

"Now there's a trick I'd like to master," he said.

"Then she told me she wasn't sure but he was most likely a bad guy, full of evil stuff, some kind of black magician. And she'd send me a message when she was sure."

"Great," the Sheriff said. "And did she?"

I nodded, forgetting he couldn't see now. "Last night. While Minerva and I were watching TV. She came on and spoke to me."

"I think you'd better call that Dr. Downey back," Sheriff Landry said to Minerva. "This boy is sicker than I am."

"No, honest, Pop. She did. I saw it, too. She came right on TV. Right in the middle of that new show about witches. Channel 7."

"I must be dreaming all this," Sheriff Landry said. "It must be those new miracle drugs the doc is trying out on me."

"Honest, Pop. Sinbad was there too."

"I'll take his word for things any day," he said. "That dog wouldn't lie to an old friend. What was the message?"

"It was kind of peculiar," I said. "She said it would be like a riddle. The set went black."

"What?" he growled.

"The picture faded off. And the set went black."

"It did, Pop. Maybe she blew the tube."

"You know she didn't, Minerva. She made it go black to let me know we were facing black magic. That means that guy in that hearse from the Happy Hills graveyard."

"Okay," Sheriff Landry said. "Now hear this." He waved his arms. "Do I have everybody's attention?"

I'm sorry I don't have the ability to pop through the air and jump into your TV set. The only way I can talk is in person. Is everybody listening?"

"Sure, pop."

"Right, Sheriff. Shoot," I said.

"Okay," he said wearily. "I know we run a dumb old-fashioned police department out in the sticks and without the marvels of modern witchcraft. The city can't afford demons, or they won't take the civil service exams. So we have to use real people. I've a few dumb detectives working for me. Sometimes they find out things I want to know. When there's any big crime, you'd be amazed at how efficiently they can work without having to use magic circles or spells. Anyway, I put them to work on a peculiar assignment. I know a kid who saw a nurse deliver a bomb in a hospital. The fact that it exploded and I got hurt isn't material. Delivering a bomb in the hospital, or any place, is. I know the boy usually tells the truth. He told me about a hearse waiting outside and his suspicion that he thought—*thought*, right?—that this nurse with the platinum-blond hair, limp, and soft voice got into it and drove away. The hearse was marked Happy Hills. Well, believe it or not, our detectives went out there and found out a few things. They may not be interesting but they happen to be facts."

"Why aren't they interesting, Sheriff?" I asked.

"Because," he said, "people usually only like to hear what they want to hear. And I'm sure you won't like to hear the facts or even find them interesting. You won't, because they'll kick your legs right from under you. You think you're on to something. Maybe you won't be so sure now."

"Okay," I said. "So tell me already."

"Fine," he said. "I appreciate an open mind. Number one: Happy Hills is a cemetery. Privately owned. Two: The owner is a man named Bert Gamsun. Three: There are no platinum-haired blonde or any other hair-style nurses working for Gamsun at Happy

Hills. Four: Gamsun is not only a cemetery owner but happens to be a resident of our fair town of Hampton. Five: Not only is Gamsun a resident, but he happens to be on excellent terms with the village, necessary for his job. He happens also to be a member of the board of the City Council. In fact, Gamsun is the chairman, more-or-less acting head of that noble dedicated selfless group.

"Checking further, Detective Lieutenant Tarsh and Detective Sergeant Hare unearthed another curious fact. Gamsun and Mr. Barker are old friends. They are both members of the council and Gamsun helped get Barker in. He is also a large depositor at Barker's bank. Small facts but at variance with a theory one might hold of Gamsun possibly being party to a plot to assassinate Barker."

"I don't think you've convinced him, Pop," Minerva said. "Steve's got his lower lip stuck way out."

"That comes from having a bulldog," he said. "What don't you like about it?"

"Well, you say they're facts but they don't sound like they mean much. I mean, they could be buddies but they could still have a falling out some time. Maybe it's even a good alibi for him. And as far as working on the city council, so what? Last year I remember we had a fellow on there who was caught for bribery."

"He's tough," Sheriff Landry said, to Minerva. "Keep that in mind, if you ever marry him. You'll never be able to pull the wool over his eyes."

"What I'd like to know," I said, "is, who is this Gamsun? Is he the one that drove the hearse that day?"

"He's the one," Sheriff Landry said.

"How come he's the driver if he owns the place?"

"He owns the hearse. He has a license to drive. If he feels like driving, what law is he breaking?"

I couldn't think of any. "Maybe the nurse doesn't work for him at his place. Maybe they just know each

other. And they teamed up on this job."

"Maybe," said the Sheriff. "All you have to do is prove it. A little evidence is all we need. If you don't have any, maybe you can say some magic words or something that will reveal everything crystal clear."

I had to laugh. "Sheriff, don't remind me of those magic words. They're real jaw breakers. Some of them are in Latin, or Hebrew or Egyptian. Some she admitted just making up because they sound good. Some are words that she just says backwards."

"Nothing like a good scientific background, I always say," he said with a grin.

Then it hit me. "Mrs. Dow," I yelled. "That's just like Mrs. Wood—backwards, I mean." He didn't fall off his bed. "You get it? Dow, Wod. *Almost* Wood."

"Very interesting," he said. "*Almost* is always good reliable evidence. But I'm glad you mentioned Mrs. Wood because I think I've got something that will interest you."

"You found her with a map or diary?" I had heard of a few cases like that, where the criminals map everything out and go out and do it, and then forget to get rid of their notes.

"Not exactly. But I'm sure that you know the police are always interested in one thing. If they're the least bit suspicious, you have to provide an alibi. They can show the motive, but if you have the alibi, you're out of it. Right?"

"Sure," I was pretty sure they didn't have any motive against Mrs. Wood. What for? Also for what?

"Naturally, in this case, we have no charge against Mrs. Wood. Apart from her being my housekeeper, I can't think of a possible motive. As far as I'm concerned, you're entitled to your suspicions and that's that. If you can prove anything, we'd have a case. The only trouble is, you would have a hard time making a charge because it so happens Mrs. Wood has not only an iron clad alibi but the word of a witness completely above suspicion."

"Like who?" I said.

"Me," he answered. My eyes goggled. He didn't see that through his bandages but he must have known because he showed me that famous long-toothed wolf grin. "I'm the witness who can guarantee her alibi."

"How come?"

"I called my house a few minutes before you got here. She answered it. As you know, a person can't be in two places at the same time. She was at my home so it was physically impossible for her to be here in the hospital delivering a bomb to Mr. Barker at the same time."

I thought about it. She couldn't have made it even if she went jet by broomstick.

"No comment?" he asked.

"You made the call from here? From the hospital?" He said he had. "From the pay phone?"

"No," he said. "The house phone. I used the hospital operator. Cops don't use their own money. What's your point?"

"Do you know positively and for sure that Mrs. Wood wasn't in the hospital at that time, maybe near the operator who works the switchboard?"

He thought a moment and licked his thin lips.

"No, I don't."

"That's my point," I said. Then I got out of there fast before he threw the bed at me.

18. Riddle of the Red Grimoire

I made it down the stairs and through the long hospital corridor and out the building and nobody came to fit me into a strait jacket. I was walking fast along the main street of our new village when I heard my name called.

"Steve. Hey, Steve!"

I turned and saw Herky Krakower smiling out of a car window.

"Hi, Herk. What are you doing here?"

His thin white hand patted a pile of books next to him. "I had to pick up some reading. My mom drove me down and now I'm waiting till she finishes some of her own shopping."

Herky has finished practically all the good books in both the school and town libraries and now has to buy his own. Being that intelligent is an expensive hobby. "Holy mackerel," I said. "What's all this?"

Herky shrugged his thin shoulders. "I've read a few of them before. I like some of them a lot. You can borrow whatever you like, Steve."

I shook my head and thanked him. "Maybe some other time, Herk. Right now I got problems."

"Like the witch of Mucker's Swamp?" he asked. His eyes were large and black, shining as always with interest. "Anything new there?"

"It's kind of wild, Herky. I don't even know how to explain it to you. I know you won't laugh but it's all kind of crazy." He was looking at me intently, as if hanging on every word. "As a matter of fact, I'm going there now to see her again."

You couldn't mistake the expression on his face. *Take me along*, it said. I chewed on my lip. It wasn't such a bad idea. I was well over my ears now in guessing and knew I couldn't hope to get by that way. What I needed fast was something like instant intelligence. And here it was, staring me right in the face. *Herky Krakower*.

Without thinking, I said, "It might be kind of dangerous, Herk."

He nodded without changing expression and I felt like an idiot. He'd had polio, as dangerous an experience as anything I could think of, and from complete paralysis forced himself to walk and talk again. Then he'd gone through the years of adjusting to life as a boy growing up crippled and partially deformed be-

cause his spine was still slightly twisted. That's not easy for a kid when everybody else is out running around playing games and seeing how far they can jump or throw things. Kids are rough on cripples. Even his name Herky was part of that. It was a nickname, for Hercules of course. I'd fallen into it like everybody else. His real name was Herman. But he didn't mind. Possibly because he had such a fantastic mind he was above feeling self-conscious or sorry for himself.

"All right," I said. "Do you want to hear all about it first? Or just come along and take pot luck?"

He smiled. "Either way. It doesn't make any difference. Let's just wait a second until my mother comes out of that store so she won't wonder what happened to me."

While we waited I filled him in, skipping no details of the events to date. Herky's brain is like a computer, an efficient machine that just needs facts to digest. Then it provides the answer.

I told him, "So far I don't have too many facts. It's all mostly guessing and supposing."

"Suppositions can be misleading," he said quickly, "but intuitive response can't be ignored either."

"Is that what I got?" I grinned. "Sheriff Landry thinks it's rocks in the head."

Herky's mother came up to the car then, carrying a load of packages. I helped her get them into the car.

"Thank you, Steve," she said. "How's your mother?"

I said she was fine; then, "Can I borrow Herk for a little while, Mrs. Krakower? I need some help."

She looked at him.

"And I need the fresh air and experience," he said.

She slid behind the wheel. "Where to, boys?" she asked.

I told her as I got in. "Mucker's Swamp."

Herky must get his brains and fine disposition from her. She didn't bat her eyes, make any funny sounds or curl her lips.

"Fine," she said. "Mucker's Swamp coming up."

Fifteen minutes later she pulled up on the hardtop back road lined with scrub pines.

"Have fun, boys," she said. She didn't ask how we'd get back. She didn't ask Herky what time he would like to be picked up. She didn't tell him to be careful. She waved and drove away. A real good mother. Just like mine.

We cut across the road. I found the narrow lane cut out of the thick undergrowth that led to her cottage.

"Look out for the goat," I warned. "He's not friendly."

We reached the tree he was tethered to. I was right: he wasn't friendly. He wasn't even living.

I stooped to look him over. I didn't see any blood from a bullet hole or a knife wound. Nothing. "What killed him?" I wondered out loud.

Herky's finger stabbed downward to the goat's chalklike filmy eyes. They were wide open. "Fright," Herky said. "That was one scared goat."

"Yeah, I suppose so," I said. "But what scared him?"

"Probably the same thing that's scaring us right now," he said. "The unknown. Come on."

He was right. I was suddenly scared. Somehow, even though the little white witch had done some silly things that didn't make sense, I had the idea that she could take good care of herself if she had to. The fact her goat was dead indicated something wrong, that maybe she wasn't as powerful as I figured nor as feared by all the demons and spirits as she thought.

We reached the cottage and I called her name and knocked on the door without getting a response. I shot a questioning look at Herky.

"That's what we're here for," he said, a lot calmer about everything than I was. "To unravel all the mysteries."

"Mrs. Hepburn?" I called, opening the door. We walked inside. It was a small modest house, too small

to hold any secrets. A parlor, living room, bedroom and bath. The doors were open and it was obvious the witch of the house wasn't home.

Herk and I came back to the kitchen, a small nook just off the living room. The round cloth-covered table where she had served me tea held two cups and two saucers. No cookie dish. I wondered who her company was. And what happened to her.

Herky was kneeling in front of the living room fireplace, where a black skillet hung from a hook set in the firewall. He lifted his hand and opened it to show me.

"Ashes, Herky? What about it?" Not too surprising a discovery in a fireplace.

"They're warm," he said. "Here. Feel."

I touched them. They were warm. "So she made a fire last night to keep warm."

He didn't answer and kept poking around in the ashes with his bare hands. I figured eventually he'd come upon a real hot cinder and then he'd have some of that experience he had mentioned wanting earlier.

He withdrew his hand suddenly and cried, "I've got one!"

"Congratulations. So now you know how to get a blister. Come on, Herk."

I was intent on looking over the room for some clues to the witch's disappearance, but I saw Herky open his hand gray with ashes, and something light and brown-colored roll out.

"Look at this," he said.

"It's a cookie, Herk. She makes pretty good ones, too. But we didn't come here to eat . . ."

He brought his hand down hard. I hate to say it, but that's how the cookie crumbled. He flicked the broken pieces apart revealing a small piece of paper.

"Maybe her egg business wasn't so hot and she's gone into making fortune cookies," I said.

Herky shook his head, studying the piece of paper. "Aleuromancy," he said. "Messages enclosed in dough

and prophetic of the future. The Chinese got the idea from the magicians."

"Okay. So what does it say? That we're going on a trip?"

He kept studying the paper until I got a little annoyed. I'd forgotten Herky loved to read. He's read anything. Even a box-top. He handed it to me. There was just one word:

TEMURA

It sounded almost like a person with the Scotch accent saying *tomorrow*. If she meant that, then what did *tomorrow* mean? And was it possible she couldn't spell?

Herky's mind, working differently, made his eyes shine with excitement. "It's a word from the Kabalah," he said.

"Okay. So what does it mean?"

"The Kabalah is made up of all the ancient Hebrew writing on magic. It has to do with spirits and demons and ways of controlling them. This is a very important word, Steve."

I was fed up with crazy words that had no meaning for me, and very surprised that Herky with all his really great scientific and mathematical knowledge would admit that a magic word was important.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's a key word of a branch of the Kabalah that has to do with mystic operations. It involves anagrams, names of demons and spirits, and other occult matter. It's written in a secret language only, you see. The words or numbers will be permutations. All mixed up. Something like a cipher."

"Since when did you take up Hebrew, Herk?"

"I just started," he said, "so I know a few words. This one TEMURA is the key. It has six letters. It means we have to find something in the amount of six, Steve."

“Six?”

I ran back to the kitchen. I counted the cups and saucers again. Only four, all together. There were three chairs. I looked around. Five windows. Two doors. There weren't six of anything to be seen.

Herky, stirring the ashes with a poker now, dug something out and flipped it out to the floor. Another cookie, which he broke open. It had a small piece of white paper inside. I ran over.

“What does that one say?” I asked.

“It doesn't matter now,” he said excitedly. “It means we're on the right track. The six will be in cookies. Come on.”

We both dug like crazy through the pile of ashes. I found a couple and Herky some more. Then I saw one fallen under the grate. “Okay,” I said. “Number six coming up.”

We got the cookies in a pile and started smashing them, both so excited neither of us thought of tasting one. Herky smoothed and arranged the six little pieces of paper.

“Remember,” he said. “It will be a message but it won't make sense. Not until we rearrange it some way that it does.”

I looked down at the papers. “Oh, boy! You weren't kidding.” Each paper had one letter on it.

NGMASU

“This can be difficult,” Herky said, staring at the pieces of paper. “It might spell out a name that neither of us will know or recognize.” He started shuffling them around and spreading them out again, like a game. “Wait a second,” he said. I was glad I had Herky along now. I watched him lift one from the end and push it to the middle, take one from the left and put it on the other end. “Here's something,” he said. “Does that hit you anywhere?”

The papers now spelled MAGNUS.

I scratched my head.

"Magnus," Herky said dreamily. "Magnus," he said again. I waited, knowing in a second or two that million-candle-power brain of his would go through 40,000 or so things he had come across in his reading. "Famous magician," he said, "Bishop of Ratisbon."

"Never heard of him," I said.

Herky didn't mind my talking. His computer kept clicking. "Middle ages. Period 1206 to 1280. Instructor to Thomas Aquinas . . ."

"Who? Who you got there, Herk?"

"Alchemist . . . Philosopher's stone . . . Android," he said. Then he smiled. "Of course, Albertus Magnus. He made a bronze android. It kept talking. Thomas Aquinas couldn't study. It drove him crazy. He smashed it. He became a saint much later on," Herky added with a smile.

"Hey, wait a second." I heard the words switch on in my head again. *Ofano, Oblamo, Ospergo*. I said them out loud: "Ofano. Oblamo. Ospergo."

"That's great, Steve. Where did you learn that?"

"The witch," I yelled. "She was telling me about this Magnus the magician. She had her book out, the old one her family used for magic. She was checking on one of his banishment spells . . ." I looked wildly around the room and spied the dusty red cover on the floor under the rocker. I dived for it. "I forget what she called it. But it's still here."

Herky held the old book tenderly, his pale skin flushed, his eyes blacker than I had ever seen them.

"The Red Grimoire," he said softly, opening it almost reverently. He chose a few random pages, looked at the old faded writing and diagrams, then closed the book almost wistfully.

"This book is priceless," he said. "It's hundreds of years old."

"That's what she said, Herk. She didn't mention all you did about this fellow Magnus, just some, about how great he was. Okay, so we found out his name with her fortune cookies. So what? Magnus is dead,

right? According to you he lived till 1280."

"I was wrong," Herky said slowly. "He's still alive."

I looked at his shining eyes and flushed face. I touched his skin. It was so hot it almost burned me. "Herky," I yelled. "Are you running a fever? How could a guy who lived in the Middle Ages and taught St. Thomas Aquinas—you've got to be kidding. Almost 700 years and he's *still living*?"

Herky looked down at the floor, slightly embarrassed. His hands moved nervously. When he took them away, I looked and kept looking, and my jaw dropped. I'm surprised it didn't hit the floor.

The letters, rearranged, now spelled: GAMSUN!

"Bert Gamsun!" I yelled. "That creepy guy from the hearse. Happy Hills!"

Herky nodded. I looked at the papers with a sudden sick feeling, my throat feeling too tight for me all of a sudden.

"Herky, I know you're smart. Don't take advantage of my stupidity. Are you trying to tell me that Albertus Magnus and this guy Bert Gamsun are the same man?"

Herky shook his head. He looked at me patiently.

"I'm not," he said earnestly. "That's what *she* said. The witch who lives here. That's her message."

"Holy mackerel," I said.

19. The Trail of the Beast

We probably would have stayed looking for more clues, trying to make more sense out of the mixed-up message the witch had left, but Herky suddenly lifted his head.

"Somebody's outside, Steve."

I keep forgetting that Herky's so sensitively attuned he gets vibrations faster than anybody. I looked out

the front room window. Somebody or something was moving in the high grass near the pines.

"Let's go," I said. Herky was still holding the big old red book and looked around for some place to leave it. "No, Herk. You better hold on to it. We don't want that to fall into the wrong hands now. When we find the witch, we'll give it back to her."

His face lit up with delight. "You mean we're going to find her?" He shook his head puzzled. "How, Steve?"

I didn't exactly know but it comforted me to have Herky puzzled over anything. I tapped the old book of magic spells.

"Just read some of that. It tells ways for getting rid of people. Maybe it's got something about how to bring them back."

"Swell," he said, very pleased.

"And if that doesn't work, maybe I'll be able to think of something else." I took another fast look out the window. Approaching the cottage was what appeared to be a man walking crouched over. "Let's go, Herk. Out the back."

We left everything as it was. Herky held on tight to the old book. I knew it was very heavy but also knew what carrying it meant to him, so I didn't offer to play big shot and take it for him. We swung around the side of the house. The tall weeds and brackish marsh were only a few steps away. I had an idea.

"Do you mind getting your feet wet, Herk?"

"Of course not," he said, his cheeks red-spotted with growing excitement.

"Okay. Then follow me."

I stepped into the ooze of Mucker's Swamp. Herky followed without hesitation. He held the old book high on his chest. He didn't want *that* to get wet. We were covered on all sides by the high wild-growing canebrake. I cut to the right, slogging along a narrow channel that intersected others, staying as close to the inner edge as I dared. I wanted to get a good look at

what was coming toward the cottage of the witch Aurelia.

I looked back at Herky. I'd been slightly optimistic when I asked how he felt about getting his feet wet. He was up to his hips in the swamp water, the big red book balanced on top of his head, held carefully by his thin extended arm. There was a strange look of contentment on his face, as though he had solved the fifth dimension. I'd forgotten Herky's world was in books and that he never had any real opportunity for adventuring.

I slowed him up with a hand signal and waded close to the edge. I waved him up and he came alongside me. I carefully parted enough of the cane for us both to look through.

"Well, it's human anyway," I whispered to Herky.

The man was heavy-shouldered and towheaded, the lightest hair I had ever seen on a grown man. His suit looked neat and expensive, his face hard, his nose as if it had been smashed. His eyes were narrow slits as he neared the door, looked quickly around, and put his hand inside his coat.

I heard a soft humming sound. "What's that?"

"Beethoven's Fifth," Herky said. He kept adventure at a high level.

The husky man at the door jerked his hand out of his coat. I saw the yellow shoulder holster and then the dull gleam of his snub-nosed gun. He stood to the side of the door, threw it open quickly, then stepped inside and closed it behind him.

"Now, Herk," I said.

We splashed through the swamp fast and near the road grabbed a clump of high weeds and pulled ourselves out. Herky had a little trouble holding the book but shook his head and set his lips when I offered my hand for it. I tried to kick some of the water out of my sneakers, but it didn't help much. I was soggy all over.

We skirted the thick undergrowth and came out on

the black hardtop where I pointed silently ahead to the dark sedan parked in the pines. We approached slowly and found it empty. The towheaded man was doing his own job.

"Watch the house," I told Herky, who turned his head and looked down at me open-mouthed. "He's got too much air in his tires. We don't want him to have a blow-out."

He smiled and went back to Beethoven's Fifth.

Afterward, we slogged along the narrow two-lane road that cut back to town. There wasn't a house in sight. Thin straggly pines lined the flat ribbon of tar gashed between them. We passed a staging area for a garbage dump that marked the innermost point of Mucker's Swamp. We were both soaking wet but the sun was out and, if we didn't get a lift, we would be dry by the time we reached town.

Herky looked down at the muck and mire he was wearing over his clothes. "That was fun," he said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." He was a mess from head to foot, too. "Do you think you'll catch heck for coming home this way?"

"What?" He looked surprised, followed my eyes, then shook his head and smiled. "Oh, no. It's the best thing that ever happened to me. This is the dirtiest I've ever been." He wore the muck of the swamp as if it were a badge of honor.

Nobody was following us. I wondered who the towheaded man was. He looked tough, like a gangster or fighter, but why would he need a gun for a visit to the witch? She wasn't dangerous.

"That fellow Barker threatened to get even if she didn't do what he wanted," I said. "Maybe he hired that fellow we saw."

"I doubt that," Herky said thoughtfully. "It would be a little too obvious. He might be a government man."

My head snapped around. "What gave you that idea?"

"I was thinking about Dr. Van Noord's disappearance," he said. "It might tie up with Barker. Evidently he knew your witch was psychic and clairvoyant. Possibly what he wanted from her was some indication of Van Noord's current work. It could be very commercial."

"Van Noord? I thought he was a mathematics professor or something."

Herky nodded. "Higher mathematics, Steve. He's a physicist really. He specializes in auditory phenomena. New perceptions in the ultrasonic field."

"What good would that do Barker?"

"I've read some of Van Noord's papers. Some of his inventions would have a pretty far-reaching effect on the world. They would by-pass a lot of our standard signals of TV transmission, radio and telephone."

"Inventions?" Then I remembered Barker's conversation with Sheriff Landry about the garage door that his friend Van Noord had rigged up for him. It opened at the sound of his car. That it had fallen on Barker perhaps wasn't Van Noord's fault. It had worked, which meant Van Noord could be a practical inventor, as Herky said. "But Barker said Van Noord was his friend. Why would he want to steal his friend's invention?"

Herky smiled. "He's a banker, isn't he? Aware of the advantages of money and making it work for him? Van Noord hasn't been in this country long. How well could Barker have actually known him?"

"You're right, Herk." I recalled more of Barker's talk with the Sheriff. "He did him that favor of helping get some of his frozen overseas assets unfrozen. Van Noord made the garage door to repay the favor. Using some electronic principle, he said."

Herky nodded. "Let's assume Barker learned Van Noord was working on something else. Something really important. He might have dropped some hint, Barker wanted to know what it was, and Van Noord

wouldn't talk. He'd paid off his obligation. His other work was no concern of Barker's."

"And Van Noord told him to go jump in the lake?"

"Something like that. Barker's visit to the witch makes sense then. He spoke of a mysterious invention, you said. It could be Van Noord's. He figured the witch could by-pass Van Noord's refusal to talk and deal directly with his mental processes."

"Then she told him to go jump in the lake too. But how does the government man come in?"

"Van Noord's disappearance. This country might have a stake in his work. Barker's gone. Then the witch, a known sensitive and clairvoyant."

I thought about it. This was Sheriff Landry's territory. "I didn't think she was that well known," I said. "She hasn't been here too long. She doesn't get around much."

"Minerva knew. You and I knew. Barker knew. Sheriff Landry knew, too. He can put two and two together better than you or I, Steve. He's an intelligent man and this is his line of work. If he weren't in the hospital possibly he might not have called in government men this quickly."

"We don't know if she's really disappeared yet, though," I said. "She might just be out, selling some of her eggs, or her herbs or something, like she does for a living."

Herky patted the big red book. "Magnus," he said, bringing me back to it. "And Bert Gamsun."

"I can't figure that one out," I said. "I saw this guy Gamsun. He looks creepy, all right, but he isn't seven hundred years old. Forget it. He can't be the same one."

Herky whistled a few bars. "He doesn't have to be. Perhaps he just thinks he is."

My jaw dropped again. "Thinks he is? What good would that do?" Then I remembered the demon Ochnotinos. The message of the witch. Black magic. Somebody she had dealt with before. Other times.

Other places. Her words to the demon. "You think Gamsun is a descendant of Albertus Magnus, and changed his name deliberately?"

"Why not? Magicians spend their lives learning the secrets of dealing with the occult world. That knowledge is too valuable to be lost. When they die, they pass it on. They try to keep it in the family, like craftsmen with special skills. Many of today's secret societies carry on ancient traditions and precepts. They don't just die out."

That was the way it had been with Aurelia Hepburn. Born a witch, she had said. Seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. All her life and that of her family, all the way back to the old Druids, concerned with magic. All witches. The Red Grimoire that Herky held right now: visible proof of carrying on, not letting the gift die; the magic of the ages between its worn old covers.

"Do you think Albertus Magnus was a black magician?"

"I don't think so," Herky said. "He was experienced in alchemy, said to possess the philosopher's stone which made possible the transmutation of metals, and more. He wrote many papers on occult phenomena. He was a famous European philosopher and theologian. Later, Bishop of Ratisbon. And instructor to Thomas Aquinas, so we can safely assume he was no black magician. His android has never been explained, however. But there is historical reference to it. We don't know what it said or how it worked. All we know is, it talked."

"Why do you think Gamsun changed his name?"

Herky shrugged. "There's an old superstition that if a man's secret name is discovered, then he loses his power. That's why you have a lot of names like Man-who-walks-like-a-Bear or Chief-Running-Horse. The fact that Gamsun is an anagram or permutation of Magnus makes me think it's something of that nature."

"What if the original Magnus was okay, just a good

man who discovered some secrets about magic and passed them on? Then, maybe somewhere down the line, somebody finds out there's something to this stuff he can really use and make out with."

Herky smiled. "That's humanly possible, of course." He made his calculation. "You have about ten generations of them to deal with."

"Fine," I said. "Maybe it started out all innocent but there's been a change in the family tree. According to the witch, Gamsun represents black magic. That means, besides making some pact with the Devil, he's using his magic for reasons of his own, his own power and all that. She thought he sent that demon after us. If he did, he knows his stuff."

"Demon?" Herky asked.

I'd forgotten to tell him that part. I did now, the entire incident, ending with how the witch had driven him off. Herky's eyes were sparkling.

"That's why you better read her book," I said. "It might come in handy."

Herky laughed. "I'd better start now," he said. He opened it and a small piece of paper fluttered out. Herky closed the cover again and started after the paper; I did too. It swirled in the air, caught by an updraught, and floated there just beyond our reach, drifting over the road. I jumped up the bank and snagged it before it drove me any crazier.

"It's probably the most important magic spell in the whole book," Herky said contritely. "I'm sorry, Steve."

I read the piece of paper and shook my head. "This is something else."

Herky read it out loud: "Beware the Beast who is Magus 6." He looked at me. "A message from the witch?" I shrugged. "We found out who Magus 6 was when we did the TEMURA anagram. That told us it was Magnus."

I folded the strip of paper and stuck it in my pocket. "Magnus or Gamsun. Now we know he's got a

third name. The Beast. Right?" Herky nodded in agreement. "The Beast," I repeated. "If we didn't know it before, she wants us to know it now. We got to beware of him."

"Or *it*," Herky said cheerfully.

20. One of Us Is Missing

We walked another mile. Then a small panel truck swung out of a side road, heading toward town. The telephone company repairman driving it saw us when we waved and stopped. He didn't have any more calls and drove us all the way into the village, Herky asking him questions about impulses and transmission and bouncing signals off the moon and our satellites, some of which the man was able to answer, a lot he couldn't. He was fascinated by Herky though, and couldn't get over the fact that this skinny little kid knew more about electronics than he did. He had about run out of answers when he finally let us off and I think he was a little relieved. He drove away, shaking his head, looking back at Herky as if he were a Martian in disguise.

We caught the next town bus heading out to the Point. As Herky dropped off at his stop, a little closer to town than mine, he hefted the big book under his arm and called back, "Thanks again, Steve."

We had dried out some but our clothes were still a soggy mess, and as he walked away with the halting twisting step the polio bug had left him I couldn't help wondering what he was thanking me for.

It was a little after noon when I got to my house. My mom was out shopping. Sinbad gave me a great reception. I told him to cool it till I took a shower and got that Mucker's Swamp muck off me and into some clean clothes. Then I told him all about it.

"Okay, that's about it," I said, later.

Sinbad nodded his head and let one eyelid droop.

"Let's try to keep awake until I finish," I told him. "There's still something important and maybe you got an idea. Herky thinks the man with the gun was maybe government on account of this Mynheer Van Noord disappeared. He didn't give me a good reason why the government might think the witch had anything to do with it. Either they think she can guess where Van Noord is or else they suspect she's working with this creep Barker to find out the secret of Van Noord's new invention. If he's not a government man, he's a gangster working for Barker. What's your guess?"

Sinbad wrinkled his brow which had enough wrinkles already. Then he rose suddenly and ran upstairs, me after him. He wheeled into the spare room we had given Minerva, skidded across the boards and rode the runner rug across till he came to the bed. He jumped up on it and faced me and barked.

"Minerva?" I said. "What kind of an answer is that? What's she got to do with it?" It was getting to be late afternoon. "She's with her pop, Sheriff Landry, now," I told Sinbad. "If you miss her, she'll be home soon for dinner."

I went over to drag him off the covers he was upsetting with his big feet. He ducked my hand and grabbed my wrist. Usually when he's feeling very affectionate he holds on like that for a while or else mangles my hand, not meaning to hurt, just showing his love.

"Ouch!" I said. "Let go. That hurts." He released his big jaws and looked at me rubbing my wrist. There was a red line now where he had grabbed me. "Look at that," I said, showing it to him, and he gave me his rumbling parrot growl. That was a message.

The red line on my wrist reminded me suddenly of the bracelet Minerva was wearing, too big for her when Mrs. Wood first gave it to her, now grown so

tight it was rubbing her wrist. Leaving a red line just as Sinbad's strong teeth had.

"Is this supposed to remind me of Minerva's bracelet?"

He started wagging his fanny, very excited.

"Why?" I asked him. "I don't like it and you know it." He put his head down and a deep growl rumbled in his throat. "Okay. You don't like it either. There's nothing we can do about it. It's hers and if she wants to wear it I can't stop her."

Sinbad looked at me for a moment. Then he jumped off the bed and ran down the steps, skidding at the bottom to let himself crash into the front door. He sat there and looked up at me. When I got down he turned his head toward the door and growled, then jumped up, ran to the windowseat and started his deep chest-rumbling growl. I parted the curtain and looked out. There wasn't anybody there. He started to bark, the deep heavy bark he rarely uses.

"Are you trying to remind me about last night?" I asked him. "When she went sleep-walking?"

Sinbad made himself shake again. Then suddenly he leaned forward and kissed me, a nice wet slobbering kiss.

"Thanks a lot," I said. "But what's her bracelet got to do with her sleep-walking last night?"

Sinbad couldn't help me there. He just looked up at me, his jaw thrust out and clenched tightly, his big sad face jutting on the thick white neck, his eyes shining with interest. His deep voice rumbled in his massive chest. I shook my head. I didn't get the connection.

"You think the bracelet had something to do with her sleep-walking?" That set his little bobbed tail going. "How can a bracelet do that?"

I tried to remember the entire incident. Minerva at the head of the stairs, her arms outstretched, then walking down. Me and Sinbad below, my mom coming out, Minerva walking up again. I could see her in

the silvery shaft of moonlight waiting near the window in that absolutely still scary position, asleep on her feet yet able to move, her expression like a statue's. That spellbound look . . .

Spellbound. I remembered the humming sound that came from outside, the dark car moving up the hill without lights. And after it had gone the humming ceased and Minerva dropped into bed as casually as if she'd never left it.

I looked at Sinbad. I made the humming sound. He growled and barked his head off.

"You're even worse than I am," I told him. "You want me to think this Gamsun was outside in his hearse making that humming sound? That Mrs. Wood gave Minerva that bracelet, and somehow, together, they were working black magic on Minerva through the bracelet to get her out of here?"

Sinbad absolutely went wild, running around the room, jumping on and off the sofa, on and off Pop's favorite chair which is off-limits to him, into the kitchen and out, up and down the stairs. He was in a whirling mad frenzy and he worked off a lot of steam before finally clattering down with his tongue hanging out and breathing hard.

"Bulldogs are supposed to be unemotional," I told him. "Since you became this famous dog detective you've changed your whole outlook on things."

He was still very excited so I took him outside. Sinbad didn't understand, of course, that I was in enough trouble already with a lot of suspicions and no facts. This new one was the daddy of them all. I could just see myself telling the Sheriff his daughter was wearing a black-magic bracelet and being possessed by black witchcraft.

I got Sinbad back inside and called Sheriff Landry's room at the hospital. He answered, talking through his teeth, so I knew he was getting better.

"Hi, Sheriff," I said. "How you coming along?"

Great, he said. Another mile of bandages off, only

a new half mile put on. I asked if Minerva was still there so I could talk to her.

"She left here a couple of hours ago, Steve. What time is it now, three? She left around noon, saying something about making a social call. I guess she wanted to see some of her friends as long as she was in town."

"A social call?"

"That's what they call it. Don't ask me why. I didn't invent the language. What kind of trouble have you been sticking your nose in today?"

"Nothing much," I said. "Except that I noticed the witch of Mucker's Swamp has disappeared." He didn't react at all. "Like this professor Van Noord. Like Mr. Barker." I didn't want to go into the fortune cookie thing with Gamsun and Magnus linked up, because he already had his proof that Gamsun was okay.

"Oh, I'm glad you brought that up," he said. "Officer Clancy was in here about an hour ago making a report. He happens to be a depositor at Citizen's Bank. He put in his weekly ten bucks. Now guess whom he saw sitting at Barker's desk."

"Give me a clue."

"He looked like Barker. I'll give you two more. He acted like Barker and he spoke like Barker."

"Did he have a broken leg like Barker?"

Sheriff Landry doesn't laugh too often. He made up for all the years.

"I didn't ask. Okay? What's your guess?"

"Barker," I said, not liking the answer.

"Good boy," he said. "Now what was that again about that witch disappearing?"

"She wasn't home."

"How's your mother?"

"Fine," I said. "I guess."

"Where is she?"

"She isn't home."

"Terrible how everybody is disappearing," he said.

"She only went shopping," I said. "She's got no rea-

son to disappear. She can't read minds or the future like the witch."

"I know, Steve," he said, his voice a lot softer and almost a bit more human. "I just thought I'd remind you. It helps to keep your perspective."

"A man with light hair came to the witch's house. He went in with a gun out," I told him. "He had a gray sedan parked outside."

"What kind of car?" he asked. I told him a new Mustang. "License plate number?" I didn't recall it. "You're a big help," he said. "Do you expect us to stop every new Mustang in town?"

"This one's got a left rear flat tire."

"Oh, boy," he said. "You got your nose in again, haven't you?"

"All the witch does for a living is sell some eggs or some herbs," I said. "If she sold him some rotten eggs, he didn't need a gun to complain."

"All right, Steve. We'll have a man out there," he said. "Anything else?"

"According to Herky, this Van Noord isn't just a fellow who invents ultrasonic doors for a hobby. He's read some of his papers and they're on new ideas in sound perception."

"What about it?"

"Well, considering he's disappeared, I thought I'd remind you how interested Mr. Barker was in the witch reading somebody's mind about a new secret invention."

"Fine," he said. "The trouble with that theory is that Barker has returned, is no longer missing, and is therefore removed from the realm of suspicion."

It sure looked that way. "Okay," I said. "You're the Sheriff."

He thanked me for reminding him. Then he told me to hold it a minute. Somebody was in the room talking to him. He came on again after a few seconds. "Sorry, Steve. I was just talking to Clancy again. He says Minerva talked him into giving her a lift down-

town here. So I imagine she'll be at your house for dinner any minute."

"Okay," I said. "Any idea where he took her?"

"She thought she'd drop in on Mrs. Carleton and see how she was doing."

"Mrs. Carleton?" My stomach twisted funny.

"Yep. I guess you got her worried. Maybe Minerva can clean up for her a little. Mrs. Carleton has done it for us often enough."

"Sure," I said. Then, "Do you know if she was wearing her bracelet?"

"What bracelet?"

"The one Mrs. Wood gave her."

I could see him shaking his bandaged head. "How would I know? I've still got my eyes bandaged. What about it?"

I couldn't tell him. It sounded too stupid and far-fetched. Even for me.

"I just wondered. I think it's too tight for her wrist but she won't listen to me."

He laughed. "Wait till you're married. Then crack down on her."

I told him, yeah, sure; said goodbye and hung up.

Sinbad was waiting. "Minerva's gone," I told him.

21. The Root of Evil

It was nearly dusk when Sinbad and I turned the corner of Maple and headed toward the third tree after the second street light on the long wide street. We were both tired. It was only a twenty-minute ride by bus but a long three-mile hike. That hike happened because somebody took his job seriously.

I had flagged the bus down at the usual stop in front of old Mrs. Teska's general store on Steamboat. I stepped up followed by Sinbad on his leash, my fare

ready. But the driver hastily covered the fare box with his hand.

"Sorry," he said. "No animals." The other drivers and I were old friends; this was a new man, evidently a replacement for somebody on the late shift. "Read the sign," he said.

"We don't smoke."

Wearily, as if he'd been having arguments since he got up, he left his seat to point out the little white sign that said NO ANIMALS PERMITTED ON THIS VEHICLE with a lot of code numbers in small type from the Board of Health and the Police Department and the Motor Vehicle Board. The Fire Department was the only bunch that didn't worry about it.

"All the other drivers know he's no trouble."

"I don't," he said. "Sorry, kid."

"He doesn't sit on the seat. He's housebroken, and I'll even pay his fare,"—something I had never done before.

"Read the sign," he said.

"But this is an emergency!"

He looked at us. I happen to have the kind of face that looks like nothing is ever happening and Sinbad always appears bored and half asleep, ferocious too but very quiet about it.

"Yeah, I'll bet. Sorry, kid, it's my job."

I would have argued some more but some old drunk in the back started yelling at the driver. "Let's get this heap on the road. Ya want me to miss my train?"

I told Sinbad as we stepped off, "They're too fussy. Maybe we'll get a lift." It was the first time in his life he had been kicked off a bus for being an animal.

We waited and waited. An old Chevy passed us up. Then a new Lincoln came breezing along. A thin well-dressed woman sitting in the back asked, "Why are we stopping, Ralph?" She saw me, then when the kid driver opened the door she saw Sinbad. "We can't have a dog in here," she said. "The upholstery."

Ralph looked at me sort of helplessly and shrugged.

I didn't want him to lose his driving privileges, so I said that was okay and closed the door again. Sinbad watched them go, looking very sad. He loves to ride in cars.

"It's okay," I said. "I still love you even if you're an animal, dog, or whatever."

I moved along to the next corner and waited there for some time. There was no traffic at all. We started walking, then waiting, then on again, and that's the way it went. I didn't want Sinbad to get some kind of inferiority complex. We hadn't walked all the way in to town for a long time but I finally decided we'd do it. It would give me a chance to look at any bus making the return to see if Minerva was on it.

If I dared tell anybody that Sinbad had started me thinking Minerva was in danger, there would be funny looks exchanged and head-tapping. Listening to any dog was bad but even worse was paying attention to an English bull, a breed generally considered to be mentally retarded. Sinbad is three years old and reminds me of a kid determined to stay three and never grow up. Admitting to being influenced by that kind of mentality had to put me somewhere in his class.

But I was gripped by uncomfortable and unreasoning fear, a dread I couldn't explain making my heart pound in my chest, my legs move faster. It was the sum of everything now possessing me. All the kooky, strange, mysterious happenings. I couldn't really believe in witches or demons or magic spells, though I'd read and heard about that fantasy world which seemed to be dragging me into it. It was like sinking in quicksand, sand that looked harmless on the surface but sucked you down till your bones were dry.

According to Sheriff Landry, Mr. Barker was back at his job. Maybe that let him off the hook. Professor Van Noord didn't mean anything to me and there were plenty of trained police detectives as well as government men who could track him down without any help from me. Aurelia Hepburn *was* a concern. I liked

her. I couldn't prove that she had actually disappeared though, either, or was in trouble. The messages left in the cookies merely gave Herky and me the facts about Gamsun, about being careful in dealing with him. Mrs. Carleton, having been in the hospital, examined by good doctors and let go, once again wasn't any of my business. Okay, I said to myself, so what *is* my business? Minerva being in some kind of trouble. Think just of her, I told myself.

The big maples on the street where Mrs. Carleton lived were casting long dark shadows when Sinbad and I rounded the corner. In a little while the street lights would go on, but meanwhile there the shadows were for us to pass one by one. Sinbad happens to be of a breed that's not afraid of anything. He's that way naturally. I have to pretend.

He moved steadily ahead pulling me along, head down, his big shoulders rocking in his swaggering sailor gait. The steel leash was taut on his thick studded collar and wrapped twice around my hand so that he wouldn't break away. It took all my strength to hold him. Right now it gave me the confidence I needed to know that, pound for pound, I had the world's best fighting machine at my side.

Twenty yards away, Mrs. Carleton's house looked dark and dismal but as we drew closer I saw a dim light from the side window. A car came down the street, swung in at the curb and parked. I wrapped another fistful of Sinbad's leash around my knuckles and stepped back, holding him tight.

The car was a fairly late model Thunderbird coupe, maybe two years old. In the shadowy dusk it looked black but could have been green. The man who stepped out reached back into the car and brought out a heavy black bag. The street lights came on as he walked around his car to the curb.

It was one more surprise to add to the list: Dr. Downey visiting here.

He crossed the sidewalk, glancing up at the house

number, and without hesitation headed up the walk to knock at Mrs. Carleton's door. Sinbad, held back in the shadows of the trees, didn't make a sound. Then the door opened and closed behind Dr. Downey.

"That was Dr. Downey," I told Sinbad. "He's the one taking care of Sheriff Landry. Now he's making a house call on Mrs. Carleton. Maybe Minerva found her sick and is still here. Maybe we got it all wrong and there's nothing to worry about. Stay loose and follow me."

In a few minutes the living room light went on. It was dim and I guessed it to be the old fringed lamp near the chair I had sat on when Mrs. Carleton became scared and pleaded with me to show more care and respect when speaking of the Devil, or "him."

Well, Dr. Downey was a good young doctor and he probably had dealt with hundreds of other cases of shock and hysteria in his short career. That he was here now made me feel less like a blundering idiot. He would take care of the old lady, give her a shot of one of those miracle drugs, and she would be okay again, big and strong, healthy and happy.

Now if Minerva was still there I could relax. The living room window-sill was narrow and high; I had to jump to get a hand-hold to pull myself up. But I'd forgotten how dirty Mrs. Carleton's windows were. I wet my finger and smeared a blurry patch in the grimy film of the darkened glass.

I couldn't see Minerva. Mrs. Carleton was sitting on her sofa, head thrown back, Dr. Downey leaning over holding her wrist with one hand. With the other he held a long hypodermic needle which he was about to plunge into her arm. I guess he knew what he was doing, but now I was afraid she would be too doped up to answer a lot of important questions.

"Let's go," I told Sinbad. The front door wasn't locked and we walked inside, to Dr. Downey's obvious surprise. His look definitely wasn't one of welcome. He withdrew the needle from her arm and swabbed

it with a bit of cotton. So I was too late.

"Hi, Dr. Downey. Sorry to break in on you like this but I had to see Mrs. Carleton about Minerva. Is she here?"

The little half-blind dog jumped off the sofa and came charging at Sinbad and me, yapping. Sinbad drew back in surprise. The furry dog was so tiny and its bark so weak and high-pitched he evidently could hardly believe it was a dog. He sat down quickly so that he wouldn't crush it accidentally with one of his big feet.

Dr. Downey, putting the needle back in his bag, hadn't answered me. Mrs. Carleton's face was pale, her head lolling back on the top ridge of the sofa. I came over and saw that her eyes were open but unfocused.

"Where's Minerva, Mrs. Carleton?"

Dr. Downey looked sidelong at me, reached for her arm and started taking her pulse. "I doubt that she can answer you," he said. "She was hysterical. I had to give her a sedative."

"How did you know she was sick? Did Minerva call you over?"

"Minerva?"

"Sheriff Landry's daughter. He told me she dropped over to see how Mrs. Carleton was today. A few hours ago."

He gave me an expressive look. "She isn't here now. She didn't call me. I decided to look in on Mrs. Carleton myself. She needs care, obviously."

"That's what I tried to tell you before," I said. "Did you come here straight from the hospital?" He nodded. "Was she there with her father?"

"No," he said. "I just left Sheriff Landry. He didn't say anything about his daughter. Since she wasn't there and has left here, we can assume she's gone home."

I shook my head. "Minerva's staying at my house until her pop gets better. She hasn't come back and

she didn't call. That's why I decided to come down here and investigate."

"I remember," he said, smiling. "You're the investigating type."

"I think something's happened to her."

"Nonsense," he said. "If she hasn't come home yet, perhaps she's doing some shopping or visiting a friend. A movie, or having an ice cream soda."

"I don't think so." I tapped Mrs. Carleton's shoulder. "How are you, Mrs. Carleton? It's Steve. Steve Forrester. What happened to Minerva?"

Sinbad heard me and came trotting over. Perhaps the little half-blind dog yapping and frisking about him made him nervous. Or he might have heard me say Mrs. Carleton's and Minerva's names. He looked up at Mrs. Carleton and a deep rumbling sound came from his throat. It puzzled him that she was different. She didn't make a fuss over him as she used to, and he sensed something was wrong, standing there stiff-legged, his lips spread in that horrible grimace, his lower tusks hooked out, his red eye glaring in the dim living-room light.

"It's okay, Sinbad, she's just sick," I told him.

Mrs. Carleton's eyes fluttered and her lips moved. Maybe she remembered him, after all. I leaned closer.

"Where's Minerva, Mrs. Carleton?"

Her voice came thin and reedy, almost in a wail. "The beast."

My heart pounded and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. "The Beast?" I yelled. "Does he have her?"

Dr. Downey's hand touched my arm. His voice was firm and controlled. "Please don't upset her. The beast she's talking about is evidently your dog. She's afraid of him."

"She's not afraid of Sinbad. We're all old friends. Minerva and me and Mrs. Carleton and Sinbad. She's talking about something else."

"The beast," she said again.

"Where did he take her? Come on."

Dr. Downey's arm pushed me away. "Stop that," he said. "She's in no condition to be questioned."

"You don't understand," I said. "This is serious. You see this beast is someone who . . ."

I stopped. When you're talking to a medical man and tell him a beast is someone not *something*, you're not going to reach him. I knew that immediately from the look in his eyes. They mocked me.

"Yes?"

I shook my head. I never could explain it to him, not in a million years. Too weird.

His hand was searching for Mrs. Carleton's pulse again. She was wearing a dark-stained bracelet over her wrist, like Minerva's. I couldn't remember Mrs. Carleton having it on the last time I was here, but then her sleeve hadn't been rolled up for a shot in the arm. Dr. Downey frowned. He tried to push the bracelet higher so he could take her pulse. It didn't move.

"That's much too tight," he murmured. He searched for a clasp to open it, without success, shook his head and reached into his medical bag for a thin long-nosed tool. "It's handy for removing buried fish-hooks," he said. "Let's see." Using it like pliers he got a purchase on the bracelet, turned his wrist, and there was a snapping crackling sound. The bracelet fell away. It hadn't merely opened. It had crumbled.

"Yik!" The odor released was so bad I had to turn my head away.

Dr. Downey stared at the broken fragments. "As brittle as antimony," he said. "I could have sworn it was silver."

I picked up a piece and rubbed it between my fingers. It crumbled easily to a soft reddish-purple powder with an odor so pungent and disturbing it made my head swim. Giddily, I held the powder in my hand out to him.

"What is it—do you know?"

He brushed the powder from my hand to his and put the tip of his tongue to a speck of it. His face was strangely rigid.

I asked him again, "What is it?"

He bit his lip. "Mandragora." He took a small envelope from inside his coat and shook the powder into it. "Incredible," he said. Then he collected all the other little pieces and crumbs of the bracelet that had fallen apart so easily, and added them to the envelope.

"What's Mandragora?"

"A very strange plant," he said quietly, "with a legendary history that goes back to Helen of Troy. There are primitive people who fear it today. Its root is large and forked and has the shape of a human form. It has another name you might be more familiar with. Mandrake."

That rang a bell. Something to do with magic.

"According to legend, it shrieks loudly when dug up," he continued. His face was thoughtful, his eyes far away, looking for something not in this room. "It's credited with having strange magical powers."

"Like what? What's it used for?"

His lips tightened. "Why go into the neurotic world of superstitions?" he said tersely. "It has a legitimate background. Used in medicine as a hypnotic drug and pain killer. The ancient Romans used it as a love potion and, when mixed with other drugs, as a death wine, commonly to stupefy criminals sentenced to be crucified. The emperor Nero used it on his victims."

"Why would Mrs. Carleton be wearing it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." He examined the thin red line that now circled her bare wrist. "As a bracelet, it's an amulet, a good luck charm. If you read the Bible, you'll know Rachel wore it to avoid sterility, and was blessed with a child." He looked at me. "Do you know if Mrs. Carleton has a living husband?"

"I don't know. I never asked. She never mentioned anything about him, or her married life."

Dr. Downey rubbed his lip. "It has another use. Since the dawn of the human race it's been known as the drug to lull all pain and anger. And one more, forgetfulness of every sorrow." He moved his hand in front of Mrs. Carleton's unseeing eyes. "The drug of forgetfulness," he said softly.

I didn't know why she needed that. Or Minerva either.

22. Mystery of the Missing Limp

Dr. Downey examined Mrs. Carleton some more. I hung around, hoping she might recover her wits and tell me where Minerva was, but she was in too much of a stupor as a result of the sedative to say anything coherent. He opened the windows and let some fresh air in, and made her comfortable on the sofa, and told her he would have a nurse drop in the next day. I don't think she understood a word he said. I wasn't sure any more that when she said "the beast" she knew what she was talking about.

Dr. Downey said he'd give me a lift if I waited a little while so I drifted around the room and came to the little alcove off the living room where the incense bowl was still burning. I called Dr. Downey over; he sniffed it and made an impatient growling sound.

"What's going on here?" He picked up the bowl, carried it off and dropped it into the kitchen sink, running some water over it. He came back looking upset and angry, wiping his white hands on his white handkerchief.

"What was burning there?" I asked.

"A little more to defy rhyme and reason," he said.

"Belladonna leaves. Another interesting plant that's poisonous. You may have heard it referred to as deadly nightshade."

I'd heard of that. "What does it do?"

He made a wry grimace. "It depends on how long she's had it burning there, inhaling the fumes. Would you know?"

I explained I had smelled it on my last visit. He made a wry face.

"It's a stimulant and a depressant of the central nervous system. It also paralyzes the peripheral parasympathetic nerve endings." He looked across the room at Mrs. Carleton lying on the sofa. "It explains her hysteria and delirium. Belladonna contains the poisonous alkaloid atropine. Daily exposure to that in conjunction with the mandrake root has subjected her system to a terrible strain."

"That, plus a little fear," I said.

His eyebrows lifted and I pointed to the pictures on the narrow wall space over the dim-red light. It was like a shrine. I had managed to get a better look while he was emptying the incense bowl.

"Pictures of the Devil! What's this all about?"

That's what they were. The Devil in various poses, drawings and engravings from old books. Small pictures, but there were a lot of them, obviously converting this corner of her house into a shrine for the Devil. Somehow I didn't think it was her own idea.

"That's what was bugging her. That's what she's afraid of. Now you know about the crazy bracelet she was wearing and the belladonna incense that made her sick. There's a lot more. There's the phony nurse who called herself Mrs. Dow and took her out of the hospital. I'll bet you'll never find her as a nurse. But you'll find her as the housekeeper who took Mrs. Carleton's place at Sheriff Landry's house. She calls herself Mrs. Wood there. She's the one who brought the bomb into the hospital and handed it to me. She wore a platinum-blond wig then. She wore a red wig

when she came and took Mr. Barker out and said she was his wife." I looked directly into his eyes. "She's the one has Mrs. Carleton scared. Her and her associate. The Beast."

He looked thoughtful. He didn't laugh at me. "Have you told any of this to the Sheriff?"

I had to laugh. "You heard me. Only this morning. I don't blame him for thinking I'm crazy. It sounds crazy even to me. Nothing makes any sense and I can't prove any of it. There's a whole lot more that I don't even want to tell you about because you'll have me put in the booby hatch for sure." I whistled Sinbad over. "Come on, we gotta get moving."

Dr. Downey snapped his bag shut. "I'll give you that lift. Where are you going?"

When I told him I didn't know he said I had to know where I was going.

"Okay. I'm going to look for Miñerva."

"All right. Where?"

I was so mad I practically had tears in my eyes. "I don't know, I told you."

We reached the front door and he opened it. We went outside. He closed the door carefully and we went down the steps. He walked to his car and opened its door.

"Get in," he said. "Your dog, too. I said I'd give you a lift."

"Even when I can't tell you where?"

"Get in," he said in a kind voice. "It will come to you."

"Okay, Sinbad. You heard what he said. Get in."

He lifted up his dark muzzle, looking at me as if he could hardly believe he was finally going to get a ride in a car tonight. I got in first, to prove I wasn't kidding, and he jumped up after me. He likes looking out the window and sometimes he tricks me that way, letting me go in ahead of him.

Dr. Downey started the Thunderbird and released the handbrake. He started his U-turn slowly. His

lights picked out cars lined along the curb the whole length of the long street. I saw the red dot on his dash.

"You've got your bright lights on," I told him. He looked down, saw the red indicator, and flicked the button with his foot that cut them down to normal driving range.

"Thanks," he said. "We'll head up to the village, and just drive around. Maybe you'll think of something."

"Okay."

"You know," he said, "you really might save yourself a lot of worry and trouble just by calling your house. You might find out that Minerva is already there, safe and sound."

"She's not there," I said flatly. He asked how I could be so sure. "Because the Beast has got her."

He stopped the car.

"The beast," he repeated after a few seconds. "You've used that word several times now. What does it mean?" His fingers drummed on the steering wheel.

"It means a fellow named Bert Gamsun," I said. "He owns a cemetery called Happy Hills."

He pursed his lips. "Gamsun? I don't think I've heard that name before. Why is he called the beast?"

"I don't know."

He glanced at me. "I can see why you're having so much trouble. A lot of unsupportable statements."

"This one's pretty supportable," I said. "At least I'm pretty sure *she* knows what she's talking about."

"Oh?" He sighed. "Well, that's better if you have somebody reliable to back you up." He didn't press or try to find out who was backing me up and knew so much. I appreciated it because he was the first one who seemed to trust me.

"Do you know anything about witches and magic?" I asked. "I mean, how does it go with being a medical doctor and all that?"

He smiled. "When I was your age, I believed in them. Demons and witches and ghosts. Werewolves,

monsters, and things that go bump in the night." He bit his lip. "It's not just being a doctor. I think it's the growing up that spoils it all."

"In other words, you don't believe in them any more?"

"I can't afford to," he said. "That's where being a doctor enters into it. Once you engage yourself in science, you have to close the door to the world of the supernatural. You can't have both and you have to make a choice. Unless, of course, I had wanted to be a witch doctor."

"Is that how they do it?"

He grinned wryly and pushed back his hair. "When you've read as much on the subject as I have, you'll know there are too many unexplainable things that have happened for anybody to pass judgment. Some people in this world possess incredibly strange powers."

"Like witches or magicians?" I asked.

He laughed. "I'll let you in on a little secret. I was an amateur magician myself once. In fact, that's how I worked my way through college. I did some shows at local night clubs and dance places. I wasn't too bad either. Not a Houdini or Thurston, of course, but not bad for an amateur."

"You mean you could do real magical things?"

He shook his head. "Not what you're thinking. Most magicians don't. They're tricks. Illusions. Sleight of hand, card tricks. That sort of thing. And some fancy patter to go with it. Sometimes you have to think and talk fast when the trick doesn't work as it should."

I had forgotten about that kind of magician. He must have noticed the disappointed look on my face.

"You've got to be a fanatic for the kind of magic you've got in mind. Devote your life to it and every ounce of brain power, ruthlessly and relentlessly. You have to live like a hermit, like a yogi. Experiment endlessly, repeating certain given rituals hundreds of

times." He shook his head. "That's not for me. I wanted a little more fun out of life. Besides," he added, "to be that kind of magician, you have to be sort of an oddball, you know."

"Why?"

"Because you're setting yourself against the system, don't you see? You're defying everything that is rational, everything that exists in a normal world. You're as much as telling everybody, 'you say this can't happen, well, I'll show you it can.'"

"But you mean they really can do it?"

"Do things outside the natural normal world? Things that are impossible? I'll let you in on another little secret. I believe they can." He glanced at me. "It wouldn't help any with my private practice if word got around that Dr. Downey believes in witches and warlocks or wizards. I'm just levelling with you because you're interested. Just as I was at your age."

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't blab about it. I guess I haven't read enough. I'm kind of mixed up."

He smiled. "When I was a kid, I didn't have too many friends, and we didn't have television then, so I read a lot. Maybe I was more imaginative than you, or more curious. Anyway, I got hooked on magic and the occult and supernatural when I was very young. Read everything about it I could get my hands on. As a matter of fact, I nearly flunked out of school because I spent too much time with those books instead of the required reading. I got hold of myself luckily just in time, but believe me by then I had read everything available on Demonology, Satanism and Witchcraft."

"Satanism," I said. "What's that?"

"Black magic," he said. "Cult of the Devil."

"Okay," I said. "That's my problem. That's what I'm up against."

"The Devil?" He laughed. "You mean those pictures on Mrs. Carleton's wall? They're harmless, I assure you."

"Then what did she have them up for?"

"I can't say," he said. "Possibly she became involved in an aberration when under the influence of that heady incense or the strange properties of the mandrake root. Now that we've removed those, in a day or so she'll have recovered enough for us to ask her some questions. Perhaps then she will be able to explain everything. I don't know how long her mind's been affected this way. But we should know soon," he said cheerfully.

"Maybe," I said. I knew he couldn't tell me exactly *how* soon but I sure wished she would hurry up. *Soon* didn't do me any good finding out what I needed to know now. This night. But I still couldn't figure out how or where to start looking for her.

"You said you read about some people with strange powers," I said. "What did they do?"

"There's an amazing list," he said. "Evidence of things that defy all reason. Past and buried civilizations with knowledge we've only recently acquired. Electric batteries, for example, found with other curios in a Bagdad museum. Made ten centuries before Volta and Galvani."

"No kidding?"

"Under the Sassanid Dynasty. We've finally caught up to that but others are still beyond our reach. The levering principles of the ancient Egyptians, for example, cutting and moving fifteen tons of solid rock adjusted to a hairbreadth in building the pyramids with tools unequal to the task. The scorched earth and rock evidence of atomic explosion hundreds of years ago found in wastelands of the East—the Gobi Desert. Indications that the old alchemists had already discovered the secrets of the atom, of fission and nuclear energy."

"Alchemists?" I said surprised. "Did you ever hear of somebody called Magnus? Albertus Magnus?"

"Oh, yes," he said without hesitation. "He was quite famous. One of the best. Then there was another, Cagliostro, a famous magician whose real name

was Guiseppe Balsamo. Paracelsus, the great German physician. Pietro Mora, alchemist, astrologer, Satanist . . .”

He hadn't been exaggerating about reading a lot. But I had to interrupt him. “That one with two names. When did he live?”

“Count Cagliostro?” He smiled. “You see, he called himself a count, too. 1745 to 1795. Something like that. He was a bit of a confidence man and swindler, and needed a better front. Actually, he was reputed to be an excellent magician. Unfortunately his creditors caught up with him and he died in prison.” He grimaced. “As did quite a few others of his talent and profession.”

“I guess so,” I said. “Now about the other one, Magnus. Would it be possible for someone living today to be related and still carrying on the same line?”

“A descendant? It's possible, sure, but I don't believe I've heard the name currently.”

“That's because he changed it. It's Gamsun now.”

“Gamsun?”

“He just moved the letters around. Magnus—Gamsun. You get it?”

“Of course,” he said smiling. “How did you figure that one out?”

“I had help,” I said. “From someone who knows.”

I didn't want to tell him *who*.

“And Gamsun is related to Magnus the magician?” He frowned, thinking. “The name Gamsun sounds familiar.”

“I mentioned him before,” I said. “Talking about Mrs. Carleton and Mrs. Wood. He lives here in town. He owns the Happy Hills cemetery. He's also on the board of the Hampton City Council.”

His hand slapped the steering wheel. Sinbad was dozing and lifted his head off my arm. “I remember the name now. The City Council, of course. He was one of three who had to approve plans for our new hospital parking lot. Some minor zoning problem.”

"He must be the one," I said. "So is it possible he had some of the old secrets of Albertus Magnus handed down to him? Passed down like the family jewels?"

"If he is an actual descendant, yes, it's possible, of course."

"And it's also possible that he might be a meaner guy than the old Albertus Magnus and is doing things the old man never meant him to do?"

He smiled. "You're suggesting black magic?"

I nodded. "I got a plan now. You still want to drive me around?"

He glanced at his watch. "I'm not on call and I have no emergency cases. I've got a little time."

"Okay, Doc. Let's go. Straight ahead."

"Fine," he said, switching on his engine. "That's all you needed. A plan."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I still didn't have one. All I had was a feeling. He drove up Maple. It runs into Main, a dead end. We reached the corner.

"Right or left?" he asked.

Main is the central street of the village, running its entire length. I still didn't have any idea where I was going but I didn't want to hold him up. "Right," I said.

He nodded and turned right. Most of the village stores had closed, and there was very little traffic. We went two blocks. The clock over Tracton's jewelry store said 8 o'clock. We stopped for a light. On the other side of the street was a small, neat sign that said Barker—Citizens Bank. Then the light changed.

"Hold it," I said. He glanced sideways at me. "Look up ahead. Look who's coming out of that bank."

The old two-story red brick building is done in Greek revival style, the narrow end turned to the street. A big man bulky in the shoulders and bald-headed was leaving by the side door. He locked it carefully and walked down the street away from us carrying a black thick brief case.

"It looks like Mr. Barker," he said. "And he owns the bank. What's so surprising about it?"

I watched Barker walk down the dimly lit street toward a black car parked at the curb.

"Watch."

Dr. Downey was getting a little impatient with me. "All right. He's walking toward his car. I'm not certain if that's his car, but it's a car. So what?"

"He made a quick recovery," I said. "I thought he broke his leg. He's not limping."

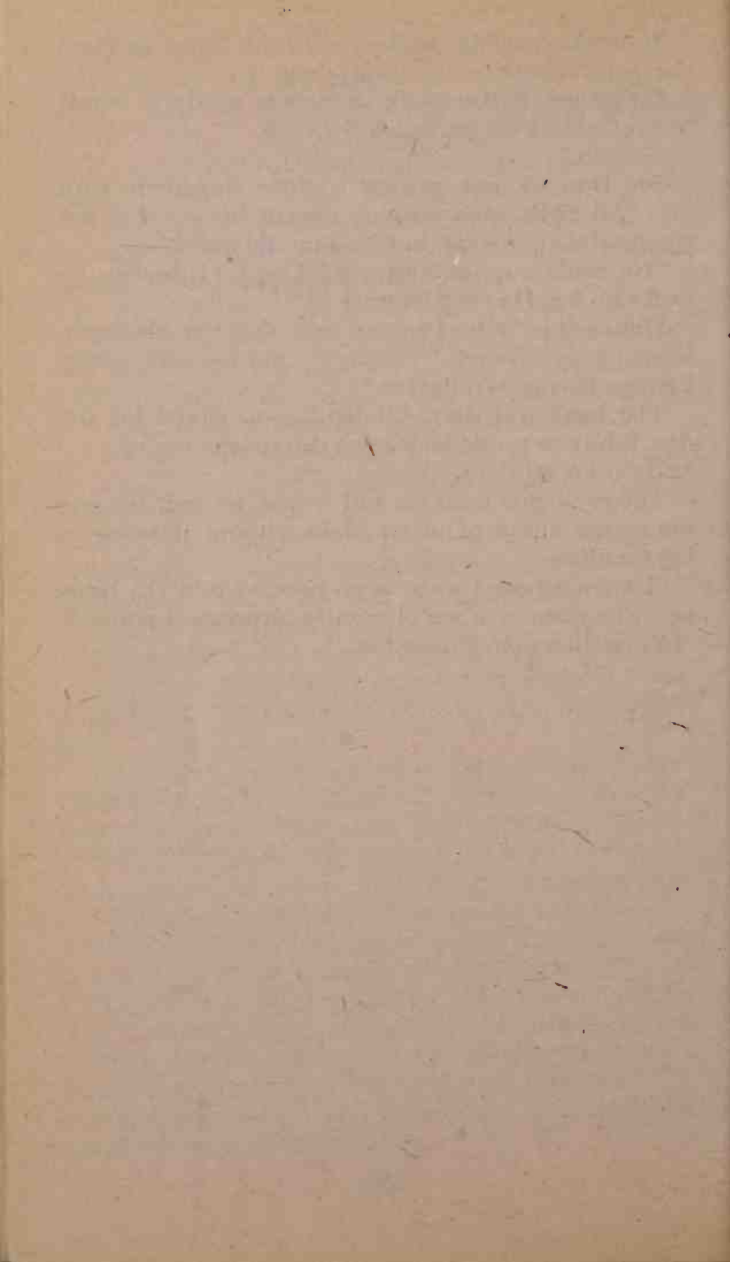
"Impossible," Dr. Downey said between his teeth, screwing up his eyes. "The light's not too good there. Perhaps it's not Mr. Barker."

The bank was dark, all lights out, closed for the day. Who else would be leaving this time of night?

"It's him, all right."

The car lights went on and it took off fast, turning the corner ahead of us on Main without stopping—a big Cadillac.

"I know where I want to go now," I told Dr. Downey, who glanced at me pleasantly surprised. I pointed. "In that direction. Follow him."



Part Four

23. Mist or Magic?

He was a good sport. He eased his Thunderbird into gear and followed Barker, saying cheerfully, "Ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die."

"You're sure he had a broken leg?" I asked.

"A cracked fibula. I saw the X-rays."

"He wasn't limping or wearing the cast."

"The fibula is the smaller bone of the lower leg." Dr. Downey explained. "He could have removed the cast and still be wearing a tight bandage under his pants leg."

"Maybe," I admitted. It wasn't any crazier than anything else so far: Barker with a broken leg who didn't limp, Mrs. Wood with a perfectly good one, who did.

"I thought you were interested in finding Minerva," Dr. Downey said.

"I am. I've got a feeling Barker is tied in with this whole mystery somehow."

"Barker?" he said, surprised.

"He's mixed up in it. You'll see."

"Fine," Dr. Downey said, smiling. "I like mysteries."

He kept the Thunderbird behind Barker far enough so as not to crowd him. Traffic thinned out until we were the only two cars on Main. At the next signal light Barker turned left and we swung along after him, just beating the light change.

Bay Road led east becoming Route 23 and curving off the bay at a fork past Mucker's Swamp to hook up eventually with Highway 27 leading to Southamp-

ton and Montauk. I thought it was interesting that Barker was heading toward the swamp's back roads where I had seen him the first time. The blacktop, a narrow two-lane ribbon, stretched flat out in a straight line toward the water, bordered near the village by a few houses but after a couple of miles by just desolate thin pines. Once past the last house, the 35 mile speed limit didn't count.

Barker picked up speed and so did we. Dr. Downey packed his pipe with one hand, lit it, and puffed away at some nice smelling tobacco. Sinbad dozed on my arm. It was warm and comfortable in the car and the feeling of menace began drifting away.

Dr. Downey took his pipe out of his mouth. "How do you figure Barker in this? Or is that another hunch?" He sounded natural and curious, not sarcastic.

"It's kind of complicated," I said. "But I think he's tied up somehow with Gamsun and Mrs. Wood, and maybe the disappearance of that missing scientist Van Noord."

He put his pipe back and got it going again. "That's a lot to hang on one man. And how does that relate to Minerva?"

"She's the Sheriff's daughter. Maybe they had to get her out of the way to keep him off balance, now that he's laid up in the hospital and can't see. Any other time they might not have taken such a chance. Sheriff Landry's no dope."

"From what I've heard, he's a very exceptional man," Dr. Downey said. "I know you're worried about him too, but I'm practically certain he'll get his sight back. We'll have those bandages off by next week and a top eye specialist in to look him over. At the worst, I expect temporary blindness because of the retina's sensitivity to light, some damage to the cells perhaps, but they will heal in time."

"Swell," I said. "And I don't think they'd hurt Minerva. But she acted peculiar the other night, and

she's wearing the same kind of bracelet you took off Mrs. Carleton."

He jerked his pipestem from his mouth. "The Mandragora root? Are you serious?"

I nodded. "Mrs. Wood gave it to her as a late birthday present. She told Minerva it was like a family heirloom. At first it was too loose and slid over her arm. This morning it was so tight on her wrist it didn't move." Like somebody or something grabbing her, I thought.

"You're saying it shrunk?"

"I don't know how, but it got smaller and tighter, just like Mrs. Carleton's. And don't forget, my guess is that Mrs. Wood changed her name to Dow when she took Mrs. Carleton home from the hospital. Maybe she had one for her too. Maybe she's got a lot of heirlooms like that. You see the connection? Does it make any kind of sense to you?"

He pulled slowly and thoughtfully at his pipe with his free hand.

"Too much surmise and not enough direct proof. But if you're correct in any of your ideas, then everything will fall into line and you *will* make sense." He shook his head. "Fantastic. So wild and improbable I'm almost tempted to believe it." He grinned at me. "You know me. I'm a pushover for anything out of the ordinary. It doesn't sound like witchcraft but it does have some extraordinary elements. If I could just understand the need for the Mandragora root bracelet. What do you think Mrs. Carleton or Minerva knows that someone wants them to forget?"

I wished I knew the answer to that one.

"Watch it," I said, as the twin red tail lights ahead blinked several times in succession. "There's a big dip ahead."

Dr. Downey braked as the Caddy had. I smelled the familiar salt-marsh air through his half-open window, and knew we were at the diamond-shaped point of Mucker's Swamp. The road dipped ahead falling to a

forked dead-end. The road to the right swings sharply away in a long curving gentle arc around the shore line to Bayview, the next town. The left fork makes a brief S-curve past a few marine shops, small boat companies, an oil refinery rig, then runs a jagged course back north to the Point near my house.

The twin red lights ahead flickered briefly again. A heavy mist crept over the yellow beams of the Thunderbird, suddenly enveloping us in a murky blanket that clouded the windshield. Dr. Downey muttered something through the clenched bit in his teeth, reached for the windshield wiper button but hit his pipe instead, knocking it out of his mouth. The hot ashes and sparks on my trouser leg burned, and I jerked.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," he exclaimed, trying to brush me off quickly, his face white and concerned. "Did I burn you?"

"It's okay," I said, knowing it was an accident. "You better watch the road."

I reached down, found his pipe on the floormat near my feet and handed it to him while he kept his eyes on the road. The mist lifted and he shook his head.

"That's odd. What happened to him?"

He braked and got his windshield wiper going. The wet film cleared, and now it was my turn to look surprised. There wasn't a sign of the black Caddy, either on the curve leading southeast, or the fork leading left. He rolled his window all the way down. The mist had lifted enough now for us to see both roads clearly for about a hundred yards. That's all we *could* see.

"What's straight ahead?" Dr. Downey asked.

"The bay," I said. "Maybe he missed the turn and went in."

Dr. Downey put on the handbrake and jumped out. He ran ahead to the grassy bluff overlooking the bay, and peered down along the path of the headlight

beams. He shook his head. Sinbad and me joined him. The water was still and black and stretched silently ahead for about fifty yards before becoming shrouded in heavy mist. No swirls, no ripples, no strangling calls for help. Where was Barker?

Dr. Downey jammed his fists in his pockets and frowned. "That's strange. I don't think I took my eye off the road for more than an instant when I dropped my pipe. Where could he have gone to?"

I didn't know. We both looked farther up the roads going in opposite directions and there was no sign of the Cadillac. Dr. Downey's shoulders slumped and we all headed back to his car.

"Now what?" he asked ruefully. "My fault. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Thanks a lot for the lift."

His eyebrows lifted. "Here? But he's disappeared. I don't know how but he's gone without a trace. Come on, I'll take you whichever way you want. Left or right. Maybe you'll pick the road he took."

"No," I said. "I got another idea. To see somebody."

He looked around. "There's nothing here."

"I know. It's Mucker's Swamp. I got a friend who lives back a block, around the corner."

He looked down there, then at me, unbelieving. "Here?"

I nodded. "Behind those pines. As long as you're interested in magic, I can tell you. Her name is Aurelia Hepburn. She's a witch. A white witch."

"Honestly?" His eyes glittered.

"That's what she told me. She's the one who tipped me off about Gamsun and Magnus being the same, and involved in black magic."

"You don't say!" He got so excited he tried to light his pipe before refilling it. Then he realized his mistake and threw the match down. "You know," he said quietly, "with all my reading I never have met a real live witch. Not one. Some who claimed to be, but they were phony. Are you *sure* she's one?"

"I think so. She acts like it."

"I'd sure like to meet her some day." He slapped his hands together, grinned and winked. "On the QT, of course. Off the record. Can you arrange that?"

"I'll try," I said. "As soon as she comes back."

His mouth opened. "I thought you said you were going to see her *now*."

"I'm just going to her house to check. You see, there's another mystery here. She's disappeared, too."

"Oh, boy," he said. "If you come out of this without an ulcer, then it's my educated guess you'll never get one." He tapped the seat. "Come on. Get in. This road's too dark. I'll drive you back in there."

Sinbad followed me back into the car without complaining. Dr. Downey swung his car around. The yellow fingers of his lights stretched far out, raking the shore drive ahead but revealing no sign of Barker's car. He backed up, then went forward about fifty yards. I touched his arm.

"This is it. Take a left."

He looked out, pressed his lips together, shook his head, but made the turn. I couldn't blame him for not liking it. There weren't any street lights and the section looked dark and desolate as he drove slowly up the narrow road.

"Okay. This is fine."

He peered out into the blackness. "Here?"

"Her house is just behind the pines, through a little lane, just this side of the swamp. I can find it." I got out with Sinbad and thanked him for the lift.

"Hold it just a second," he said. His hand reached into his pocket and came out holding something silvery and thin. He pressed one end of it and a thin yellow beam leaked out of the other side. "A pencil flashlight," he said. "It might help you find your way." When I hesitated he said, "Go ahead. I was a kid once myself."

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it," he said. Then, "How are you going to get back home?"

"Oh, we can get a lift," I said. I wasn't sure we could but I had to say something so Sinbad and I could get going.

"All right," he said. "Any way I can turn around here?"

"It's too narrow," I said. "You'll have to back out."

He waved and slowly put the car in reverse. "Good hunting," he called, stepped harder on the gas and the Thunderbird went back faster than it had come in. He was a good driver. We watched him swing around the bend, then straighten out and head back toward town.

"Okay," I told Sinbad, taking a tighter hold of his leash. "Let's go." The pencil flash wasn't much of a searchlight but it took us around the curved lane and up to the witch's cottage, which was dark and silent except for a clumping sound.

"It's her shutters," I told Sinbad. "They move with the breeze."

The door was closed but unlocked. Inside I whispered, "Mrs. Hepburn?" There wasn't any answer. We searched through the rooms, and for the pieces of paper Herky and I had found in the fireplace cookies. They were gone, too.

I heard a tire-humming sound coming down the road, and ran to the window in the dark front room, on the way bumping into the kitchen chairs and table.

"Don't make any noise," I told Sinbad. "A car's coming."

I didn't know if I could depend on him. He's not too good at minding because of his very independent nature and his bulldog stubbornness. But we both knew we weren't alone.

The car stopped behind the pines. Its door opened and closed. Then silence. I cracked the front door an inch and listened to soft footsteps approaching but couldn't see through the velvety darkness. The steps seemed uncertain and halting.

"Come on. Back up," I whispered to Sinbad. He

surprised me by letting me urge him back toward the bedroom of the witch, where I half shut the door and dropped to my knees, getting a tight grip over his big chest from around his thick white neck. "Take it easy," I whispered in his ear. It twitched and I felt his tail wagging excitedly against my chest. I waited.

The front door opened. There was a scuffling sound near the floor, a match flickered and died, followed by a muttering sound. My heart was pounding.

Okay! I told myself. Now! Here's your chance to untangle some of the threads of the mystery. This is what you've been waiting for.

Up till now things had happened when I wasn't around, and I had to guess, and maybe guessed wrong. For once I was present, an eyewitness right on the spot. If anything was going to happen tonight here, in the witch's house I'd be the first to know about it. Realizing that, I had to take a deep breath. I had forgotten one thing: that I'd be scared.

I crouched low at the half-open bedroom door. Then, holding Sinbad tightly, I aimed Dr. Downey's pencil flashlight toward the scuffling sounds and the thin white beam stabbed the darkness.

Sinbad stiffened. I felt his tremendous strength as he surged forward against my strangle hold. At the same instant I saw the thin scared white face trapped and frozen in the bright beam, no more surprised than I was.

Of all possible callers expected, this one had never entered my mind.

Herky Krakower.

24. The Inscrutable Urge

"Herky!" I yelled. "For Gosh sakes, what are you doing here?"

He blinked and his face relaxed. "Hi, Steve. Is that

you?" I pointed the thin beam at Sinbad, then my own face. "Oh, boy! That's a relief," he said, and when I pointed it back at him, "I hope that isn't a laser beam you're holding. They're usually red."

"Laser beam?" I flicked it on and off. "It's a pencil flashlight. Dr. Downey gave it to me."

I let Sinbad tug me over so he could give Herky one of his slobbering greetings. "Okay, that's enough. He already had a bath today." We sat down on the floor next to Herky. "How come you came back?"

"A page is missing," he said.

"Huh?"

"The Red Grimoire," he explained. "The witch's book of magic spells, remember? You asked me to read it. Page 347 is missing."

"Only one page, Herky? So what?"

"Well, it's actually two," he said patiently. "Page 347 on one side, 348 on the other. I thought it might be important."

"Herky," I groaned. "That's a very old book. Probably a lot of pages are missing."

"No, just that one. I checked."

I remembered how she had opened it and a page fell out which she put back carelessly, it seemed, almost without looking. I told him about that. "She might have put it back any place. Maybe farther along."

"No. I went through it. It's missing."

"Well, that book had about a million pages," I said, remembering its bulk. "One missing page isn't so important, is it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I came back to look for it just in case it was around. It was in a section for SPELLS FOR MAKING ONESELF INVISIBLE."

I ran the thin beam around the floor and couldn't see it. "It must be a good section. I think the page is invisible, too."

"Why don't we put on the lights so we can see better?" Herky said.

"We can't. Somebody else might be coming. How

did you get down here? Your mom drive you?"

"No, I took a cab. I still had some allowance money left over."

I got up and looked out the window. If there was a cab on the road beyond the pines, I couldn't see it.

"I told him not to wait," Herky said. "I didn't know how long it would take. How come *you're* here?"

"I was in Dr. Downey's car. We saw Barker leaving his bank. He'd just had a broken leg and now he wasn't even limping. So I asked Downey to trail him. We lost him around the bend at the junction. He disappeared."

"Disappeared? What do you mean?"

I told him what had happened in the rolling thick fog, of the accident with Dr. Downey's pipe when we took our eyes off the road for a few seconds. "Barker's car wasn't in the bay and he didn't leave a note behind saying which fork he took," I added.

When Herky asked what I was doing riding in Dr. Downey's car anyway and I gave him the events of the entire evening, he said, "Mandragora root. He wasn't kidding. It's a very powerful and dangerous drug. It belongs to the potato family and has a carrot-like root which looks human. People believe it shrieks when it's picked from the ground. And you say Minerva's bracelet is like Mrs. Carleton's?"

Herky was far from being a doctor but evidently had come across legends of the Mandragora plant in his vast reading. So it wasn't secret.

"Minerva's looked the same and had the same rotten mouldy smell, and weird shrinking."

"It's odd that somebody would go to all that trouble. There are so many modern drugs that could do the same trick. Mescaline and LSD and even opium. Those are hallucinatory. If they wanted to poison her they've got handy things like DDT or any insecticide. The fumes are deadly if inhaled and even contact with the skin can be fatal. Why go to the trouble of the Mandragora bracelet?"

"Maybe they get more of a kick using black magic," I said.

"But it's not working with Minerva so far, right?"

"I'm not sure." I told him about the sleep-walking.

"That could be anything," he said. "When I was a little kid I walked in my sleep too. All I had to do was watch some exciting movie on TV to bring it on."

"Did I tell you about the humming sound from outside?"

"A humming sound? Who heard it first, you or Sinbad?"

"Sinbad."

"Then it was very high-pitched. Dogs can hear sound beyond our sound frequency range. So it was ultrasonic and they lowered the frequency when you or Minerva heard it."

"Ultrasonic? That's supposed to be Van Noord's field. This humming came from the hearse. Gamsun's."

"And he disappeared," Herky said. "That's what makes this even more interesting."

"Yeah," I said gloomily. "Interesting is right," I snapped the little flashlight on again and we looked some more for the missing page. We raked through the fireplace too but found nothing.

"Steve, did you notice the little papers that spelled Magnus-Gamsun in the anagram are gone?"

I told him I'd already had that big thrill.

"Who do you figure took them? The towheaded man?"

"He came in right after we left. That's a good possibility. If he didn't, maybe she had another visitor after that."

"Barker perhaps?"

"I don't know. The Sheriff said he was at the bank this morning. Maybe he put in a long hard day there."

"So who are we waiting for now?"

"I don't know."

That was the trouble with hunches. They didn't let

you in on the details. I thought about it some more. Then I shook my head.

"What windmill?" I asked.

"Windmill?" Herky said as if surprised.

"Didn't you just say we should go to the windmill?"

"No. I didn't say anything after asking who we were waiting for."

I put the flash on his face. He wasn't kidding.

"That's funny," I said. "I heard it. Wait . . ." I was hearing it again, and Herky's lips weren't moving. But I was hearing words right in my head.

"Go to the windmill . . . go to the windmill, laddie!"

"It's her," I whispered to Herky. "The witch. She's talking to me. "Go to the windmill, laddie"—she just said it again."

His eyes were shining. "Anything else?" he whispered. "It's thought transference, Steve. Concentrate. Don't think of anything but her."

I concentrated. It didn't do any good. We were cut off.

"Do you know *what* windmill?" Herky asked me.

"I don't know any windmill around here," I said. Then I heard her soft voice with the little burr in it. I raised my hand and Herky knew I was getting her again.

"The water. Over the dark water. Behind the stone . . . stone walls. The windmill over the water, lad."

"The windmill over the water," I repeated in a low voice looking dead ahead at Herky. His mouth hung open just like mine. Then even though my eyes were set on his, suddenly a vision of a little island popped into my mind. It was night. There was a long stone house set far back. And as I glanced to the right I saw it, the large spidery webs of the mill.

"Tuckermill Island," I said. "It's right across the bay."

"Aye, laddie, that's it."

"Across the bay?" Herky whispered. "Over the

water? How are you going to get there?"

She must have tuned in on Herky too. "*The boat, laddie,*" she crooned. "*Look for the boat in the moors.*"

"There's a boat in the moors," I told Herky. Then I blinked. "What moors?"

"She's Scotch," Herky said. "She probably means Mucker's Swamp here."

"*Aye, laddie.*"

I looked at Herk again. "She said 'Aye, laddie'—did you hear her?" He shook his head, bit his lip and stayed perfectly still, concentrating with all his power. He shook his head sadly.

"I guess the trouble is I haven't seen her . . ."

Then he raised his hand to me as if stunned and the most amazed happy expression spread across his face. He held his breath, his lips parted in wonder. I didn't want to spoil it for him so said nothing. Then he gulped and nodded as if to thank her.

"'Look out for the first step?'" I grinned while asking him.

"'Look out for the first step,'" Herky said. "I heard her, Steve. I heard her myself. Isn't that incredible?" I got up off the floor. He looked up at me.

"Here's something more incredible," I said. "We got to go look for that boat in the moors."

We found it below her house hidden in the reeds at the edge of the swamp, a small white dinghy, the paint chipped away. It had oarlocks and oars and a large tomato can for bailing water. There was a lot of water in it and we dumped it out. I checked the keel and the boards seemed seaworthy so we got in and shoved off, even though it wasn't a boat you'd pick to beat your way across a deep wide bay over wind-tossed waters.

Sinbad didn't bother checking anything. He loves riding in a boat. He got his name from the legendary sailor and likes to live up to it. In the old days, English bulls used to ride the quarter-decks of the brigs and frigates because most sea captains carried their

dogs along. So he was really reliving old times.

We were in the swamp area about a quarter mile from the bay and I thought we could slip through some of the maze and interlocking channels and find open water. The thick reeds surrounding us were over ten feet high and in the dark you couldn't see through them. Herky held on to Sinbad and I poked along the narrow path of marsh water. It led to a dead end. I backed and tried another opening that looked better. It led to a murky Y-shaped channel and I had to make a decision. I chose left and that ran into a rotted tree stump blocking our passage. I had no room to turn the boat so I sculled back and we hand-hauled our way, pulling at the thick clumps of reeds. This time I took the other line of the Y and it worked fine for about twenty yards. Then it ended in a tangled dam. Even Columbus would have had trouble in Mucker's Swamp.

It was too high and thick to carry the boat over so I backed off again and found another narrow trail. This swung left, then kept meandering right, great for progress but bad for direction. I had to head east, the other way, to cross the bay. I stayed with it, hoping it would swing left again but it didn't. Finally the line of reeds on the left side thinned enough for us to force our way through. I breathed a sigh of relief and then nearly choked.

I had now navigated my crew and me to a circular open area about twenty yards wide that was a complete and total cul-de-sac with no opening anywhere. I went around it twice, poking with my oars and flashing my little light to no effect. It was a blind alley, impossible to penetrate, the tall thin weeds lined up stiff and high like an arrogant army that wouldn't let us pass. I looked helplessly up at the sky. The moon was bright and full, not a cloud in the sky. There wasn't any wind or a ripple on the water.

I looked at the hostile circle of stiff unbending unyielding reeds surrounding us, then at Herky and Sin-

bad. They didn't say anything. They trusted me because they know I'm this great sailor.

I thought about Aurelia Hepburn and her telepathic message to Herky and me.

"She shouldn't have hung up so soon," I told Herky. "What we need is a road map. I can't get out of here and I don't even think I can find our way back." I looked up at the moon and pointed with my left hand. "Tuckermill Island is north-northeast, way over that way. We're nowhere."

It was practically hopeless. Even if I did find some channel back, I now knew we could spend the rest of the night in the maze of Mucker's Swamp looking for an opening east to the bay. I felt disgusted with myself. I must have missed an opening somewhere in the dark.

I started to back water to skirt the perimeter again but had hardly dipped oars when I heard a soft sighing sound. I raised my head. The reeds were swaying very slightly, very gently. I looked at the sky. Clouds, coming from the west, looked dark. I felt a breeze touch my face. The smell of rain.

The reeds started to rustle as the wind came up. It came in short sharp gusts and they bent and separated, like giant fingers spreading before us. The boat bobbed in the water and I shipped oars.

"Hold tight," I said to Herky. "Something strange is happening. I think she's giving us a hand."

I saw his face white in the moonlight, his black eyes large and glittering. He smiled wanly and gulped a few times. The boat lifted and dipped and swung around in a half circle. Sinbad barked. I didn't do anything.

There was a flash of lightning in the west and the low rumble of thunder. The wind picked up. The reeds sighed and stretched and waved and bent. Our boat turned a quarter more as the wind picked its way through the marsh grass. We were at the east edge again now, facing the swaying reeds. There was

a loud thunderclap, a bolt of lightning, and the wind rose to a piercing shriek. The reeds bowed low before its force. The boat bobbed higher then settled and picked up speed, appearing ready to run aground. Then it happened. Almost by magic the line of reeds parted, leaning to one side.

"Steve! There's a way in!" Herky whispered hoarsely.

It was a hidden channel, an opening in the maze. I pushed hard on my oar, leaned back and we went through. The boat brushed the reed grass back and we edged our way along a narrow serpentine waterway shrouded in mist. I pulled in my oars and we drifted through. I sat half-turned, watching the prow nose its way along. Soft rain rippled the water behind us, pattering gently like a thousand tiny feet. As we passed, the marsh reeds that had bowed before us sprang erect again.

"Thanks, Baalzaphon," I murmured.

The wind lowered, caressing my face, ruffling my hair. I wasn't afraid now. It rose sweeping ahead, bending the high thick weeds and rushes that had been grouped in obstinate clusters, making them sway and separate, revealing the secret channels they were guarding, clearing a path for our little boat.

The maze continued, the narrow waterway ending at a dike. A clump of tangled weeds and twisted brush heaped high on a bank blocked our way. But the friendly wind guiding us, clever and insistent, found a line of reeds to the side and parted them. They fell stiffly like stricken sentries and we slipped through. Another ditch, another narrow canal leading to another seemingly impassable part of the bog; still the wind found the weak links in the maze and broke them for us. It was almost mechanical. The reeds were toy soldiers obeying some secret command.

The wind continued without pause. I rowed some and we drifted, up one channel and down another, then eastward and across a sodden morass of reeds and rushes, making progress slowly but effectively, leading

in the direction I wanted but couldn't find in the swamp myself.

Sinbad barked his own triumph at the rustling reeds as we slipped through. Herky held him back with both arms around him, a smile on his white face. Over his shoulder, I watched the reeds, parted and broken by the wind, rising again after we passed, shaking themselves upright, forming and closing ranks again, a solid forbidding phalanx once more, impenetrable and mysterious.

Then Herky's mouth opened with a new expression. He leaned forward excitedly, touching my knee, and pointed over my aching shoulders.

"Steve, we made it!"

I felt on my face the cool wind that swept across Jonah's Bay and watched the last of the Mucker's Swamp rushes recede and become blanketed in mist.

I didn't have to look where Herky pointed. I knew the little white witch and her demon Baalzaphon wouldn't let us down.

25. Grist for the Mill

It was dark on Jonah's Bay. We didn't have a compass but somewhere in his reading Herky had learned celestial navigation. He picked out a few stars to help him compute our course and directed us dead on line.

My shoulders ached as we neared the island, muscles that I didn't know I had. The friendly wind put in an extra effort to bring us in, and I shipped oars and let the tide do the rest of the work. The moon came out bright and full, a worry now when our arrival was hopefully to be a surprise. Then the dark cloud that had been hovering over us drifted across to blot out the light. The keel scraped on the sand, we scrambled out and I beached the dinghy.

We passed the cobbled rubble of a stone quay with twisted blackened iron mooring posts and the jagged remains of what had once been a wooden pier, the huge pilings and girders still sunk into the basin of the bay but no longer connected to the island. It looked like we'd stumbled into a disaster area after a war. I reached down and picked up an old cannon ball about the size of an apple, one of several half-buried in the sand. I'd forgotten that during the Revolutionary War there had once been smugglers and pirates in these waters.

We climbed a grassy knoll and there in the distance was an old stone house. Behind it stretching to the sky, the huge sweeps of the mill dangled, patched and fretted like a great spider web. The sails were still, ominously quiet.

Crossing over the rutted tracks of what had been a wagon trail from the mill to the quay loading area, we came upon a fallen signboard, incised: TUCKER'S MILL. Estab. 1672 A.D.

We were skirting a welter of rotted sheds and rustic fence when the moon broke free of the clouds denying us further protection.

A man wearing a hat stepped out from the shadows, and said, "Hold it right there."

He was about twenty feet away, with something shining in his hand. I sucked in my breath. What were we going to do now? Then I felt the shock of a terrible shooting pain. My arm felt wrenched from its socket as Sinbad tore free. There was the swift rush of his feet, the man's surprised grunt and then the crunching sound as Sinbad hit him around the knees. He went down backwards. Herky and I ran over to find him out cold and his hat fallen off revealing the shock of yellow hair.

"The towheaded man," Herky whispered.

He could have yelled it and the man wouldn't have heard. Sinbad stood over him, licking his face, not angry or anything. He's not trained to attack or kill. That's one of the good things about having a dog who

makes up his own mind. He doesn't like people pointing things.

My foot hit something and I picked up the gun he had been holding. Under the coat, flung loose on the ground, was its yellow arm holster. I didn't want the gun, but I didn't want him to have it either. If he was a government man, he was keeping it a big secret, and if they had the witch and Minerva inside, why was he skulking outside behind a wall instead of in there doing something? It seemed more likely that he was a lookout for Gamsun and his bunch. I threw the gun away so he'd have something to keep him occupied while we did a little reconnoitering.

The house was built of brick and fieldstone. "Two-story Dutch Colonial," I told Herky. "An extra wing has been added. That accounts for the L-shape."

Old houses are my specialty and the only subject I can discuss with Herky without feeling like a moron. The lower windows had heavy cross-casings, the upper ones were divided vertically, and all of them had diamond-shaped "leaded" lights, except for two small attic windows in each gable. Dutch bricks and the Dutch cross-bond patterned the walls. The roof was steep sloping and parapeted, the end chimneys built into the gables. Between the windows on either side of the front entrance was a gun port, and a pair of circular lookouts in each of the upper gables.

"It's a pre-Revolutionary Dutch house and frontier fort combined," I said. It had evidently been restored and improved, the end chimneys told me that, and any other time I would have liked to take the time to really look it over and admire it.

We circled the collapsed and charred remains of more sheds and out-buildings. I knew some of these very old houses had curious underground passages, some leading to secret kitchens, smuggling rooms for booty hiding, or "listening" rooms. I scraped away a tangle of undergrowth and found a low rusted iron door, half-buried. I pulled it open and went in. I fell down several worn stone steps and remembered the

words of the witch. *Look out for the first step.*

Sinbad and Herky came down after me and we crawled through a narrow passage and entered a room with heavy planking, then through a stone-arched doorway into a narrow hall and came out in the old stone kitchen. It was empty and the ashes in the fireplace were cold.

The house had been enlarged from its original central chimney design. A second room had been added using the central-hall plan of the early Georgian houses and an extra chimney built into the end gable. The old parlor was scantily furnished with pieces of its period and the fireplace sealed off, a new one added. Off the hall, large double doors leading to the dining-room all were closed, but light ran along the bottom edges and I heard the murmur of voices. I grasped the railing of the old staircase and, touching Herky's arm, pointed upstairs.

We went up quietly and quickly. The first two rooms were empty. She was in the third, sitting still in a large rocker, swaying back and forth, her long blonde hair turned ash by the silvery light the moon traced through the diamond-shaped windows, her eyes open. She should have noticed us approaching.

"Hi, Minerva," I whispered.

She didn't respond to that either. I came close and touched her arm and she just sat there and stared at nothing.

Sinbad came over and brushed against her legs, looking up and wiggling his fanny as usual when he sees her. She didn't reach down and sock him as she always does, or rough him up or scratch his head or pull his ears. Sinbad couldn't understand it. He turned his big ugly sad head to me, puzzled; whined and pressed it closer to her. She just sat there and rocked slowly, back and forth, back and forth.

Herky made a wry grimace.

"I guess you were right," he said, and bent to look down at the bracelet she wore.

"I guess that Mandrake finally took effect." I

picked up her limp hand, got a good grip and tugged hard on it, but nothing happened. "Hold the light," I told Herky. I used all my strength, twisting with both hands, but the bracelet didn't fall apart as expected. I remembered how Mrs. Carleton's had crumbled when Dr. Downey touched it.

"Didn't you tell me he used one of his instruments?" Herky asked. "A long-nosed pliers?"

Of course. Well, I didn't have any pliers but I had something stronger, something with more power than a monkey wrench—the jaws of my lovable monster. I snapped my fingers and he came over. I lifted her arm and put the bracelet in his mouth. He looked at me baffled.

"Hold on," I told him.

We've played that game of tug-of-war ever since he was a pup and I've never been able to break his bulldog grip. He tested the bracelet gingerly, rolling his eyes up at Minerva to see what her opinion of all this was. She didn't notice him.

"It's okay," I told him. "You'll be doing her a favor. Okay, go!"

Sinbad shifted and tightened his grip. Then he leaned back on his haunches and lifted his powerful neck. While I held Minerva's wrist tightly, Sinbad shook his head in a sudden quick wrenching motion. There was a snap. He looked at me surprised and I opened his jaws to let the pieces fall out, then rubbed his massive chest.

"You did great," I told him. He liked that.

I rubbed the raw welt around Minerva's wrist, trying to ease back some of the circulation. I shook her arm and fingers.

"If it's the kind of poison that can be absorbed through the skin, you can't expect an immediate reaction," Herky said.

Her expression was peaceful and passive. Her eyes closed, her head fell back, and her chest rose and fell rhythmically.

"Perhaps she'll sleep off the effects," Herky said.

I hated to leave her that way. "Stay, Sinbad," I said. He didn't mind at all. Knowing that his presence would give her enough protection, Herky and I went downstairs.

If they had the witch in the house, she would most likely be behind those big double doors through which came the soft murmur of voices but no screams or lashes. Evidently things still hadn't reached a critical point where I had to do anything desperate or stupid. It was important to know more of what was going on but too dangerous to try to eavesdrop at those doors.

I drew Herky back to the deserted parlor and studied the fireplace that had been boarded closed in the remodelling of the house. I tapped the oak-panelled walls near it.

"They needed secret passageways in the old days," I explained, "in case some Indians happened to drop over. And I don't mean for tea."

I got lucky right away.

"It sounds hollow," Herky said.

There are many ways to trigger a secret panel but only one works. The exact spot. I finally found it pressing a center rosette on a molding decorating a section of the wall. The panel swung open noiselessly.

We stepped through into the darkness of a cramped area half the size of a phone booth. Dr. Downey's friendly and helpful flashlight showed a passageway continuing along the wall. We followed it and went down five plank steps to where a small opening had been cut into the outer wall and an iron door inserted. It had rusted hinges. I forced and wedged it open narrowly.

"That's another way out," I told Herky. "It probably leads to the water. Not a bad getaway. Maybe it saved somebody's scalp."

"I've heard of these," Herky said. "But we're not running away from any Indians now."

"I can't tell when they added the extra wing," I said. "It's early Georgian but even fifty or a hundred

years after this place was built they still had the same worry about their lives. If my guess is right, they liked the idea and continued it. That should lead us right up to the new attached ell and the living room, we'll be able to find out what's going on."

The passageway continued on a narrowing incline, allowing barely enough room to move. The new builder probably didn't have the time the original settler had. Or maybe he didn't have the same worry. We came to the end and faced a dark rough wall.

"Let's hope this is a sliding panel," I whispered. "Otherwise we'll fall in on everybody and it won't be such a secret meeting."

I was tuned-in somehow to the builder's mind and my fingers found the edge of a smooth surface. The panel was long and narrow, fitted top and bottom to smooth rails grooved and still working. I drew it back slightly. We didn't need much space to see through and couldn't risk somebody noticing an open panel in the wall.

Herky fitted his eye below mine. Barely fifteen feet from us a group stood and sat opposite the fireplace, appearing engaged in quiet ordinary conversation. Gamsun and Mrs. Wood were standing on the wide-planked floor. Barker sat alone on a Chippendale Louis XV sofa, slumped back, eyes closed. Aurelia the little witch sat on a Hepplewhite shield-back chair. An old man with wispy white hair, stretched out on a settee near her, I guessed to be Van Noord. Another man stood with his back to the group, facing the windows.

Who was he?

"What do you think, Henry?" Mrs. Wood said.

The man facing the leaded windows turned. "I don't like it," he said sullenly. "Do we always have to wait for him?" He was tall, thin and red-haired.

Gamsun spoke. "Yes. And we've been over that before, haven't we?" His voice was flat, nasal and nasty. He stepped toward Aurelia who sat watching the doz-

ing old man. "You've had enough time. Stop stalling."

"Aye," said the little white witch, "enough time for many things. And yet not enough to do the simple thing you've asked. I told ye before, it can't be done."

Gamsun smacked his hands together. "It's got to be. You've got the power to do it. We know. The sooner you tell us what we want to know, the better it will be for you."

"It can't and won't be done by me." She looked him in the eye. "There's no need for threats. We don't fear you or your magic."

"What magic?" Gamsun snarled. "It's a simple business transaction. We'll get it out of him eventually. Your way would save time and be easier on Van Noord. There's nothing to worry about. Nobody will ever know."

She laughed. "The air is a witness," she said. "It will be written in the sky."

"What?" Gamsun muttered.

"She's balmy," Mrs. Wood said, her voice silky soft.

"Written in the wind," the old witch said, "and on the water. The world will know."

"She sounds daft, all right," Gamsun said. "But maybe it's just an act."

"You're the daft ones," said the witch crisply. Her hand stretched to indicate Van Noord who lay still, not moving, hardly breathing. "You've doped this poor old mon far too much. It'll be a wonder if he stays alive long enough for you to pry out his secret."

"What?" The tall thin red-haired man looked angry. He walked and leaned over her threateningly. "Maybe we ought to hurry her up," he appealed to Gamsun. "Why don't you let me take care of her?"

Gamsun shook his head. "I told you before. Forget it, Henry."

"But what if she's right and he dies on us?"

Gamsun smiled. "He won't die. He was given just enough to take him through this period under our control. Blanked out so he'll never know what hap-

pened to him. If she won't get it out of him, we'll get him to talk. As soon as our friend gets here, perhaps we'll be able to persuade her to save him the trouble." He bowed to the old lady. "Remember," he said, still smiling, "whatever weakens his resolution can do the same to yours. And if you've read his mind already, we'll be able to get that information from you."

"And how would you be doing that?" she asked. "I've already said you don't frighten me."

Gamsun spread his hands apart. "There are other ways," he said. "Sodium Pentothol, for example. It works on people who refuse to talk. You see, they can't help themselves then and it all comes out."

The old lady glared at him. "We'll see," she said. "There's that, as you say, persuasion of the Devil that you are, and there's also the magic of the witch and you'll find out about that shortly. Remember, I've warned you. It will be written in the wind. In the sky."

I closed the secret panel and tapped Herky's shoulder. We backed away quietly and turned when the narrow passage permitted. We reached the half-buried iron door at the bottom and I pushed it open. Herky followed me out and I wedged a small stone in the opening so that we wouldn't be locked out.

"Now what?" Herky said.

I pointed toward the silent mill fifty yards away. The torn canvas sails flapped idly in the night breeze as they hung on the huge rigid sweeps.

"We're going to write something in the wind in the sky," I said.

26. A Message in the Sky

The tower stretched before us dark and mysterious in the clear night, the small round windows glittering like cat's eyes, the great gaunt sweeps reaching to strike at the stars. The wind worried the torn ends of

the sail-canvas flapping over the rigid forms, causing an endless chatter that climbed to a sighing whisper high in the sky.

The mill was very old, the frayed sail-canvas once rigged on the huge whips like sails on a ship now only threaded remnants. Each sail was six feet broad; the whips, pierced with crossbars, about forty feet long. There were four of them fastened to a giant sail-axle. They were called sails, or sweeps, or mill-blades.

"There's a slight wind," Herky said. "Why aren't they moving?"

"There's no fantail on this one so it's not automatic and has to be turned by hand to catch the wind. When we get to the top, we'll release the brake."

Herky tilted his head back craning to see the dome-like cupola at the top of the black tower.

"We'll do *what*?"

"Take off the brake," I said. "The tower is fixed but that capped dome rotates. It carries the wind-shaft. All we have to do then is face the sails square to the wind."

I saw his thin fixed smile as we walked under the spidery shadow of the dangling sails. They made a strange thup-thupping sound as they swayed restlessly on their axle, the wind playing with the torn edges of the canvas. I heard other sounds and stopped: soft murmurs and rustling noises, like pines souging when the wind blows; sounds that grew louder and became harsher and rasping. The mill seemed alive somehow, creaking, groaning, almost suffering. I heard a deep whispering sigh and felt it shudder.

It was round, faced with brick and tile, cobbled at the base and patched with cement. There were gaping holes in its sides and twisted black forms that reminded me of the broken ribs of some giant skeleton. The door was locked. I pressed hard against it, trying to force the bolt. The entire tower shivered and I felt a terrifying vibration through my hands. An invisible army of tiny voices chattered from inside the hollow

of the mill, and I felt a chill as if they were mocking me.

Herky's face was pale. "It has very good sound effects. Are you sure we have to go in there?"

"Mills are like boats," I said. "They seem to come alive, and moan and groan at you. It only seems spooky because it's around midnight."

I found a broken bench and set it against the bricks under the small porthole window. I pulled myself up and rapped hard and pushed it open. Then I slipped through and dropped to the floor inside. A cloud of dust enveloped me. I coughed and sneezed and found the door in the dark, slid the bolt and let Herky and some fresh air in.

I closed and bolted the door and darted my little flashlight beam around the nooks and crannies. Tiny yellow eyes stared at me from the darkness, and there was the scurrying of little feet. Mice. The chaff husks and flour made a carpet an inch thick on the yellow floor.

Musty rubbish was scattered from wall to wall. Bricks and straw, gunny sacks, a worn broken broom, a hurricane lamp, spilled meal and flour, iron wheels and a long musket that looked like a pre-Revolutionary flintlock, a yellowed pad of billings, scattered bits of oddly shaped pegs and wooden-toothed wheels, rotted crates and wormy blanketings. It wouldn't have won any medal from Good Housekeeping.

"This is the bottom floor and storehouse," I told Herky. "Up above is the granary and the whole works." I put the light on the thick center post. "This was once a big oak tree," I said. "It goes all the way up to the top."

The oak beams were colored a deep reddish-yellow with age and the friction of ropes and sacks. Hanging from them were all the old primitive tools with the strange-sounding names: fag-hooks, hog-jets, thrifts, pritchels, wooden shawls, sack-boys, hay-tedders, mill-picks, all kinds of skeps and sieves.

"How do we get up?" Herky asked.

We found a ladder, set it against the wall, and climbed to a trap door which swung up easily. We pulled ourselves out.

"Second floor," I said. "Granary and meal bins." Sacks and chaff littered the floor. Slatted bins covered one end, fed by a funnel from the floor above. The boards above us creaked and sighed. "We're safer up there than here," I said. "Let's find another ladder and you'll know why."

We got up there the same way. Herky stared at the huge center cogwheel and the overhanging smaller ones.

"Those small ones adjust the stones," I said. "Stone hoists. The geared wheel works with the end ones revolving the millstones."

The middle floor took the massive wind-shaft which holds the sweeps. Fixed on the wind-shaft were two huge cogged wheels made of wood, braced and banded with iron clamps, which transmit the power to two pairs of millstones. A huge iron collar fitted into the massive oak which ran all the way through. The entire structure of the mill rested on this beam as the upper part was turned to enable the sails to face the wind. We went up to the next floor.

"Stone floor."

The millstones were circular, about four feet in diameter, formed of wedge-shaped pieces cemented together and bound by iron hoops. The surfaces were cut into a series of radiating ridges and furrows so the wheat could be pushed from the center to the circumference of the stones, as well as being broken between the edges of the ridges.

"They had to be perfectly level and exactly parallel to each other," I told Herk. "Only the upper stone revolves. It's called a runner. The lower is the bedstone and stays fixed. One of those stones weighs close to a ton."

Herky grinned. "I see what you meant about it being safer up here."

"So far," I said, "so good." I was still wondering

how I was going to do what I'd said. How do you write on the wind in the sky in a windmill?

I found the huge tiller fitted around a wheel of the axle between the stones.

"Here's the hand brake. It stops the revolving of the sweeps. I'll release it now. Look out the window and tell me what happens."

He got over to the small window and I pulled hard on the old oak lever. I held on to it and listened hard, but didn't hear anything more than the same distant flapping of the sail edges and the moaning of the timbers inside.

"Anything?" I finally asked.

"Nothing's happened yet, Steve. They're still the same."

I moved the tiller back and forth.

"Still nothing," Herky said.

I smacked my forehead. "No wonder. There's another brake up in the tower. They both have to be released."

We went up to the grain floor past the hoppers and half-filled soggy sacks. Then we were pushing against the final trap door and inside the small dome. I touched them off in a hurry. "Wind shaft. Driving shaft. Crown wheel. And brake wheel."

I pulled hard on the lever. Herky looked out. We heard a great shuddering sigh and a creaking noise that shook the flooring.

"You've got it," Herky yelled, forgetting caution.

The track curb of the movable tower carrying the sails spun slowly, complaining as the sprockets took the drive in its gears, the rim of the brake wheel released from the long tiller tailpole.

The leading edge of the downslope wind was westerly—from the west, blowing parallel to the length of the island and the inland coast at about ten miles an hour. Above it stretched a belt of cumulous clouds. We had a sea-breeze front.

The sails thup-thupped, inclined upward at an angle of five to fifteen degrees of the horizontal to give

them their weathering, planed to the direction of rotation. The wind struck the sides of the vanes, turning them and the track wheels. The tower shook and trembled and I heard the dull groaning and grating of the heavy stones below as they began to revolve. Then the sails were facing squarely into the wind and I shoved the tiller back hard against the slot of the wheel rim. The tower heaved and quivered, the heavy beams creaked, and the floorboards swayed under our feet as we felt the backlash of the locked long-sweeps.

Herky looked at me questioningly.

"Okay," I said. "We got the wind and we're ready. Now we have to figure out how to write the message."

Herky looked out the small window. "How far are we from the mainland? I can't see anything but sky and water."

"About five miles," I said. "But they'll be able to see us. As soon as we find out how to write in the wind."

Herky smiled. "You're going to set it on fire."

I shrugged. "What else? We can't overpower them. All we can do is send off something from here that somebody may see, and then wait and hope. They needed a boat to get here, probably a power launch. If we scare them off, we still have our dinghy for Minerva and the witch."

"They won't go yet," Herky said. "They seemed to be waiting for somebody else—evidently the real leader."

"That's right," I said. "If Gamsun isn't the Beast, then maybe he is. I don't figure that red-headed guy they called Henry for it. Anyway, we can't lick them so we have to outsmart them." I grinned and licked my cold lips. "That's why I brought you along."

Herky was moving about the small tower muttering. "Each of those blades are forty feet high. That's eighty feet and about ten for the diameter of the sail-axle. Almost a hundred foot circle. With about a fifteen foot radius and a breeze of thirteen feet per second we'd have about one horsepower." He broke off

suddenly. "When this mill was built they used pitch to waterproof roofs and for caulking seams of ships. It's a wood preservative and a coal tar derivative, so it burns."

"Now you're talking," I said.

There wasn't anything like it in the tower, and we dropped down below to the grain floor. There wasn't anything there but a lot of sacks, half-filled with dried corn husks and the wooden hoppers that delivered the corn to the mill-stone funnels below. We took the ladder down there. By this time we were getting used to the creaking of the beams and the overall feeling that the mill was alive and breathing, and had lost a lot of our fear. Where the gaping holes showed in the sides and the old weatherboarding was rotten and crumbling, the moon light streamed through revealing the gaunt ribs of the mill and the musty rubbish in its corners. The querns, the heavy millstones that ground the corn to flour were not revolving but shook and vibrated on their wooden pins, as if anxious to get going now that they had been brought back to life. With their tremendous weight and that of the heavy cog and drive wheels and its machinery beneath the flooring, and the way the entire mill shook, I had the feeling we would all come crashing down any minute.

I guess Herky had the same feeling. That spurred us on. We found the pitch bucket in the corner near a pile of enormous wooden wheels with applewood teeth still unworn by the friction they had generated.

We had the pitch bucket but nothing to light it with. All I had in my pockets was a few cents, some string, and a piece of white chalk I carried in case I wanted to mark out a target in a hurry. Herky didn't have anything useful either. There should have been a big box of matches around somewhere in the mill, but we couldn't find a single one. Then I remembered the flintlock I'd seen on the ground floor as we came in.

"The musket," I yelled and went down the ladders barely touching the rungs. I brought it back up and

Herky was already gathering a pile of dried-up gunny sacks and straw matting.

We set up shop on the middle floor. There wasn't any powder in the pan of the old rifle. I removed the lump of flint. On cock, it would strike the steel of the pan-cover, throwing a spark into the powder in the pan, and then—boom! All I wanted was the spark.

I struck the flint against the pan several times and nothing happened except that I was ruining my thumb every time I brought it down. Herky saw my problem and pushed a thin pile of straw against the steel collar around the oak center post.

"Maybe you'll have better luck with a bigger target," he murmured.

He was right. We blew the spark into a tiny flame and nursed it carefully. I soaked the sacks in the pitch, and half of myself at the same time. I guess I was getting nervous.

I went out the small window and inched along the wind-shaft and stuffed the soaked sacking into the light rod framework of the sweep-blades. They shook and shuddered and trembled at my touch, and when I looked down at the ground far below, I felt like doing the same.

From the axle to the extremity there were about twenty holes with inserted crossbars. I got out as far as I could shoving the sacks down and into the web, and plastered the shreds of sailcloth with what pitch I had left in my hands. It was kind of a messy job but when I straightened out finally I had all four blades covered. I took a last look before crawling back in and started to worry that now perhaps I'd disturbed the precise balance of the blades with all that crazy gunnysack and wet black pitch.

Another more positive thought, that we might be running out of time as far as saving Minerva and the witch, chased the worry about the blade balance right out of my mind.

"All we have to decide now," I said to Herky, "is

whether we light up first or release the brake wheel. What do you think?"

Herky frowned. "The way this building is shaking a gust of wind might send those blades moving out of control and you'd never be able to get them lit. I'd say burn first, Steve, and worry later." He grinned.

"Okay," I said. "But we'll have to move fast or we're liable to burn the mill down instead."

I sent him up to the tower to stand ready at the brake lever there and leaned out the window, a small torch of rolled sacking in my hand. The pitch responded beautifully to the torch and as soon as I had everything going I dashed back to the first brake wheel and jammed the lever back.

"Okay, Herk," I yelled. "Move it!"

He yelled something down and I waited for the millstones and drive wheel to start turning. Nothing happened. The flames outside started to really flare out and I wondered for a second if we were going to burn up our message before we had a chance to transmit it. Then I remembered that Herky might not have enough weight on him to hold the big lever back, and I dashed up the ladders again to join him in the tower. He was fighting it, using all his strength, almost crying with frustration.

"It's okay," I said. "Two is always better than one. I learned that in new math."

I put my weight to his and the lever came back, the rim spun free, the track started to rumble, the sprockets whirred, the wheels spun, the millstones below started to rumble and whirl, the blades outside started to thup-thup-thup, the building started to shake, the beams to quiver, and Herky and I started to jump around as happy as a couple of licensed firebugs could be.

By the time we got to the bottom of the mill, we had built a huge circle of flame a hundred feet high in the sky. It lit up the grounds, the crumbled sheds and out-buildings, and the water beyond, and made it easy for

us to find our way back to the old stone house where Minerva and the witch were prisoners. I stopped to take a final look back before heading for the secret entrance. It was beautiful.

It was so beautiful, so breath-taking, I took another long look to admire it. I thought it terrific enough to be seen all the way out at Montauk Point.

I was so thrilled looking at this beautiful wonderful fiery message written by Herky and me in the sky that I didn't even notice that Dracula-type Gamsun and the other fink Henry waiting grimly outside the house to collar us.

27. The Trouble with Being a Prisoner

They shoved us into the new wing's west parlor where they'd been holding their meeting, closing the double doors behind us.

"Hi, dumbbell," Minerva said. "I've been expecting you. What took you so long?"

She had recovered fast. She was holding Sinbad on his leash. The little witch was next to her stroking Sinbad, sitting on the edge of a wing chair. Professor Van Noord was still asleep on the sofa, breathing heavily.

"Herky and I had to get organized," I said. "What happened upstairs?"

"When they saw Sinbad with me? They knew he wasn't along when they brought me here. Then when they asked me if it was my dog, I told them he wasn't, of course."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "So that's how they found us."

"Are you for real?" Minerva hooted. "You could hear that fire and the windmill going ten miles away."

"No kidding?" I said pleased. I went over to the old lady. "This is my friend, Herky Krakower. I don't

know if that's what you meant, but we sent your message."

"Aye, laddie." She shook Herky's hand and looked into his eyes. "My," she said with a wondering and pleased note, "you are beyond reality, aren't you, lad? In the mathematical universe." Herky is very shy and didn't know what to say. "Aye," she nodded. "A perfect computing machine." She turned his hand over, studied it for a second, then covered his palm with her other hand. "The stiffness in your back will be an inconvenience for some years, laddie, but it's of no real importance. Your mind will play with the stars." She folded his hand now. "When you're twenty-three you will discover what only three other men in the world have known. What they had to give was lost to the world and you will be the one who will say the words." She closed her eyes to say, "It is a very long formula. Simple but very long," then she opened them again. "The following year you will fall in a curious accident. And as a result, you will be well again, your back as straight as this other lad." She motioned to me.

Herky stammered his thanks and took back his hand.

"I'm glad for Herky's sake," I said. "But as long as you're reading the future again, maybe you can give us an idea of what's going to happen tonight."

The little lady smiled. She smiled at Minerva and then at me. "Here's how it all started," she said. "And here's how it all ends."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

I realized suddenly that Barker was not in the room. I wondered if he had gone out with the other man when they looked for us. The big doors at the far end of the room opened. Sinbad growled. Mrs. Wood and the red-haired man she called Henry came in.

"Hi, Mrs. Wood," Minerva said cheerfully. "Pop told me to give you a message . . . but I've forgotten what it was."

"That's all right, child," Mrs. Wood said softly, "It will come to you."

Minerva nodded. "I hope so, because it was pretty important." She looked over Mrs. Wood's shoulder. "I know you. You're Mr. Carleton. I thought you died."

He shot her a nasty look but didn't say anything. He inclined his head and whispered something to Mrs. Wood, who nodded and let her eyes travel to Minerva's wrist. She must have noticed the bracelet wasn't there. Her eyes glittered.

"You're mistaken, dear. This isn't Mr. Carleton. It's Mr. Dow." Then she smiled. "Perhaps you should lie down and rest."

"Why?"

"You've been in an accident, child. Don't you remember?"

Minerva shook her head slowly. "I was? I—I don't remember." She sat down suddenly on the sofa near Aurelia.

"Yes, my dear," Mrs. Wood said. "A nasty accident. But you'll be all right. Lie down and rest."

"Okay, Mrs. Wood. Thanks," and Minerva let herself fall back obediently on the sofa.

"That's fine. I'll look in on you later. Just lie there and rest"

"All right, Mrs. Wood," Minerva said dreamily.

Mrs. Wood smiled and went out of the room with the red-headed man, closing the doors behind them. My mouth hung open wider as I looked down at Minerva and saw her wink. Then she sat up and tossed her long blonde hair.

"How would you feel about being married to an actress?" she asked me.

"Oh, boy," I said, summing up a lot of my feelings. "What was all that about recognizing that guy as Mr. Carleton. Did you mean Mrs. Carleton's husband?" She nodded. "But then you said he died."

"He did. Six months ago. They'd been separated and divorced for several years," she said. "Then he

returned a year ago and wanted her to marry him again and she refused. He threatened to kill himself. She thought he was kidding. So he did."

"Killed himself? How do you know for sure?"

"He had a key to her old house. He did it there. She had the doctor rush over. But he was dead, all right. She even invited Pop and me to the funeral. Pop thought it wasn't a good idea considering she still didn't like him, and he was a no-good character. I'm not even sure if she went to it herself."

"Where was he buried?" It was an idle question.

"Where else? Happy Hills."

That shook me up a little.

"Maybe you forget what he looked like. Mrs. Wood said he was Mr. Dow. Remember, she once used that name. At the hospital when she took care of Mrs. Carleton."

Minerva shook her head. "It's Mr. Carleton. I saw him a few times. And she showed me their old wedding picture. Maybe he's calling himself Dow now."

Had this anything to do with Mrs. Carleton having a nervous breakdown and falling apart like she did? Funny, that Mrs. Wood not only had her job now but also her old husband. Maybe the beast was this Henry Carleton, not Gamsun. Or maybe even Mrs. Wood. I didn't know what to think. I looked at the witch Aurelia.

She got to her feet. "We'll have to marshall our forces, children. They'll be coming back soon." She went through the pockets of her long skirt. All she could find was a handkerchief, and she stuffed that back. "I need something for marking," she said briskly.

Herky and I went through our pockets. She took my piece of chalk, also the string. She checked its length and then had me hold it down on the floor with my thumb pinning one end. Then she walked, describing a big circle around us with the chalk. She shortened the string and made another circle inside it. She marked the center point with a small cross, measured, made a series of arcs that bisected the

outer line, and joined these. Now she had a five pointed star. She made a lot of funny signs and horse-shoes over each apex of the star, being very business-like about it and humming a little tune. When she had done, she straightened up. She looked at two huge candlesticks bearing black candles on the fire-place mantel.

"That will keep out the Devil but you must all stay inside the circle." She went through her pockets again. "Do any of you have any salt or garlic?" she asked next and we all shook our heads. It didn't bother her. "I've not too much faith in that stuff anyway," she said. "What we'll need will be a proper spell for invisibility. Now how did that go again?" She mumbled to herself and tugged at her nose, rubbed her chin and wrinkled her brow.

"Herky," I said.

He bit his lip. "Sorry, Steve. That starts on the bottom of page 346. The next page is the missing one, 347 and 348, the one I came back to look for. After that comes Image Magic. How to destroy your enemies with wax images, wood or wool."

Aurelia Hepburn looked at us.

"We found your old Red Grimoire at your place, and I let Herky take it home to read, just in case. He's got a perfect photographic mind. That page you want isn't in the book—it's missing. Ask him anything else in case you forget. He's got perfect recall."

The witch tugged at her chin. "There's one in the middle of the book about Transformation. That's a very good one. The enemy's attention and judgment is disturbed and we make real transformations of ourselves, becoming other shapes and forms, you see, to confuse them."

"Herky?" I asked hopefully.

"That's page 231," he said. "All blurred with the ink running over, blotting and staining it. The next four pages are all stuck together. The next open page is a recipe for using a two-tailed lizard in oil."

She stared at Herky, then laughed. "I knew it!

Cousin Aretha borrowed the book for a time. I believe she used it for a pot cover and the steam seeped through." She grinned. "Aretha never took her magic seriously." She paced around the inside of the circle screwing her face up in vain efforts to jog her memory. "It's all there, but jumbled up. There's the proof ye must never neglect an art, children."

My eyes swivelled back to the black candlesticks. The circle she had made so quickly was an indication that she wasn't taking this too lightly. I had a feeling those black candlesticks were part of that black magic she had warned me about.

I heard Sinbad growl. Gamsun came through the double doors, giving me my first chance to get a good look at him. He came closer and I got a better look. Heavy black eyebrows over dark smouldering eyes. His face a pasty white cracked by more tiny wrinkles than I could count. He looked older than I had thought. He stopped when he saw her drawn circle. His bloodless lips writhed and he raised his arm toward her.

Sinbad stepped out of the circle dragging me after him, his growl deep and threatening as he stood bow-armed and heavy-shouldered between the little old lady and Gamsun. His black jaws set menacingly in that horrible cockeyed grin that meant trouble. His red eye glared balefully.

Gamsun backed off a step. He looked at me. "Your dog?" I nodded, proudly. He put his hand in his pocket and it came out holding a gun, making Sinbad's growl grow more threatening. "Tie him up, kid, if you don't want a few bullets in him."

My eyes stung. I held tightly to Sinbad's chain leash and wrapped another fistful around to hold him. "Take it easy," I said. His deep voice rumbled some more.

Gamsun pointed over my shoulder to the far wall. I couldn't take a chance; he could be a good shot and even though Sinbad was deceptively fast for his size and bulk I knew a bullet was faster.

Gamsun circled the room warily, keeping distance between him and Sinbad, and got to the wall first. He reached halfway up the oak panel and that section slid back. I stared. The inner wall was dark-stained stone. Set into it at different stages were iron clamps, braces and brackets, thick black chains trailing to heavy cuff-like manacles. It was only one wall but it looked like a great start for a torture chamber.

Gamsun bent quickly, picked up a chain fastened to a wall brace and tossed it to me. "On his collar," he ordered.

I didn't like it but obeyed. Sinbad let me snap it on, looking at me dumbly.

"It's okay," I said.

Gamsun slipped the other end of the heavy chain through one of the big iron anchor pins in the wall and snapped on a heavy padlock, yanking hard to make certain it was secure. Then backing clear of Sinbad he waved the gun toward me. "Okay. Back to your little group."

I heard the chain snap taut as Sinbad strained against it, trying to follow. I gave him the hand signal and told him, "Stay." He cocked his head and made the parrot sound, ending on a note full of outrage. "It's okay," I lowered my hand. "Sit." He just stood there massive and disturbed, not understanding at all, his jaw thrust out belligerently. He was letting me know what he thought.

"I can see you've got him well-trained," Gamsun said mockingly. He waited till I got back inside the witch's circle, then he sauntered toward her. She was muttering to herself strange unintelligible words, rubbing the top of her blouse and a silver locket hanging there.

"An amulet," Herky whispered to me. "It's worn as a protection against black magic."

"Let's wish her luck," I said.

Gamsun turned his head as the ten-foot door opened again. The man called Henry, alias Mr.

Carleton, alias Dow, stood there, Mrs. Wood behind him.

"He's come," they said.

Gamsun's face twitched. A door slammed downstairs. Heavy feet climbed the stairs in irregular rhythm, only it was more than one pair. The Beast! I thought.

The footsteps stopped on the upper landing. A voice said:

"I caught him trying to get away. What's going on here anyway? Who set that mill on fire? It can be seen from here to the Point!"

Mrs. Wood's soft voice mumbled something which didn't seem to please the visitor.

"That's no excuse," he said sharply. "Can't you be trusted to do anything right?"

Then Carleton—or Dow—muttered something about the witch, further upsetting the new arrival. Gamsun, looking very worried, walked out toward him and started to wave his hands.

The visitor snapped. "You've had enough time to get her to do what we want. That fire outside is liable to bring everybody down on us. Now we'll have to . . ." He was interrupted by Gamsun putting fingers to his lips warningly. "What?" he said.

Barker was pushed into the room and followed by a man stocky, businesslike and angry, whose mouth closed when he saw me, his eyes startled.

I was surprised, too; by the one person I could have sworn wasn't involved in this mystery—that friendly old collegiate amateur magician—you guessed it—Dr. Downey.

28. Black Magic Blues

We stared at each other a few seconds. Then he spoke. "Well. Now you know."

I nodded, my cheeks feeling very hot, my eyes tight. "I guess you're still pretty good at the sleight-of-hand, Doc." His eyebrows went up, his brown eyes alert. "Pretending to drop your pipe and knocking the ashes all over me when we were following Barker. It gave him a chance to hide in that boat yard near the water."

He made a short mocking bow. "Congratulations. Sorry if I burned you. It was all I could think of."

"That's okay," I said. "So you're in on this with them—and all that stuff with Mrs. Carleton. Nice going, Doc."

He shrugged. "There's no point to explaining anything to you." He frowned. "I'm just kind of sorry you let yourself get so involved—and your friends..."

"You creep!" Minerva yelled.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"Sure," I said. Then, "Say, doc, just to clear up a point—are you the Beast?"

His brown eyes flicked and stared past me into space.

"The Beast 6 whose name is called V.V.V.V.V.V. in the city of the pyramids. SONUF VAUR ESAGII!" He knew magic words too. "Magus 9°-3°." He recited some other funny names with degrees after them, then his eyes focused back on mine. "It's a name. Not in your experience. Not what you think." I didn't get it. "The formula of Thelema," he said dreamily. "Babalon and The Beast conjoined. The last formula of rebirth and renunciation." He touched the center of his forehead. "To the Ancient one, CHAOS."

I caught Herky's eye. "Magus 6. You goofed. He has the same six as Gamsun-Magnus. D-o-w-n-e-y."

"Sorry, Steve." He sounded contrite. "That CHAOS," he whispered, "is a general name for the totality of the units of existence." I nodded dumbly. I still didn't get it. "It's an ancient Coptic spell," Herky added, "sometimes called Omega." That went by me too.

Downey turned to Barker, took his briefcase and

opened it. I saw a lot of money inside before it was closed and handed back.

"That should do it," Downey said to Barker, who gave him a fawning smile.

The red-headed man returned. He walked with an odd halting limp which somehow seemed familiar to me. He held a thick-handled whip with long tipped lashes. Downey looked at him surprised.

"What's that for?"

The red-headed man smiled, like one of those psychopathic gangsters, and jerked a thumb toward the witch.

"She's not fooling me. She's been looking at Van Noord all day. She knows something. I'll get her to talk."

Downey's lips tightened. His eyes flickered to me again briefly, before he muttered, "Forget it. There's no time . . ." A shrill whistle sounded outside. "What was that? We can expect a fire boat."

Mrs. Wood dashed in wringing her white hands. "A boat's coming in. There's a searchlight." She looked at me, hate in her dark eyes. "It's your doing, you snooping kid!" She jerked the whip from the tall red-headed man's freckled hands.

I was sorry I'd been in such a hurry to tie up Sinbad. I looked down at the outline of the witch's circle and wondered if it really could do any good. I looked at her face. She didn't appear worried, nor did Minerva and Herky. I took another quick look at the mad-eyed Mrs. Wood and knew I made up for all of them. The red-headed man tried to take his whip back and Mrs. Wood pushed him away violently, suddenly shrieking at him. Her voice wasn't soft now.

Everything started moving faster.

He looked at her surprised. She started for me and Downey pushed her aside.

"What do you think you're doing!" he said angrily, taking the whip and throwing it across the room.

"Let's keep our heads." He shook his head, looked toward the witch, then walked up to the circle. "I'm sorry," he told her. "We don't have the time to be patient or reasonable now. I'm afraid you'll have to cooperate with us or be hurt . . ."

He stopped open-mouthed with surprise as her hand suddenly darted out and clutched the sleeve of his coat. She squinted her eyes close to it.

"Nae, mon," she said. "You'll be the one hurt tonight. I see blood on your arm."

He jerked his arm away. "What?" He looked down at his jacket sleeve and scowled. "There's nothing there. What are you talking about?"

The old lady smiled. "Your blood, mon. If the wound's not there, then you'll be getting it."

He pounded his fist in his hand impatiently. A soft whistle sounded outside below the house. He frowned. Then a yell made him turn.

Mrs. Wood was clawing at Barker, who was pushing her back, and screaming.

"Get away from me!" Barker raised his arm, waving the thick briefcase. "What about me?" he shouted to Downey. "Am I out, or not?"

Gamsun reached up and grabbed the case from him. "You're out," he said. He turned away and tried to get out the door but Barker grabbed at him.

"Wait," Barker yelled. "My money . . ."

He was interrupted by the bullet from Gamsun's gun. Minerva's scream made me jump nearly out of my shoes. Barker slid slowly to the floor, his back closing the door as he fell, a surprised hurt look on his fat face.

Dr. Downey was flushed. "Gamsun, are you crazy? That wasn't part of it!" He strode forward angrily, his hand out. "Give me that briefcase, you fool!"

Gamsun, unable to get out the blocked door, snarled and circled away from it, holding the gun on Dr. Downey, the briefcase shoved tightly under his other arm.

"Fat chance," he jeered. "This is another operation you flunked, bright boy!"

Dr. Downey half-crouched, balancing on his toes, his arms bent. He took two steps along with Gamsun, watching the gun warily, then suddenly leaped in a diving headlong tackle. Gamsun's gun barked again and Downey fell, clutching his shoulder.

I stared goggle-eyed at the blood suddenly coursing down his arm. The witch had seen it before it happened.

"Hold tight," she was saying. She linked arms with Herky and me. "Stay inside the circle."

What was happening in the room didn't look like any kind of black magic, but I nodded dumbly and linked arms with Minerva. The smell of cordite made my nose wrinkle. Sinbad sneezed and pulled at his chain.

Mrs. Wood and the tall red-headed man went around Dr. Downey, who started to sit up, his eyes off focus but directed at them. They began tugging at Barker's inert body but stopped suddenly and backed away, looking frightened. Something was bumping the door from the outside. It gave slowly, pushing Barker aside, and flew open. Sheriff Landry stepped into the room.

"Pop!" Minerva yelled in surprise, breaking our arm hold and stepping out of the circle.

For a second I had trouble recognizing Sheriff Landry without those bandages over his eyes. They were red-rimmed but nothing else seemed wrong with them as, mean and yellow, they roved the corners of the room. His long teeth were bared, his lean face twitched, and he looked big, mean and tough, more like a hungry wolf than ever. His hand snaked out suddenly. It was holding his big .38 Police Special and I felt like cheering.

His hot wolf eyes raked Mrs. Wood and Dr. Downey sitting swaying on the floor. "You're a good group," he rasped between his teeth. Then he noticed the red-

headed man. "Still around, Carleton? I thought we put you away for good last time."

I had only that second to feel good. Gamsun took a quick sidelong step and grabbed Minerva. He held her close, between him and the Sheriff's gun, his own automatic over her shoulder.

"Drop it, Sheriff."

Sheriff Landry's eyes blazed green insanely. His wide shoulders hunched. For a second I thought he was going for Gamsun. Minerva cried out and he recovered, the long muscles of his face twitching, his gun hand wavering. It lowered and he let the gun fall from the ends of his stiff-curved fingers.

Mrs. Wood and Carleton cut across the room. He smiled at the Sheriff as he stooped to pick up his gun. Sheriff Landry watched him coolly. Then his other hand came up suddenly, his balled fist crashing into Carleton's chin, almost tearing his head off. He hit the floor heavily and lay still.

"Try me again," the Sheriff said between his teeth.

Gamsun yelled. He came forward, holding Minerva as a shield, waving his gun to get Sheriff Landry away from the door. Sinbad strained on the chain. Gamsun heard his strangling breath and looked back nervously. He saw the chain holding, smiled, and shifted his eyes back to the Sheriff.

"You'll never make it, Gamsun."

Gamsun's pasty face was dead white. His gun hand made small circling movements.

"Get away from the door," he snarled, breathing hard.

He took another step and Sinbad threw himself against the thick chain again. I knew how he felt but it was impossible, the chain too big, the iron pin anchored solidly in the stone wall. He tried again and was brought up short with a strangling sigh. Gamsun was almost at the door. Sinbad shook his big head angrily, his deep voice like thunder in the room, and drove forward again, his powerful legs going like iron

pistons until he came to the end, his thick shoulders down, and surged out like a relentless wave. The chain tightened and his feet flew digging into the floor. He could hardly breathe now. His eyes bulged horribly. Then suddenly the anchor pin was trembling in its cement hold. It shook looser under Sinbad's final convulsive effort. As I stared paralyzed, a crack appeared in the stone; the pin wobbled. He lunged again. The pin flew out. The heavy chain and manacle crashed on the floor and Sinbad was free and away, thundering across the room like a runaway express train.

Gamsun turned too late. Sinbad was too furious, his charge too fast. He launched himself through the air, the long chain behind him like a comet tail, and the frightened man went down as if hit by a tank. The briefcase from under his arm landed near the fireplace. His gun caromed off the wall and slid across the hardwood floor, stopping just outside the witch's circle.

Sheriff Landry looked down at the stunned man. "I said you wouldn't make it," he said curtly, then bent to pick up his own gun and slip it back into its holster.

Minerva had been knocked aside when Sinbad banged into Gamsun; now he stood over her whining softly and licking her face. She sat up, hugged him, then poked him a few times to show her appreciation and his whole rear end vibrated and trembled with love. She unsnapped the heavy chain, padlock and iron ring from around his thick white neck.

Dr. Downey was white-faced, looking down stunned at his bloody coat sleeve. The Sheriff hoisted and half-carried him a few steps and set him down in a big chair.

"You'll be all right, doctor," he said. "All you need is some competent medical attention." He took off Downey's blood-soaked coat, ripped off his tie and shirt, and made a tight tourniquet against the coursing wound in his right upper arm.

I was watching like a spectator at a play. It seemed

all over, the bad guys down, the good guys taking over.

I heard a slithering noise, and out of the corner of my eye saw Gamsun stretched out on his stomach a few feet away make a sudden move. He must have feigned grogginess until the Sheriff's back was turned. His hand was reaching for his gun. I woke out of my trance and was about to kick it away when Aurelia Hepburn's voice came shrill in my ears.

"Let it be, lad. Don't move."

I responded like a robot. Gamsun's hand quivered inches away from the gun on the floor, a mad triumphant gleam glittering in his black eyes. The little witch leaned down toward him, her tiny feet rimming the circle. She raised her hands over her head. A strange smile was etched on her face as she said:

"Go ahead, mon. Touch it. Get hold of it and then we'll see if you can lift it."

Gamsun laughed. His long white fingers found the gun butt. "It's cold steel, my dear," he told her, a gleeful note in his voice. "That's beyond the magic of any witch."

My eyes flicked to the Sheriff. He had turned and was watching, aware of the duel. To my mute question, should I still kick the gun away, he shook his head almost imperceptibly, no.

The witch was muttering soft strange words sounding like she was reciting the dictionary backwards. Gamsun's hand was locked on the gun and now it quivered. The witch's blue eyes blazed at him like twin laser beams.

"Aye, it's cold steel," she rasped. "And beyond ordinary magic." Her fingers spun the silver amulet on the chain around her neck. "This is the amulet of Isobel Gowdie, witch of Auldearne, no ordinary witch. And I am Aurelia from Mull, the isle of the Druids in the Hebrides. I know the curse of Alice Molland, witch of hate, and I've the demons of one-eyed Balor to help me." She laughed a short shrill note. Then she locked her thumbs over her head,

crossed her feet and said. "ABRASAX! SABRIAM! SABAF!" Her voice was like a soft song now. "Pick up your cold steel now if you can."

I felt Herky's breath on my cheek as he leaned to watch Gamsun's writhing fingers struggling to lift the gun, which shook and trembled but never left the floor. Great veins stood out on Gamsun's forehead and beads of sweat bubbled. His arms and legs twitched convulsively as if trying to lift a ton. The gun was a black automatic of a weight just short of a pound, but it now must have become a cannon to him. He tried and tried but it seemed glued to the floor.

His arm fell limp. Then he raised his head and fixed his dark-ringed eyes on the witch, his lips drawn back over his sharp white teeth, and the thousand wrinkles in his face suddenly came to life like snakes. Five feet away I felt the force of his hate like a jet stream. My knees buckled and my legs became jelly. He was directing all his energy on the witch but it bounced off her like waves hitting a rock. I felt my forehead tighten, my vision blurred, and I started to feel very depressed. Then a cool wind stirred my hair and I felt it press down on me, numbing my bones. I shivered.

"Stay back," the witch hissed in my ear, her hand clutching my arm. "Concentrate your resistance."

I looked down and saw one of my feet outside the circle. I drew it back. My toes felt numb.

"Watch the candles on the mantel," she said.

Their flames had grown two inches higher. She raised her hand. The flames contracted immediately as if she had thrown sand over them, flickered, dwindled, and then they went out.

"There's that for your black magic," she said to Gamsun straining on the floor, his face contorted with hate.

I heard a sob and saw Mrs. Wood standing near the fireplace next to the red-haired man. Her hand clutched her throat and her eyes were large and

frightened. The man was sitting up, groggy and gaping. I looked at Dr. Downey. He had forgotten he was shot and was sitting on the edge of his chair with a look of absolute wonder on his face.

Gamsun was sweating, his face carved out of a block of agony. He had released the gun. His hands were trying to clutch the floor, his nails scratching at the wood and slipping. Then I saw what was happening to him. He was stretched out prone, but his feet were losing contact with the floor and rising. Then his thighs lifted, as if some invisible giant force behind him were tilting him like a wheelbarrow.

"And here's the magic of Menw, and Math, and Eiddilic the Dwarf, for killing my goat." She spat the names out and his entire body lifted off the floor. She held him there, her eyes riveted and focussed upon him, creating some kind of a force field that locked him in space.

"And the mark of Master John so men will know you," she said. Her hands snapped forward and Gamsun screamed and clutched his face. His body spun parallel to the floor. The old lady said, "So mote it be!" and brought her hands down to her sides.

Gamsun's scream ended on a high lingering sigh. Then his body struck the floor, rolled over, and his hands fell away from his face. There was a round red mark on each side of his forehead, and as I watched they became small bumps.

"The Horns of the Devil," Herky whispered.

"Aye, lad," the witch said. "A proper decoration for the likes of him."

I looked at Minerva. Her face was white.

"Jeepers!" she said. "How about *that*, Pop?"

His lips framed a soundless whistle. "I'll buy that," he said. His chest raised high, and then he exhaled. He must have been holding his breath too.

Mrs. Wood and the red-headed man stood still against the fireplace wall, their expressions blank, as if they knew it was all over. I was waiting for the Sheriff's next move, when he would lay down the

law to her, tell her off for betraying a trust and all that, maybe even put handcuffs on her.

The room lights went out suddenly and put a stop to that kind of thinking.

I heard the Sheriff tell Minerva to stay down, then quick rustling footsteps, a click and silence. Matches flared in the darkness near the Sheriff and went out. I remembered I had a flashlight, and ran with it across the room. Its thin beam finally located the wall switch, and the Sheriff snapped it on. His thin lips formed a half smile.

"A real magic show ending in a disappearing act," he said admiringly. "Not bad."

"What?" I looked around.

Everything was the same except Mrs. Wood and Henry the red-headed man were gone. So was Barker's briefcase with his money. The fact that the door behind the Sheriff was still closed, blocked by Barker's prone body, made it even more interesting.

29. Magic of the Druids

The little witch was sitting in the center of her circle, her head bowed and folded inside her arms, rocking back and forth, humming a little tune. She raised her head.

"It was none of my doing," she said simply.

The Sheriff scratched his head, looking about the big open room puzzled.

"It's the secret passageway," I yelled.

"I'll buy that, too," he said.

I knew roughly where it was but not how to trigger it from our side of the fireplace wall. The Sheriff gave me time to explain and waited patiently while I tapped all over the panelling searching for the release. By the time I found it and slid the panel back, showing him the dark passageway inside, I knew they

were both already through it and away.

I felt miserable because, having discovered the secret way out, I should have remembered about it sooner. The Sheriff noticed me chewing myself out.

"Don't feel too bad," he said. "Sheppard will stop them."

"Sheppard? Who's he?"

The Sheriff started to explain about a contact he had on the island, and I started to feel sick.

"Does he have thick, very blonde hair, and a busted nose?"

He nodded, interested, and I felt sicker. Herky didn't look happy either.

Sheriff Landry frowned. "What's wrong with you two?"

The downstairs door slammed and we heard footsteps running up. The Sheriff turned, hand on his gun butt. The big doors were still closed. The side which appeared to be working was still partially blocked by Barker's feet but it was now being steadily forced open. Then into the room, his hair dishevelled, his tough face bruised and angry, his eyes searching, stepped the towheaded man.

"Over here, Sheppard," the Sheriff said.

He came over slowly, holding his bloodied head. His eyes found Herky, and me, and then Sinbad. They narrowed to slits. The Sheriff sighed.

"Sinbad?" he asked me.

I gulped and nodded. He whistled softly and looked down at my big lovable monster.

"You got to remember he just saved Minerva," I said quickly.

The Sheriff nodded. "Sure," he growled. "But he can't go around knocking down everything he sees. You're supposed to be his master. Can't you control him?"

"Who, me? Him?"

"It's all right, Sheppard," the Sheriff told him. "I know these boys. And the bulldog."

The towheaded man looked at us curiously, then

at Sinbad who cocked his head up at him and grinned his crooked way. "Is that what it was? A dog? I thought it was a tank that hit me." The man rubbed the back of his head gingerly.

"He didn't know who you were," I said. "None of us did. Are you a government man?"

He gave me a disgusted look, shifted his eyes to the bodies lying around the room, then spoke to the Sheriff. "Looks like I've missed a lot. What's happened?"

The Sheriff started to explain, stopped and cocked his head. We heard the scream of a powerful motor launch going away.

"There they go," he said morosely. "Guess they had their boat hidden the other side of the island." He signalled to the towheaded man and jerked his thumb to the wispy white-haired old man lying on the sofa, whose eyes were open now, staring at the ceiling. "That's Professor Van Noord. He seems to be all right. You stay and keep an eye on the others. I'll try to find a phone and get out an 'all points' alarm on them."

When the Sheriff turned for the door, Aurelia Hepburn raised her hand and stopped him.

"I can bring them back for you," she said.

Sheriff Landry folded his arms and looked down at her. The towheaded man came over. "Who's she?" he asked.

"Aurelia Hepburn. Dame Hepburn. Our resident witch."

The towheaded man looked startled. "Hepburn? I was at her place . . ." He couldn't believe it. "She's the witch?"

Sheriff Landry nodded, still looking steadily down at the witch. "How do you propose to do it, Miss Hepburn?"

She was tugging at the ends of her handkerchief, being nervous, I thought. It had been a rough day for the old lady, and a long tough night.

"You'll be recalling I'm a Druidess," she said softly. Her eyes found mine and she smiled, her hands busy

making three knots in the handkerchief. She held it out pinching one corner letting the knotted part dangle. "There's a proper way to take care of them. The gift of the Druids, you might say."

Minerva was pressing against my shoulder, her lips parted, when the witch opened one knot slowly.

"I want the wind," she said clearly.

The towheaded man looked at her with disbelief. He tugged at his lower lip and looked at Sheriff Landry as if he thought he was crazy too. Tree branches scraped against the roof. Sheriff Landry shook off Sheppard's questioning stare, took out his pipe and pouch, loaded it and struck a match to the bowl. He leaned back against the fireplace wall and puffed contentedly. A whispering sigh heightened outside the leaded diamond-shaped windows. The panes vibrated. The wooden shutters rattled.

Herky watched spellbound as the old lady opened the second knot. She addressed the high beamed ceiling.

"I'll be wanting more wind than that," she said. "I'll have a proper gale."

The wind rose, slapping the shutters against the side of the house. The windows shook. Tree branches lashed the facing gable. The heavy beams overhead creaked.

Minerva took my hand, and said, "Weirdsville," her eyes rolling.

Sheriff Landry removed the pipe stem from between his teeth, pointing it at the witch's handkerchief. "You've another knot left, Miss Hepburn," he said.

"Aye," she nodded. "That's the one to bring them back." She undid the knot and snapped the handkerchief outward, facing the quivering windows. "I'll have the hurricane now, if you please."

The wind rose to a shriek. The leaded panes flew open. Great gusts of wind and rain lashed our faces. The surf roared and the wind howled above it. She was having her proper storm. I remembered her tell-

ing me the Druids were always especially good at this one thing, producing storms at sea.

There were two light sconces on the inside wall flanking the fireplace, a high glass chandelier in the room's center, and three similar wall brackets against the outside wall at intervals between the window sections. They dimmed and flared again, flickering almost like candles. The witch was dancing in a tight circle, her face fixed with a dream-like smile, her arms and hands flowing in a slow rhythm as if pulling and drawing the storm closer to us. There was a low rich roll of whispered thunder. Another followed—a third—a fourth. The chandelier swayed. Then a sudden fresh gust blew me across the room with Minerva. Lightning flashed blindingly outside, followed instantly by a crash of thunder. The chandelier glass tinkled as it swayed on its metal chain in a longer arc.

"Let's get out of here," Sheriff Landry said. He pushed Minerva, Herky and me toward the door and extended his hand toward the witch.

"Better hurry," she said quietly. "I'll be along presently."

We were filing through the door when another gust shook the house. The chandelier tore loose and crashed into a thousand sparkling fragments as the lights went out. I looked back for Aurelia Hepburn. She stood at the window facing directly into the storm, her hair blown straight back by the wind, the moon lighting up her face as she smiled.

"Thank you, Baalzaphon," she shouted. He sure deserved it.

We call the cyclones over our Atlantic Ocean region West Indian hurricanes. They're called typhoons in the Pacific, but they're the same thing. We've had them before on our thin shelf of eastern Long Island, the storm moving west-northwestward from the Carolines 1000 miles away, tearing up Florida, then shifting over Cape Hatteras and travelling the last 400 miles northeastward. They'll have gusts of over 100

miles an hour with the barometer dropping to 27 inches.

A hurricane is a special kind of windstorn. It needs a great mass of warm moist air to feed on, and it curves to follow the path of any low-pressure trough. The winds are counterclockwise in direction, twisting around a vortex, the narrow circular area of calm in the center. The winds blow in opposite directions with the east getting a 150-mile wind, and the west a 50-mile wind. This creates the dangerous semicircle sailors have been taught to fear. They usually take ten days to move from the tropical oceans south of the Caroline or Marshall Islands up to us.

So I can't explain how Aurelia Hepburn, even with the help of Baalzaphon managed it so fast. By the time we got downstairs the front door had blown open and we had to hold on to each other to get to it.

The water had risen all along the shore and great waves were tearing in as if they meant to devour the island. I'd never seen such waves on Jonah's Bay. The hurricane tore the heads off them tossing them fifty feet in the air. It ripped at the old windmill. There was a grinding battering noise and I saw the tower go down. Then the millblades Herky and I had set on fire scattered like toothpicks thrown in the air.

Minerva's voice was shrill. "Look! There they come!"

Their 30-foot launch looked like a speck riding the crest of a great wave. The crest dropped and they disappeared from view. Then they were on it again, perched helplessly on the tip, balanced like a tray on a waiter's hand. The billowing tide rushed them in, the wave broke high on the shore and they were catapulted across the wet sand. The boat skidded up the embankment, careening crazily, and stopped just short of the house.

The Sheriff strode down the steps, the wind lessening with each stride so that by the time he reached their boat the storm had passed on. The high cirrus clouds had cleared and the sky sparkled with a mil-

lion diamonds. He hauled them out of the boat, soaked, sodden, and shaking with fear.

"Welcome back," he said. "You'll be interested to know that you're under arrest again, Carleton. Like old times. You too, Miss Gamsun."

I was more surprised than they were. Miss *Gamsun*?

30. Old Ties and Loose Ends

It had taken longer to get off the island than we expected. The witch's hurricane had wrecked all the town's police-patrol and fire boats, so they had to come for us in a borrowed fishing boat, one built a little stronger than the P.D.'s newer ones.

Barker had recovered, apparently only stunned by being shot, and on his way across the bay he did a lot of talking to Sheriff Landry and Sheppard. He sat apart from the others, a bandage on his head, looking daggers at Gamsun for putting a part in his scalp with a .44 caliber bullet.

Gamsun didn't feel much like talking. He had caught a lot of the splintered glass when the chandelier fell and looked more like a man who had tried shaving with his left hand than like Dracula.

Dr. Downey was glum, glassy-eyed and shaking, having lost a lot of blood from his shoulder wound. He had also lost his happy brisk bedside manner too, and sat looking as if he wished he had studied law instead of medicine or magic.

Mrs. Wood appeared sadder than ever, only this time with good reason.

Henry Carleton sat wet and mad, about as happy as a sky diver who just found out he'd forgotten his parachute.

When the Sheriff opened Barker's briefcase, recovered from the boat Mrs. Wood and Carleton had tried to escape in, he whistled. It came to a hundred

thousand dollars, even soaking wet. I dropped him a hint that if they were handing out any reward money he could take the fifty-six bucks I owed him for the golf shoes out of my share. He said he'd think about it.

The big detectives were waiting and a couple of beefy policemen, all of whom along with Sheppard took Gamsun, Wood and company off to the hospital for treatment before arraignment. By that time they didn't look dangerous, confident, or even mysterious.

Sheriff Landry had a squad car waiting and insisted on delivering Aurelia Hepburn home personally. Professor Van Noord, wide awake now, wanted to go along to find out what it was all about. I was interested in that too, so were Minerva and Herky.

Dawn looked as good over Mucker's Swamp as any place.

Aurelia Hepburn made us all comfortable. She put the kettle on for tea, prepared sandwiches, and had cookies for Minerva, Herky and me. These didn't have any secret messages inside. She made some porridge for Sinbad and spoke secretly to him in high soft tones. Sinbad proved that the Druids had a gift for understanding animal language by lapping up the oatmeal. I never knew he liked it. He always acted at home as if his whole life depended on raw hamburger.

The witch hadn't spoken to Professor Van Noord till this time. He'd been drugged when they brought him to the island. Now she poured his tea and asked how he liked it, with cream or lemon, one lump or two, and he told her in his thick Dutch accent.

She sat beside him at her table. "That's a marvelous idea you have, mon. Is ultrasonic the correct word for it?" His wispy white eyebrows flew over his pale China-blue eyes. "An audio-oscillator tuned to a higher frequency than the human ear can detect," she added.

Nobody blamed the Professor for choking over his

sandwich. She patted him on the back till he recovered. Then she continued as if she were reading it all out of a newspaper.

"Beamed on a sleep-walking index obtained from alpha and delta measurements with electronic sound sensors to a conjugate image point at 366 wavelengths. That sounds wonderful!"

Professor Van Noord's tea cup clattered into its small saucer. His mouth opened.

She raised her finger. "Don't interrupt, mon. I've got to read it all proper. My, but it is very elaborate. Up to a ten foot resolution at a range of three thousand feet." She frowned. "I don't understand this part . . . between alpha and amnesia fugue . . . inducing bypass of the low voltage drowsy stage, alternating low voltage fast activity and high voltage low activity . . . to an EEG pattern of the first stage of normal REM . . ." She shook her head as if confused, then suddenly leaned back laughing. "Why it's nothing more than a sleep machine!"

The old man stood up shaking. "You are the police here, no?" he asked Sheriff Landry, who nodded. The professor pointed accusing. "Then I demand you arrest this woman. She has somehow broken into my house, stolen my notes from my study."

The little witch smiled and asked Minerva if she wanted another cookie. Minerva said no, thanks, but Herky and I were talked into another plateful.

The Sheriff tried calming Van Noord down. "Dame Hepburn hasn't seen you before today, Professor. She hasn't been near your house, taken your notes, or even seen them. Take my word for it. All she's seen is the inside of your head," the Sheriff added, taking out his handkerchief and mopping his brow. "This is going to be great fun to explain," he said darkly.

The old man got angry. "What?" He touched his forehead involuntarily. "What are you saying?"

The Sheriff sighed. He rubbed his chin. "You're going to give me a lot of trouble, you know that?" he

told the witch. "It's this way, Professor. Dame Hepburn is a clairvoyant. A psychic. She can read a person's thoughts perfectly."

"85 percent," the witch said, "give or take a point."

The Professor stared at them.

"That's why you were kidnapped," the Sheriff said patiently. "And Miss Hepburn too. They wanted her to read your mind, don't you see? To get the secret of your new discovery—this sleep device or machine, whatever it is."

"But I told nobody what I was working on," the old man said. "I don't know these people."

"You told Barker."

"Mr. Barker? He was one of them?"

"Well, let's put it this way," the Sheriff said. "He was and then again he wasn't."

"Mr. Barker was my friend. He did me a very great favor when I come here to this country."

The Sheriff nodded. "I'm sure he did. And he wanted one in return. You thought the automatic supersonic garage door was that. Right?"

The Professor shrugged. "Well, yes—he did something good for me. So I made a fun thing for him. A game—a toy. My work is with sound. That garage door was nothing."

Sheriff Landry pushed away his tea cup and lit his pipe. "Maybe it was nothing for you but it impressed Barker. You see, he's a business man with little numbers running around in his head all the time, becoming big dollar signs and bigger numbers. He knew he could make a bundle peddling some of your ideas."

"But I do not do these things for money," the old man said excitedly. "It is—like you would call my hobby. I do these things for fun."

Sheriff Landry grimaced. "Barker doesn't understand that word. When you told him you were working on an idea for putting people to sleep, he knew it was worth a fortune. In this country, Professor, there are a lot of people who can't sleep well nights."

They're nervous, or unhappy, or over-ambitious, or they ate too much, or they're in love . . ."

"Oh, come on, Pop," Minerva interrupted.

The Sheriff grinned. "Take my word for it, Professor. The sleeping pill industry is pretty big here: Sedatives, barbiturates, tranquilizers. Runs into millions. Well, Barker saw all those people using your sound machine. No drugs, no booze, no pain."

The Professor sat down at the table again. "And that's why I was kidnapped? Because I wouldn't tell Barker how my idea worked, exactly?"

The Sheriff shook his head. "No. You were kidnapped for fear you might tell Barker."

"I do not understand," the old man said, speaking for me, too.

"Barker made the mistake of telling Gamsun and his bunch. They needed your sleep device for their own purposes, which we'll go into later. When Barker tried to keep you for his own pigeon they threatened him. The garage door falling on him was their first warning."

"The garage door fell . . . ? Impossible. I designed it perfectly."

"Any mechanism can be fouled up. But they exposed themselves. Barker already knew too much about their organization—he had been a member, you see. The only way to keep him from talking was to put him out of the way completely and absolutely."

"You mean that was why they brought the bomb into the hospital?" I asked. "Not to get you?"

"I don't think so," he said, after a brief pause. "Maybe. They didn't know what he might have told me at that point, so it's possible. We'll find out more after some questioning."

"What about all that money he brought to Tucker-mill Island? Did he rob his own bank?"

"Second question first—we don't know yet. We'll be going over his books. As to the payoff—he knew they meant business after that bomb. He talked Dr. Dow-

ney into giving him another chance, promising a bundle if they'd let him off the hook. That's the pattern, and it's my guess."

"But Gamsun shot him anyway," I said.

Sheriff Landry said dryly, "I don't think Downey was in on that."

"No," I remembered. "He got mad, told Gamsun he goofed, and went for him. Gamsun shot him, too."

"I'm still confused," the old man said. "If the woman here was to read my mind and tell them, what went wrong? As you can see, she knows as much about it as I do."

"Sure," the Sheriff said, "she knew, but she wouldn't tell them she knew."

"Aye, mon," the little witch said. "She wouldn't."

"Why not?" Van Noord asked.

"Because I don't like threats, mon."

"Threats? They offered me a good deal of money," he said. "I told them it wasn't for sale. They would have paid you a fortune."

"Aye," she said. "There was that. But I use the gift as I see fit. It's not a commodity to be shopped for."

"What was the big deal about the sleep machine anyway, pop?" Minerva asked.

"Business expansion," he said dryly and was favored by her are-you-for-real look. "They have an unusual organization. Rather, they *did* have. Starting as Satanists, a cult of Devil worshippers with magic rites and rituals. But knowing that a good many people are afraid of the Devil got them involved with blackmail and extortion. Big money.

"My guess is they wanted the machine to put people to sleep and then hypnotize them. Apparently it's inaudible and undetectable, operating from a wide range with subsequent amnesia. What better way to learn intimate secrets, and plant post-hypnotic suggestions that would benefit the organization?"

Herky coughed politely and quietly said, "It wouldn't have worked."

Van Noord jerked. "What?"

Sheriff Landry smiled. "How was that again, Herky?"

"It wouldn't work for their hypnotic purposes because you bypass the alpha and drowsy first stage of sleep and go into the first stage of REM," Herky explained. "Hypnosis can only be induced in the light early stages of sleep. By the time a subject has reached the rapid eye movements of REM sleep, he has already passed through deep delta sleep, and in REM he is concerned only with himself, his ego and his dreams. REM means rapid eye movements, Steve."

The professor stared at him.

"Also," Herky continued, "your frequency is either in, or induces the fuguelike state of, temporary amnesia. It's not controllable. In hypnosis, the subject takes suggestions from the hypnotist. In amnesia and fugue, the subject's own obsessions are his driving force. So, Gamsun and his gang might have put people to sleep but couldn't influence them because the machine reaches a different level of unconsciousness."

Van Noord drummed the table with his fingers, his eyes on the ceiling, his lips moving soundlessly as if he were making a big calculation. A sudden smile came across his face and then faded as Herky continued:

"It wouldn't work for Professor Van Noord, either, because there's loss of identity with the fugue state of amnesia. The person sleeping would lose awareness of his personality, who he is, and his relationship to his environment. He would have no reason to wake up, no ego drive from his brain telling him why he had to, or what his situation in life was. If he had a job, he'd probably show up late and be fired. If he showed up at all."

Professor Van Noord mumbled something about maybe he should change his amplitude potential of velocity.

That sounded good to me but Herky didn't think much of it. He was so interested he forgot that Pro-

fessor Van Noord was a famous Dutch scientist and he only a 12-year old kid.

"No," he said. "Your problem area is the fugue state. Besides loss of memory, the subject often begins a new life, remembering nothing of the amnesic period." He smiled gently. "In that case, you'd have a lot of angry deserted wives on your back."

Professor Van Noord took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "It was only for fun," he said. "I wasn't putting it on the market, remember."

"But you should," Herky said. "It has some very interesting possibilities."

"I could pass the fugue state that bothers you," Van Noord said suddenly, snapping his fingers, "and go immediately into REM sleep."

"Oh, no," Herky said. "You wouldn't want to do that. You'd be putting them into a cataleptic state."

"What?" Professor Van Noord said.

"Narcolepsy," Herky told him. "Under sudden emotional storms, they seemingly faint and go immediately into deep REM sleep. The trouble is when they awaken they can't move. They're paralyzed for a considerable time."

"Narcolepsy," Van Noord muttered.

"Perhaps you'd be better off using theta waves," Herky said. "They're common to anxious subjects and people who can't sleep would tend to be anxious, I imagine."

Van Noord nodded. "Yes. True. True."

"Or lambda waves," Herky said. "Since alpha waves disappear when the eyes are open."

"Lambda waves," Van Noord said, his eyes rolling.

"You might run into a hallucinatory reaction," Herky said. "But it might precede the normal dream state. What kind of an attenuator are you using, variable or fixed?"

Professor Van Noord pushed away his tea cup and turned to the witch. "If I could trouble you for some paper and pencils," he said, "perhaps the young man

and I could work out this—this problem.”

“Aye,” she said smiling. “Delighted.” Aurelia Hepburn cleared a table in the back and set some pencils and paper down. “You can work it out here in quiet, professor.”

He got up and bowed stiffly to Herk. “After you, my friend,” and they went to the other table and started working out the bugs in the professor’s sleep machine.

31. Last Ends Tied

Sheriff Landry smiled as he watched them arguing and scribbling away. “I’m kind of glad Herky’s interests don’t lie in criminology. Otherwise I’d be walking a beat again.”

“Yeah,” Minerva said, jabbing me with her elbow. “How come *you* don’t have any brains, dumbbell?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that exactly,” her pop said quietly. “If it hadn’t been for Steve, we’d never have cracked this case, or probably even have gone into investigating it.”

“You’re kidding,” she said.

I gave her my noble suffering-in-silence look.

“Nope,” he said. “Not to mention saving your life and Miss Hepburn’s by setting the windmill on fire. I didn’t know Sheppard had followed them on his own. I didn’t know where you were, or Miss Hepburn either. But when I see a circle of flame a hundred feet high coming from a windmill that I know hasn’t been working for about a hundred years, I kind of get the feeling—because I’m a Sheriff, Chief of Police, and amateur detective—that somebody is trying to give me a message.”

“Blah,” Minerva said. “Big deal. *I* could have told you where I was.”

“Oh fine,” he said, and looked down at her wrist.

"By the way, where's your bracelet?"

She looked at her bare wrist and rubbed it. "I don't know. Guess I lost it. Why?"

"I miss the smell," he said wrinkling his nose. He looked sharply across the table at me. "You take it off?"

"Me and Sinbad. I couldn't break it with my bare hands."

Minerva's eyes turned a darker blue. "You broke my bracelet? What was the big idea? Just because you never liked it?"

Her pop put his big hand on her arm. "Take my word for it, he did you a big favor."

"Why? Was it stolen or something? Not a genuine antique? I don't care. I liked it."

"Even if it was poisoning you?" he asked softly.

"Yike," she said. "No kidding?" He nodded, and she asked me, "Did you know that?"

I shrugged. "Mrs. Carleton was wearing one like it and when Dr. Downey cut it off he told me it was Mandragora root, which makes people forget things. Maybe he cut hers off to throw me off the track. I think I told him you had one just like it."

She squeaked, "What do I have to forget?"

Sheriff Landry's eyes were bleak again. "You haven't figured that one out yet, I suppose, Steve?"

"I think it's got something to do with Henry, whether or not he really is Mr. Carleton, your housekeeper's ex."

"Now, that's the kind of son-in-law I'm interested in," he said. I hated to tell him I was more interested in getting off the hook about that fifty-six bucks.

"Speaking of mysteries," I said, "how come you can see so good all of a sudden instead of being all bandaged up, and like blind?"

"That's where you come into it, Steve. Everything jelled and fit into place from the moment you helped me see clearly."

He explained that when he threw the bomb away, he thought he had protected his eyes by shutting them,

ducking his head, cradling it inside his arms an instant before the blast. When he regained consciousness and found himself almost completely taped and bandaged, it surprised him to be that banged up. But a doctor was leaning over him saying he'd been severely burned and suffered temporary blindness, with a possible chance of permanent eye damage. He was one of the hospital staff, considered competent, even reputable, and brilliant for his age, so when he insisted the bandages had to be on at least two weeks it was only reasonable to take him at his word.

Minerva sighed. "Come on, Pop. Get to the point."

The Sheriff grunted and lit his pipe. "Lying there immobilized, I had nothing to do but go over in my mind all the wild and unsubstantiated charges Steve had made, even against our own Mrs. Wood. He was so convinced he was right, so unshakable, he made me think—what if he was right? Working backwards, what could be somebody's motive?"

"Money is always a pretty good motive," he continued. "So is revenge. I had the time bomb to consider, directed to a wealthy banker. I was indirectly hurt by it. I started to think about how anybody might put a workable criminal plan into operation.

"Immobilize the law would be a good way to start. Remove him completely from the scene of action. That represented my condition. If Steve was right, everything else was wrong. I had to try the other assumption—what if I wasn't temporarily blinded? What if I could see?"

"You lifted the eye bandages and peeked?" I said.

"Late one night. The room was dark and it was a safe enough risk. Exposure to light is what's dangerous. Usually I can see pretty well in the dark."

Like a wolf, I thought.

"And that night I saw as well as ever. I checked the other bandages. My hands weren't as badly burned as the doctor had said. Nor my chest. Not enough to be wrapped up like a mummy. I had to consider now that Steve *was* right and there was a conspiracy going.

"The improbable has to be attacked first. That was the respected Dr. Downey who had done the bandaging and given me the gloomy prognosis. I had my detectives run a wire on him, what we call a 'make.' His previous hospital post was in Northridge, upstate: a good record marred by two accidental deaths that could have been due to negligence on his part but the charges, never supportable, were dropped. He resigned and came to our Hampton hospital a year ago. We checked his private life. A big spender, playboy and gambler. Those are expensive hobbies."

"You still pretended you were blind?"

"I played it exactly as they planned it—giving him all the rope I could. Meanwhile, using Internal Revenue Agents, we checked his bank account. He had more money deposited than his medical practice warranted. He made the mistake of using Barker's bank.

"We found cancelled checks for large sums exchanged between Downey and Bert Gamsun, others for his purchase of the Tuckermill Island property, and several small boats. Rather unusual but there was no evidence of collusion or criminal action. Gamsun was a respected citizen and ran the city council. We dug into his past and found his hobby was magic, like Downey's in college. So they had that much in common. Both amateurs. No name or reputation."

I remembered that morning with Ochnotinos, the demon the witch chased off. Producing him was pretty good for an amateur.

"We couldn't find any other connection. Then we got lucky in Northridge again. It seemed Gamsun or a man answering his description operated a cemetery up there too. The name used was Magnus." He saw me grin and stopped. "What's so funny?"

I told him about Albertus Magnus, the famous magician from the Middle Ages, and how Herky and I figured it out from the fortune cookies.

"That's probably it," he said. "Changed his name when he came down here. Maybe one of the doc's accidental deaths brought Downey and Gamsun togeth-

er. Or their mutual interest in the black arts. I can only guess that Gamsun started the racket down here, and that Downey with his intelligence and scientific background started to take over.

"He's a smart cookie, fooling me completely. The setting of Barker's leg was phony too, Barker using that to get away from Carleton and Gamsun long enough to make a deal with Downey. After the bomb his only hope was Downey and a big pay-off."

"Come on, Pop. One at a time."

"I'm trying," he said. "Downey also treated our Mrs. Carleton for her nervous breakdown. Finding nothing on the nurse Mrs. Dow, who took her out of the hospital so quickly, I went to Steve's other wild accusation—Mrs. Wood. Her husband died suddenly and was buried in Happy Hills, leaving her a small inheritance. Checking further proved her to be Gamsun's sister, but not that they were both Satanists."

"When did you find that out?" I asked.

"Barker talked a lot and he'll talk more. Also we found the wall pictures at Mrs. Carleton's house. That was part of their plan to drive her out of her mind. Obviously planted by Carleton while the others—Gamsun, Mrs. Wood and Dr. Downey—contrived to keep her in a hallucinatory state."

"Why?" I asked. "What did they have against her?"

"Mrs. Carleton, with us three years since Minerva's mother died, was separated and divorced from her husband Henry Carleton for about eight years. Before she worked for us, I had several times put him, a small time blackmailer and extortionist, away for short terms. She didn't know much about him when they were married, and when she found out he was a crook, she left him.

"He served his time and returned unexpectedly a year ago, wanting her back, pestering her. I had an idea she was troubled by something but she never complained or asked my help.

— "One day he called from her house—for which he either still had a key or forced entry—and swore he

would kill himself if she didn't take him back. When she laughed he made a strangling sound and the phone went dead. She hurried home, found him on the floor and a card on him to call Dr. Downey in case of an emergency. Downey pronounced him dead of poisoning, issued a death certificate, and had him buried in Happy Hills. Nothing like owning your own cemetery when you have bodies to dispose of."

"So Dr. Downey signed a phony death certificate?"

"Right. Obviously he had given Carleton a drug to simulate death. And Gamsun accepted the body for burial, I believe, also with full knowledge—making him an accessory."

"Why would they do that, Pop?"

"To give Henry Carleton a chance for a new life, unsuspected by police, and pave the way for driving Mrs. Carleton out of her mind or into Happy Hills."

"What have they got against her?" Minerva was mad. "The creeps."

"I have an idea Henry Carleton merely intended to carry out new assignments for the Gamsun gang, apparently Mrs. Carleton saw and recognized him. She tried to tell me, but was afraid. When mysterious phone calls to her began to come she told me she was being followed by him. I thought it hysteria, a natural result of shock, feeling of guilt and remorse. She finally quit her job with us, recommending Mrs. Wood oddly enough, as a good cook and housekeeper who liked children. I imagine Henry did a good job there of persuasion. Mrs. Carleton wasn't at all well by then and may already have been under the influence of drugs provided by Dr. Downey, Mrs. Wood or even Gamsun. It doesn't really matter because all conspiring members to a crime are equal principals.

"Last night, Steve, I decided to follow your hunch about that platinum-blond nurse, and did some more digging at Happy Hills."

"And found an empty coffin?"

"No. There was a body, but not Carleton's. Dead several years, no upper teeth, only three lower molars

showing evidence of grinding against uppers, meaning this man had worn an upper denture."

I was puzzled. "So what?"

"Mrs. Carleton had once told me the only good thing about her husband was his teeth. Obviously the body we dug up wasn't Henry. But it did have a considerable concentration of arsenic. We're checking now, but it's quite likely Mr. Wood's departure was hastened so our Mrs. Wood could enjoy her inheritance sooner than he intended. Her involvement with the felonies of Downey and Gamsun will be determined following the examination of our forensic pathologist. She is involved in the kidnappings. That's good for one to twenty-five years. Van Noord's kidnapping, with intent at extortion, is usually good for life imprisonment. It appears they were after his sleep machine, but so far we're still operating without much more than surmise and conjecture. Evidence stands up better in court."

"You had her for the bomb," I said.

"I have only your word for it," he said. "No proof. She has the voice you described but so far we haven't been able to turn up the platinum-blond wig, or evidence of limping."

"She got it from Carleton," I said. "He limps for real."

"So do a lot of other people," he said. "Sorry. No proof. The same for the other times you claimed Mrs. Wood was operating: as Mrs. Dow or the red-haired woman."

"Barker's talking. Wouldn't he know?"

He shook his head. "He was doped up at the time and doesn't remember. That's our only absolutely unsubstantiated action."

"Okay. I still think it was her even if I can't prove it. That bracelet she gave Minerva. Kind of a criminal act, isn't it?"

"If we could prove it." He sure didn't jump at everything I saw so clearly. "In the first place you destroyed the evidence."

"It's probably still there. Send one of your cops back. And don't forget Mrs. Carleton had the same kind."

"I didn't see that one either," he said dryly.

"What I don't get is why Dr. Downey tied up with this Gamsun. He really seems like a nice guy."

The Sheriff nodded. "You didn't notice his eyes."

"What about them? They're brown."

"With dilated pupils."

"Huh?"

"The telltale sign of an amphetamine addict. Pep pills. It's fairly common to hard-working people like medics who need to stay awake and alert. Unfortunately it's a tough habit to break, hooking addicts more than heroin. They follow up with barbiturates to slow them down. The amphetamine psychosis becomes the behavior of a paranoid schizophrenic."

"So he's a drug addict?"

Sheriff Landry shrugged. "Undoubtedly for a long time. Possibly that's what attracted Gamsun. A doctor at a hospital has easy access to drugs of all kinds. Gamsun needed them, either for himself or the subjects he picked for his extortion racket."

"How come he needed them if he was such a great magician? All that black magic jazz and the Devil worship!"

He showed me his wolf grin again. "Magic takes a lot of time and preparation and doesn't always work. But those marvels of modern science, hypnotic and hallucinatory drugs, are fool-proof and dependable. A hypodermic can't be beat for instant magic."

It sounded reasonable. "How come you hadn't done anything about these criminals?"

"Frankly, because we didn't know anything about them until you butted into their plan. That's all it takes sometimes, for someone to open his mouth. I imagine we'll be hearing a lot of complaints from citizens terrorized into paying blackmail. Maybe, in Happy Hills we'll uncover some more secrets. Maybe we'll find other council members involved, bribed to

keep quiet, who'll get some stiff sentences. Barker will turn state's witness, and we'll get to the bottom of it all soon. But you started it."

"What about that phone call you made to your house before the bombing, when Mrs. Wood answered?"

He grinned. "You get another gold star there, too. Now that I know Downey was in it, I'll buy your guess he took over the hospital switchboard and switched the call to her there as she waited around to deliver her package." He shook his head and gave me what was a very warm look, for him. "You had a lot of them, Steve. And if you hadn't been so bullheaded, none of it would have come out in the open."

"Oh, blah!" Minerva said. "Aren't you going to give me any credit?"

Sheriff Landry blinked. "Just tell us what for."

"For making them kidnap me."

"I'll bite," he said slowly. "Why did they?" He frowned. "They knew you were my daughter and that they were taking a big risk right there."

She tossed her long blonde hair. "You're both so smart. I'll let you guess."

"It wouldn't be that you met them coming in Mrs. Carleton's as you walked out, would it?"

"That's not fair," she said. "Who told you I was there?"

"Clancy. A good dependable cop. Okay, what happened?"

"Like you said," she admitted. "I bumped into them when I was going out."

"Mrs. Wood and Carleton?"

Minerva nodded. He nodded grimly, pushed his chair back from the table, lit his pipe again, and growled, "Afraid you'd identify them."

"I guess so," she said.

I looked at Minerva. There was something in her expression I couldn't trust. "Hold it, Sheriff. I know your daughter. She's not telling the whole truth."

He shrugged. "Your witness."

"They were coming after you before," I told her. "That night you were sleep-walking. The night the hearse came down the road to my house."

She didn't answer. The Sheriff looked sharply at me. "What was that?"

"I didn't want to worry you . . ."

I told him about Sinbad waking me, about hearing the humming sound outside, seeing the hearse without lights, Minerva walking down the steps to the door, and back upstairs to bed, the humming getting louder.

"I don't get it," he said. "What's the humming to do with it?"

I tried to recall exactly what it sounded like. Suddenly a similar loud humming filled the witch's parlor.

"Was it something like that, lad?" she asked from across the room. I looked over there. The humming had stopped. Sinbad, big as he was, lay on her lap, snoring but not humming.

"You mean you did it?" I asked.

"I 'saw' the lass was in trouble," she said, nodding. "The only thing to do was scare them away and prevent her from leaving the house. It worked, eh, lad-die?" she smiled.

"A force field," the Sheriff muttered, shaking his head.

It had worked all right. There wasn't any point to asking how it was possible for her to send that humming sound all the way from Mucker's Swamp. After all the other things, I had the feeling the little witch could do anything she wanted, once she remembered her magic formulas.

"Okay, Minerva," I said. "So it wasn't the bracelet. Why did you make them kidnap you?"

"To find out where they were operating from, dumbbell." she said. "You know, like their headquarters."

"You could have come along with Herky and me."

"Are you for real?" she hooted. "Me spend five hours watching you row a dumb boat across the bay?"

"She's still not telling the truth," I told the Sheriff. "I know Minerva. She can be pretty sneaky."

"All right, Minerva," he said, "how do you want it? From the Chief of Police or your father." She tried not looking at him. "Withholding evidence can be kind of serious. That's official." She tossed her hair. "As your father, I've got a better threat. You'll still need my permission to get married."

"Okay," she said. "I've got something they wanted." He waited. "I guess it's some pretty important evidence or something."

"What kind of evidence, Minerva?" he asked politely.

"A couple of wigs," she said. "Like a platinum-blonde and a red one."

Sheriff Landry and I nearly fell off our chairs.

"Would they be Mrs. Wood's?" he asked carefully.

"How should I know?" she said loftily. "They were at our house, and she came back to look for them later, if that's what you mean."

"You've got the absolute evidence," he said delightedly. "All we need. That's wonderful. Where are they?"

"Not at our house, if that's what you think."

"Your turn," he told me between his teeth.

"Okay, Minerva," I said. "We both give up. Where?"

"Where do you think dumbbell? At *your* house!"

"My house? How did they get there?"

"When your mom drove me back to pick up some of my clothes. Didn't you see the hat-boxes I had?"

"I didn't notice."

"Let's say you did," she said. "You still don't know a thing about women. Don't you know I never wear a hat?"

"Oh, boy." She really killed me.

"One second," the Sheriff said, his eyes narrow slits, and looking more like a mean wolf than a loving father whose daughter just gave him some great evidence. "What else did you have in those hat boxes, along with the wigs?"

"Only a picture."

"I'll give you two seconds to describe it or you'll be grounded for a month."

"Oh, you," she said. She glared at us both. "Oh, well, I feel like telling anyway. It just happens to be an old wedding picture Mrs. Carleton left lying around." She waited a second. "I once showed it to Mrs. Wood."

"So they knew you could identify Henry Carleton," he said thoughtfully. "Why did you do it?"

"I told you," she said, mad. "I wanted to make them kidnap me. You're both such big deals. It's not so hard being a detective. All I needed was a little luck and I could have solved the whole thing by myself."

Sheriff Landry strangled on his pipe smoke. While I waited for him to recover, I looked over at Herky and Professor Van Noord still working on the sleep machine, and Sinbad snoring on the lap of the little witch.

"You wanted to solve this case?" The Sheriff said, as if he had never seen Minerva before.

"Why not?" she answered innocently.

He growled deep in his throat, then reached over and grabbed my arm. "About that fifty-six bucks you owe me—forget it," he barked. "You'll be needing it some day for a good divorce lawyer."

"You mean it?" He nodded grimly. "Gee, thanks, Sheriff." That was some good news for a change.

I got up and went over to Sinbad and tugged his ear. "Hey, wake up, sleepy-head," I told him. "We have to go home now. Then I'll fill you in on everything that happened."

Sinbad opened one eye, grunted, and fell asleep again. The little witch stroked his head gently.

"Oh, he already knows, laddie," she said. "You've all been so busy, I told him."

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