

THE BLACK THUMB MYSTERY

KEN HOLT *Mystery Stories*

THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

THE RIDDLE OF THE STONE ELEPHANT

THE BLACK THUMB MYSTERY

THE CLUE OF THE MARKED CLAW

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

THE SECRET OF HANGMAN'S INN

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

THE CLUE OF THE PHANTOM CAR

THE MYSTERY OF THE GALLOPING HORSE

THE MYSTERY OF THE GREEN FLAME

THE MYSTERY OF THE GRINNING TIGER

THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAGICIAN

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHATTERED GLASS

THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

THE MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

THE CLUE OF THE SILVER SCORPION

THE MYSTERY OF THE PLUMED SERPENT

THE MYSTERY OF THE SULTAN'S SCIMITAR

A KEN HOLT *Mystery*

**THE BLACK
THUMB MYSTERY**

By Bruce Campbell

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*

NEW YORK

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE BLACK THUMB MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE VERDICT

THE COURTHOUSE was sticky with late summer heat and the corridors were full of milling, perspiring townspeople waiting for the jury to complete its deliberation. At one end of the hall, near an open window that admitted occasional puffs of warm air, Paul Waddel, the defense attorney, talked in a low voice with two of his associates. Near his group were two boys, one a giant with a shock of red hair, the other smaller and more slender but with a promise of steel-spring endurance in his wiry frame.

Sandy Allen, the redhead, paced nervously in a tight circle, while his friend Ken Holt looked on with a faint smile that didn't quite erase the concern from his face.

"Take it easy, Sandy." Ken put out a hand and stopped the pacing. "You can't influence the jury by beating yourself to a pulp. They're going to make up their own minds."

"Sure." The words were more grunted than spoken. "And we're the boys who are helping them do it."

It was obvious by the way Ken shrugged his shoulders that the subject had been discussed often and fruitlessly before.

"For the last time," Ken said, "will you get it through your thick skull that there isn't anything else we could have done? We heard what was said in the bank that day—and we had to testify."

“And for the last time,” Sandy retorted, “let me tell you that Frank Brown could no more conspire to rob the bank than I could jump out of that window and fly back to the newspaper office.”

“All right.” Ken’s voice was a little sharp. “I didn’t say he was guilty—and neither has the jury yet. I only—” He shut his mouth with a snap, grinned, and punched Sandy’s shoulder. “O.K. I’ll shut up. Whatever you say goes with me.”

“Forget it,” Sandy replied. He resumed his restless pacing while Ken, leaning against the relatively cool wall, watched silently.

He tried to get his mind off the trial by making himself think of his father, Richard Holt, the famous foreign correspondent now on assignment in Mexico. But thinking of one newspaperman led to another and he found his uncontrollable mental processes returning to the office of the Brentwood *Advance* where Sandy’s father and older brother Bert were waiting for the verdict.

“I’m going to get a drink of water,” Ken muttered to no one in particular and pushed his way through the crowd to a drinking fountain hallway down the hall. The lukewarm water did nothing to revive him or to quell his rising irritation.

Instead of rejoining Sandy, Ken slipped into the almost deserted courtroom, dropping into the nearest bench and resting his head against the hard wooden back. His eyes closed against the glare of the sun that streamed in through the huge windows.

The sticky heat made him think longingly of the cool air of the mountains of Colorado and brought back memories of the exciting and dangerous adventures he and Sandy had gone through there only a short time before. He thought of the big trout in the dark waters of rushing Elephant Creek and of the midnight battle that solved “The Riddle of the Stone Elephant.”

Ken’s mental meanderings carried him back even

further to the time when he had first met the Allen clan, and how they had unquestioningly pitched in and joined him in the desperate events that followed Richard Holt's fight with a ruthless gang that would have stopped at nothing to accomplish their purpose. It had taken all of them working together to probe "The Secret of Skeleton Island."

Ken sat up straight on the bench. Sandy hadn't scoffed at his fears that time. He'd gone willingly and happily into battle against unknown odds merely because of friendship. And Mrs. Allen, too, hadn't doubted him. She'd given him a home—the first home he'd had in all the years since his mother had died.

"I'm a heel," he said to himself and got up from the bench to hurry back to Sandy. This was the time Sandy needed a friend—someone to talk to, someone who would listen sympathetically.

Sandy was still walking around in circles. "That sure was a long drink."

"I was doing a little thinking," Ken said.

"Good," Sandy replied absently. He hadn't even heard what Ken had said. His ears were cocked at the legal group near by. A middle-aged woman and a boy had joined the attorneys. The boy, a little younger than either Ken or Sandy, had looked at them briefly and had turned away.

"I can't understand what's taking them so long, Mr. Waddel," Mrs. Brown was saying. Her careworn appearance expressed dramatically the strain under which she had been living since her husband had been arrested. "Surely they must know Frank is completely innocent." She looked up at the tall lawyer. "He *will* be acquitted, won't he?"

"Sure, Mom." Her son tried to reassure her, but his manner was not nearly as confident as his words.

Waddel looked uncomfortable and helpless. "You can't ever predict a verdict, Mrs. Brown. Of course, the jurymen are all people who have known Frank for years. That

should help. On the other hand. . .”

Frank Brown’s son threw an angry glance at Sandy and Ken. “I know,” he said. “On the other hand there are some people who would say anything for a story.”

Sandy started toward him involuntarily, but Ken clamped his hand on Sandy’s arm and swung him in the opposite direction.

“That’s not fair, Roger,” Waddel was saying quietly. “There were four people in the bank at the time of the robbery and all of them heard the holdup man speak to your father. They had to testify.”

Ken was urging Sandy along down the hall. “Come on. Let’s get some of that lukewarm water.”

“You see what I mean,” Sandy said. “I don’t blame Roger. I guess I’d be just as sore if it was Pop in Mr. Brown’s position.” He bent over the fountain, took one sip, and walked into the courtroom with Ken close on his heels. “It’s all right for you, Ken. You weren’t brought up in Brentwood—you haven’t known the Browns all your life as I have. But I *know* them—I know Frank Brown is innocent. And no amount of testimony can make me feel any different—even my own.”

Ken pushed his big friend down onto a bench. “Look, Sandy. If you say Mr. Brown is innocent, that’s all right with me. We’ve been through enough together for me to take your word for anything. But—”

“That’s it,” Sandy broke in bitterly. “That *but!*”

“I know,” Ken agreed quietly. “It’s that *but* that might send Frank Brown to jail.” He dropped onto the bench and twisted sideways to look directly at Sandy. “Remember when I first stumbled into the *Advance* office? I was wound up just as Roger is—it was my father who was in trouble. And Pop said to take it easy—be logical. I couldn’t, of course, because I was too close to the trouble. I wouldn’t expect Roger to sit back calmly and figure this thing out, but *you* should be able to. What have we got in this case?”

Sandy stared straight ahead glumly and silently.

Ken pressed on. "Two masked men come into the bank, pull guns, and take every bit of cash they can lay their hands on. Right?"

"Right," Sandy admitted.

"Then one of the men says in a loud whisper to Frank Brown the teller, 'Good work, Frank. You'll hear from us.'"

Sandy fidgeted. "Can't deny that—we were there."

"All right," Ken continued. "As if that wasn't enough, one of the bandits drops a scrap of paper on which is printed by hand the words 'Use side door. Half past one is the best time.'"

"I know the rest as well as you do," Sandy said. "The piece of paper came from a bridge score pad in Brown's house. The pen that was used to print the words was the pen on Brown's desk—that was proved by experts. But that doesn't prove that Frank Brown did the printing." Sandy sat up straighter as he became more vehement. "Waddel brought out the fact that Old Tom Simpson hadn't turned up to wash the windows in the Brown house two days before the robbery. He also showed that no one ever saw the substitute Old Tom sent—either before or since. That substitute could have written that note while he was working around the house, couldn't he? And where is Old Tom? No one has seen him—he's disappeared. Doesn't all that prove that Mr. Brown was framed?"

Ken shook his head. "It proves that somebody *could* have framed Brown—not that somebody *did*. And Mr. Waddel, as hard as he tried, couldn't even suggest a reason for anyone framing Brown. You said yourself, Sandy, that everybody likes Frank Brown. So why should anyone want to frame him?"

Ken didn't like to watch his words take the fight out of Sandy. The huge frame slumped back, the broad shoulders dropped.

"That's it," Sandy said very quietly. "Why should anybody want to do that to a man like Mr. Brown?"

Ken pressed his advantage. He felt that if he could

only get Sandy to look at the grim picture with his brain, instead of his heart, he might snap out of it. "There are only two likely possibilities, Sandy. Either Frank Brown is guilty or he was framed. But unless a reason can be found for the framing . . ."

"So you think he's guilty," Sandy said in a whisper.

"I don't know what to think," Ken said hurriedly as he saw the stricken look on Sandy's face.

There was a bustle then at the far end of the courtroom and several attendants entered through the back door. From the corridor people began to file into the room, taking seats as rapidly as they could. Waddel and his associates walked down the aisle and took places at their table inside the rail where they were joined an instant later by Brown. The prosecutor and his staff entered, and from a sudden craning of necks it was apparent that Mrs. Brown and her son had come in and taken seats at the rear of the room.

Then the jury entered the box. The judge made his entry a moment later, a somber, black-robed figure. Everybody stood up as the clerk chanted the unintelligible ritual that reconvened the court.

There was a deep hush as the judge asked if the jury had agreed on a verdict, and an even deeper silence while the foreman got to his feet. Ken knew the verdict even before the words were spoken—it was clear from the way the foreman stammered over the brief formula.

"We find the defendant guilty as charged, Your Honor."

For a split second the silence continued and then the hubbub broke out, punctuated by angry raps of the judge's gavel. Mrs. Brown started down the aisle toward her husband, but stopped when he shook his head emphatically. She turned and almost ran toward the rear of the courtroom. The boys and Mrs. Brown and Roger reached the heavy doors at the same instant. Sandy stopped abruptly.

Mrs. Brown was making a valiant though futile effort

to hold back her tears, and Roger's eyes blazed in a white, dead-looking face. He put his arm around his mother's shoulders.

"Look," Sandy said. "Let me."

Roger turned his head. "Why don't you leave us alone? You've got a good story, haven't you?"

Ken pulled Sandy's arm hard enough to swing the redhead completely around. "Go call Pop," he snapped. "He's holding the front page. I'll speak to Mr. Waddel and see if they're going to appeal the case."

He waited until Sandy had stumbled into the phone booth before he went back into the courtroom.

CHAPTER II

HORN STEPS IN

THE ENTIRE ALLEN FAMILY showed the effects of the verdict. Ken looked around the supper table that night and thought that this was probably the first silent meal he had ever partaken of in that ordinarily bubbling household. And judging by the still heaped up serving platters, the Allen appetite had vanished with the family's good-natured chatter.

Mom sat quietly staring off into space, or at Pop at the other end of the table, which was about the same thing because he never even noticed. Bert, who had brought the still-wet edition of the *Advance*, sat slumped in his chair looking at the story headlined:

FRANK BROWN GUILTY!
WILL APPEAL VERDICT

Sandy dropped a fork and the clatter sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet room.

"Sorry," he murmured.

Ken pushed his chair back noisily and when they all looked at him he said, "I know I may not feel this as keenly as you do, but I didn't like my part in it either. If there's something we can do to help the Browns, I say let's do it. If there isn't, I don't see the good of acting like this."

"I think Ken's right," Mom Allen said after a moment.

“But there’s nothing we can do,” Bert objected.

Pop Allen shifted his big body in his chair. “That, I’m afraid, is precisely Ken’s point. Waddel used every means at his command, and he’s a good lawyer. The police department here helped him all they could— they didn’t even arrest Frank until there was no other alternative. The two thugs who came into the bank seem to have vanished completely—and it’s been a month since the robbery. None of the larger bills have turned up yet and there never was any hope of tracing the smaller denominations.”

Bert took it up. “No fingerprints—no descriptions that couldn’t fit anybody.”

“But we can’t just sit here,” Sandy protested.

“I tried to call Marcia Brown,” Mom Allen said. “She wouldn’t speak to me.”

Pop nodded. “I know. I did too. I wanted to suggest that maybe she could use some additional funds—lawyers and appeals are expensive.” He sighed. “She cut me off short.”

Bert got to his feet, changing the subject deliberately. “I’ve got a meeting to cover.”

“Wait, Bert. I’m going down to the office.” Pop bent down to kiss Mrs. Allen’s cheek and followed his son out of the room.

“We’ll clear up, Mom,” Ken said.

Mrs. Allen nodded and pushed her chair back. She hesitated a moment and then circled the table to put an arm around Sandy’s shoulders. “I know, Sandy,” she said softly. “It’s hardest on you. Roger Brown has always looked up to you as his special hero, and to have him misunderstand . . .” She walked quickly from the room.

Ken began to stack the plates. “Come on.”

Sandy was silent all through the dishwashing and when the last plate had been put in the cupboard he went out on the back porch and sat on the top step. Ken watched him a moment, shaking his head, and then he too went outside letting the screen door slam behind him.

“Let’s go,” he said. “She needs a bath.” He pointed to the red convertible standing in the driveway. It had been a gift after their adventures on Skeleton Island, and had carried them more than fifteen thousand miles since.

“Looks clean enough to me,” Sandy grumbled. Then he twisted his head and looked up at Ken. A small smile appeared on his face. “Stop babying me, I’ll get over it—I guess.”

“At the rate you’re getting over it I’ll be an old man before it happens.” But heartened by the smile, Ken continued. “How about a swim?”

“Too soon after supper.”

“We can wait down by the lake where it’s cooler.”

“O.K. I’ll get our trunks.”

It was already dark when they headed homeward again. The swim had been refreshing, but it hadn’t done anything to lift Sandy’s gloom. A few blocks from home Ken pulled up to the curb and stopped the car. “Know what we’re going to do?” he asked.

“What?” Sandy’s disinterest was obvious.

“We’re going over to the Brown house and see them.”

Sandy swiveled his head around. “What for? They don’t want to see us.”

“Maybe so,” Ken admitted. “But we want to see them. We have to make them realize that there was nothing else we could do at the trial—but that we want to do what we can to help now. If they understand that, maybe you’ll stop looking like a sourpuss all the time.”

“I’m not going,” Sandy stated flatly.

“Oh, yes, you are.”

Sandy grinned a little at the thought of Ken’s one hundred and forty-five pounds making Sandy’s two hundred do anything he didn’t want to. “You’re going to need a little help, son.”

Ken snorted. “My brains against your brawn—you don’t have a chance. I’ll use psychology on you.” He grew more serious. “You’ve got to do this, if not for your sake

then for theirs. They have to stop feeling like outcasts. It's your duty as a friend."

"Roger'll probably slam the door in my face."

"So what? Push it open again. Mrs. Brown seems sensible enough."

Sandy thought a moment. "You really think I ought to go, huh?"

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I hadn't thought so," Ken said quietly. He waited until Sandy nodded and then got the car moving again. In front of the tree-shaded Brown house, Ken killed the motor and waited for Sandy to make a move.

"Go on," he said finally. "It won't get any easier."

"We can't," Sandy said, and there was definite relief in his voice. "They've got visitors." He pointed to the car parked in front of theirs—a big green coup with New York plates.

"I suppose this is the only house in the block," Ken retorted. "How do you know the owner of that car is visiting the Browns?" He nudged Sandy. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

From force of habit—Sandy had been here many times—he led the way to the side porch, a path that led directly past the windows of the Brown living room. There was light streaming from the windows, but the path itself was in darkness because of the heavy growth of shrubbery along the wall. Sandy suddenly stopped.

"Listen," he whispered. "I told you they had visitors."

From almost directly above them came a man's voice, deep and heavy. "David Horn," it said. "Private investigator." There was a pause, and then he continued. "My credentials."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand the purpose of your visit," a woman's voice answered. "You said it might be important to my husband?"

Sandy whispered. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Horn's next words, coming before the boys could take

a single step, drove all thoughts of leaving out of Sandy's mind.

"I've been following the case, Mrs. Brown, and it's my opinion that your husband got one of the rawest deals I've ever seen—and I've seen plenty of them in my work."

"A detective!" Sandy breathed. "And he believes Frank Brown is innocent!"

"Quiet!" Ken moved closer to the shrubbery.

"We know my father's innocent," a third voice—Roger's—broke in. "But what can we do about it?"

"We're appealing the case, of course," Mrs. Brown said. "And we expect to see justice done."

"Justice!" Horn laughed. "Unless you get some new evidence you won't have a chance. Your lawyer did all he could with the material he had, and he won't be able to do any better next time unless you give him some ammunition to fight with."

"The police are still looking for the two men," Mrs. Brown said. "If they find them—"

"*If* they find them," Horn cut in. "They've had a month already. No, Mrs. Brown, you'll have to find them yourself." There was a pause. "That's why I'm here."

There was doubt in Marcia Brown's voice when she answered. "You think you can find them when the police can't?"

"I've done it before," Horn said, with a note of smugness. "You must understand, Mrs. Brown, I'm not belittling the police. I'm merely saying that I have contacts they don't—and I can use methods they can't. I can, for example, pay a man for information."

"If you're suggesting that I engage your services," Mrs. Brown replied, "I think it only fair to say that I have very little money. I'm not even sure I can afford the expense of the appeal, but that I'll manage somehow." She grew a little bitter. "In spite of what some of our neighbors seem to think, the Browns are honest. We expect to pay for what we get."

"That's me she's talking about," Sandy said miserably.

"Don't be a chump. She's talking about the jury," Ken snapped back. "And keep quiet, huh?"

"I have no doubts of your honesty," Horn said, "and what's more important, I have no doubt of your husband's. But I'm glad you brought up the question of money. Unfortunately, I can't work for nothing—and my fees are not modest."

"I've never dealt with a detective before," Marcia Brown said, "so I don't know what an immodest fee is."

"Five thousand dollars." Horn dropped the words into a complete silence.

Roger repeated the figure in a hoarse voice.

"That's so far beyond the realm of possibility," Mrs. Brown said quietly, "that it cannot even be considered. It's completely impossible."

"Nothing is impossible if you want it badly enough," Horn replied. "Isn't your husband's freedom and good name worth that?"

Marcia Brown spoke simply. "It's worth everything I have. But I haven't nearly that much."

Horn sounded very suave. "Naturally, you are more competent than I am to judge your financial position. But it seems to me that with so much at stake you might find some way to raise the money. Friends, perhaps? Some property that could be sold or mortgaged? And in any event—"

"The summer place," Roger broke in. "Couldn't you convince Dad . . ."

"I promised, Roger, and . . ." There was agony in Marcia Brown's voice that expressed better than anything she could have said how it hurt her to put her husband's fate on a dollars-and-cents basis. But she got herself under control and her voice regained its dignity. "I think we've discussed this far enough, Mr. Horn. I'm afraid we can't afford your services."

"I don't blame her," Ken muttered. "That's practically

blackmail. He knows she'd do anything to help her husband."

"As you wish, Mrs. Brown," Horn answered. "But I was going on to say that there would be no need for a sum that large now."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Brown sounded a little breathless as if new hope had arisen. "You said—"

"I said my fee would be five thousand dollars, but it is payable when and if I prove your husband's innocence."

"You mean," Mrs. Brown whispered, "that you are so sure you can succeed that you are willing to gamble with your fee?"

"A detective who claims to be sure of a case before he starts is either a fool or dishonest." Horn chuckled. "I'm neither. But I think that the chances are so heavily in my favor that I am justified in risking my fee on the outcome."

Now Marcia Brown was near tears. "Did you hear, Roger? He thinks he can—" She stopped abruptly and addressed the detective again. "You're not just saying that—you really think you can do it?"

Again the deep voice chuckled. "I assure you, Mrs. Brown, David Horn does not take a five-thousand-dollar fee lightly."

"He means it, Roger!" Mrs. Brown cried. "He really means it. And when Dad's home again we'll manage to get the money somehow. We'll *make* him sell the summer place—we'll mortgage the house—anything." For a moment there was silence and then the boys could hear her take a long, wavering breath. "I'm sorry, Mr. Horn, but you don't know what this means to me—this assurance from you. I've been telling myself that we would certainly win the appeal, but—"

"You mustn't stop the appeal," Horn cut in quickly. "Don't miss any possibility—attack from every angle. If I succeed quickly, the appeal won't be necessary, of course, but it never hurts to make sure."

"Of course," Mrs. Brown said. "When will you start?"

For the first time Horn seemed a little hesitant. "I'm afraid I let you get a little too enthusiastic about the financial arrangements. I can gamble on my fee, but I cannot undertake the expenses involved. You will have to pay those as I go."

"Oh." Mrs. Brown's soaring hopes plummeted. "And how much will that cost?"

"I can't foretell that," Horn replied. "It depends on what I have to do—where I have to go, and how much I must pay for information. It also depends on how much assistance you can give me."

"What kind of assistance?"

"Can you give me a better description of the substitute window cleaner than that which was circulated through the press?"

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Brown said sadly. "I didn't pay much attention to him when he turned up with a note from Old Tom. We were having a party that night and I was too busy to do more than to see him started."

"Have you any clues as to the whereabouts of Old Tom? Clues that you and your attorney may have discussed privately?"

"None."

"We couldn't even locate a photograph of him," Roger said. "We thought we'd get it published in newspapers."

"Too bad," Horn said. "I had hoped to get a lead or two."

"You don't think it's impossible now, do you?" Marcia Brown asked breathlessly.

"No," Horn answered, "but— You see, Mrs. Brown, bank robbers are a small but select group in the thieving profession— and each one has certain characteristics which are almost trade-marks. In this case there is one outstanding feature—the purposeless incrimination of your husband. I say purposeless because Mr. Brown seems to have no enemies who want revenge, and that's the only feasible motive. In view of the trouble taken to

plant a man in your house to manufacture the evidence, it follows that the man who planned the crime is possessed of a vicious streak—a desire to harm people even when he gets no good out of it.”

Sandy whispered. “He’s making sense, now.”

Ken grunted unintelligibly.

“To my knowledge,” Horn went on, “there are perhaps half a dozen men who have in the past displayed such tendencies, although not in precisely this manner. My first job would be to locate these men and find out, in one way or another, where they were on the day of the robbery here in Brentwood. Should I find that one of them is without an alibi for the time of the crime I would concentrate on him further. But this all costs money—thence the expenses.”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Brown said. “The expenses. But you have no idea how much it will cost?”

“My first move would be to go to Chicago where two of my possibilities are at present. At the same time I would put an operative on Old Tom’s trail. If we could find him, and confront him with photographs of known bank robbers, we might cut our task short.” He paused a moment. “I should think that expenses shouldn’t go over a thousand dollars, and to start I’d need only a part of that—say two hundred dollars.”

In the pause that followed Sandy whispered, “Pop could. . .”

Horn spoke again. “I guess there isn’t anything more I can say. I’ll leave my card—my office is in New York—and if you decide to let me by, just phone me.”

“One moment, Mr. Horn.” Mrs. Brown’s determined voice cut in. “I’d like to discuss this with my son. I feel that every minute my husband spends in jail is a year off his life—and ours. I don’t want to waste a single instant. Will you wait here for us?”

After five minutes of complete silence, Ken and Sandy heard Mrs. Brown’s voice once more.

“We’ve decided,” she said. “We may be wrong, but we’d

never forgive ourselves if we left a single possibility untried. Here is a check for the amount you need to start your work.” And a few seconds later, she added. “I don’t have to tell you what your success will mean to us.”

“Indeed you don’t,” Horn answered quietly. “And may I add one more thing? I’d tell no one about our transaction—except your attorney, that is. He’ll want to check up on me, as he certainly should. But I wouldn’t like the press or the police to hear of my efforts. They can scare the game off very easily, you know.” His voice began to fade out. “I’ll report to you regularly and. . .”

Ken and Sandy waited until Horn’s car drove off and then they got into theirs and headed homeward. Sandy breathed a great sigh.

“Boy! Do I feel better now. At least someone’s working on the case. I didn’t much like the sound of him, but he seems to know what he’s doing.”

Ken grunted in answer.

“What’s the matter?” Sandy asked. “Don’t you think they did the right thing?”

“I guess so,” Ken said. “But it seems to me they should have checked up on Horn first.”

“Don’t worry. Mr. Waddel will do that—but good. He’s the cautious type.” When Ken remained silent, Sandy laughed. “I know what’s eating you, son. You’re jealous. *You* wanted to investigate this case.”

“Who? Me?” Ken said indignantly. “You’re crazy. All I want is to be left alone, and, since that lemon-flavored look seems to have been wiped off your homely face, I’m happy. In fact,” he added, “I’m so relieved that I’d almost be willing to pay Horn myself.”

“Listen to the man!” Sandy taunted. “And one thing more—that psychology of yours didn’t work. You didn’t get me to talk to the Browns.”

“I don’t know when you’re more impossible,” Ken replied with dignity. “When you’re a sourpuss, or when you think you’re a comic.” But he was grinning happily in

the light reflected from the instrument panel.

CHAPTER III

SACRIFICE PLAY

IT WAS JUST TEN O'CLOCK when Ken and Sandy finished telling Pop and Bert about the overheard conversation. The *Advance* office was quiet at that hour, except for the drone of an old electric clock on the wall, and the very occasional whir of tires as a car passed by outside.

Pop was leaning his swivel chair back at a perilous angle, his feet cocked up on the battered desk. For several minutes he sat that way, rocking a little, and tilting the chair back even more dangerously.

"You're going to turn over, Pop," Bert said, as he had said hundreds of times in the past.

"Haven't done it yet," Pop drawled back automatically.

"And you've been sitting like that for twenty years." Sandy grinned as he completed the remark.

Pop swung his feet off the desk and the chair came forward with a groan. He looked from Sandy to Ken and then back again. "You know you shouldn't have been listening, don't you?" Before they could answer, he smiled and added, "Course, I would have done the same thing myself. Wouldn't be a reporter otherwise."

"But don't you think Mrs. Brown did the right thing?" Sandy asked.

"I don't know. Seems like it, but on the other hand—"

Ken broke in. "I think she should have checked up on Horn first."

Pop nodded. "But Waddel will take care of that, and from what you two say, Horn wasn't at all worried about being investigated. That's a point in his favor."

"But look at the size of his fee," Bert said. "That's pretty steep. And, anyway, most private detectives work on a daily basis and not on a flat sum. Seems to me he's taking advantage of Marcia's predicament."

"Granted," Pop said. "He sounds like a pretty shrewd article. But if he can do what he says, it'll be worth it." He scratched his head. "What I'm thinking about is how we can offer to help Marcia without admitting that we snooped. That is, if Horn gets a clean bill of health."

"We could admit listening," Ken suggested. "It's not such a terrible thing to have done under the circumstances."

Pop glanced at the clock. "I'll try it." He spun the dial on the telephone and waited. "I hope she's not asleep yet," he said, and then suddenly spoke into the instrument.

"Roger? This is Allen at the *Advance*. Is your mother still up? I want to speak to her." There was a pause and then Pop spoke again, this time in a growl that would have scared the boys if he hadn't winked at them as he talked. "Never mind what *you* think. Get your mother to the phone."

There was another pause and then Pop went on, his voice gentle again. "Marcia? Pop Allen. Never mind that—listen a minute. I've got a confession to make. Those two brats, Sandy and Ken . . ."

For a minute he spoke rapidly, telling Mrs. Brown why the boys had gone to her house and how they had happened to overhear the conversation. Then he listened a moment, a smile on his face. He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, "She's not as mad as I thought."

He spoke into the mouthpiece. "No, of course not. I'm not that much of a fool. We won't print a line. But what I wanted to say was that if you need some financial . . ."

He listened again, this time for several minutes. "All right," he said finally, "if you want to be stubborn about it. But keep it in mind, will you? And tell Roger to come down off his high horse. Whether he likes it or not, Sandy and Ken want to help. And keep me advised of what goes on, please." He dropped the phone into its cradle and swung his feet back up on the desk.

"She won't accept help," he said. "But she's not mad at us, anyway. If Horn makes progress, she'll get his expense money somehow, she says, even if she has to browbeat Frank into letting her sell their summer place in Connecticut."

"What's so important about a summer place?" Ken asked. "You'd think they'd be willing to sell almost anything to—"

"Sentiment," Bert explained. "Frank's people have owned that land for two hundred years—they settled there before the Revolution."

"It's more than that," Pop added, "though Marcia probably thinks that's the reason. Frank made Marcia promise not to sell, so that if he's imprisoned for a long time Marcia and Roger can get along by running it as a summer resort." He began to pack his pipe. "He made her promise not to mortgage the house for the same reason—for her own protection." Between puffs he added, "Foolishness."

The phone rang then, shrilly disturbing the quiet that had once more settled down. Pop scooped it up. "*Advance.*" He nodded. "He's here." He handed the phone to Ken. "Granger at Global News."

Ken grinned. "Message from Dad maybe." He got the instrument into position. "Ken, Mr. Granger. . . What?" His grin grew broader. "How is he? . . ." Ken looked over at the Allens. "Dad sends everybody his best from Mexico. He'll be there another two weeks."

From the phone came the harsh voice of the editor of Global's New York office. Ken listened for a moment.

"Sounds good to me. I'll check." He covered the mouthpiece. "He has two good seats for the double-header tomorrow, Sandy. What say we run in and see it?"

Sandy looked questioningly at Pop who shrugged resignedly. "Sure. There's nothing on the fire for you two."

"We'll pick up the tickets at the office about noon," Ken reported. "Thanks, and—just a minute." He turned to Pop. "How about if I ask him to check up on Horn? He could do it easily."

"Won't hurt," Pop agreed. "If it's not too much trouble."

Ken spoke to Granger rapidly for a minute. "Horn—like on a cow. First name David—like and-Goliath. If it's not too much . . . Thanks, Mr. Granger. . . . No, sir. We're not messed up in anything."

"Yet," Sandy added from across the desk.

Ken replaced the phone. "He'll have a report for us when we pick up the tickets tomorrow."

The thermometer was reaching for the 100-degree mark by the time Ken drove the convertible down the ramp into the big garage underneath the Global News Building on Fifth Avenue the following afternoon. An attendant ran up.

"Sorry. This space reserved for Global cars."

Ken extended his open wallet showing a Global press card.

"O.K. I'll take it."

The boys slid off the hot leather upholstery. "Don't bury it, please," Ken said. "We'll only be a minute."

They were whisked up thirty-five stories in an *express* elevator and entered the air-conditioned headquarters of the international news service for which Richard Holt worked. Ken identified himself to the receptionist and was handed an envelope.

"Mr. Granger left this," the girl said. "He's out."

Ken thanked her and tore the envelope open as they moved away. He handed Sandy two box-seat tickets for the Polo Grounds and unfolded the sheet of typescript that

accompanied them. Sandy read the note over Ken's shoulder.

Ken and Sandy:

Here are the ducats, you lucky dogs. I have to work! Not much dope on Horn. Very successful, very expensive, and has large circle of friends of dubious honesty. Does mostly insurance work—recovering stolen jewels, etc. Reputation a little shady but does deliver the goods. Some people think he has more than a nodding acquaintance with crooks; say he knows of jobs before they're pulled and acts as middleman between crooks and insurance companies who are glad to pay off thieves because it's cheaper than paying the insurance. Never proved, however. Horn has never run afoul of law—yet. Hope this helps.

Below his penciled signature Granger had added the address of Horn's office.

"Nice guy, this Horn," Ken murmured.

"So what?" Sandy asked. "As long as he gets results. If he knows all those crooks he may be able to get a line on the two men we want."

"Maybe. But there's a little difference between returning stolen jewels and catching bank thieves. He never turns in the jewel thieves, remember—only the jewels. In this case he's supposed to turn in the men—not the money. Will his contacts go that far, I wonder?"

"You're a worry wart," Sandy retorted. "Let's go to the ball game."

At the fifth inning the game was still scoreless, and pop bottles at Sandy's feet showed his attempt to beat the dullness and the heat. He was ordering another when the inning came to an end.

"I think I'll have a hot dog too," he said.

"I'm ready to settle for an air-conditioned movie," Ken muttered. "Granger sure knew what he was doing. He's probably up in that cool office now, watching the game on television." But despite his discomfort he grinned a moment later and pointed toward the dugout, where a

clowning player had assumed a heroic pose, hand on chest, for one of the photographers.

Suddenly the pop bottle slipped from Sandy's hand and crashed noisily on the cement floor.

Ken turned around. "What's the matter? See a ghost?"

Sandy seemed oblivious of the question, and of the fact that his feet were in a puddle of cream soda. He was still staring fixedly at the posing player.

Ken shook him. "What's—?"

"I just remembered something," Sandy said. "I think maybe we can find Old Tom."

"What!"

Sandy took his eyes off the field. "A couple of years ago I had to go out to his shack to get him to come over to help Mom with some cleaning. There was a picture on his wall—one of Tom. He was in a baseball suit, the old-fashioned kind, and he was posing just like that. On his chest was the word *Rockville*. If that was his home town, maybe that's where he is now!"

"And how many Rockvilles do you think there are in this country?" Ken asked.

Sandy shook his head. "I seem to remember from something Tom said—I was asking him about the picture—that his team used to play teams from around Brentwood, so it couldn't have been too far away. What should we do?"

"Let's see where this Rockville is," Ken said. "We can find that out in the library." He got to his feet. "Come on. We'll read about the game in the newspaper."

At the main library it didn't take very long to determine that there were Rockvilles in almost every state, but that one of them was only about fifty miles from Brentwood. They returned the gazetteer and left the building. In the car Ken sat quietly for a moment.

"We could tell Chief Skelly in Brentwood," Sandy suggested. "He could get in touch with the Rockville police and they could check."

Ken shook his head. "Risky. If the police go after Tom, he might get scared and refuse to talk. And unless he's willing to talk we won't get any place."

Sandy grinned. "We could go look him up ourselves. That's what you want to do, isn't it?"

Ken remained serious. "No-I mean, sure, but I don't think we ought to. We don't want to do anything to jeopardize Mr. Brown's chances. I think we ought to get in touch with Horn and tell him about it. He ought to be able to handle Tom without getting the police into it at all." He fished the paper out of his pocket and checked the address. "It's way down on lower Broadway."

"Saturday afternoon," Sandy said. "Think he'll be there?"

Ken shrugged. "We have to pass the place on our way to the tunnel, anyway."

The midtown traffic was at its worst and it took them long minutes to negotiate one block. But below Twenty-Third Street they made better time and finally Ken pulled into a parking lot a block below the building in which Horn had his office. They walked back and entered the doorway.

It was an old building—one that had been erected when lower Broadway was the hub of the city's commercial life. The elevator was ancient and when they stepped out on the tenth floor they found that it was dimly lighted. It took a moment to find the door they wanted, bearing the words:

DAVID HORN
CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS

Ken pushed it open and they entered a small untidy outer office. The stenographer's desk was deserted.

Ken looked at Sandy and pointed to another glass door in the wall beyond. Sandy nodded, and just as they started toward it they heard the unintelligible rumble of Horn's voice. He was evidently using the phone. When the brief

conversation was finished, Ken walked to the door and knocked.

A moment later footsteps approached and the door was opened.

Their first impression of the detective was his small stature. From the quality of his voice both boys had assumed that he must be a huge man, but as he stood before them, they found they had to look down at him. He couldn't have been more than a few inches over five feet, and he was almost as big around as he was tall.

"Yes?"

"Are you David Horn?" Ken asked dubiously.

"Yes. What can I do for you?" He didn't seem eager to invite them in. In fact he stood in the doorway, blocking their entrance.

"We're from Brentwood." Ken introduced Sandy and himself.

At the name of the town Horn's eyes narrowed and he listened intently.

"We have a lead you might be able to use in the Brown case," Ken added, "and—"

"How did you know I was on the Brown case?" Horn cut in. "I told Mrs. Brown . . ."

"It's not her fault," Sandy said. "We sort of overheard you talking last night and . . ."

"Come on in." Horn closed the door carefully behind them. "So. You overheard, eh? And I suppose by this time everybody in town knows the whole story."

"No," Ken said, and explained what they had done. Horn relaxed slightly and pointed to some chairs. "Sit down. Let's get this straight. You say the paper isn't going to print anything. Right?"

The boys nodded.

"Good." His round dark face almost smiled. "You see, it wouldn't take much to scare off my contacts, but if no one else is going to know, I guess we'll be all right." He took a cigar out of his desk drawer and lit it. "Now what about

this lead?"

"It's about Old Tom," Sandy said. "We think he might be in a town called Rockville."

"Rockville?" Horn started visibly. "What makes you think that?"

Ken hadn't overlooked Horn's surprise. "Did you ever hear of it before?"

Horn took his time about answering. "As a matter of fact I have—not an hour ago. The man I've got tracing Old Tom called in to say he'd found his home town was Rockville, but he didn't know which of all the Rockvilles in the country it was. Have you run it down closer than that?"

"Maybe." And Sandy told him about the baseball picture.

"That's good work." Horn nodded. "May save considerable time. I'll check it immediately." He stared at his cigar ash a moment. "You're the two who were mixed up in that Skeleton Island deal, aren't you?"

Ken nodded.

"That was a nice piece of work," Horn said. "Of course I only know what was in the papers, but it looked like a smooth job." He carefully knocked the ash off into an ash tray. "But this job is different."

"We're not going to get involved in this," Sandy said.

"Good. I'm glad you see it my way." Horn tilted his chair back. "You heard what I told Mrs. Brown about how I work. My contacts—and I'm not worth a plugged nickel without 'em—would freeze up if they knew anyone else was on the case. They trust me—and I pay them. But they wouldn't trust anybody else."

"Well," Ken assured him, "we haven't any intention of butting in. We want to help the Browns—not spoil things for them. We just thought we should tell you about this."

"You were right," Horn agreed heartily. "And I hope you won't think me unreasonable in asking you to stay away from the case. Not," he went on hastily, "that you

haven't already helped tremendously, you understand. In fact, I'd appreciate anything you came across—so long as no one but you two know what you're doing. Especially the Browns."

"Why especially?" Sandy asked. "I think they'd like to know we believe in Mr. Brown's innocence and that we're anxious to help."

"I'm sure of it," Horn said. "But suppose you tell them about this and they get their hopes up? And then it doesn't amount to anything—as might happen, you know. Then what?"

"Guess you're right," Sandy admitted reluctantly.

"They'll find out when it's all over," Ken reminded him.

"Sure," Horn agreed. "I'll tell them myself. But not now." He stood up to indicate that the interview was over. "One more thing. Suppose you tell the Browns and *they* let it slip, and some kindhearted soul goes to Rockville to find Tom? He gets scared and takes off again—and we never find him. No, son. Take it from me. No secret's a secret once more than two people know it."

He put out his hand. "So I can depend on your discretion?"

"Sure," Ken said.

"Swell, and thanks again. And call me if you happen to hear anything else that might help."

Sandy was still a little glum when they got into the car a few minutes later. "If we could tell the Browns we're working with Horn, it would fix everything up."

"It sure would," Ken agreed cryptically, heading for the Holland Tunnel and Brentwood.

They stopped for supper on the way, and it was about nine thirty when they turned into the Allens' street.

"Look ahead," Ken said. "There's Roger Brown."

Sandy grunted and then sat up. "Hey! What're you doing?"

Ken was slowing the car down as he headed in toward the curb. "Let's talk to him. Pop fixed it up." He pulled up

the brake. "Hello, Roger."

The boy, some fifteen feet away, started, and then stared at them steadily a moment as if unable to make up his mind about answering. "Hello," he said finally, and then turned away to walk on again.

"Wait," Ken called. "We want to talk to you."

"What for?" But he stopped.

"I guess you know about last night. We're sorry about that."

"That's all right. It doesn't matter."

"Thanks," Sandy said. "And Roger—about the trial—there wasn't anything else we could have done."

"Sure. I guess not."

"Have you heard from Horn yet?" Ken asked. Roger hesitated. "We just got a telegram," he admitted. "He's in Chicago and he says things look promising."

"In Chicago!" Sandy echoed. "But—"

Ken's foot came down hard on his instep. "Good," Ken said. "Things'll come out all right. And don't forget—we're with you."

"Thanks." Roger almost smiled.

"How could Horn be in Chicago?" Sandy demanded when Roger was beyond hearing distance.

"That," Ken said quietly, "is a good question."

CHAPTER IV

A SECOND DISAPPEARANCE

“IT DOESN’T MEAN a thing,” Pop said flatly.

They had been arguing for an hour over the seemingly impossible feat of Horn’s being in two places at once—at his office and in Chicago. Sandy was now convinced that Horn was up to no good and that Mrs. Brown should be told immediately. Ken was reserving his opinion. Pop’s careful timetable showed it just possible that Horn could have left New York right after the boys had seen him and have been in Chicago before they reached home.

Sandy picked up the timetable. “I know it’s possible, but it doesn’t seem very probable. Even on the fastest plane—and he’d have had to do some kind of checking in Chicago before he’d have anything to wire them about—” He looked up belligerently. “It would have been pretty slick work.”

“Not necessarily,” Pop said. “We know he has men working for him. Maybe one of his operatives dug up the Chicago information and told him the minute he landed. The wire could have been sent at the airport.”

“On the other hand,” Ken pointed out, “I did have the distinct impression, when we left him, that he was going right out to Rockville to check on Tom.”

Bert spoke up. “But that was only your impression. Horn said he had a man working on Tom, so why isn’t it likely that he sent *him* down to Rockville?”

“Could be,” Ken admitted.

“I say let it ride overnight.” Pop got to his feet and stretched. “Horn could be a wrong one, I admit that in fact Granger’s report hints at it strongly. But I think we ought to give him a chance before we upset the Browns’ hopes.” He yawned. “I’m going to turn in.”

Some time later—the big grandfather clock in the hall had just struck two—Ken sat up in bed and looked across the room. The mound of bedclothes that was Sandy was motionless, but Ken whispered, “Hey.”

“You awake too?” The reply was instantaneous.

“Can’t sleep. Things keep going around in my head.”

“Me too.” There was a perceptible grin in Sandy’s voice. “It’s only fifty miles.”

“What is?” Then Ken laughed. “Rockville?”

“What else?”

“Couldn’t do anything now, of course, but . . .”

“We might in the morning,” Sandy finished. “I’m getting worried about the way you read my mind. What’s on the agenda for tomorrow?”

“Sunday? Nothing important.”

“We might take a little trip then?”

“How much money is there in the gasoline fund?”

“Enough, I guess,” Ken said. “Last time I looked there was a ten and some singles. And I suppose we could. . .”

“Borrow some from the photographic fund.” Again Sandy completed Ken’s thought. “There’s about fifty dollars there, left over from what Global paid for those Stone Elephant pictures. Of course,” he went on sarcastically, “I had intended to buy a stroboscopic flash outfit, but that can wait.”

Ken grinned in the dark. Sandy would happily spend every cent they had on his camera, but he would just as happily toss the money into anything that seemed more important. And Ken knew how important the Brown case was to his friend.

“You wouldn’t know how to use the flash outfit

anyway,” he murmured. “Maybe we can get to sleep now.”

At breakfast the next morning the Allen clan raised no objection to the proposed trip, although Mom insisted that they take a lunch along. “The chances are you won’t get a decent meal all day. I’ll just make up a little box.”

Sandy grinned at her. “Little enough to fit into the car, please.”

Rockville, an hour and a half away, had been well named. The pastures surrounding it were dotted with rocks, and there were few clean fields that could be profitably tilled.

“Looks as if they couldn’t even raise enough feed to make dairying pay,” Sandy commented.

Ken pointed to a tumble-down deserted farmhouse. “I guess that’s why these places are being abandoned.”

A moment later they came to the town itself, consisting apparently of a few stores and one gas station. Only the station was open. Sandy drew up alongside its pump.

“Want gas?” The man seated in the shade of a tree looked as if he might be Rockville’s oldest citizen.

“No, thanks,” Sandy told him. “Just information.”

“Good. ‘S’ too hot to pump. What’d you want to know?”

“Is there a Tom Simpson around here, sir?”

“Simpson?” the old man repeated. “There’s a Simpson place up the road a piece, but nobody’s lived in it since it went for taxes.” The wrinkled face acquired more wrinkles of concentration. “Tom Simpson, you say? That’d be Jonathan’s son, I guess. Seems to me he—” Suddenly his eyes lit up. “Wait a minute. Wilbur said somethin’ . . .” He turned toward the gas station and called. “Wilbur! C’m’ere!”

A man of about fifty materialized in the doorway. “What is it, Pa?”

“Didn’t I hear you say Tom Simpson came by here a couple of hours ago?”

“Nope.” He shrugged a pair of thin shoulders. “Said it was a man that might ‘a’ been Tom. I haven’t laid eyes on

him in years, so maybe I wouldn't know him if I fell over him."

"Where's the Simpson place, sir?" Ken asked.

"Want to buy it?" There was a shrewd light in the old man's eyes. "Cause if you do, I got a better one."

"No," Ken said hastily. "We just wanted to see if maybe Tom was there."

"Even if it was Tom I saw," Wilbur put in, "he wouldn't be there now. He was leavin' town when I saw him—with a man in a big car. Mighty big," he added. "Took nineteen gallons of gas to fill the tank."

"What kind of car?" Sandy asked quickly.

"Did you notice the license plate?" Ken added.

"Nope. It sure was big though."

"Which way were they going?" Ken asked.

"That way." Wilbur pointed in the direction from which the boys had just come. "Simpson's place"—he pointed in the opposite direction—"is that way a mile."

"Yep," the old man said, "we've got a mighty pretty piece of land up the lane. Fine for a summer place."

"Thanks," Sandy told him. "If we ever need one, we'll remember."

"You do that, son."

Sandy whistled when they were under way again. "Whew! That's getting information the hard way. What do you think?"

"Too many possibilities yet. Let's find the Simpson place and see if that tells us anything."

Sandy watched the mileage, and when they had gone a little more than nine-tenths of a mile beyond the gas station he slowed down. "There's an old house."

"Look!" Ken pointed to the overgrown driveway leading to it. "Oil on the grass. Someone's driven on it recently."

Sandy backed up, swung the car into the lane, and drove close to the old house. It seemed weather-beaten to the point of collapse, but the porch, when they tried it, was solid under their feet.

“Know what this reminds me of?” Sandy grinned.

“Yes—and this is no time to bring it up.” Ken could hardly repress a shudder at the thought of another abandoned house they had investigated in Colorado.

He pushed the front door open when no one had answered their knock, and looked inside. Sandy, behind him, sniffed.

“Smells like pipe smoke—or maybe cigars.” They entered what had probably once been the parlor and glanced around. Ken walked to the fireplace at the far end and felt the bricks.

“Warm. There’s been a fire here recently.”

“In hot weather like this?”

“To cook on, probably.” Ken picked up a crumpled paper bag. “Groceries, I’d say.”

They walked through a doorway into another room. A pile of empty tin cans adorned one corner.

Sandy inspected the labels. “Beans, soup, corned beef, salmon, tomatoes—quite a selection.”

Ken made a rough computation. “About enough for a month’s stay, I should think.”

Sandy had pounced on a carton near by. “Look at this.” He read the label. “Dexter Super Market. Dexter’s between here and Brentwood. Looks like Tom stocked up on his way over from Brentwood.”

“If it was Tom,” Ken said. “Might have been a tramp, I suppose, just wanting a place to stay for a while.”

Sandy was poking around in a closet. “No full cans. Either he ate everything, or he took along what was left.” His voice grew muffled as he penetrated deeper into the recess. “Hey!” he shouted, backing out suddenly. Triumphant he held up an old sweater with still-visible markings where letters had once been sewn.

“B.H.S.,” Ken said.

“Sure. Brentwood High School. Somebody at home probably gave it to Tom when it got too shabby to wear to school.”

“That about clinches it then,” Ken said. “Tom was here. The question is, who took him away again?”

Sandy dropped the sweater on a chair. “That’s simple. Horn—one of his men, I mean.”

Ken thought a moment. “Makes sense, except for one thing. Why didn’t Horn send him out here yesterday when we first told him? Why wait until this morning?”

“It’s a six-hour trip from New York,” Sandy reminded him. “He’d have arrived after dark, and that’s no time to look for a strange house.”

“But he doesn’t seem to have looked,” Ken objected. “At least not at the gas station, or they’d have told us. And that’s the only place that was open in town.”

Sandy grew impatient. “But there are houses around here—the detective could have stopped at any of them and found out. Or he may have come in on another road, where there’s another gas station open. The point is Tom was here. And the chances are that by now he’s back in Brentwood already identifying bank robbers’ photographs. Let’s go.”

“O.K.” Ken said. “There’s no sense hanging around.”

Ken drove, and Sandy seized the opportunity to eat two of the sandwiches Mom had packed. Ken wasn’t hungry—and he wasn’t in the mood for talking. Sandy’s spirits, however, had risen considerably, and he remarked several times that Horn seemed to be doing a good job after all.

They pulled into the Allen driveway by two o’clock, but before Ken could shut off the motor Bert appeared on the back porch.

“Mrs. Brown’s been calling for you two. Wants you to come over as soon as you get in.” He looked at them curiously. “Anything wrong?”

“Everything’s fine,” Sandy assured him. “Tell you when we get back.”

Ken backed the car around and drove the two blocks to the Brown house in silence. The green coupé was in

front of the house again.

Roger was waiting for them at the door, grim-faced and angry. He opened the door and gestured them in.

"I thought you said you wouldn't mess up this case." Horn spoke almost before they saw him seated near Mrs. Brown.

"What do you mean?" Ken asked. "How did we mess up anything?"

"How do I know *how*? I just know you did."

"I don't understand," Sandy said. "What—?"

"I flew in from Chicago this morning," Horn said with exaggerated patience, "at Mrs. Brown's expense, because I got a call from my man that Old Tom had disappeared again—that somebody had gone to Rockville for him and taken him away. Who did you talk to? Come on—tell me."

"We didn't tell anybody," Sandy protested.

"No?" Horn turned away from them. "This is serious, Mrs. Brown, and might get even more serious if these two busybodies can't stay away from things that don't concern them. Maybe if *you* asked them—"

Ken broke in. "We didn't tell anybody about Tom except the Allen family. They certainly didn't repeat it."

"That's your story," Horn said. "But the facts speak for themselves; somebody beat us to Old Tom."

Sandy moved forward. "Look, Mr. Horn, we're sorry about that. But *we* gave you the tip, so it's not likely we'd try to mess it up. Maybe you'd do better finding out who got there first, instead of wasting time like this. We don't like to be called liars, Mr. Horn."

"Stop it, please," Marcia Brown pleaded. "I don't know what's happened and it's too late to worry about it. I realize you boys are doing your best for us, but I must ask you not to interfere with Mr. Horn. If we could have found Tom . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"What time did your man get to Rockville?" Ken asked. "We—"

"Let's just skip the questions," Horn interrupted

brusquely. "What you don't know, you can't repeat."

"Repeat!" Sandy's face, already red, flamed as bright as his hair. "We just—!"

"Hold it, Sandy." Ken took his arm. "We're sorry, Mrs. Brown, but honestly we had no part in what happened this morning. We told Mr. Horn about Rockville in good faith, and that's all. And now I think we'd better go."

"But I'd just like to ask—"

"Never mind." Ken tightened his grip on Sandy's arm and didn't release it until they were in the car.

"What's the matter with you?" Sandy grumbled as they rolled down the street. "We should have made him explain what happened. I'd like to know when his man was there. And why he didn't get there faster. We should have stayed until we were sure the Browns believed us."

"Don't worry about it," Ken said. "But," he added quietly, "I think Mr. Horn will stand some investigating. I wondered about him last night. I wondered some more in Tom's house this morning. And now I'm pretty curious." He stopped in front of the Allens'. "You take Bert's ear and see where Horn goes when he leaves the Browns. Don't follow him far—only until he leaves town."

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to talk to Roger as soon as Horn leaves. I want to know what went on after we left."

"Roger won't talk to you. Didn't you notice his face?"

"Oh, yes, he will," Ken said confidently. "And I'll even predict one thing he'll tell me."

"What?"

"That Horn just asked for more money."

CHAPTER V

KEN TALKS FAST

KEN SAT IN THE RED CAR a block to the north of the Brown house, and the minutes crawled slowly by. Sandy was invisible—his post was a block and a half south, in the direction that Horn would take on his way to the highway. When the short, plump detective finally came into sight, walking briskly toward his green coupe, it was a few minutes after three. An instant later he drove off past Sandy's watching post.

Ken settled down again. He had no assurance that Roger would come out of the house alone—or at all. But he intended to speak to the boy, even if it was necessary to wait all afternoon.

By three thirty Sandy turned up. He had left Bert's car at home and come on foot. Ken looked at him questioningly when he slid into the convertible.

"Horn drove down to the highway and stopped at Joe's for gas. I waited until he left and then talked to Joe."

"Well?" Ken kept his eyes glued on the block ahead.

"He asked Joe for a Connecticut map. Joe didn't have one, but he did have a northeastern regional map stuck up on the wall and Horn studied it pretty carefully. I saw him. He held a piece of paper up against the map and wrote on it. Tracing something, maybe. Not very helpful."

"Can't tell. Might—" Ken straightened. "There's the Brown car leaving. Mrs. Brown's driving and—no, Roger's

not with her. Wonder if she'll be gone long enough for us to talk to him?"

"Probably," Sandy said quietly. "Visiting hours at the county jail are from four to five on Sunday. If it weren't for that vicious bonding company lawyer," he added bitterly, "Mr. Brown could be out on bail now pending the appeal. But no—they set bail at fifty thousand dollars—so Mr. Brown has to sit there and wait. You'd think he'd committed ten murders the way that prosecutor went after him."

"The bonding company wants to recover the money, Ken said. "They probably think that by making things tough for Mr. Brown he'll be willing to tell them where it is.

"Oh, sure. As if he knew! And the thieves got less than five thousand dollars, anyway. What's that to a big company?"

"Matter of principle, I suppose. They think they have to be tough in order to discourage bank robbery." Ken started the engine. "Coast is clear now."

Roger came to the screen door of the porch in answer to their knock.

"We'd like to talk to you, Roger," Ken said.

Roger held the door closed. "I don't want to talk to you. Why don't you leave us alone? Didn't—?"

"Give us ten minutes. Then if you still want us to leave, we'll go."

"O.K. Ten minutes." Roger stood back to let them come up on the porch but made no move to invite them into the house.

Ken leaned against the porch wall. "We wanted to tell you that we have serious doubts about Horn having been in Chicago."

Roger's face remained blank. "Prove it."

"We can't," Ken admitted. "But what would you say if we told you we spoke to him in New York yesterday?"

"He told us about that. He took off for Chicago right afterward." Roger looked at his watch. "Nine minutes left."

“Horn asked for more money, didn’t he?”

Roger looked up sharply. “You been eavesdropping again?”

Ken shook his head. “It would have been logical.”

“Sure. Especially after you made him come back here for nothing, by scaring Tom off.”

Sandy fidgeted. “Look, Ken, we’re not getting any place. Let’s go.”

“Not yet.” Ken kept his eyes on Roger. “We were at Rockville ourselves this morning at eleven thirty. According to the man at the gas station there,” he went on, ignoring Roger’s angry start, “Tom left a couple of hours before that—say at half past nine or maybe ten.”

“What difference does it make when he left? He’s gone—that’s the important thing. And you had something to do with it.”

“No, we didn’t,” Sandy broke in.

Ken ignored the interruptions. “According to Horn, his man went there and found Tom gone. I’d like to know two things. What time did Horn’s man get to Rockville? And how was Horn notified of Tom’s disappearance in time to get back here from Chicago by the hour he arrived?”

Sandy whistled. “I never thought of that. Why didn’t you ask Horn, Ken, instead of dragging me out of here so fast?”

“Never mind that now.” Ken kept his eyes on Roger, who seemed to be trying to compute hours in his head. “If Tom disappeared at nine thirty,” Ken went on slowly, “and Horn’s man didn’t get there until *after* he’d gone, it must have been at least nine forty-five or a few minutes earlier. In any case he couldn’t have reached Horn in Chicago much earlier than nine forty-five. Could he?”

Roger shook his head dazedly. “I guess not.”

“We’ll give him the benefit of every doubt,” Ken went on. “Let’s suppose Horn got a call before ten— and I don’t think that’s possible. But even if he did, and he caught a plane one minute later, how could he have reached

Brentwood by early afternoon when the nearest big airport is fifty miles from here?” He paused a moment. “Or maybe you think he parachuted down as they went over—and landed in his car which by a happy coincidence was parked in the right spot.”

A full minute passed in silence. Even Sandy was still.

“Let’s go inside,” Roger said falteringly. “I want to think this over.”

They settled down in the living room and Sandy watched Roger struggle with Ken’s questions.

Sandy pressed their advantage. “The old duffer at the Rockville gas station—the one who told us about Tom—didn’t mention anyone else having asked for him, and the gas station was the logical place to inquire. So I think we’re justified in doubting that Horn’s man ever went there at all.”

“No,” Ken said quietly. “I think he was there.”

“But how—?” Sandy subsided at a look from Ken. “But Sandy just said that no one else asked for Tom,” Roger pointed out.

“Suppose Horn knew where Tom was all the time?” Ken dropped the explosive question as calmly as if he were asking the time.

Roger was on his feet. “That’s crazy! Horn knows that if we can find Tom, it’ll help. He’s working for us. Why should he hide Tom?”

“I can think of two possible reasons,” Ken answered. “But first, will you tell us what happened here after Sandy and I left?”

“Look,” Roger pleaded, “Mom is banking everything on Horn now. If there’s something wrong you’ve got to tell us. Mom just . . .”

“Just gave Horn more money?” Ken asked.

Roger nodded. “He said he needed another two hundred to get back to Chicago and take up where he’d left off. And to keep a man chasing after Tom.” He swallowed. “We don’t have much. . .”

“Did Horn suggest mortgaging the house again?” Sandy asked.

Roger nodded. “But we can’t. We promised Dad.” He turned to Ken. “You *have* to tell me. What do you know about Horn?”

“Not until you tell us what we want to know. And anyway,” Ken added honestly, “I’m not sure—I’m just guessing.”

Roger gave up. “O.K. But it’s nothing important. He asked for the money. . .”

“Go on.”

“He asked Mom again if Dad had any enemies, but we couldn’t think of a soul. Then he—but that question didn’t make any sense. He just wanted to know if the name Brinkly meant anything to us.”

“Does it?” Ken leaned forward.

“Not much, except that about six months ago a man by that name wrote to Dad and asked if he wanted to sell our summer place up at Black Lake in Connecticut. Dad wrote back that he didn’t.”

“Is that all?” Sandy sounded disappointed.

Roger shrugged. “Brinkly wrote again, explaining that he’d bought the land on both sides of ours and that he wanted the whole tract for a big estate. But Dad wasn’t interested. That land’s been in his family for a couple hundred years.”

“It *doesn’t* make any sense,” Sandy muttered.

“What else happened?” Ken asked.

Roger looked uncomfortable.

“He talked about us?” Ken suggested.

“Yes. He blamed you for losing Tom, and for wasting all the money it cost to come back from Chicago.” Roger stood up and walked to the window and back. “But if you’re right, and he never went to Chicago, then he was lying about the money he said he’d spent.”

“What do you think, Roger?” Ken asked quietly. “Do you think we’re justified in having doubts?”

"I don't know what to think. When Horn first came he sounded as if he might get some place. He was tough about money—but even so, he was willing to wait for his fee. And Mom figured that if he got Dad out . . ." He stood over Ken and looked down at him. "What do you think Horn is after?"

"Money," Sandy said. "He wants all he can get before he produces Toni and gets his five thousand dollars. And maybe he's not sure he can prove your father's innocence, so he's trying especially hard to get a lot of money for phony expenses while the getting's good."

Roger had turned white. "But he sounded sure he *could* prove it. And you said maybe it was his man who took Tom away this morning. Wouldn't that prove that he isn't doing any more than stalling, that he can save Dad when he wants to, even if he is trying to—to play us for suckers for a while?"

Ken stood up and pushed the boy gently into a chair. "I said I could think of two possibilities why Horn might be hiding Old Tom. Sandy told you one—money. The other is even less pleasant. Suppose Horn is in on the scheme to frame your father? Suppose he had even bidden Tom in the first place? That would explain how he knew about Rockville and why he had to put Tom some place else when we turned up with our suggestion."

Ken looked from Roger to Sandy and back again. It was difficult to determine which was more dazed by his bombshell.

Sandy recovered first. "Where did you get that idea? What reason would Horn have for framing Mr. Brown? Just to get himself a case and make some money? That certainly doesn't make sense."

"My father's never even met Horn," Roger said numbly. "There's no connection. . ."

"I said I was just guessing," Ken reminded them. "But it would explain some things, wouldn't it?"

"But if you're right, we should *do* something—have

Horn arrested.” An angry flush had replaced Roger’s pallor.

“Hold it,” Ken told him. “What would we charge him with?”

“With taking money under false pretenses,” Sandy said. “*He* should be in jail instead of Roger’s dad.”

Ken shook his head. “We couldn’t prove anything. He could say he had an operative in Chicago—which would be a legitimate reason for demanding expenses without going there himself.”

“But we’ve got to do something,” Roger said. “We can’t let Mom . . . When she hears about this, I don’t know what she’ll do.”

“Don’t tell her,” Ken advised.

“I have to. I can’t just—”

“I meant don’t tell her just yet. If Horn is in on the whole scheme, we don’t want to scare him off. He might lead us to the reason for the frame-up.”

“But he’ll keep asking for money,” Sandy protested.

“They can stall him,” Ken said. “Look, here’s my idea. If Horn’s only trying to get all he can out of you before winding up the case, he won’t quit if you make it difficult. When he thinks he can’t get any more, he’ll clear out if he hasn’t got any real evidence—or he’ll turn his evidence over and collect his final fee. On the other hand, if Horn is part of the whole plot, he certainly won’t quit—no matter how long you stall on the expense money. He’ll want to keep in touch with you to find out what you’re doing. Does that make sense?” he asked.

“But can’t we do something in the meantime?” Roger asked. “Just stalling is . . .”

“We’ll keep an eye on Horn, and one of two things should happen. Either he’ll wind up the case if he is just playing you for what he can get—or he’ll lead us to the real reason behind the frame-up, if we’re lucky. But you’ll have to be careful with him. Don’t say you have no more money for expenses—just say it’ll take a little while to get. Make it

take a week or so.”

Ken looked at Roger anxiously. “Do you think that’ll be possible—without letting your mother know all this?”

“I don’t know. It *will* take time to get more money, but Mom might convince Dad to mortgage the house or sell the summer place.”

“Either of those things would take time,” Ken pointed out. “And things may break before that.”

The front doorbell rang loudly.

“Your mother?” Sandy started to his feet.

“I don’t think she’ll be back yet.” Roger went to the door.

A moment later he was back in the room. “Special delivery,” he said, looking down at the envelope in his hands. “From that man Brinkly,” he added wonderingly. “I guess I can open it.” After a swift perusal of the single sheet he looked up, his eyes wide. “He’s offering us ten thousand for the summer place! Says he wants it right away so he can have it worked on during the fall.”

“That’s a lot of money,” Ken said slowly.

“It sure is. Especially,” Roger added, “as Dad always figured the place wasn’t worth more than seventy-five hundred. Maybe now he’ll let us sell it, and we could afford to get another detective on the job!”

“Don’t try that—yet,” Ken begged. “And when you see your father, convince him *not* to let your mother sell for a while. Tell him what we’ve been talking about. Will you?”

Roger nodded slowly. “O.K. But I don’t see what you think you can do.”

“Just give us a little while,” Ken asked. “You’ve got nothing to lose. If we fail, we’ll tell you and you can do whatever you think is best then.”

“All right. But it’ll be hard to keep this from Mom,”

“We’ll be in touch with you soon,” Ken promised as they left the house.

Sandy was taciturn as they drove away. “You got us in a fine kettle of fish. And we’re in it up to our necks” he

said finally. "What's going to happen when we admit we're stumped?"

"We're not stumped yet." Ken drove into Joe's gas station. "Didn't you say Horn wrote something on a piece of paper that he was holding up against the map on the wall?"

"That's right. So what?" Interest replaced Sandy's gloom.

Ken got out of the car and walked up to where the big map was tacked to a bulletin board. Joe watched him.

"What are you two after now?" he asked.

Ken had his head against the map and was squinting at it from an extreme angle. "Just looking, Joe." lie straightened. "Can we borrow this map for an hour?"

"Guess so. But don't forget to bring it back." Sandy looked on as Ken loosened the thumbtacks and carefully rolled up the large sheet. "Now what?"

"Come on home." Ken said nothing further until they were in the car again. "We have some of that lampblack we used for fingerprints, haven't we?"

"Sure. But whose fingerprints are you—? Oh Horn's?"

"You'll find out."

Five minutes later the map was flat on the floor of the boys' room and they were dusting the black powder over a small section of it. Then Ken blew most of the dust off and bent close to see the results of his work. Dark dust still lay in some shallow depressions—faint markings that had the form of letters and figures.

"How do you know Horn wrote that?" Sandy asked. "A lot of people could have leaned against the map to write in the months it's been outside Joe's station."

"Could be," Ken grunted. He reached for a paper and pencil and began to copy off what he could see. When he had finished he grinned. "But how many people do you suppose would have written this?"

Sandy read aloud. "Route 35 to Wrightville, 41 to Greentown, 30 to Skytop, 15 miles Route 20." Sandy

looked puzzled. “What’s it mean?”

Ken pointed to the map. “Follow the directions.” A moment later Sandy looked up from the map, his eyes startled. “They go to Black Lake! That’s where—”

“Where the Brown summer place is,” Ken finished. “And that’s where I think we ought to go.”

CHAPTER VI

THE MORGUE IS CHECKED

THERE WAS A COUNCIL of war that Sunday night at the Allen house. The supper dishes had been cleared away and around the big dining table the three Aliens and Ken examined each point of the perplexing case in which the boys had become so deeply involved.

About Horn's devious actions there was agreement; he was up to no good. Pop leaned toward Sandy's idea that the man was out after all he could get by whatever means were necessary. Bert took sides with Ken in believing that there was more than greed behind the detective's behavior.

"I admit I can't prove anything at this point," Ken said. "But it just doesn't add up to me. Maybe it's intuition," he added.

"But where's the motive?" Pop asked for the tenth time. "Why should Horn frame Brown?"

"I don't know," Ken replied. "But I'm beginning to think it's got something to do with Black Lake and maybe with a man named Brinkly."

"That doesn't hold water," Sandy objected. "If Horn is involved with Brinkly, why should he deliberately bring up his name at the Browns'?"

Pop agreed. "Asking them about Brinkly does seem proofs to me, that whatever Horn is up to, it has nothing to do with Brinkly." He knocked the tobacco out of his pipe irritably. "I wish I could remember what's familiar about

that name.” He looked across the table at Ken. “What did you say the initials on that envelope were?”

“C. A.,” Ken said. “Clarence A.”

“C. A. Brinkly,” Bert mused. “C. A. B. I wonder . . .”

“Got it!” Pop let the front legs of his chair come down with a crash. “Cabco Petroleum. That’s it.”

“Of course! He got mixed up in a messy lawsuit over oil lands,” Bert remembered.

“He got out of it, too,” Pop added, “but with a lot of dirty oil streaked over his reputation. He’s a big wheel in that business—the less reputable side of it.”

“Say!” Sandy came to life. “Do you suppose he wants the Brown place because there’s oil on it?”

“In Connecticut?” Pop’s eyebrows lifted. “Oil?”

Sandy subsided. “I guess not.” Then he brightened. “It wouldn’t have to be oil—might be gold or silver, or coal—anything that’s valuable. Maybe he got sore at Mr. Brown for not selling the property and got even by framing him.”

“A likely story,” Ken said. “And what’s Horn’s connection?”

“Maybe Brinkly hired him to do the framing.” Then Sandy shook his head. “No—that’s no good.” He had ignored Ken’s sarcasm. “In that case Horn would have been careful *not* to mention Brinkly’s name—and he’d probably have known where Black Lake is without looking it up.”

“Let’s stop this guessing for a while,” Ken suggested, “and see what we really know-”

Pop grunted. “That’ll only take a minute. You’re sure of just one thing: that somebody got Tom out of Brentwood a month ago, and that somebody spirited him out from under your noses again this morning.” He looked at them over the rims of his glasses. “But you can’t prove even that much. If you could prove that Tom was being deliberately kept hidden, Waddel might be able to cast enough doubt on the State’s case to win the appeal. But the prosecutor could make a monkey out of him on this flimsy hearsay

stuff we've got so far."

"We're just where we were," Sandy summed up glumly.

"No, we're not," Ken argued. "We're pretty sure now that Horn is up to some mischief. We're also pretty sure that Black Lake has something to do with the case—or Horn wouldn't have written down the directions for getting there."

"We've been over all this before," Sandy said.

"The thing that's holding us up," Ken continued, "is lack of a motive. When we get that, we can go to the police and leave it to them."

"When you get it, Ken," Pop asked, "or *if*?"

Ken smiled. "Until I'm sure we're licked, it's *when*."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I think we ought to get to Black Lake right away and look around. The solution may be plain as day."

"Not tonight," Pop objected. "That's a long haul."

"It's a hundred and forty miles from here," Sandy said.

"I think we should stop in New York first," Ken continued. "We could go through Global's morgue and see what they have on Brinkly—just in case. Then we could sleep tonight at Dad's apartment and get an early start tomorrow. We should be at Black Lake by noon."

"And back tomorrow night maybe." Pop nodded. "Well, maybe it's worth a try."

"If we get held up, we'll let you know where we stay up there," Ken said.

Pop stood up. "Well, don't stick your necks out. Just look—don't touch. If you *do* get something concrete, call us right away and we'll get the wheels in motion."

Sandy got to his feet. "What'll we need?"

"Won't be much room—not after your photographic equipment's packed," Ken pointed out.

"There's one thing I don't like about this." Pop's worried voice sobered them again. "I don't like keeping Marcia Brown in the dark."

"I don't like secrecy any better than you do, Pop," Ken

said quickly. "But should we risk telling her our suspicions now? It would make it too tough for her to negotiate with Horn, without giving something away. If he's in on the whole crooked deal and gets scared off—well, that's something we've got to avoid. We did suggest that Roger tell his father."

"That's right. I forgot. And I think Waddel should know." Pop's brow cleared. "That should take care of it. Now you two better take off—if you're going."

"Before Mom gets back from the movies," Bert added with a grin. "Or she'll keep you another hour while she packs you a lunch."

There was little traffic and they made excellent time. It wasn't much after midnight when Ken pulled to a stop on a deserted Fifth Avenue and they took the night elevator up to the Global office. The battery of news tickers greeted them with a muffled roar as they entered the busy news center.

Ten minutes later they were seated at a long table poring over dozens of clippings from an envelope marked *Brinkly, Clarence A.* They leafed rapidly through the long, narrow strips of paper—the similarity in many of the stories made it unnecessary to read every word. Finally Ken slid the sheaf back into its envelope.

"Pleasant chap, isn't he?"

"Almost every clipping is about a lawsuit," Sandy said. "Looks as if he never did anything *but* get in trouble."

"Not in trouble—out," Ken corrected. "He's too slick to get caught. Did you read what that judge said in the last story?"

"Something about Brinkly being able to find every loophole in the law and making one if there wasn't one already there." Sandy stood up. "If he's really mixed up in this, we'd better watch our steps."

They returned the envelope and took the elevator down to the street. Sandy stopped at the car and looked up and down.

“Never thought I’d see Fifth Avenue without a car in sight,” he said.

Ken started the motor. “The traffic’ll begin to stir again in another hour.” He turned in the middle of the block and headed northward to the Holt apartment, which was always kept in readiness for Richard Holt or for the boys when they came to the city. When they stopped for a light on Fifty-seventh Street a car pulled up alongside.

“See?” Ken gestured. “Tomorrow’s traffic beginning already.”

Sandy failed to comment. Ken glanced sideways at him and began to smile. Sandy was sound asleep. The light changed and Ken started off again, the other car dropping behind as the powerful convertible accelerated rapidly. From force of habit Ken looked in the mirror. The other car was half a block behind now. At Sixty-sixth Street another light caught them. This time the other car was a full block behind. But when Ken moved ahead on the green light, half the distance between them was swiftly covered.

“Light jumper,” Ken muttered. A vague feeling of uneasiness passed over him. “It’s silly,” he said half-aloud. “Why shouldn’t another car be going up Fifth Avenue?”

Sandy stirred. “What? We home already?”

“Keep an eye on that car behind us.”

Sandy sat up. “Following us?”

“Probably not. Just jitters. But watch it.”

With a quick glance to make sure he was clear, Ken swung left into Sixty-ninth Street and stepped down hard on the accelerator.

“Went on up Fifth,” Sandy reported.

“Good.”

“Who’d be following us?” Sandy tried without success to complete the sentence before he yawned again.

“Nobody, I guess,” Ken admitted a little sheepishly.

A few minutes later he parked in front of an old house on West Seventieth Street. They took out their two bags—one containing a few clothes, the other Sandy’s always-

present camera and accessories. Ken locked the car and they entered, walking quietly up carpeted stairs to the third floor.

When Ken had locked the apartment door behind them, he made a quick survey of the four rooms. Sandy watched him.

“You’ve got it bad, haven’t you?” He grinned. “Did you look under the beds?”

“I’ll leave that for you. I’m going to take a shower and hit the sack.”

Ken was sitting up in bed when Sandy finished his shower and came out of the bathroom in his pajamas.

“Now what?” Sandy asked. “More ghosts?”

“No. Just waiting for you to open the window.”

“Couldn’t you do it while you waited?” But Sandy crossed the room and the shade flew up with a clatter as he let the string slip out of his hand.

“That’s right,” Ken said. “Wake up the whole street.” He turned off the light on the bedside table and pounded his pillow into a comfortable shape. “Well— open the window.”

“Come here.” Sandy spoke so seriously that Ken joined him in an instant. “Look down there—at that double-parked car.”

Ken obeyed. “The car that was behind us on the Avenue?”

“It could be. Hard to be sure. I didn’t get a good look at it before,” Sandy murmured. “Maybe it’s just somebody being brought home.”

“We’ll soon find out. He can’t stay double-parked all night.” Ken slid the window gently open and listened. The car was three stories down and half a block away, but the light from a street lamp reached it enough to show that it was a big, heavy automobile.

“A mighty big car,” Ken said softly. “Remember?”

“Yeah. Took nineteen gallons of gas.”

A figure stepped out of the car just then, and they

heard the sound of a car door closing. There was only a quiet purr from the engine as the car moved up the Street, passing directly beneath their window and disappearing around the next corner.

Ken groped over the table next to the window and found a pencil. "RU7—69C," he said as he scribbled. "New York plates."

When he looked out the window again a lone shadowy figure was walking toward them. It was a man— that much they could see. But he was on the far side of the street and keeping as close to the buildings as possible. His figure was little more than a dark blur. When he came directly opposite their window, the man glanced carefully in both directions and then walked up the three steps to a recessed front door.

"Maybe he lives there," Sandy whispered, after several minutes of eye-straining observation.

"Probably. I didn't hear the door open and close, but—"

"Look!"

Down below there was the sudden brilliant flare of a match. They could make out the shape of cupped hands holding it but could see nothing of the face above. The match was flipped out into the street and darkness settled down again—except for a little point of red light that faded and glowed at intervals.

"Could be his wife doesn't let him smoke in the house," Sandy whispered after several long minutes had gone by. But there was no conviction in his voice.

By tacit agreement they maintained their vigil until the cigarette arched into the street in a shower of sparks.

Ken held his breath. But no sound of a door opening and closing could be heard.

And then, a moment later, another match flared and the intermittent fading and glowing of a small red point of light began again.

"Who do you suppose," Sandy asked quietly, "is so

interested in us?”

“And how long has he been following us?” Ken added.
“Ever since we left Brentwood?”

CHAPTER VII

BLACK LAKE

AT HALF PAST EIGHT the next morning Ken was speaking to Pop at the *Advance*, giving him a terse description of the previous evening.

“What! Someone followed you? Who?” The diaphragm in the phone almost shattered at the impact of Pop’s voice.

“We don’t know,” Ken said.

“That’s not so good. Maybe you two are warmer than we thought.”

“That’s fine,” Ken countered. “But don’t worry. We’ll take care of ourselves.” He repeated the car’s license number. “If you could check the ownership it might help.”

“O.K. Maybe I can have it by the time you get home tonight.”

“If we aren’t going to make it, we’ll call you.”

“Good. Well . . . Say! You two got enough money?”

“Sure. Got all of Sandy’s camera money. We’ll let you know if we need more.”

“See that you do.”

Sandy snapped the valise shut and straightened up. “Well? How do we elude our watcher if he’s still outside?”

They had checked the doorway across the street when they woke up, and found it—as they had suspected apparently deserted.

“We wouldn’t know him if we saw him, so it’d be a little difficult to lose him.” Ken shrugged. “It could be any of

those people wandering around down there.”

“Let’s start out and just wander around ourselves for a while. Then if we spot a car tailing us, we can take steps.”

Not long afterward Ken was turning the red convertible west toward the Hudson River- At Twelfth Avenue he headed downtown toward the Midtown Tunnel to New Jersey, and then, cutting left again, drove east on Thirty-second Street.

“Nobody followed us around that corner,” Sandy reported.

“Good.” Ken turned south again at the next block and then west until he entered the tunnel. Five minutes later they were on the Jersey side of the river and heading north. By this time they were pretty sure no one car had kept up with their route.

“Look at the map, Sandy, and see how we’re going to get back across the river into Connecticut.” Ken let the car out a little as the traffic thinned.

“We can cross back again on the George Washington Bridge,” Sandy mumbled, deep in the map. “And then the Henry Hudson Drive up into Westchester, pick up the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut.”

“Too logical,” Ken commented.

“All right. We could cross on the Yonkers Ferry and go up the east bank of the river until we can across and pick up U.S. 7.”

“That sounds better—not quite so obvious.”

“There’s still that little matter of breakfast,” Sandy pointed out when Ken had passed a third diner. “Or you decided to fast until we’ve solved this mystery?”

“I’m looking for a diner with a rear parking lot. Don’t forget this is a pretty conspicuous car—just in case our friend—or friends—has an eye out for us.”

“Oh, sure,” Sandy snorted. “They’d watch for us! With the thousands of miles of roads around here, it’d take an army.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Ken slowed up and turned off the

road to park behind a shining chromium-plated diner. "There are only three possible main routes to Black Lake. Three men could check on whether a red convertible used one of them." He slid out of the car. "So we'll keep out of sight as much as possible, and we'll take every little parallel country road we can find."

"Have it your way. But I can think of two flaws in your argument," Sandy pointed out as they walked across the parking lot. "One, if they're as smart as you think they are, they'll have a man at Black Lake and he'll see us no matter what road we take. Two, maybe it's not Black Lake they're worried about at all."

"You've got a point there—but just the first one. I'm still banking on Black Lake to give us the answer—or at least a good clue."

When they finished breakfast it was ten o'clock. But by half past three, when they should have reached their destination, Ken was backing the car out of a narrow dirt road which had ended in a swamp.

Sandy grinned. "According to my sextant, we're about 2,500 nautical miles from the Hebrides. If you want to wait until the stars come out, I'll take a sight I and get a better fix." He watched Ken's exertions for a moment- "This is the fifth back road that's petered out on us."

Ken got the car headed back the other way. "Very funny. Here I am trying to keep you safe from harm and all the return I get is cheap sarcasm." He leaned over to look at the map between them. "Where do you; suppose we are?"

"I *think* we're still in Connecticut. More than that I wouldn't say." Sandy pointed to a dot. "We passed, through that town an hour ago."

"That's the last sign of civilization I remember." Ken grinned. "You want to take the wheel?"

"Not me! You got us into this. Get us out."

"O.K." Ken started the car once more. "Let's see, which is north?"

“Wait. I’ll get out and look at the trees for moss.”

“Never mind,” Ken said with dignity. “I’ll find it.”

“If it takes you all night,” Sandy added. He slumped deep in the seat. “Wake me up when we get there.”

It didn’t take all night, but the sun had almost set when Ken pulled up alongside a sign that said:

BLACK LAKE—2 Mi.

“I’m hungry,” Sandy warned him. “So don’t get any funny ideas about crawling the rest of the way on our hands and knees, under a camouflage of fresh foliage.” But when Ken sat quietly, without answering, he added more seriously, “What’s the matter?”

“You were right, of course—that they’d see us the minute we hit town, if they’re watching for us at all. But since we’ve come this far on our own, I’d like to be able to get a look around the Brown place—and Brinkly’s two pieces of property too—before we drive smack up the main street.”

“Good idea. There’s another hour of daylight left. Let’s stop at the next gas station and ask questions. We ought to be able to manage it—we know the Brown place is on the west shore of the lake, and we’re west of the lake now. We wouldn’t have to go through town.”

At the next gas station Ken left the car for a few minutes and returned with a sheet of paper. “We’re in luck. The chamber of commerce gives out these maps of the area.” He spread it out on the steering wheel. “See here we are now. Here’s the lake—five miles long, running north and south. The town is at the lower end.”

“Looks like two lakes, divided by a—”

“It’s one lake, all right. I asked. That’s a dam there in the middle, with a small powerhouse. Now look at this. The east shore is pretty well-populated—lots of houses, lots of streets. But the west shore’s got just one road, running along near the lake—because there are only a few

houses over there, mostly big estates.”

“What else do you know? Is there a restaurant?”

“Never mind your stomach for a minute. Listen. Mr. Brown’s place—I didn’t ask; he volunteered a lot of information about the west shore—has almost a quarter mile of lake frontage. And the land on both sides of his is owned by a newcomer—millionaire named Brinkly”

“He told you that, huh? Town must be mighty proud of its new citizen.” Sandy pointed. “What are those pencil lines?”

“He put them on while he talked. They’re Brinkly’s property lines. See-his first piece begins at the darn and the powerhouse, then comes the Brown place, then more Brinkly land. Let’s go look for ourselves-”

“There’s the powerhouse,” Sandy said a few minutes later, as they turned north along a road bordering the west shore. “So I suppose Brinkly’s land begins here.”

They looked at each other and then back at the heavy wire fence enclosing the property.

“Likes privacy, doesn’t he?” Ken commented.

“Trespassers will be prosecuted,” Sandy added, reading from one of the signs along the high mesh barrier.

“And look at the barbed wire on top. Real hospitable, I call it.”

Suddenly the fence took a sharp right turn and headed lakeward, disappearing among heavy trees.

“So this is the Brown place.”

It too was heavily wooded land, similar to Brinkly’s property except for the absence of a fence. Where it ended, two-tenths of a mile farther on, the fence began once more marching up out of the woods to run alongside the road.

Ken drove without speaking some distance further, then swung the car around at a wide spot in the road and headed back.

“Watch out for the Brown driveway,” he said. “I didn’t notice it before.”

“It was there. Plenty overgrown, though. That’s

because Mr. Brown didn't get out here this year. He spent vacation in jail instead." Sandy, no longer even pretending to remember his hunger, leaned forward. "Take it easy." Ken slowed and a moment later Sandy added, "Here it is."

The car turned and nosed into the narrow rutted lane. About fifty feet to their right the Brinkly fence paralleled Brown's driveway.

"You suppose the fence goes all the way to the lake?" Sandy wondered. "It— Here's the Brown house."

Ken stopped the car. It was a pleasantly weatherbeaten old New England farmhouse, with a huge porch that ran the full length of the building on the road side. Part of it was two stories high, but for most of its length it was only one. A red barn stood to the north a few hundred feet from the house itself.

"Let's walk down toward the lake," Ken suggested, after they had walked slowly around past close-shuttered windows. "See how far it is."

Beyond the clearing that surrounded the house the trees closed in again, on either side of a once clearly defined path.

"There—you can see it already." They had scarcely stepped in among the trees when Sandy spoke, but they continued on their way toward the glisten of water some distance ahead.

"Don't turn," Ken said suddenly, in a whisper. "But over there—just beyond Brinkly's fence—somebody's keeping up with us."

"Right," Sandy breathed. Then he stumbled and fell to one knee. "Wish they'd take better care of their path," he said loudly, remaining close to the ground a moment while he rubbed his shin.

"You all right?" Ken asked.

"I guess so." Sandy winked at him as he got up and started forward again. "Got a look at him," he whispered. "Big man—with a rifle or a shotgun."

"Nice going." Ken murmured. "Anybody we know?"

Sandy shook his head.

A moment later Ken stopped him. "Sounds like a waterfall," he said. "Listen. Over to the left."

"Want to go see?"

"Might as well take a real look at the lake first." When they were again walking forward he added under his breath, "Did you see that faint path right there—crossing this one, as if it went from one Brinkly fence to the other?"

"A Brinkly short cut?" Sandy suggested quietly.

"Could be. Seemed fairly new. We'll try to get a better look later." He raised his voice. "There's the lake."

They'd come out at the edge of a shallow beach, evidently man-made, because on either side of the short stretch of sand the shore was formed of huge craggy rocks rising straight out of the water. A flat-bottomed boat lay upside down near a small dock.

The man with the gun was just beyond the fence. When the guard realized they had seen him he spoke in gruff voice. "That's private property you're on."

"We know," Ken said pleasantly.

"We don't like trespassers around here."

"So we gathered," Sandy said. "We saw the fence."

The man waited a moment, as if puzzled. "You got any business around here?" he asked finally.

"Why?" Ken asked.

The single syllable seemed to puzzle the man even sere. "Because," he said after some time, "you're trespassing."

"Remarkable, isn't it?" Ken said to Sandy in a clearly audible voice. "He's so sincere about his work that he even guards the neighbor's property."

"I don't know what you're jabbering about," the man growled. "But you'd better scam before. . ."

"Before what?" Ken asked.

"Before . . . before I tell the owners of that property."

"Why don't you do that?" Ken turned to Sandy. "Shall we walk up the beach a way?"

"I'm not sure it was smart to make him mad," Sandy

said quietly as they walked north away from the fence where the guard still stared at their backs.

“Probably not,” Ken admitted. “But what else was there to do—tell him why we’re here? And I wasn’t going to let him run us off.” He stopped at the edge of the rocks. “Listen—the waterfall again.”

Sandy climbed a rock. “Pretty dark under the trees, but it looks like a brook comes down into the lake along here.” He leaned over. “Quite a deep ravine.”

They retraced their steps then, back toward the house. The guard had disappeared from sight.

“What’re you saying?” Sandy asked, as Ken began to mumble.

Ken shook his head and kept walking. When they reached the house he looked up. “I was counting,” he explained. “There are ninety-five steps from the house down to that crosspath. We’re going to be investigating that at night, and I wanted to be sure we could find it.”

“With our friend next door being so pleasant, you want to go snooping at night? Remember—he carries a gun.”

Ken slid beneath the driver’s seat and started the engine. “Why not? We’ve got nothing to lose by looking around, have we?”

“Just four arms, four legs, one head—mine, that is, You don’t seem to have any these days. Four eyes, two chins . . . You want the entire inventory of what we’ve got to lose?”

“Relax, son. It’s hard to hit anybody at night.”

Sandy shrugged in pretended resignation. “Well, anyway let’s eat first. They always give a condemned man a hearty meal.”

CHAPTER VIII

LUCKY BREAK?

BLACK LAKE, like many small New England towns, had one street lined with business buildings, one cross street of secondary importance, and a dozen or so side lets that were entirely residential. In its earlier days the activity of the village had centered around the south end of the lake, where a flour mill and lumber yard had utilized the water power. The old mill was still standing, but its creaking wheel now merely attracted the summer visitors who came in droves to buy the ice cream and hot dogs dispensed in the mill yard.

Sandy looked at the cars massed in the parking area there. "Something tells me," he said, as they drove slowly by, "that we should have made reservations. We'll never get a place to stay overnight in this crowded town."

Ken swung off the main street—called Lake Drive obviously because it hugged the lake's eastern shore—and into Walter Avenue, the principal cross street. "According to the map," he said, "there's an inn on this street, and several private houses that take overnight guests."

"There's one." Sandy pointed. "But the sign says 'No Vacancy.'"

"Same thing across the street."

They passed three more filled tourist homes, and then, almost at the end of the street, they saw the inn.

Sandy whistled. "That's not for us."

Ken stopped the car to get a better look. The beautifully restored old colonial brick house sat several hundred feet from the sidewalk, behind a lawn that looked more like a custom-made carpet than a result of Nature. Discreet lighting was furnished by old lanterns fastened to the great trees rimming a semicircular drive. The guests wandering about the wide porch and the walks were so well-dressed that both boys instinctively glanced down at their wrinkled slacks.

“We’ve got sports jackets with us,” Ken said defensively.

“And about forty-five dollars,” Sandy added. “With luck it might just pay for a room for the night.” He bent over the chamber of commerce map for a moment, “Let’s go. There are two tourist courts about half a mile out of town on this street—they’ll be more our speed.”

But the tourist courts were also filled, and half an hour later, when the clock on the dashboard said nine, Ken once more pulled up before the Stage Coach Inn.

“This is our last chance.”

“We still can’t afford that place,” Sandy protested. “Even if they have a room—which they probably haven’t.”

“If it’s as expensive as we think, they might just possibly have an attic room left—one none of their regular guests would consider.” He waited a moment. “Or would you rather sleep in the car?”

“I don’t know why I’m arguing.” Sandy grinned. “Even if they have a room they’ll throw us out on our ear. We forgot to bring our dress suits. So go ahead—try it.”

Ken stopped under the portico at the front entrance. “Anyway, our car fits in with the surroundings.” He squirmed into his jacket which had been lying on the seat back and ran a comb through his hair.

“I suppose you think that’s an improvement,” Sandy commented, but he too went through the motions and a moment later they were standing before the desk waiting to be noticed by the clerk. The man turned toward them

finally.

“You have reservations?” His pale blond eyebrows lifted slightly above his pale-blue eyes.

“Brr,” Sandy muttered.

Ken stepped on the redhead’s foot. “No,” he said, “but we—”

“I’m very sorry.” The clerk left no doubt as to the insincerity of his words. “But without reservations . . .” Coolly he turned away from them.

“You’re sure you haven’t even got a small room just for tonight?” Ken asked.

“You know,” Sandy said helpfully, “up under the roof, or down the cellar, or—”

“Hardly.” The clerk ignored Sandy entirely. “You might try one of the tourist courts.”

“We have,” Ken said. “Everything in town’s filled up.”

“In that case . . .” The shoulders in the pale honey-colored jacket shrugged delicately. They were dismissed.

But the phone on his desk rang just then, and the clerk had to turn half toward them again to answer it. “Stage Coach Inn,” he said. Then his voice became breathlessly subservient. “Yes, sir . . . At the moment, sir . . . No, nothing available. In any case we’d hardly. . . What! . . . But of course, sir, if you say so.”

Ken and Sandy, taking some comfort from the fact that there were those to whom the supercilious clerk apparently felt inferior, were walking slowly toward the door.

“We might look around for a nice soft rock,” Sandy said. “Or maybe we could—”

“One moment, please. Please!” The clerk was beside them, mopping a furrowed brow with a dazzling handkerchief. “A most astonishing thing has just happened. Our district manager just told me there’s a cancellation. I can give you a room after all!” His attempt at a friendly smile clearly cost him a great effort. “More than a room, in fact—a suite!” He took their arms and

urged them back toward the desk. "I'll have a boy bring up your luggage and park your car." He brought his hand down on the bell.

"Hold on a minute." Ken stepped back. "We don't want a suite—we just want one room."

The clerk laughed nervously. "But I'll let you have for the price of a room. Er—seven dollars, that would be. I—It's rather late, you see. There probably won't be another demand for it. So fortunate, isn't it? I tell you, we'll shut off the other two rooms—just let you have the bedroom and bath."

"That ought to be enough," Sandy said judiciously. "We don't want to set up housekeeping, we just want to sleep."

The clerk laughed again. "So amusing. Exactly." He to the waiting bellboy. "Take these gentlemen's to Room 205. Their car is outside." He looked interrogatively.

"The red convertible," Ken said. "But don't put it in please. We may want it later."

"Yes sir. No, sir." The boy saluted and moved off, words "Two-o-five!" drifting back over his shoulder.

"This way," the clerk murmured.

An elegantly silent elevator deposited them on the second floor, and a moment later the clerk was stepping aside to gesture them through a door.

"Seven dollars for this?" Sandy stared. The great square room was lavishly furnished with what appeared to be valuable antiques. Magnificent draperies framed the row of windows overlooking a garden.

The clerk inspected the two closets, checked the beds to see if they had been properly made up, and clicked on the bathroom light. He tried a door on the far side of the room and nodded when he found it locked.

"That leads to the other rooms of the suite," he explained. "Well, I guess you're all settled."

The bellboy arrived just then with their bags and the car keys, and then he and the clerk left together.

“We haven’t registered yet,” Ken reminded the latter.

“Any time.” He waved a slender hand. “When you come down to dinner. Oh, yes, the dining room will be open for another half hour, so . . .”

“Thank you.” Ken waited until the door had closed behind him. “A most fortunate cancellation.” He mimicked the clerk’s well-modulated voice.

Sandy stretched out on the bed and sighed. “Most fortunate indeed. And complete with restaurant Funny, too—I didn’t think that’s what was going on over the phone when we heard his end of the conversation. Oh, well—” He yawned. “You get cleaned up first.”

“Sure.” Ken spoke absently. “I wonder. . .”

Sandy sat up. “Stop mooning around and get ready to eat, will you?” He frowned at Ken, who was staring at the locked door. “Five minutes ago you were willing to accept anything. Now you’re sulking because you can’t have the whole suite. What’s the—?”

“Very curious,” Ken muttered.

“It certainly is. Here I am starving and—”

“This door lock. Usually a connecting door like this has a latch on both sides. This one hasn’t. We can’t lock it from this side.”

“This side—that side. What difference does it make?”

“If it’s locked from the other side, it means it can be opened from there too.” Ken sat down slowly. “This thing’s fishy.”

“Look,” Sandy pleaded, “he said the dining room closed in half an hour.”

Ken looked up. “Let’s have some food sent up here.”

“Say! Not a bad idea.” Sandy picked up the telephone from the table between the beds and asked for room service. A moment later he put it down in disgust. “Clerk says it’s too late. So come on. Let’s get going.”

Ken stood up abruptly. “O.K. Might as well.”

When they opened the hall door some ten minutes later a flash of white was just disappearing around the

corner of the corridor. It had vanished quickly, but not before they had recognized the loaded tray the waiter was carrying.

“No room service?” Ken asked quietly.

“Well—” Sandy grinned, cheerful now at the near prospect of food. “Maybe they don’t like to pamper guests like us—afraid we’ll come back again.”

But when they had been seated and given their order, Sandy leaned forward. “Now, mastermind, what’s eating you?”

“Just too many things that don’t make sense. It’s not logical that someone should cancel that suite so late and just when we had turned up. That phone conversation sounded fishy to me too. And the way the clerk changed his attitude so quickly. One minute we’re dirt under his feet, the next he can’t do enough for us.”

“Except to persuade room service to send up a meal.”

“That fits in, too,” Ken pointed out. “I think we’ve been watched ever since we tangled with Brinkly’s guard. Someone wants to know what we’re up to—maybe what’s in our bags too, and what we talk about, I think the clerk was ordered to get us a room and then to see to it that we left it for a while afterward. That door’s locked on the *other* side, remember.”

Sandy was staring at him. “You know what? You’ve gone too long without food. Your mind’s wandering.” He smiled suddenly. “Ah—here it comes. Now you’ll feel better.”

Half an hour later Sandy leaned happily back in his chair. “That apple pie’s almost as good as Mom’s. Now, are you back on the beam again? Ready for a little snooping tonight?”

“I want to snoop around our room first.”

Sandy looked puzzled, but he followed Ken upstairs without further comment. He watched curiously as Ken, having locked their door, bent over the camera case and their second bag to study them briefly.

“Now look,” Sandy said finally, “what—?”

Ken gestured sharply for silence, fished a pencil and a piece of paper out of his pocket, wrote rapidly and handed the paper to Sandy.

“What say we take a little walk and see the town?” he asked in a voice slightly louder than normal, as Sandy the paper. “Air’ll do us good after that meal.”

Sandy sober now, stuffed the paper in his pocket. “Rather take a run in the car?”

“No. I think a short walk’s what we need.”

“All right.”

They were half a block away from the inn before Sandy pulled the paper out again. “Are you kidding about this? Or did you really set a trap with the bags?”

“I set it all right, while you were washing up—and I was sprung. There was a hair across each latch, and they were gone when we went back. The bags were definitely opened. And I’ll bet there was somebody in the room beyond that door listening to us too.”

Sandy walked ten steps in silence. “This doesn’t look so good. We may be fooling with a higher explosive than we figured. We’d better call Pop,” he added.

“Yes,” Ken agreed absently. “You know, the way the clerk was kowtowing over the phone, he must have been talking to somebody with a lot of authority over him I’d sure like to know who owns that place.”

“Well, let’s ask,” Sandy said.

“Who? The clerk?”

“You really are cracking up. Naturally we’ll seek our information from the most reliable source—the local newspaper.”

Ken grinned. “I deserved that. Let’s find it.”

But when they tracked down the *Black Lake Weekly* on a little side street, the office was dark and deserted. Back on Lake Drive again they paused a moment and then headed toward a huge drugstore whose long soda fountain and many counters were all blazing with light.

“You’re not hungry again,” Ken said. “You couldn’t be.” But he edged onto the stool alongside of Sandy’s and echoed his order for a chocolate soda.

“Quite an inn you’ve got here,” Sandy remarked as they were being served.

“Yep.” The clerk wasn’t busy. “Just been fixed over about four months ago.”

Ken lifted up an unwanted spoonful of ice cream. “New management?”

“Yep. Old Peters—fellow who used to own it—died a while back, and it was rotting away until this outfit bought it and began to renovate.”

“What outfit?” Sandy asked.

The clerk shrugged. “I don’t recall. Not one of the regular hotel chains, I remember that much.” He noticed a customer at the far end of the counter and left to serve her. But when he was finished he wandered back. “Funny I can’t think of the name. I remember it was kind of funny too. Seems like they had something to do with railroads.”

“Lots of hotels are owned by railroads,” Ken said.

The clerk shook his head. “Nope. Wasn’t *exactly* a railroad- It— I’ve got it! Standard Commissary Company! They’re the people that feed the railroad workers in the camps, you know.”

Sandy looked blank. “I don’t get it.”

“These maintenance gangs that live in camps along the tracks where they work—somebody has to feed them. The railroads hire these commissary companies to do it, for so much a head.”

“Seems funny for that kind of a company to buy a hotel,” Ken said.

“Yep. That’s what I thought. And, believe me, no railroad gangs ever get fed in *that* place.”

They didn’t attempt to discuss the puzzle after the clerk had left them. Instead Ken said, lowering his voice, “Would it be possible to rig up a photo trap that’d take a picture of anyone snooping around our room?” Sandy

shook his head. "Too complicated."

Ken frowned. "If we could get a line on who. . ."

Sandy said, "Wait," sat in thought for a moment and then glanced around the store. "I've got an idea. If I can get two chemicals at the photo department here, and a cheap notebook— Come on."

They slid off the stools and a moment later Sandy was asking another clerk, "Have you got any pyro developer? I don't want the prepared solution—just the chemical."

"No, sir. But I've got a good fine grain—"

"How about your pharmaceutical department? They might have it. It would be labeled pyrogallol."

"I'll see." The clerk sounded dubious as he went off, but he returned shortly with a small brown bottle. "Would this be it?"

Sandy read the label. "Right. Now, how about some sodium carbonate?"

"We've got that right here. Four ounces be enough?"

"Plenty. And that'll be all."

"But you'll need potassium bromide, sodium sulphide . . ."

"This is a very special developer," Sandy explained. "It needs only the two ingredients."

"Well, if you say so. . ." The clerk, plainly doubtful, made a small package of the two containers.

They found the kind of rough-papered notebook Sandy wanted at the stationery counter, and then Sandy entered a phone booth at the back of the store and put in a call to the *Advance* office. Ken leaned against the door and listened.

After a brief account of the day's ventures, Sandy said, "So we'll scout around the lake tomorrow, and get a good look at the territory from the water if we can. Sure, we'll be careful. Did you trace that license number? . . . - No kidding! . . . Yes, it does . . . Can't now. It would take too long. We'll write you a note about it . . . Sure, he's fine. And tell Mom I had some apple pie tonight that runs hers

a close second. She'd better get in some more practice. . . .
O.K. Good night—"

"What's going on?" Ken asked as Sandy emerged.
"What surprised you so much?"

The grin had disappeared from Sandy's face as he urged Ken toward the door. "I take my hat off to you, pardner," he murmured when they were outside. "That big car—the one that takes nineteen gallons—belongs to an outfit called the Standard Commissary Company."

CHAPTER IX

SANDY SETS A TRAP

“STANDARD COMMISSARY.” Ken was still muttering the words half a block later. “The deeper we get into this mess, the more loose ends we find.”

Sandy nodded. “Horn, Brinkly, and now—”

“Wait a minute.” Ken stopped short. “Brinkly’s in oil. Refineries, wells, pipe lines—maybe they use commissaries for their crews too. Maybe there *is* a connection there.”

Sandy looked unconvinced. “Still doesn’t explain a fancy hotel here in Black Lake. Or Horn either.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know about Horn,” Ken agreed. “But let’s call Global and ask for a check on the ownership of Standard Commissary.” And when Sandy nodded, they turned and retraced their steps to the drugstore.

“I told Granger to wire us care of Western Union,” Ken said, emerging from the phone booth a few minutes later. “We don’t want a message like that delivered to the hotel. Now,” he added, when they were on the street once more, “give with some information about this booby trap of yours. How does it work—if it works?”

“That’s the trouble,” Sandy admitted. “I’m not sure it will. But here’s the idea.” He turned toward a bench in the little square they were crossing. “Let’s sit a minute.”

“O.K.” Ken glanced around to make sure nobody was within earshot.

“Pyrogallol,” Sandy said, crossing one long leg over the

other, "is a developing agent—it turns the silver bromide on a film to metallic silver."

"Please—no technical lectures."

"All right, stay ignorant," Sandy retorted. "In words that a four-year-old would understand, pyrogallol—pyro, for short—also stains fingers dark brown. That's one reason it's not used much. It takes quite a while to stain by itself, though, so we'll use sodium carbonate to speed it up. Once our snooper gets some of both those chemicals on his fingers—presto! An hour later he's a marked man—recognizable anywhere!"

"Good. Very good. All we have to do is persuade the snooper to dip his hands into the two bottles—"

"Relax," Sandy said. "That's what the notebook is for. We dust our powders on the pages, alternately—first sodium carbonate on one, then pyro on the next. He looks through our notebook and—" Sandy spread his hands in a gesture of triumph.

This time, Ken looked at him admiringly. "Not bad. The notebook, of course, will be full of intriguing codelike figures which he will attempt to decipher."

"Of course."

Ken grinned. "I like this. Let's go. Or wait—can he just wash it off—the stain, I mean?"

"No. And you may take the word of an expert. I got some on my hands once. It wears away, of course, eventually."

"'Eventually' should give us time enough," Ken agreed with mock solemnity.

By prearrangement Ken was assiduously studying the notebook as they entered the inn lobby, and then, as if suddenly aware of the possibility of prying eyes, he hurriedly stuffed it into his pocket.

"A great act," Sandy commended him quietly. "You almost tripped over that dowager, but otherwise it looked fine. You almost aroused *my* curiosity."

"Oh, it was nothing," Ken said modestly. "My

grandfather was Sarah Bernhardt's coachman."

In their room Ken sat down immediately at the desk, and, with Sandy looking over his shoulder, filled the first dozen pages of the little book with a meaningless jumble of letters and numbers. Then Sandy took his place and deftly spread a thin film of powder on the pages, blowing off the excess so that what remained was deep in the fibers of the fairly coarse paper and invisible to the eye. Ken ran his finger lightly over one of the sheets, and studied it to make sure he had picked up some of the barely perceptible grains.

"But nobody would notice it," he added.

"Better wash your hand," Sandy advised, grinning.

When they left their room the next morning the notebook lay innocently on the desk, and they were wearing the self-consciously cheerful air of vacationists determined to enjoy themselves. Sandy's camera was slung over his shoulder—the big telescopic lens safely hidden, as were the small but powerful binoculars that Ken carried—and they talked loudly of sight-seeing to be done. The clerk at the desk was a stranger to them, but he became instantly obsequious when Ken identified themselves.

"We're in 205," he said, "and we may stay another night. Would that be all right?"

"Oh, perfectly." Eyes like round black marbles beamed at them. "Going to enjoy some of our scenery?"

Ken nodded. "Looks like a nice day for it."

A sign announcing rowboats for rent drew them to a halt at the foot of the lower lake, and Ken called out to the man in charge to ask if there were a similar rental service above the dam.

He shook his head. "All private property up there."

"Now what?" Sandy asked.

"We'll go up, anyway." Ken started the car and headed toward the west shore of the upper lake.

"Remember? I'm not such a good swimmer," Sandy

said.

“There’s a boat at the Browns’,” Ken reminded him “With oars under it.”

Sandy groaned. “That thing’ll leak like a sieve. It’s probably been on the beach forever.”

“Can’t leak faster than we can bail. Than you can that is.”

A few minutes later Ken was parking the car near the barn on the Brown property, and he found an empty can in the back that he handed politely to Sandy before they set off through the woods for the lake.

“Our friend of the shotgun hasn’t put in an appearance yet,” Sandy remarked, eyeing the fence far to their right.

“He couldn’t keep us off the lake in any case.” Ken glanced upward and increased his pace. “Looks like there might be a sudden storm coming up, though. It’s a good thing it won’t take us long to row past the Brinkly property and back.”

It took both of them to turn the boat over.

“Plywood job,” Sandy muttered, straightening. “Shouldn’t leak too much.” He snapped the hinged oarlocks up and laid the oars in the boat. “O.K.?”

Together they picked up the light craft and slid it into the water. It floated high and only a few drops seemed to penetrate its joints. Ken took his place on the rowing seat and Sandy gave a shove and hopped in as it slid away from the sand.

“Better roll your pants up,” he advised a moment later as Ken was bending to the oars. Their combined weight had lowered the boat some six inches, and now leaks not earlier apparent were making themselves known.

The sky was growing lead-colored and the black water was suddenly crisscrossed with jagged white froth where the wind skimmed the top off the small waves.

In the brief minute that Ken left the oars unattended the wind turned the boat broadside, and was blowing it

toward the rocks just outside Brinkly's fence.

Ken grabbed the oars hurriedly and began to stroke. When the craft was fifty feet offshore he said suddenly, "Look."

Sandy turned on the stern seat. "Well, what do you know? Our friend!"

On Brinkly's beach the guard had stationed himself, his shotgun cradled in his arm. A narrow gate in the fence behind him was ajar.

"He's saying something," Sandy went on. "Probably warning us to keep off. Let's cut this short, shall we?"

"As long as we're not planning to go ashore there," Ken said, "we don't have to worry about his warnings." He swung in a circle to bring the boat broadside to the beach. "Try to see what Brinkly's hiding behind that fence."

But it was growing darker, and already the ground under the heavy trees was too shadowy to show details.

"We'd better give this up and get back to shore," Sandy muttered. "We can't see anything, anyway, and we're making water fast." He was careful to bail even as he talked.

"In a little while," Ken agreed. "I'll cut in closer and—"

"Boat behind you!" Sandy interrupted.

Ken looked. A white rowboat had materialized out of dimness on a course suggesting that it had come the far shore. The man in the rowing seat was lean rangy, and looked muscular beneath his careless ducks and sport shirt. He saw them an instant Ken had sighted him, and rested on his oars, let-the wind move his boat nearer theirs.

"Nice blowy day for a row, isn't it?" he asked pleasantly when the two boats were only some twenty feet apart.

"In a tight boat maybe," Sandy answered, dipping another can of water over the side.

The stranger smiled sympathetically and then glanced up at the sky. "Mine is dry enough now—but it looks as if it were going to get some water in it soon up there. I think

I'll put in and walk back." He nodded once more, dipped his oars and began to off, heading toward the shore the boys had just left.

Ken let his boat drift in a southerly direction along the shore line, still trying to peer through the fence to discern what might be behind it other than towering trees and shrubbery.

"Our rowing enthusiast is heading toward Brinkly's beach," he said suddenly.

As they watched, the other boat came to rest on the sand and was pulled up hard by the gun-bearing guard. The rower jumped lightly out and the two men turned to look at the boys.

"You don't suppose that's Brinkly, do you?" Sandy asked.

"Could be anybody making an emergency landing. Still—" He began to pull on his right oar to put his bow east across the lake.

Sandy looked up from his bailing. "I suppose you're going to try to find out where he came from?"

"Might be worth a little row," Ken agreed blandly. Five minutes later they had lost sight of their starting place and were surrounded by an impenetrable murk.

"I hope you're satisfied," Sandy said.

"The shore can't be much further. The lake isn't very wide here."

Just then the turbulent wind blew a hole in the clouds, and Sandy sighted land. "We're almost there," he said, forgetting his irritation. "Keep it on its course."

Luck was with them and the light stayed until the boat was only fifty feet offshore. There, in the lee of steeply rising wooded land, they floated easily and Ken relaxed. Together they studied the shore and then they looked at each other. For as far as they could see a heavy woven wire fence paralleled the water line.

"Looks new too," Ken muttered.

"Just about as new as the one on the other side,"

Sandy agreed. Sloshing water recalled him to his job and he bailed out three canfuls. "Let's get back before we sink, and talk this over later."

And that time Ken agreed. The lull in the coming storm lasted until they were halfway across the lake again, and then the clouds closed in tighter than before. The wind doubled in velocity and dull thunder rolled in over them from the northeast. Respectably sized waves were striking them broadside and slopping over the side of the boat to make Sandy's job even more difficult.

Ken was throwing all his weight on the oars now, in full, rapid strokes that brought perspiration face but which seemed to do little toward moving the soggy, unresponsive craft.

"We're being blown south," Sandy said. "More right oar." A particularly loud blast of thunder drowned out his words and he repeated them in a shout.

Ken complied, and the bow moved slightly toward the north. A particularly large wave dumped a bucketful of water over the side just then and Sandy was kept occupied for the next minute.

When he looked up he saw the shore line ahead; they leading directly for Brinkly's beach. "Right oar," he shouted as he caught sight of the two men still standing where they'd been fifteen minutes earlier.

Ken looked around to get his bearing and in that moment the wind blew them another twenty feet down lake. Ken was breathing hard. "We may have to land on Brinkly's beach."

"Better not," Sandy advised. "The guard's getting restless."

Ken took another look over his shoulder and saw the man move forward to the water's edge, his shotgun held as if in readiness.

"Let me row awhile." Sandy dropped his bailing can.

"I'll make it," Ken replied. He dug the oars in once more and tried to keep the bow headed north. But the

wind was driving the boat backwards down the lake. Already they were halfway past Brinkly's beach, where the guard, watchful as ever, was paralleling their course, his gun in his hands.

The roll of thunder overhead was almost continuous now and the visibility had decreased so that the shore was hardly discernible.

Ken shipped the oars helplessly and the boat turned completely around so that Sandy was facing south, and the low stern was swamped by each wave that struck it.

Sandy got to his feet cautiously. "Slide over," he shouted. "I'll take it in." He cast one more glance at the shore to get his bearings and had to look twice to see the guard and the man in white; the boat had drifted another hundred feet.

He edged forward slowly as the wind tore at him and spun the boat around once more. Ken was just beginning to rise when Sandy saw it—a low catwalk that extended across the lake starting from the near shore and disappearing into the haze over the lake. And below the catwalk the roiled waters of the lake disappeared smoothly into space.

For an instant Sandy stood paralyzed, his mouth wide open. Then he found his voice.

"The dam! We're going over!"

Ken's head swiveled around and a split second later he grabbed for the oars, wasting precious seconds with the oarlocks as the wind and the current carried them swiftly toward the edge. Already the current was so strong that his efforts seemed to have no effect.

"Right oar! Right oar!" Sandy bellowed.

The three hundred feet between them and the cataract dwindled to two hundred, and then to a hundred and fifty, and their pace toward destruction increased with each lost foot.

Ken missed a stroke and the craft began to swing crazily in the whirlpools above the spillway. Before he

could regain his position, Sandy, disregarding the wild careening, leaped into the rowing seat, thrusting Ken hard against the side. The redhead picked up the right and began to throw his tremendous back muscles into huge sweeps.

“Pull!” he shouted. “Pull—keep up with me!”

They were broadside to the dam now, swung by the gigantic thrusts of Sandy’s oar. But Ken’s exhausted body was finding new strength in the face of their danger, and he gained confidence from the powerful figure beside him.

Finally they began to move slowly toward the shore, but they still continued their sideways slipping toward the dam. The roar of water was loud in their ears, and the boat seemed to vibrate with the intensity of the sound. Fifty feet from them the lake slid over into nothingness, out of which a dense mist climbed to twist into wind-blown swirls.

“Pull!” Sandy commanded. “One—two—three— four.” He gasped. “One—two—three—four!”

Ken caught the rhythm and heaved with it. The logy boat, weighted with her load of water, seemed to lift with each heave.

“One, two, three, four!” Sandy’s stroking was a chant that seemed to pick Ken up each time. “Pull!” he yelled. “Pull—once more—give it all you’ve got!”

Ken’s body became an automatic machine, feeling nothing, but instinctively obeying the bellowing orders.

The stern slipped sideways and Sandy’s oar was almost striking the dam. He heaved twice as hard and drove the boat away and then pulled again to keep it there.

Ken’s fingers were numb from his death grip on the oar. He clamped his mouth down hard and pulled once more, and then once more. “I can’t—”

“Pull!”

And then, miraculously, they shot forward out of the sucking current into a quiet backwater that moved lazily in slow circles. The boat grated on rock and ground to a

stop.

They dropped their oars and let their exhausted bodies slump forward.

CHAPTER X

TWO AND TWO MAKE BRINKLY

LITTLE BY LITTLE their heaving chests quieted and the came back into their faces. A short distance from the boat the water rushed by, but where they were grounded in a corner formed by the shore and the high buttresses of the dam, there was almost no motion.

They looked at each other and grinned sheepishly.

“You and your ideas.” Sandy picked up the can and began to empty the boat.

“I’ll do that,” Ken said. “You row.”

“What, again?” Sandy handed over the tin, and moved on the seat to let Ken slip by to the stern.

The short, rainless squall was almost over; already the clouds were thinning out and the wind was dying.

Sandy shoved the boat clear of the rocks and edged along the shore, heading north toward the Brown beach. A hundred feet or so above the dam the fence began. The intervening land apparently belonged to the electric company whose powerhouse became visible when the clouds lifted.

The Brinkly beach slipped by—deserted this time and a few moments later the bow was nudging the sand beside Brown’s landing.

Their knees were still a little shaky when they climbed out, but by the time the boat was ashore and turned over,

neither of them showed any ill effects of the narrow escape they'd just had.

"Now what?" Sandy asked.

"We'll check Western Union first," Ken said, "and then go see if our trap's been sprung."

Half an hour later Ken stepped back into the car and handed Sandy the copy of the wire he had just collected at the Western Union office.

"STANDARD COMMISSARY SUBSIDIARY OF CABCO PETROLEUM," he read. "WHAT'S UP? REPEAT WHAT'S UP? EXPECT CALL THIS AFTERNOON." The message was signed *Granger*.

Sandy whistled quietly. "Two and two make Brinkly, no matter which way you add it."

Ken put the wire in his pocket and then pulled it out again, together with a pencil. "Are we making any headway at all?"

"Brinkly wants Mr. Brown's land—that's certain."

Ken made a note. "And," he added, writing another line, "Horn is up to some monkey business."

"Three," Sandy contributed, "somebody's been fobbing us in a car that belongs to Standard Commissary—and that means Brinkly."

Ken added that. "Four," he went on, "that fenced-in hill on the east shore suggests that Brinkly is after more than just a big estate. Maybe he doesn't want people overlooking his west-shore property."

"Why?" Sandy questioned. "What's he doing?"

"We're just writing down what we *know*," Ken reminded him, "—or at least what we have some idea about. Horn seems to have no connection with Brinkly." He underlined *seems*. "And now for some questions."

"Good," Sandy said. "One, who framed Mr. Brown?"

"*And why*. The *why* is probably more important."

"Also, why does Brinkly want the Brown place so badly?"

"Right."

“What’s Horn’s connection with the case?”

Ken finished his writing. “They’re still the same old questions,” he said. “You know, that path that runs across the Brown land intrigues me. I still think we ought to take a look around there after dark.”

Sandy sighed. “I knew we’d get back to that eventually. I suppose—” He had been leaning forward to snap on the ignition key, and, as his eyes glanced into the rear-view mirror, he froze. “Look behind, Ken.”

Ken reached up and turned the reflector. Then he turned it back again. “Our friend of the rowboat—the man in white. I never saw the car before.”

The stranger followed at a discreet distance until they turned into the inn drive.

“We’re not hiding here,” Ken pointed out, as they walked up the single flight of stairs to their room.

Outside their door they listened a moment before Ken inserted the key in the lock. The room was quiet. When they entered it, it seemed undisturbed. But they bent closely over the notebook and then grinned at each other. Four faint dots on the desk blotter had indicated the little book’s original position. It was clear that it had been moved.

Ken bent again, lower still. “The hair’s gone,” he said quietly. “The book’s been opened.”

Sandy raised his clasped hands in salute, but remembered to whisper. “Now all we have to do is look for black fingers.” Then he boomed cheerfully, “How about it? Don’t you think it’s time for lunch?”

The clerk nodded when they passed the desk. “Did you have a pleasant time?”

“Very interesting, thanks,” Ken answered.

A moment after they were seated in the dining room a voice interrupted their study of the menu.

“See you got in all right, too.”

Sandy gulped and Ken set his water glass slowly back on the table. The stranger from the rowboat was standing

beside their table, smiling down at them.

“Yes, thanks,” Ken finally managed.

“Good.” He smiled. “Since we’re all here together, we might as well introduce ourselves. I’m Sherwood Clark.”

Ken told him their names.

“Glad to know you. Going to be here long?” Clark asked.

“We don’t know exactly—we’re just looking around.”

Clark smiled again, but less enthusiastically. “You’re lucky. I’m working. I’m with Standard Commissary—we run this hotel, you know. So this is a combination business and pleasure trip for me. Standard Commissary”—his voice slowed and he seemed to space the with special emphasis—“is, as you know, a Cabco petroleum subsidiary.”

Sandy broke the brief blank silence. “Oh. I thought you lived at the lake—seeing you rowing up there.”

“Yes,” Ken took it up. “We’ve heard it’s all private property up there, so we thought if you were there—”

“It *is* all private property,” Clark interrupted, his eyes narrowing. “Some of the property owners get pretty irritated with trespassers.” He started away with a final over his shoulder. “Pretty irritated.”

“Is that a warning?” Sandy asked a moment later.

“That’s not what worries me.”

“Oh, no?” Sandy leaned back to allow the waiter to set food on the table between them. “Well, it does me. Anything would after our little adventure this morning.” he went on when they were alone again. “He’s telling us they’re wise to us. Making that little trip tonight would be walking into a trap, now.”

“Maybe,” Ken said absently. “But what gets me is why he took the trouble to make it so clear that he knows *we* know what Standard Commissary is.”

“That’s part of the warning. He practically told us be everything we’ve been doing—even about the wire we got.”

“But *how* does he know?” Ken asked a little

impatiently. "Do they tap the telegraph lines?"

Sandy put his fork back on his plate. "That's right. How could he have seen that? We didn't leave it in the room. And if they can learn about all our messages—"

"Exactly. We have to get word to Pop. And we—"

"We could call from the next town."

Ken smiled suddenly. "I just figured something. We'll check it after lunch."

When they had finished eating, Ken led the way to a lobby phone booth and they both crowded inside.

"Western Union," he said, and then held the receiver a few inches from his ear so that Sandy could hear too.

"Western Union," a metallic voice rasped out in a moment.

"This is Ken Holt. Is there a telegram for me from Global News?"

"Say, what is this?" The voice was more rasping than ever. "We gave that message to a young man an hour ago. Then another fellow came in and I had to type up another copy. He said *he* was Ken Holt. And now you call. What's going on?"

"It's quite all right. Thank you," Ken said politely and hung up.

"Simple, wasn't it?" he said to Sandy when they were in the car. "Clark follows us—sees me get a wire— knows my name, so he goes in and gets a copy too."

They both sat silent for a while as Sandy drove the car to the end of the main street and out into the surrounding countryside. When he pulled off the road into one of the small roadside parks that dot Connecticut highways, Ken spoke.

"We have to wire Pop and tell him we're going home."

"What! We've got to stick around. Let's ask Pop and Waddel—or Waddel, anyway—to come up here."

"Sure," Ken agreed. "That's what I mean." Sandy opened his mouth, but Ken hurried on. "But we want the boys at the hotel to *think* we're going home. So let's send a

wire from there and then call Pop and tell him real story. We'll check out of the Stage Coach and drive south until we're sure we're not being followed. Later, somewhere, we can meet Pop and Waddel. Once they're here we'll at least have the right to go over the whole Brown place—Waddel can even bring a letter from Mr. Brown."

Sandy thought it over and then nodded. "Sounds good."

They discussed details and agreed that they would meet Pop Allen and Waddel at whatever hour was convenient to them, in the parking lot of the old mill. They would send the wire immediately, check out of the hotel, and telephone from a near-by town.

"It won't give us any time to look around for black fingers right now," Ken pointed out, "but—"

Sandy, driving back toward town, suddenly groaned.

"What's the matter?"

"I just thought of something. If our snooper wore gloves—well, my great scheme will be just another idea gone wrong."

They were passing one of the local tourist courts just then, and before Ken could answer, the car was braked so suddenly that he was thrown against the windshield.

"What are you trying to do? Turn us over?" he asked.

Sandy had swerved sharply into a side road. "Getting the top up," he said tersely, and pushed the button on the dashboard. When the convertible's roof had risen and been clamped in place he backed out onto Walter Avenue again and turned back toward the semicircle of small white cottages they had just passed.

"Look at the car outside the last tourist cabin," Sandy said.

Ken, already alerted by Sandy's manner, turned quickly in time to see a green coupe.

"Looks like Horn's," he agreed, "but I suppose there must be hundreds of cars like that."

"Let's find out." Sandy swung to the right on the next

cross street and drove two blocks up a hill. There he turned around and parked in such a position that they could overlook the tourist court below. Ken focused the binoculars on the green car.

But at the end of twenty minutes he turned to Sandy. "This may take all afternoon. One of us had better take the car and get back to the inn to—"

Sandy interrupted. "Somebody's leaving that cabin!"

Ken snapped the glasses to his eyes and searched for his quarry. He followed the unidentifiable back of the figure as it went around the rear of the car to get into the driver's seat. For only an instant, as the door was being opened the man was full face in the powerful glasses. But it had been long enough.

"One for you," Ken said. "It's Horn all right."

CHAPTER XI

FALSE TRAIL

SANDY SWITCHED THE MOTOR into life. "We can trail him he said, and headed downhill for Walter Avenue in a rush. They were still half a block away when the green coupe passed the corner, moving toward town. Sandy maintained that distance, and, to be sure they weren't observed, allowed a car to come between them."

Horn swung left around the lake, along the west shore, and when the houses thinned out the traffic did too.

"Better hold it here," Ken said finally, when the green coupe and the red convertible were the only cars visible on the road. "We've got a pretty good idea of where he's going, and we don't want to be seen."

"Brown's?" Sandy turned the car back toward town.

"Or Brinkly's."

"It wouldn't be Brinkly's," Sandy objected. "If he knows Brinkly, wouldn't he be staying there—or at the inn?"

"Not necessarily. He probably knows we're at the inn and doesn't want to see us. And as for Brinkly's"—Ken shrugged—"there may not be any room."

"So now you think they *are* in this together."

"I don't know," Ken said. "I just mean that Horn's presence at the tourist court doesn't prove anything one way or the other."

"I suppose you're right. And now we'd better get that wire off."

The clerk was gracious about taking the telegram. Sandy hastily inscribed the message they had agreed upon: LEAVING HERE FOUR PM. DON'T WAIT SUPPER. When the clerk had read it over he looked up.

"Sorry to see you're checking out," he said, as he picked up the phone. "I'll call this right in and put the charge on your bill. Anything else I can do?"

"Thanks," Ken answered. "Would you ask when the wire will arrive?"

"Certainly. And I'll have your bill ready shortly."

Fifteen minutes later Sandy was wincing as Ken counted out several bills and handed them across the desk.

"There goes my new high-speed flash outfit," he muttered.

"Don't blame it on me." Ken grinned. "Most of it's for food—most of which you ate."

"I never seem to be able to get any sympathy out of you," Sandy complained.

The clerk returned with the receipted bill. "The wire will be delivered in Brentwood in about an hour," he reported.

They thanked him again, assured him they'd enjoyed their stay, and a few minutes later were in the car.

"Walter Avenue south to the highway?" Sandy asked, from behind the wheel.

Ken nodded. "That's what they'll expect us to do, so let's not disappoint them. I'll keep an eye out." Before they had gone more than a few blocks, he added, "Clark's car just pulled out of that side street. He's following."

When they swung into the highway Sandy's foot pressed down harder on the accelerator and the car picked up speed. "Still with us?"

"Yes. Keep it as it is. We'll ignore him."

For fifteen miles the car behind kept them in sight, and then suddenly, at the top of a rise, it pulled off to the side and stopped.

“He’s probably going to keep an eye on us from there,” Ken said. “Take it over the next rise.”

They zoomed down the long drop and kept an even fifty miles an hour up the hill that followed. When the car dipped over the crest, Sandy drove off the road and halted. “He can’t see us now.”

Ken picked up the binoculars and got out.

“Take it easy,” Sandy cautioned. “He may have glasses too.”

A moment later Ken came back on the run. “Get moving! He’s coming.” The door slammed. “He’s a smart apple, all right,” he added, as they shot ahead. “He waited just to see if we’d pull up when we thought we were safe.”

Sandy got the car up to sixty to make up some of the distance they’d lost. “Coming over the rise yet?”

They were climbing the next hill before Ken replied. “No. Probably watching us, though.”

They rounded a bend and Sandy pulled up. Ken jumped out and scrambled up a high bank to reconnoiter.

“He’s there, all right,” he said when he returned. “Watching the road with binoculars.”

“Better keep moving then. Hard to know how far he can see.”

Five miles farther on Ken checked the time. “We’d better not postpone our phone call much longer. Let’s stop at the next gas station. You can be filling up the tank—that’ll look legitimate, and we need gas anyway—while I get Pop.”

“Right. There’s one just ahead.”

Ken slipped inside the station the minute Sandy stopped the car. It was several minutes later when he emerged.

“Had to wait,” he explained as they drove off again. “Bert checked with Waddel while Pop held the phone. Pop and Waddel are both coming, but they can’t leave until seven—Waddel’s held up. We meet them at eleven.”

“At the old mill?”

Ken nodded. "Even if we're spotted there, it won't make any difference by then." He looked at the map. "There's a road heading west pretty soon—Route 22. Let's take it and then hole up somewhere for a couple of hours. We can cut back to Black Lake from that direction."

"Uh-huh. But what about our friend Horn all this time?"

"I've been thinking about that too. What do you figure we ought to do about him?"

Sandy made the turn onto Route 22 and lowered the visor to keep the sun out of his eyes. "It'll be dark about eight. Why don't we plan to be back at the tourist cabin by then? Maybe we can pick up his trail again before meet Pop."

"Good idea. So long as we keep out of sight. And now let's find a little country road where we can park safely for a while." He shook his head sadly. "Too bad, of course. You'll probably be starving long before we get a chance to eat."

Sandy grinned. "Look in the glove compartment."

Ken opened it and tried frantically to catch the flood of packaged crackers and chocolate bars that cascaded out.

"Bought 'em while you were phoning. I knew you'd try to starve me this afternoon."

Ken was still re-stuffing the glove compartment when Sandy swung off into a narrow rutted lane and pulled up beneath a tree well back from its edge.

"And now," Sandy said loftily, "if you will give me a chocolate bar—one with nuts—I will relax."

Ken groaned and removed the front row of crackers.

"I made careful computations," Sandy said, unwrapping; the bar Ken finally handed him. "At the rate of one per half-hour, they should last until seven. By then, I figure, even you'll be willing to hunt for a restaurant."

Sandy was unduly optimistic about his appetite. By six he had eaten only two chocolate bars and one box crackers, and he didn't want any more. Ken had en

nothing. He had spent the afternoon sunk in such a thought that, after one or two attempts, Sandy had ‘en up trying to draw him into conversation.

At six thirty, when the sun was dropping toward the hills to the west, Sandy got out to stretch. There was a hint of autumn in the shadows closing swiftly down, and the smell of wood smoke drifted in the air. Sandy shed his sports jacket from among their luggage, put on, and got back into the car. “Now,” he demanded, “what have you been in a trance about?”

“What do you think?” Ken sat up a little. “And you know, maybe I’m getting some place.”

Sandy got more comfortable. “Where?”

“Motive. I think maybe I’ve got it.”

Sandy jerked around. “You’ve got it! Well, give!”

“Well, it doesn’t make much sense.”

“Oh, fine!” Sandy slumped down again. “That kind of motive I could invent myself.”

“I don’t mean it doesn’t make sense so far as being a motive is concerned. I just mean it doesn’t make sense toward building up an appeal for Mr. Brown.”

“You’re not making much sense, either.”

“I know. Still—maybe you’ll like it.” Ken grinned. “I got it from something you said.” He grew serious in. “Remember? You said maybe Brinkly framed Brown because he was sore at him for not selling his place?”

“Sure. And we all decided it wasn’t very probable.”

Ken nodded. “But considering Brinkly’s reputation. . .”

“You mean the way he’s always grabbed any oil land he wanted?”

“Exactly.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Sandy said firmly. “It *doesn’t* make sense. How would framing Mr. Brown get Brinkly the property in the first place?”

“Very simple. Once Mr. Brown’s in jail, Mrs. Brown needs a lot of money to fight his case. Brinkly might have thought she’d be glad to sell then.”

“But why does he want it so badly? And what’s Horn’s role in your scenario?” Sandy demanded.

“Maybe—as you also once suggested—Horn handled the framing.”

“For which I was promptly jumped on.”

“I know,” Ken admitted. “But it does vaguely add up that way.”

“It would add up to a lot more if you could think of reason for Brinkly’s eagerness to get the property in first place.”

“Do you suppose,” Ken offered tentatively, “there’s something about the house—something Mr. Brown doesn’t know about maybe? A priceless deed in a secret room . . . a . . .”

Sandy snorted. “You don’t know Mr. Brown. Family history’s his hobby—he knows every inch of that house, every deed any member of his family ever signed. It’s no good. Unless Brinkly’s gone overboard on the idea of a palatial Black Lake estate, I give up.”

Ken sighed. “Me too. Maybe we’re just too close to it. Maybe Pop or Waddel—”

Sandy sat up and snapped on the motor. “Maybe we’d better get started if we want to keep an eye out for Horn.”

It was a little after eight when the convertible slid to a halt on the same side street from which the boys had observed the tourist court earlier in the day. Below them the fronts of the semicircle of small cottages gleamed in the glare of two large floodlights but behind the curving line of buildings were dense shadows.

“His car’s there,” Sandy said quietly. “And there’s an unpaved road along that side of the tourist court. We could park a block or so along it and walk back to his cottage.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know,” Sandy admitted. “Look in the window, maybe, and see what he’s doing. You got a better idea?”

“No. Let’s go.”

Sandy turned the car to face back toward Walter Avenue when he stopped it some distance from the tourist cottages. Then they got out and closed the doors softly.

"It's the second one in from the road," Sandy reminded Ken as they walked quietly back.

A few minutes later they were huddled in the darkness behind the empty cottage next to Horn's.

"Let's get right under his window," Sandy whispered. "Watch that patch of light on the ground."

They avoided the glow and moved with extra caution across a patch of gravel. Beneath the window they dropped to their hands and knees.

Ken waited a minute, then briefly raised his head to peer through the narrow strip of light between the drawn blind and the window sill.

"He's in there—reading a magazine," he breathed against Sandy's ear. "Alone."

Except for the faint strains of a radio from the opposite side of the court, and the occasional hum of a car passing on Walter Avenue, the night was silent. They waited a minute, each aware of what the other was thinking: that it was foolish to go on crouching beneath a window if Horn was going to spend the evening reading.

Ken shrugged and raised his head for another look—just in time to see Horn inspect his watch. Swiftly he reported to Sandy and the latter nodded; perhaps Horn wasn't settled for the evening after all, but merely filling in a few minutes until—They would wait a while. It might be worth it.

Ten minutes later Ken saw Horn put down his magazine, stand up, count the change in his pocket, and reach for his hat. He signaled Sandy to be ready to run for their car if Horn got into his.

But when the flimsy door had been locked behind him Horn didn't turn toward his car. Instead his squat figure moved along the curving driveway in the opposite direction to the street.

In the open space behind the cottages the boys kept pace with him, watching his progress from behind each of the small buildings before they sprinted across to the cover of the next one. Horn didn't go far. He entered the central one of the cottages—a building resembling the others, but already identified by the boys as the office of the court's manager.

They hurried to its rear windows, only to find them closed and dark.

"There's a window in the side wall." Sandy tugged at Ken's arm.

"Too much light there."

"Plenty of shrubbery. Come on."

At the corner they slid behind a row of closely spaced evergreens that hugged the cottage's wall, and wriggled along the narrow space, crouched low, until they reached a window.

For a moment they heard nothing. Then suddenly, and so close that they realized he must be standing just inside the window, they heard Horn's voice.

"One ten?" it said. "Just a moment, operator."

Four heavy bongs suggested four quarters dropping into a pay telephone, followed by the double tingle of the dime.

"Hello? Hello?" Horn said. "Who's this?"

He lowered his voice a little then, but the words were distinct.

"This is Horn . . . I know you did, but this is important—to you."

In the long silence that followed Ken memorized the time—eight forty—and the cost of the call. They might be necessary facts if the call had to be traced.

"Yeah," Horn said suddenly. "I'm at Black Lake now. And I've learned plenty. You don't want that land for any estate, my friend. There're big doings up here—much too big for the chicken feed you're paying me. . . . Sure, I'm in it up to my neck, but you're in over your head, and don't

forget it. . . That's better. Sure we can talk it over. I'll always listen to reason. But let me give you some advice; get things cleaned up over there quick—get everything out of sight—because those two wise kids your man lost in New York have been snooping. . . I don't think so, but you'd better not take any chances. . . Good. I'll take charge of the job. You just call them and say I'm on my way. And don't forget—we've got a conference coming." The receiver rattled into place and an instant later the office door slammed shut.

The boys wriggled hastily backward until they were free of the clinging shrubbery, and then rapidly retraced their steps. They were barely in time to see, from behind the shelter of the neighboring cottage, the lights of Horn's coupe snap on as he switched the motor into life. Instantly they turned and dashed for their own car, and Ken slid behind the wheel.

"What's it all about?" Sandy asked a few minutes later, as they turned down the west shore road a safe hundred feet behind the green car.

"It didn't make much sense to me, either," Ken admitted. "But there's apparently something we've got to see in a hurry if we're going to see it at all—whatever *it* is that Horn told somebody to get out of sight."

"Think he's going to Brown's or to Brinkly's now?" Then Sandy sat up straight. "Say, I'll bet he was talking to Brinkly on the phone!"

"Could be." Ken dropped back and allowed the taillights of the car ahead to diminish to two pin points. "Can't get too close here. He'll get wise."

"Don't forget we've got to meet Pop at eleven."

"We won't forget. We'll just see if we can find out where he's going first."

"I don't like the sound of things," Sandy muttered. "If he *was* talking to Brinkly, it seems to me he's on one side of something and Brinkly's on the other. And I'm afraid we're going to find ourselves right in the middle."

CHAPTER XII

A LIGHT IN THE WOODS

THE LITTLE POINTS of red light ahead winked abruptly Ken stopped the convertible so fast that the wheels locked and dragged through the gravel. But before the car had stopped rocking he was out of it and had crossed the strip of grass to press his head against Brinkly's wire fence.

"Shut off the engine and turn off the lights," he said to Sandy. When the redhead had joined him, he added, "Put your ear to the fence."

For a moment of utter silence they both stood leaning awkwardly against the barrier. Then they heard a tiny metallic clang carried to them over the metal wire.

"That was the gate opening," Ken said, not moving.

Half a minute later they heard another sound, louder this time.

"Gate's closed," Ken said, straightening. "Well," he started back toward the car, "at least we know Horn went to Brinkly's."

"So that *was* Brinkly he was talking to," Sandy said slowly. "And they didn't seem very friendly, either."

"But he must have done *something* for him. He talked about having been paid," Ken pointed out. "For framing Mr. Brown, maybe?"

Sandy's mouth was set. "We'd better hurry if we want to learn the answer to that." He glanced out of the car at the narrow road. "This is no place to park. Let's leave the

car on the side road that leads to the powerhouse. We can walk back from there—it's only half a mile."

"Good idea." Without turning on the lights Ken maneuvered the car around, and then, using the parking lights only, drove it slowly back to the powerhouse driveway. There, a few hundred feet from the shore road but turned to face it, and under the screening branches of a huge tree, he turned off the ignition and the lights.

Behind them, the distance of a city block away, the water going over the dam made a dull roar, and all around, the wind in the trees and the chirping of crickets made the black night seem alive with sound. Ken and Sandy sat without speaking for a moment, each trying to fit the recent hour's events into the pattern of what they already knew or suspected. Sandy spoke first.

"Brinkly hired Horn to frame Mr. Brown, so as to force Mrs. Brown to sell the property here."

"Because Horn had the contacts necessary to hire two bank robbers," Ken completed the thought. "That makes perfect sense, even if we don't know why Brinkly's so eager for the Brown place."

"What doesn't make sense, though, is why Horn then offered to try to clear Mr. Brown."

"I think," Ken said slowly, "it was to make sure Mrs. Brown would need money—a good deal of money. I think he's supposed to be stalling her along—always saying he's just on the verge of accomplishing something—and taking every cent she could raise. He's good at it too. Look how well he sold himself when that business of Old Tom and Rockville came up."

"You must be right," Sandy said after a short silence. She gave him another two hundred dollars that day." Abruptly he jabbed at the door handle. "That crooked little ball of fat! I want ten minutes alone with him—that's all." He turned and glared at Ken. "What are we waiting for?"

"Take it easy," Ken protested. "Don't get mad at *me*."

Sandy relaxed slightly. "Sorry. Don't mind me. But

let's get going if we want to find out what they're up to."

Ken looked at his watch. "Nine thirty. Gives us an hour and a half before we meet Pop." Then he looked down again, this time at the sleeve of his light sports coat. "We've got those coveralls in the back, haven't we?"

"Sure. I'll get them."

Hurriedly they slipped into the inconspicuous dark garments.

"Got the flashlight?"

"Right here," Ken said. "Let's go."

"Let's get our signals straight while we can still talk," Sandy suggested when their eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and they were able to walk quickly. "Where do we go and what do we do?"

"My hunch still says we ought to take a look at that path we found—the new one. But let's not walk right down the Brown driveway. Let's go past it a little and go in through the woods."

"Don't forget the caretaker with the shotgun," Sandy reminded him. "And Horn may be armed too."

"If you're going to count up sides, you might as well add Clark and at least one other person—the one who went through our notebook. For all we know they may all be here."

When they reached the beginning of the Brinkly fence they stopped talking, and, as a further precaution, walked on the silent grass along the opposite side of the road. Near the spot where they knew the Brinkly gate must be they took particular care, setting their feet down cautiously to guard against the noisy snap of a twig or the rattle of a stone. Both of them breathed more easily when the pale blur of the fence was no longer visible across the narrow stretch of roadway.

They almost missed the overgrown Brown driveway, but Sandy noticed it just in time and caught Ken's arm. They waited a moment, crossed the road swiftly, and then a moment later moved into the shadows of the heavy trees

beyond the rutted lane.

There, progress was even slower and more difficult. The ground was littered with a year's accumulation of fallen leaves and dead twigs, and it was almost impossible to move without making some sound. They found themselves stopping every half-dozen steps to listen for some indication of pursuit, but all they could hear was the soft rush of the stream in the ravine and the drone of the crickets.

Finally they came to the edge of the woods. Ahead of them the clearing seemed startlingly light under the open sky. The Brown house, and the barn near by, were plainly visible as huge dark shapes against a gray background. In the last deep shadow of the forest they stood still once more to listen for any sign of movement.

Sandy's sharp vision saw it first—a tiny glimmer of light that vanished and reappeared and vanished again. He gripped Ken's arm and turned him to face it.

"In the woods behind the house," he breathed.

The light blinked again—further to the left this time then once more.

"Flashlight. Along that path," Ken whispered almost inaudibly.

After another minute had gone by, Ken gestured toward the barn, moving his arm in a circle. Sandy understood. The clearing was too open. They would circle it, keeping in the cover of the trees that grew close to the far side of the barn.

Silently they ducked back into the woods and followed the curve of the clearing as it swung around toward the barn. When they stopped to listen for a moment, not far from the big structure's weathered wall, they heard the sound of water. It seemed very close.

"The brook." Sandy's lips formed the words almost without sound.

Ken nodded.

Suddenly there were no more trees before them, and

the terrain almost simultaneously changed beneath their careful feet. Now they were walking on stones—large stones that demanded a slow and devious path. The noise of the water was very loud.

Ken stumbled. But before he had fallen, Sandy grasped him and pulled him erect again. They paused for a moment, and Ken rubbed his arm where Sandy's grasp had held it. The fierceness of the grip gave him some idea of Sandy's burning anger.

Ken chanced a faint whisper. "Take it easy."

"I'm O.K." Sandy moved forward again.

They proceeded by inches, trying to gauge the nearness of the ravine by the increase in volume of sound the stream made at its bottom. But the sound was deceptive, rising and falling confusedly as the water tumbled forward over an uneven bed.

They took another step forward—and plunged into nothingness.

Desperately, Ken threw himself backward, fighting to keep his balance. After what seemed an eternity of falling, one of his arms struck a bush and his fingers tightened convulsively on thorny branches. At almost the same instant his other hand felt the tough material of Sandy's coverall and twisted automatically around it.

The shock of Sandy's full weight seemed to rip his arms out of their sockets. But somehow Ken's hands held on, one to the precarious bush above his head, the other to the folds of cloth.

After a breathless agonized moment Sandy's weight lightened. A faint scraping against stone told Ken that Sandy had found a crevice for his feet. Slowly the big body turned, and Ken sensed that the hands were feeling along the rough rock for a hold.

"O.K." came the whisper at last.

Ken loosened his grip on the coverall, twisted painfully against the rock, and found he could clutch at the bush now with both hands. Slowly he pulled himself upward.

Then, lying flat on the big rock just above the bush he reached down until he felt Sandy's shoulders. A moment later Sandy was beside him.

Exhausted, they lay side by side on the stony shelf. They swallowed air in great gulps, and Ken was certain that the pounding of his heart could be heard even over the noisy brook below.

But no shout or light indicated that the fall had given warning of their presence, and Ken allowed himself to lie quiet for another moment until his heart slowed down and the pain in his hands and arms assured him that the numbness of shock was wearing off. Then he struggled to sit up.

"Thanks," Sandy breathed hoarsely, stirring at the same moment.

"Don't mention it," he whispered. "Hope it calmed you down a little."

In the faint moonlight they grinned at each other.

Then they both got to their feet.

By tacit consent they moved up and away from the ravine, into the woods again, before they started in the direction of the path. Ken remembered with a rueful grin how foresighted he had thought himself when he counted the number of steps between the Brown house and the path; that figure was entirely useless to then-i now. And so was the sound of the stream, by which for a moment he had thought they might guide their course. Echoing and re-echoing against its rock walls, it gave no indication whether they were five or fifty feet from the ravine's edge.

Suddenly the flashlight glowed briefly in front of them again, so close this time that they both stopped dead where they were. Balancing on one foot, afraid to set the other down, Ken lived through a moment that seemed an eternity, until he was convinced that he and Sandy had not after all been visible in its quick flare. The lowered but still penetrating voice that reached his ears then assured him that the holder of the light and his companion—there

must be at least two persons there on the path—believed themselves to be alone in the Browns' woods.

“Watch the light, you fool!”

“Want me to break my neck?” The answer was a growl.

The first voice had been unmistakably Horn's. The second one had sounded familiar, too, but they couldn't immediately place it.

Ken put his foot cautiously down, and touched Sandy's arm. Together they continued to stand quiet for several minutes. The light flashed twice again, farther to the left each time, and then flashed a third time, pointing downward; the men were at the edge of the ravine and descending into it.

When the sound of their footsteps on the rocks had been lost in the roar of the water, the boys knew their own progress would also be inaudible, and they began to move again, cautiously, toward the spot where they had last showed. When they too reached the rocks dropped down flat and edged slowly ahead. The terrain beneath them had already begun to slope downward when they stopped, startled by a new sound. To Ken it suggested the creak of a bucket's handle, followed by the clank of the bucket against stone, half lost in a curiously concentrated swish of water over rock. The sequence of sounds was repeated twice again. And then a voice—not Horn's—said, “Good enough?”

“Go over it a couple more times,” Horn ordered. “Can't be too sure.”

“O.K. O.K.”

The flashlight was shining steadily now, but hidden from them by an overhanging shelf of rock, so that the boys could see it only as a glow reflected by the rocks on the opposite side of the ravine. And although the voices sounded fairly close beneath them, the speakers themselves were hidden by the same outcropping rocks.

An exceptionally loud clank split the air.

“Take it easy with that bucket!” Horn snarled. “Want to

wake the whole country side?”

Ken had a sudden revelation of what they might be doing down there. Could they be washing something—rocks, presumably; what else would be found in a ravine?—by filling a bucket and swishing its contents over the surface? But he was too busy listening to the conversation below to attempt to understand the purpose of such activity.

“There’s nobody around here to wake up. I’ve been here long enough to know that.” A swish of water punctuated the sentence. “And I been here long enough to know how to do a job, without the boss sending you down to see I do it right.”

“You didn’t get rid of those two wise kids yesterday.”

“*That* what you’re worrying about!” There was scorn in the voice. “Clark says they’ve cleared out.”

“Sure.” Horn was equally scornful. “And Clark’s pal did such a good job of trailing them in New York that I had to come out here to fix things up.”

The bucket clanked again, resoundingly. “All right. You don’t like the way I do it—do it yourself.”

“I guess it’s good enough now. We just don’t want to take any chances. You may have made those kids suspicious yesterday, you know.” Feet scraped harshly against rocks as they started the upward climb.

“Afraid of a couple of kids!”

“Taking sensible precautions isn’t the same as being afraid,” Horn said sharply, a little out of breath with the exertion of the ascent. “In fact, we’ll send Clark to the inn when we get back, just to make sure they haven’t turned up again with reinforcements.”

The upward pointing light silhouetted Horn’s pudgy body for an instant and then it was in the dark again. The boys could sense rather than see how close the two men were passing, and they held their breaths until the noise of the footsteps had died away again to the right. Then they let another several minutes go by, in silent darkness, until

they felt securely alone.

Ken heaved a sigh as he finally spoke. He had been afraid that Sandy's anger—strong even after the jolt back to sanity that their fall had furnished—might have sent him plunging after Horn then and there. "Guess it's safe to take a look around now," he murmured.

"Guess so."

Not daring to use their own light until they were over the edge of the ravine, they felt their way carefully first forward and then down. Only when they were at last at the water's edge did Ken pull the flash out of his pocket, and even then he muffled it in a fold of his coverall so that only a tiny gleam escaped. Slowly he turned it, left and right, forward into the water and beyond it to the opposite wall and—with utmost caution—back up against the rocks they had just descended. Both he and Sandy watched closely as the area was illuminated for them, bit by bit.

But their light revealed nothing except solid stone and swiftly rushing water. There was no sign to indicate what the two men had been doing there a few minutes before.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EVIDENCE IN THE RAVINE

SANDY SOUNDED DESPERATE. "We have to find out what they were doing down here."

"Shh." Ken switched off the light and clutched Sandy's arm. But after a moment he realized that it had been only some woodland creature—a bat, perhaps—that had startled him, and he snapped the flash on again. "We'll find it," he said quietly, and began to move the light back and forth once more.

Through countless ages the brook's erosion had worn a narrow cleft in the black rock. It was less than ten feet wide at the bottom, and the brook running at their feet was little more than a foot deep. But the rocks at their backs were wet far above the water line. Ken held the light on them steadily for a long moment, studying their dark shine, and remembering the idea that had come to him while the men were at work.

"They were washing down the rock walls," he said slowly. "But why?"

The quick intake of Sandy's breath was a sound of agreement. "Sure! That's what they were doing. I thought it sounded like— Was something written up there, do you think?"

Ken shook his head. "Doesn't seem likely." He got down on one knee and held the light close to the wall.

Slowly his fingers explored the wet surface. "Funny," he murmured. "It's very sharp and rough right here, as if it had been recently chipped. Very funny. Because most of the rock around here seems to have been worn pretty smooth."

"Prospecting, do you suppose? For what? Gold?" Sandy sounded dubious.

"That doesn't seem likely, either," Ken admitted. He plunged his hand into the chill water directly below the marred rock, and when he brought it up again it held several slender sharp bits of rock, each a few inches long. "That's funny too," he said. "In a swift stream like this, over a rock bed, you'd expect to find fairly smooth pebbles, not—" He held the slivers out so that Sandy could see their knifelike outlines.

Sandy shrugged his bafflement. Then he said decisively, "Let's go up to the Brinkly house. I've had enough of wandering around the edge of this situation. We haven't any idea of what's going on—and I don't think we're going to get one until we move in a little closer on their headquarters. What do you say? With any luck we might find another convenient window, like the one at the tourist court, or—"

"Don't be crazy. We'd be sticking our heads in a noose," Ken said flatly. "We're getting somewhere—slowly. If they're interested in this rock, that must be the reason why they want the property. And if we get this stuff analyzed—"

"We haven't got a lifetime! Besides, don't you remember Horn said they were going to get everything out of sight? Apparently they've already cleared up whatever was down here. D'you want them to—?"

Ken put a hand on his arm. "Look, do you agree they're interested in this rock?"

"Sure. Probably. But—"

"Well, the rock can't be put out of sight. It'll be here—tomorrow and the day after too. They've hidden any

evidence of what they were doing to it, except for this chipping, but they can't hide the rock itself. So, pretty soon, we can find out why they were doing the chipping. Then we'll have some *facts*. What we're more likely to find if we try snooping around Brinkly's tonight is just plain trouble. Use your head, will you? I say let's get back to the mill and wait for Pop."

Sandy was silent for a long moment. Ken waited. He had confidence in Sandy's logic—if he could persuade him to put his anger aside long enough to exercise it.

"All right," Sandy said finally, in a flat voice. "I suppose you're right. I just get so mad when I think about Mr. Brown sitting in jail while—"

Ken's grasp on his arm tightened warningly and he shut off the flashlight's faint beam. Sandy, instantly alert, stood listening, too, for what he realized Ken must have heard. The next time they both heard it—the snapping of a twig beneath heavy feet.

Sandy led the way, with Ken's hand still on his arm, and together they started upstream. The darkness in the ravine was like black curtains before their eyes, and the sound of the water absorbed the additional sound of their movement against its current. But their safety could be shattered in a moment if a light were directed into the narrow-walled ravine.

Faint, unintelligible voices floated down to them. They didn't dare to hurry, in case they should stumble, and at any second—

Sandy's outstretched hand encountered a boulder jutting into the stream. Quickly he dragged Ken around behind it, and they crouched in the protection of its bulk. From behind their solid screen they could see that the water where they had stood a moment before was now illuminated by a strong beam of light.

"Well, find it, before . . ." It was Horn's voice, only half audible over the noise of the stream.

Light passed and repassed over the stretch of water

they could see, and the rock walls became a shifting pattern of momentary gleams and deep shadows.

“. . . it couldn't be *in* the water. I . . .”

“Well, look anyway.” Horn's anger was evident.

The boys stood rigid, straining their ears. Feet were splashing in the stream now, and the flashlight was apparently pointed downward into the water.

Ken clenched his teeth. Had Horn and his confederate lost something at the very spot he and Sandy had searched a moment earlier? Had there been some clear evidence there—evidence which they had missed, and which now it would be too late for them to find? Beside him, he could feel Sandy's muscles tense and knew that he was experiencing the same sense of frustration.

“Sure Clark didn't take . . . inn?”

“Of course I'm sure. He . . .” The splashing feet were noisier than ever for a minute, and when they heard Horn's voice again it was apparently finishing a fairly lengthy tirade “. . . would mean plenty to any body who found it!”

“O.K. You want me to wade in the brook all night— I'll wade.”

In the same moment a stream of light shot past the boys' hiding place and lay along the water's surface, illuminating it from below where they stood to a point far beyond them.

Horn's confederate was noisily coming upstream— in the path the boys had just taken.

Ken and Sandy pressed themselves flat against their rock. The light was almost beside them now, a round bright pool on the stream. It swung away from them, up the opposite wall, down again, across the stream and—

“Wait!” Horn's peremptory voice, from farther back somewhere, stopped the beam as it reached to within a few inches of their feet. “Swing it up there again.” The light wavered, swung back across the stream, and again climbed the far wall. “There!” Horn said. “There it is on that ledge.”

“All right.”

The man was still only a matter of feet from where the boys stood, but Ken took a chance. Balancing himself by grasping Sandy’s shoulder, he leaned forward until he could see around the rock. Outlined against the glow of a flash, a shadowy figure was flattened against the opposite wall, arm stretched upward. The arm lowered. There was something in the hand.

“I’ll take it.” Horn came forward into the light.

The shadows were confusing. But for an instant Ken caught a glimpse of what was being transferred from hand to hand. It was a flattish rectangle, with protuberances along one edge. A small motion picture camera? A—

“All right. Now let’s get going.”

Ken straightened and turned his face against the rock as the light dropped and pointed downstream.

The men were leaving with the mysterious object which might have told him so much if he could have seen it more clearly. After a moment of indecision Ken leaned forward again. They wouldn’t turn back, he told himself and if he could manage a second look at that they had been so desperate to find. . .

But the two figures were only dimly moving shapes against a dancing water-reflected glow. Whatever Horn carried he held in front of him, and— Ken’s foot skidded on wet rock and he lurched forward. Sandy grabbed him just in time, jerking him upright and back into the rock’s shadow. Ken caught his breath. Something had glinted at his feet an instant before, and there had been a clinking sound just as Sandy hauled him back, Ken’s hand went to his pocket. His flashlight was gone. It had fallen out when he was leaning at that perilous angle and had struck a stone.

How loud had that noise been, he wondered, motionless, ears straining.

“No—I didn’t hear anything.” The rough voice floated angrily back at them.

“Well, I did,” Horn said sharply. “Listen!”

For what seemed a century the boys stood side by side, not daring to breathe.

“Ah—muskrats, probably,” Horn’s companion said then. “Come on.”

“It didn’t sound like muskrats to me.”

“Did you ever hear one?” There was a note of derision in the question. “Are you coming?”

“Well—”

They were far enough away for the sound of their movement though the water to be undetectable. Horn’s last word had appeared to be capitulation, but they couldn’t trust it as such. For another century they stood without moving. Then, gradually, Ken’s muscles relaxed. If Horn and the other had been returning, they would surely have reached them by now. That meant they had continued on their way, in the opposite direction. The miniature roar of the brook had not been interrupted now for long minutes.

Once the need was past for concentrating all his faculties into the effort to listen, Ken’s thoughts reverted instantly to that small, dark shape.

Sandy’s voice was the barest whisper against his ear. “See anything?”

Ken turned his head so that his answer too need travel only a distance of inches. “Small black box. Flat.”

“Camera?”

“No.” He was sure it hadn’t been a camera, but less sure of why that conviction was so strong. Those roundish protuberances he had glimpsed— “Had pair of earphones.” He spoke the discovery as he made it. That’s what they had been!

“Radio?”

“No.” It hadn’t looked like a radio, somehow, although he supposed there were varieties he wouldn’t recognize.

Sandy’s fingers tightened on his arm. “They use electronic gadgets when they’re looking for oil! Think—?”

He stopped abruptly. His last word had been spoken almost aloud. Once more they stood in rigid silence, recalled to the precariousness of their situation.

But this time, after a considerable wait, Ken said, "Let's find the flash and get out of here." If Horn had seriously suspected anyone's presence in the ravine, he thought, he would have come back looking for them long before.

Ken moved a step to bring himself to the spot where flashlight had fallen, and bent down to feel for it on the stream bed.

Sandy's last suggestion might be the right one, he thought, exploring the chilly water with his hand. He knew there were such things, although he had never seen one himself. An electronic device would be to have earphones. If he had only had a better look! If he had been able to see whether the face of the box had dials on it—but no; they would certainly have been visible if they were there.

Sandy had stooped beside him and was also fumbling at the bottom of the black stream. "Think that might have been it?" he asked. "You said earphones, and—"

Ken's body jerked with the shock of the thought that had just struck him. Of course! Earphones! And the shape was right. But if he had guessed correctly, then—

"You know," he said slowly, "I think maybe it was—"

"All right, you two!" The harsh command came simultaneously with a brilliant flash of light from above, pinning them against the dark water like flies on paper. The figure behind the light was invisible, but the voice was unmistakable. "Muskrats, eh?" Horn laughed disagreeably. "All right, climb up here. And don't try any monkey business. It wouldn't be smart." The long gleam of a shotgun thrust forward into the light.

The boys' eyes met once, grimly, and then they started up the rock wall side by side. Toe holds and crevices for their fingers were easy to find in the bright downward glare. They reached the top quickly.

The figure holding the shotgun—Horn’s companion during his mysterious task in the ravine—was the guard who had addressed them from behind Brinkly’s fence the night before. His face looked ugly and menacing.

“You!” he said.

“I’ll handle this,” Horn said coldly. He gestured with the flashlight. “Get moving. Straight ahead.”

CHAPTER XIV

HORN SHOWS HIS HAND

THEY WERE MARCHED across the Brown property, on the path Ken had found so intriguing, until they reached the Brinkly fence. There Horn moved around them to release the catch on a small gate ingeniously fitted into the fence, gestured them through, and relocked it behind them.

“O.K. Go on.”

They continued to follow a faint trail through the trees on a course roughly parallel to the lake front. When they had gone several hundred feet they saw a glimmer of light ahead, and shortly afterward could make out the bulk of a huge old house.

Horn walked around them, led the way to a side ence, and opened a door. The barrel of the guard’s shotgun was close behind them as they entered, crossed a small square passageway, and passed through another doorway into a lighted room. The guard closed both doors and leaned against the glass-paneled inner, one, his gun cradled in the crook of his arm.

“Wise guys,” he muttered. “I told you to stay away from here.”

“I’ll handle this, Williams,” Horn said. “Sit down—over there,” he told the boys, gesturing to two chairs drawn up beside a round table.

The room was a kitchen, but the bedraggled cot in the corner suggested that the rest of the house was empty of

furniture, and that someone—presumably Williams, the guard—lived in these cramped filthy quarters. A pile of unwashed dishes filled the old.. fashioned sink, and a single unshaded bulb hung from the ceiling. Late summer flies buzzed lazily around it and wandered at ease among the crumbs and coffee stains on the table.

“Now,” Horn said, “let’s hear what your story is *this* time. I thought you were going home.”

Ken eyed Sandy, wishing desperately that he could communicate with him. He would have liked to suggest, first of all, that they play along with Horn as quietly and as lengthily as possible, for, when they didn’t turn up at the old mill, Pop wouldn’t delay too long before he set out to look for them. And therefore, despite Williams’ belligerent air and his gun, they probably wouldn’t be held here indefinitely. Besides, it was possible that they could use the time to advantage— that a conversation with Horn might reveal some of the things they wanted to know. They would have to be careful to conceal whatever they had discovered for themselves and especially—Ken’s heart thudded heavily—the one astounding fact he had been about to tell Sandy when Horn’s light caught them. He would have given a great deal to be able to lean over now, for a single instant, and whisper in Sandy’s ear, “I think the box was a Geiger counter!” The possibilities suggested by that fact—if he were right about it—were limitless. But they were trapped now, as unable to speak to each other as if they were miles apart.

Horn was growing impatient. “Never mind the silent conference,” he said sharply. “Talk.”

“Well,” Ken said slowly, “we changed our minds about leaving. That’s all.”

“That’s right,” Sandy said, coolly, and Ken shot him grateful glance. “We just changed our minds.”

“And what made you do that?” Horn demanded. “What did you find out around here that—?” He stopped himself. “Why’d you change your minds?”

Ken hesitated deliberately.

“Let me ask ‘em,” Williams said, taking a step forward.

“Never mind. I’ll take care of this.” Horn smiled unpleasantly at the boys. “Or would you rather talk to Williams here?”

“We didn’t ‘find’ anything,” Ken said.

Horn pulled a chair toward himself and sat down astride it, leaning his pudgy forearms on the back. “You wired you were going home. You changed your minds. Why?”

“Well, we wanted to get a good look at the Brown property,” Ken said finally.

“Why?”

Ken waited for the space of a slow breath, hoping he was taking the right course. “You know why. You think Mr. Brown was framed too, don’t you? That’s why you’re working to clear him.”

“Hey! Whose side are you on?” The guard had swung suddenly on Horn.

“Keep out of this!” Horn snapped. “Brinkly knows what I’m doing.”

“That’s what you say!” Williams advanced on him, his gun gripped firmly in both hands now.

Ken shot Sandy a warning glance, in case the redhead were contemplating a break while Williams’ attention was absorbed.

“*He* told you too, didn’t he?” Horn was asking. “He called you up and told you all about me.”

“Sure. He called up. And he says a guy named Horn’ll be around. But how do I know you’re Horn? And if these kids know all about you—”

Sandy had shot Ken a wink in the space of that look. He too realized that the sudden antagonism between their two captors might mean more than a chance to escape.

“Sure,” Sandy said now blandly, “we know him pretty well. In fact, we’ve been working on some of your ideas, Mr. Horn—the one about Brinkly, for example. Remember?”

You asked Mrs. Brown if the name Brinkly meant anything to her.”

“Shut up!” Horn spoke without turning his head. “Didn’t Brinkly describe me to you?” he asked Williams.

Williams lifted one side of his mouth in a grin. “Sure. Said you were a short fat runt. That part fits fine.”

“All right.” Horn winced but apparently decided that this was no moment to argue about his physical characteristics. He took a wallet out of his pocket and tossed it to Williams. “There. Read the identification.”

Williams glanced at it and threw it back. “Anybody can get cards printed.”

Horn stuffed the wallet back in his pocket. When he withdrew his hand it held a revolver. Williams stiffened “You two just sit there,” Horn said over his shoulder to the boys. “We’ll step outside for a minute—but we’ll be where we can see you. So don’t try anything.”

Horn maneuvered Williams out into the small areaway between the inner and outer doors. He himself faced the boys every moment, and after he had shut inner door he stood looking directly at them through the glass while he spoke in an inaudible whisper to Williams. Ken tried to read his lips but gave it up. The man scarcely moved them when he talked.

Ken glanced down at his wrist watch, caught Sandy’s eye and directed his look at it too. The hands stood at nearly ten thirty. If Pop reached the old mill at eleven, waited for them perhaps fifteen minutes, and then set out to discover their whereabouts . . .

The door opened and Horn and Williams were back in the kitchen. Williams was relaxed again and took his original stand against the door with a more submissive air.

“Now” Horn’s smile was cold beneath his shrewd narrowed eyes. “What were you snooping around the brook for?”

“We saw a light.” It was unfortunate that the quarrel had been patched up so soon, Ken was thinking. He

remembered that Horn had warned Williams once about the light. "We couldn't help seeing it," he added, "flashing on and off through the trees."

But Horn didn't rise to the bait. He kept his eyes sternly on the boys. "Had you walked from town?"

"No."

"Then where's your car?"

"Oh, we parked it—somewhere." Ken made his voice vague.

"Where?" This time Horn swung toward Sandy.

"Er—" Sandy made an obvious pretense of deep thought. "I guess we don't remember. Around here somewhere."

Horn studied them a moment.

"Want me to—?" Williams stepped forward.

Horn gestured him back, without turning. "Did someone else drive you here?"

"N-no." Ken hoped it sounded like a lie. It wouldn't hurt, perhaps, for Horn to think that they had help near by.

Horn looked at them a moment longer, and then he said with sudden decisiveness, "Williams, you'd better get outside and keep an eye on the gate. If they've got somebody driving up and down in the road waiting for them, or— Just stand inside and make sure nobody gets through. And let me know if anybody tries."

"But—I don't know whether I should—" Williams puzzled. "Think you can handle these kids?"

Horn smiled briefly, placing his revolver on the table "I can handle them."

"Well, all right then." Williams turned reluctantly, opened the kitchen door, and closed it behind himself. No one spoke until the outer door had banged shut.

Then Horn got to his feet, slipped the revolver into his pocket, and moved quickly to a window. "Just want to make sure he's gone," he said in a conspiratorial tone.

Ken and Sandy stared at him in amazement. Before

they could speak Horn was back at the table again, pulling his chair closer to theirs.

“I didn’t know how to get rid of him until you gave me the lead by trying to pretend some friends of yours might be outside in your car. Nice stalling you were both doing,” he added in congratulation. And then, after a quick grin, he went on, “But you sure messed things up, coming here. Just can’t keep your nose out, can you?”

“As your friend Williams put it,” Ken said slowly, “whose side are you on?”

“He’s no friend of mine.” He grinned again. “That wasn’t Brinkly who called him up about me. I got a pal of mine to do it.”

Sandy leaned forward, but Ken spoke first. “What are you doing up here?”

Horn spread his plump hands. “Same thing you are. There’s something fishy around here, all right. I haven’t found out yet what it is, but I’m fairly sure Brinkly’s behind it. I couldn’t get much out of Williams—he just doesn’t know enough—and I may not have much time left. If he gets hold of Brinkly he’ll find out who I really am. So let’s work together—and fast. Have you learned anything at all?”

Neither of the boys answered him immediately. Among the dozen things crowding into Ken’s mind was Horn’s telephone conversation from the tourist camp. They had only guessed that it was Brinkly he was talking to, of course, and—in that case his present friendliness could so easily be a ruse, an attempt to trick them into telling him things he couldn’t learn otherwise.

Horn nodded resignedly, as if to say he understood the reason for their hesitation. “I know,” he said. “You’re suspicious because you think I spirited Old Tom out of Rockville. But can’t you guess why I had to do it?”

“Suppose you tell us,” Ken suggested. “You *had* said it would clear up the case if he was found.”

Horn smiled ruefully. “I can see I should have taken

you into my confidence earlier, but I thought at first you were just a couple of kids.” He leaned forward. “I talked to Old Tom and found out he couldn’t identify the man who had paid him to stay away from the Browns’ that day—or the man who took Tom’s place on the job.” He shrugged. “So I realized that Tom alone was no help. I had to get right to the bottom of this thing.”

“When did you come up here to Black Lake?”

“This evening, early. When I saw I couldn’t break in up here, I fixed up that fake phone call, so Williams would let me in.”

The buzzing of the flies was the only sound in the cluttered kitchen. Early evening, Horn had said. But Ken and Sandy had seen Horn at the tourist court that afternoon.

“What’s the matter?” Horn demanded. “Don’t you believe me?”

“If you’re on our side,” Sandy said, “prove it by get-us out of here.”

“I can’t. Williams would never let you through the gate.”

“What about the side gate?” Ken suggested.

Horn shook his head. “They’ve got Clark—another of Brinkly’s men—patrolling the grounds. We’d never make it.”

“But you sent him—” Sandy stopped, but it was already too late.

In a flash the revolver was out of Horn’s pocket and pointing first at Sandy and then at Ken. The friendliness had been wiped off Horn’s face as swiftly as his hand had moved.

“All right,” he said, his voice deadly quiet. “What else did you overhear down there at the brook?”

Again the buzzing of the flies was his only answer.

Ken watched the muzzle of the little gun, swinging in its slow small arc. They knew now how quickly Horn could move. It would be useless—it would be fatal—to try to take

that gun away from him.

“Don’t you ever talk?” Horn asked, almost casually. “Don’t you ever do anything but listen in on other people’s conversations? It’s a bad habit, you know. It leads to trouble. Brinkly won’t like it when I tell him about it—and he’ll be here soon.”

Ken blinked. The hand holding the gun— For a moment he’d thought— The gun swung again, its tiny hole aimed straight at him. And this time he was sure. The thumb and forefinger of Horn’s right hand were darkened. It was Horn who had looked through their carefully planted notebook!

Ken groaned inwardly. If they’d only noticed it before, when there had been some chance of seizing Horn’s weapon! Now it was too late. Or was it?

“You may be interested to know,” Ken said slowly, “that we got a photograph of you while you were looking through our notebook. It’s in the mail now to— well, to people who will be interested.”

He was watching Horn’s face. Beside him he heard Sandy’s quick gasp, and the fainter one that must have escaped him in the moment that he too saw the telltale brown stains. But Ken didn’t turn. Horn’s eyes had slitted and he seemed to be turning Ken’s statement over and over in his mind.

Finally he gave his head a single sharp shake and smiled slightly. “That was a good try, but it won’t do. I searched everything—there was no camera in the room. And there wasn’t enough light for a photograph anyway. The curtains were drawn.”

“We used black light,” Sandy said.

Horn shook his head again. “No use. I’m not biting. Not even on that ‘code’ of yours—though I had it half copied before I caught on.”

He wasn’t bluffing, Ken saw. He was telling the truth. And Ken wondered why it had ever seemed to him that Pop would find them here. It didn’t seem likely now.

The harsh light glinted on the gun and the flies settled and rose and settled again.

Ken realized despairingly that he had never even had the chance to tell Sandy about his certainty that the black box was a Geiger counter, and the possibilities this suggested about the Brown land. If there was uranium there, or some other radioactive material—

Ken's thoughts came to a dead stop. *Radioactive.*

Had Horn realized why Ken knew he had looked through the notebook? Apparently it hadn't occurred to yet to wonder. And in that case . . .

Of course it was a crazy, risky thing to do. Horn might know too much to fall for it. Or Sandy himself might unwittingly ruin Ken's scheme, because Sandy didn't know about the little black box. Ken turned slightly, waited until Sandy looked at him, and then sent him a glance that begged mutely, "Follow my lead."

Had Sandy understood him? He couldn't tell. He would have to take the chance.

Ken settled in his chair, directly facing Horn, and fixed an intent gaze on the hand that held the gun.

CHAPTER XV

THE BLACK THUMB

A LONG, SLOW MINUTE ticked by, during which Ken stared lengthily at Horn's hand, looked away and then, as if drawn irresistibly, let his eyes fasten on it again.

But Horn apparently didn't notice. "You're playing the strong, silent type now, I see," he said finally, as if amused.

Ken gave no sign that he had heard. Instead he glanced at Sandy, waited until he caught his eye, and directed Sandy's gaze with his own back to Horn's hand.

"We were right," Ken murmured out of the side of his mouth but loudly enough for Horn to hear.

"Looks like it," Sandy returned. He flashed Ken an alert questioning look that said, "Is that what you want—that I should agree with anything you say?"

"What are you mumbling about?" Horn rapped out.

Ken nodded to Sandy in the brief second during which the detective's eyes had focused on the redhead. Then Horn was once more encompassing them both in his watchful stare. This time he became aware that they were looking downward toward his own hand.

Instinctively he glanced down at it himself. A grin twisted his mouth. "If you're asking each other whether it's loaded or not, I can tell you. It is."

"What?" Ken said vaguely. "Oh. The gun. No, that wasn't—" He stopped abruptly.

“Wasn’t what?” Horn demanded.

“Oh, nothing—I guess.” But Ken frowned intently at Horn’s hand for another instant before he pulled his eyes away from it.

Horn snorted his amusement. “‘Nothing’ is probably right. If you think you can distract my attention with some more of your childish gags . . .” As he spoke he had noticed the stain on his thumb, and he let his words trail off as he twisted his hand around so that he could rub at the mark with another finger. But the gesture was impossible so long as he held the gun. Lifting his eyes swiftly so that he could watch them, Horn transferred the gun to the other hand, held the stained one up to get a good look at it, and then rubbed the darkened thumb and fingers against his sleeve.

“It doesn’t come off, does it?” Ken said intently. Horn snorted again, gave up rubbing at the stain, and took the gun into his right hand again. “Don’t worry. A little dirt won’t disturb my aim.”

“Dirt?” Ken attempted an imitation of Horn’s derisive snort and was proud of the result.

Horn eyed him sharply and then appeared to relax. “I’m ambidextrous,” he informed them with a grin, taking the gun back into his left hand. It was a gesture of contempt and so was the casualness with which he glanced at the stain again and pretended to be mildly interested in it, as if the boys scarcely occupied his full attention. He lifted the stained thumb to his mouth and licked it.

“Don’t put it in your mouth!” Ken said swiftly.

Horn, about to rub the dampened thumb on his sleeve again, paused to glare at him. “Why don’t you just give up?” he said unpleasantly. “If you want to give me some information, I’ll listen. Otherwise. You might as well face the fact that you’re not going to have a chance to break out of here and that none of your mutterings are going to do you any good. I’m not even listening.”

“All right.” Ken shrugged. “Sorry.” Then, as if Horn’s words had freed him from some restraint, he looked at Sandy and said, “We certainly guessed it: U_3O_8 .”

Sandy’s eyes met his with complete lack of comprehension, but his voice gave no hint of his bafflement. “No doubt about it. Definitely U_3O_8 .”

Horn smiled faintly and transferred his attention again to the stain, as though to indicate his assurance that nothing they said could distract him.

“Is it beginning to feel numb yet?” Ken asked, staring intently at the hand once more. And when Horn ignored him, he said to Sandy, “It takes about ten hours for the numbness to set in doesn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Sandy agreed.

“And by then, of course, it’s too late.”

Horn was still pretending to ignore them, but a stirring of worried curiosity in his half-shut eyes told Ken that their comments were beginning to bother him. Ken leaned forward a little. Instantly Horn swung the gun a fraction of an inch in his direction.

Ken shook his head impatiently. “I’m not trying anything. It’s just—” He pointed directly at Horn’s hand. “Is that really what it looks like? Or is it just a stain? I mean, have you really tried to get it off?”

Horn stared at him a moment. “What do you mean— it really what it looks like?” he barked.

“Oh, nothing.” Ken sat back, forced himself to laugh in seeming embarrassment. “Just a wild idea I had about. . .” He nodded toward the hand. “But I realize it’s probably impossible. I mean, how would you ever come in contact with it? That stain is probably paint or something like that.”

Horn rose slowly to his feet. The worried curiosity showed more clearly in his eyes now, but there was no hint of it in what he said. “I’m just going to teach you two a lesson,” he said. “Maybe it’ll come in handy in your future career as detectives—if you have any future

careers," he added significantly. He was backing slowly away from them, but the gun was still held steadily pointed in their direction.

"You've been needling me," Horn went on, "in a futile effort to get me into a position where you could jump me. You think if you get me over here to the sink" —he reached it as he mentioned the word—"and busy trying to wash off my hand"—with the stained thumb and forefinger he found the faucet behind his back and turned it—"that then I'll be off guard. Don't you?" He had the hand under the running water now, and was rubbing the fingers together. "I just thought it might be educational for you to know," Horn continued, "that it doesn't work. See? Here I am—ten feet away from you—and with one hand busy. And you're still in the same spot you were in before. Now, are you satisfied?" He grinned contemptuously.

Ken and Sandy had not moved. Sandy was, Ken knew, intently waiting his lead. Ken himself waited until Horn, having turned off the water again and rubbed his hand dry against his coat, glanced swiftly down at it and then up again.

"Did it come off?" Ken asked. "Is there any change at all?"

Horn was returning to the table, moving slowly. When he drew close Ken could see that the worry was sharp in his eyes now.

"Just what game do you think you're playing?" Horn asked, in his former contemptuous tone. But his next question belied the contempt. There was a note of fear in it. "What's all this about this stain?" He thrust his right hand toward Ken who flinched away from it. "Come on!" Horn said furiously. "Talk—if you know what's good for you."

"What do you want me to say?" Ken asked. "You wouldn't believe me, anyway."

"Never mind whether I believe you or not. What were all those letters and figures you were muttering a while

ago? And what d'you keep talking about this stain for?"

"Well—" Ken shrugged resignedly. "I said it was a wild idea, and I still think it is." He was watching Horn closely. "But when I saw you with that Geiger counter before, I—"

The table quivered under the jolt of Sandy's sharp movement.

"Geiger counter!" But Horn's attempt at an amused snort this time was feeble. "Wherever did you see one of those around here?"

Ken sat back, spread his' hands. "O.K. So I was wrong. There's nothing for you to worry about then." He indicated the darkened thumb. "But naturally when I saw your hand and figured you'd been doing something with U_3O_8 or some other radioactive stuff—well—" He shrugged again.

"Well, what?" Horn's voice was low and hard.

"Well," Ken shook his head. "But of course you'd know enough not to handle anything like that without taking all the precautions—assuming you ever did handle it, I mean." He was looking at Horn innocently now, but his heart was thudding. Horn's eyes were slits in a face.

Sandy laughed unexpectedly. Horn jerked toward him.

But Sandy didn't seem to notice. "You're crazy, Ken." He looked over at his friend with a grin. "Everybody knows about radioactive stuff these days—how you have to wear lead gloves and—oh, all that stuff." He turned toward Horn. "Ken lets his imagination run away with him. Why, if you'd washed your hand with soap a minute ago, that stuff whatever it is, would probably be off now."

"Sure it would." Horn glanced at Ken. "I'll prove it to you." He started backing toward the sink again. "You might remember this advice too; don't start something you can't finish."

For a split second, while the man felt behind him for the faucet, the boys risked a glance at each other. Ken didn't need Sandy's infinitesimal wink to tell him that now Sandy knew the score. The moment Sandy had suggested washing the stain with soap, Ken had known that his

mention of the Geiger counter had been all Sandy needed. Now they could play this dangerous game together.

Horn daubed at the harsh yellow soap in the cracked dish, rubbed his thumb and fingers together, held them under the stream of water and then repeated the whole performance.

“Making any headway?” Sandy asked innocently.

The gun was still pointed in their direction, but the hand that held it was slightly unsteady now. Horn moved back toward them, rubbing the stained fingers on his coat. Near the table, under the strong light of the single bulb, he held the fingers up.

Sandy gasped as if involuntarily. Ken let his eyes grow wide. The stain was as dark as it had been before.

“Gosh!” Sandy murmured. “And that’s strong soap, too, isn’t it?” He stared. “You don’t suppose it could be— You haven’t been near any uranium oxide or anything like that lately, have you?”

“Of course not,” Horn said unconvincingly.

“Well—” Sandy shook his head. “It sure does look the way Bob Random’s hand did.”

“Who’s he?”

“Didn’t you read about Random?” Ken asked wonderingly. “He was that young physicist that got his hand burned at one of the experimental atomic labs. The papers were following the case—how they tried taking the hand off, and everything. But of course nothing helped.”

“It’s the white blood cells that go,” Sandy added.

Ken felt a heady excitement. Together they were making swift progress. Horn’s face was pale, and one of his eyes had developed a slight tic. The tiny muscle jumped convulsively once—and then again.

“You two cut it out!” Horn said, and his voice had thickened. “I know what you’re up to and it won’t work.”

“O.K.” Ken waited a minute, and again the flies took the room, buzzing noisily.

One of them settled on Horu’s nose, and he made an

instinctive movement toward it with his right hand. But he jerked the hand back before it touched his face.

Ken said then, evenly, "You very kindly gave us some advice. I suppose we could give you some too." He nodded slightly toward the stained thumb and fingers, now being held awkwardly in front of Horn's stiff body. "An ordinary doctor wouldn't be much help to you. You'd have to go to one of the specialists who know how to deal with that sort of thing."

"And that's the one thing he can't do, Ken—don't you see? Any specialist would want to know how he happened to have handled the stuff," Sandy explained. They were talking now as if Horn weren't in the room. "And I suppose if Horn told them, then he'd be in as much danger from—well, from—"

"From Brinkly, you mean?" Ken offered.

Sandy nodded. "He sounds as if he must be as dangerous as uranium oxide any day." He lowered his voice slightly, but not so much that Horn couldn't continue to hear. "Any man who would deliberately let other people come in contact with radioactive material, who wouldn't warn them how to protect themselves—"

"Shut up!" Horn said. "If you know what's good for you."

Ken laughed. "If *we* know—" He let the rest of it go unsaid. "Of course maybe Brinkly warned everybody else. Maybe it's just the one man he doesn't like that he doesn't bother with."

Horn lunged forward, gun pointed.

"Cut it out, Ken," Sandy begged. "Look, Mr. Horn, maybe Ken thinks I shouldn't do this, but I can't help it. Zinc ointment is supposed to delay the burning action for a time. If you've got some here, you ought to put it on."

Horn relaxed slightly from his tense position, and Ken knew Sandy had been right. He had pushed Horn a little too close for safety there for a moment. They wanted to goad him into carelessness, not into pressing that trigger.

But he couldn't let Horn know that he felt relieved. "Softy," he said toward Sandy, out of the side of his mouth.

"Zinc ointment," Sandy repeated firmly. "Why don't try it? Maybe you do think we're kidding you, but harm can it do to put a little ointment on that—that burn."

Horn's lips twisted in a weak imitation of his once scornful smile. "Zinc ointment, eh?" The eye muscle jumped.

He began to edge slowly toward a cabinet hanging on the wall near the sink. "Might as well humor you. Anything to keep you quiet." The measure of his fear was in the feebleness of his excuse for agreeing to Sandy's suggestion.

With his stained hand he reached up to the cabinet, pulled it open, and felt along its shelves, keeping his eyes on the boys until his fingers encountered a tube. He held it in front of him, saw that it was toothpaste, and tried again. When he finally had the right tube he began awkwardly to twist off the top.

It was a difficult feat with only one hand. Finally the heavy white ointment was being squeezed out, and Horn was trying to rub it in. But his pudgy fingers couldn't spread it over all the stain. The boys could see his growing fury as he struggled with gun and tube and medicine.

"Let me do it," Sandy said.

"No, you don't!"

"All right." Sandy sank back in his chair. "But it has to be rubbed in well, or it doesn't have any effect. It has to get down through all the burned tissue."

The gun was shaking now. Ken couldn't be sure that Horn's fingers might not set it off unwittingly. And the tic had become more frequent.

"All right," Horn said suddenly. "Come over here." As Sandy rose, Horn said to Ken, "You stay where you are."

When Sandy reached him, Horn extended the stained hand and the tube it held. The other pointed the gun

directly at Sandy's stomach.

Ken caught his breath. He had realized what Sandy might be trying to do—and he had accomplished his purpose. But Horn was being too smart for them. He hadn't fallen into the trap of pointing the gun away from Sandy.

The redhead squeezed out a blob of the ointment and rubbed it into the stained fingers. Horn stood motionless, watching him and holding the revolver in its position.

The ointment had all been smoothed in. The gun had not wavered for an instant. Sandy began to squeeze the tube again.

Suddenly Ken stood up, shoving his chair back away from him so that it scraped noisily across the rough floor. Horn's head snapped up and the gun swung around.

Sandy struck. His hand slashed at Horn's wrist knocking the gun to the floor. In the same instant he drove his foot down hard on Horn's instep.

Horn cried out at the pain of his crushed foot, but Sandy's left arm had encircled the short fat neck and the bellow changed to a strangled grunt.

Before Ken could do more than kick the revolver out of reach under the big stove, Sandy had released Horn and was measuring him briefly for the knockout blow. His right arm flashed. Horn bounced back against the sink, and the pile of dishes there cascaded off like a waterfall. Again the right drove forward, and Horn slid off the sink and stumbled to the floor. Sandy picked him up, stood him on his feet and drove still another blow, this one aimed at Horn's wobbling chin. The detective fell with a thud that jarred the floor.

"Come on." Ken was pulling at Sandy's arm. "We've to got to get out of here. Those dishes must have been heard all the way back to Brentwood."

Ken pulled open the glass-paneled door, with Sandy right behind him. Two steps brought him to the outside door on the other side of the little entranceway and in

another second he was turning its knob.

But before he could thrust the door open, it was jerked out of his hand from the outside. Someone was just entering the house.

CHAPTER XVI

A COURTEOUS HOST

KEN STEPPED BACK instinctively, colliding with Sandy.

The door swung wide and the figure on the other side became visible. It was that of a tall, well-dressed man, slightly gray around the temples and with a lean, narrow face. If he was startled by their presence, only his lifted eyebrows gave evidence of the fact. After an instant's hesitation he took another step forward, and Ken and Sandy both stepped back again.

"Williams?" The man's voice was raised slightly and he seemed to direct the word over their heads. Then he lowered his cool gray eyes and seemed to inspect the boys curiously, as if they were two strange but harmless insects. "Who are *you*?" he asked, and took another step forward. "And what are you doing in my house?" he added.

Sandy stepped backward of his own volition that time, and Ken swung around slightly to follow hint. When the boys were both back in the untidy kitchen, Ken found his voice.

"Your house?" he said. "You're Mr. Brinkly?"

"That's right." The tall man was in the kitchen now too, seeming curiously out of place in its squalor. "Are you friends of Williams?" he asked, his voice still cool and impersonally courteous. "Or—?" His casual roving glance caught sight of Horn's figure still sprawled on the floor near the sink. "Who is that? And what's happened to

him?”

Ken was startled out of the blank surprise which had gripped him from the moment the door was pulled out his hand. “That’s Horn,” he said. The detective’s face clearly visible; there seemed no reason why Brinkly shouldn’t have recognized him instantly.

“Who?”

“Horn,” Ken repeated flatly. “Don’t you know him?”

“Never heard of him. Certainly never saw him before.” Still impersonally curious, the tall figure bent Horn and then straightened again. “He’s alive,” he murmured. Then he turned and looked at the boys, as if giving them his full attention for the first time. “Just where is my caretaker?” he asked. “And what are you up to?”

“We’re not up to anything,” Sandy flared. “We—”

Brinkly’s look seemed to wither Sandy’s voice in his throat. The tall figure stepped unobtrusively in front of kitchen door before he spoke again. “I repeat”—the was icy now—“where is Williams? He was supposed to meet me at the airport.”

“He’s out on the grounds some place,” Ken said: And then he too moved, to stand directly in front of the man.

“You did say you were Brinkly, didn’t you? C. A. Brinkly?”

“I did. And unless you tell me quickly who you are, I think I’d better call the police.” His glance traveled over Sandy’s head to the telephone on a shelf across the room.

“You never heard of a detective named Horn?” Ken asked.

“I have already answered that question. Now are you going to—?”

“Maybe you’d *better* call the police,” Ken said slowly. “In fact, if you won’t, I hope you’ll let us call them.”

“You?” For the first time the quiet gray face wore an expression of confusion. “You don’t mind if the police find you here?”

The half-grin on Ken’s face was involuntary. “We’d like

them to. And we'd like to tell them how we were brought in here—*forced* in here—by your caretaker, Williams, and that man there." He nodded toward Horn.

"Forced?" Brinkly echoed, just as feet pounded outside and the far door banged open.

"Who's—?" Williams burst into the kitchen. "Oh! It's you, Mr. Brinkly. I—" He stopped as his eye fell on Horn. For an instant he stared at the limp figure and then he turned on the boys. "What'd you do to him?" he growled, and, propping his gun against the wall, he dropped on one knee to inspect the detective more closely. "It's O.K. He's breathing."

"I've already determined that, Williams," Brinkly said. "What I want to know is what's been going on here—and who these people are."

Williams got slowly to his feet, his face blank with surprise. "Why, *they're* the two you told me to keep an eye out for," he said, jerking his head toward Ken and Sandy.

"I told you to keep an eye out for them?" Brinkly sounded incredulous. "When?"

"When you phoned me a couple of hours ago. When you told me that a detective—this guy here"—this time the head indicated Horn—"was coming down to take over and that I should do what he says."

Brinkly lowered himself on a chair, and his slender hand brushed distastefully against the crumbs and the flies. "I didn't telephone you, Williams," he said slowly and carefully. "I haven't spoken to you since the day last week when the architect and I were here drawing up preliminary plans for remodeling the house."

"But, boss— if you didn't call me, who did?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Brinkly looked up at the boys with sudden decisiveness. "Now suppose you two sit down over there"—he gestured toward the same chairs they had occupied so short a time before—"and tell me exactly who you are and what happened here tonight."

Ken looked over at Horn as he sat down. "He could tell

you a lot better than we can.”

“Oh?” Brinkly spoke over his shoulder to Williams. “Do something to bring that—to bring him around. Maybe then we can make some sense out of all this.”

“Yes, sir.” Williams filled a cup with water and dashed it over Horn’s face. The detective did not stir. “What’d you hit him with? An ax?” Williams muttered, moving toward the sink to refill the cup.

Brinkly cleared his throat. “Perhaps in the meantime”—he waited until both boys were looking at him—“you might tell me your names. If you have no objection, that is.” He smiled faintly, courteously.

For a brief instant the boys exchanged glances. Too much had happened in the past few minutes—too much that they didn’t understand. If they had been entirely wrong in connecting Brinkly with the plot against Mr. Brown, if Horn had deliberately aroused and encouraged their mistrust of Brinkly for some purpose of his own, what course should they take now?

It was impossible to decide, Ken thought, on the basis of the information they possessed. But in order to get more information—“I’m Ken Holt,” he said quietly, “and this is Sandy Allen.” He watched Brinkly’s face as he spoke, but its expression did not change.

“Good,” Brinkly said. “We’ve come that far, anyway. Now about this business of being ‘forced’ into this house, as you put it. Perhaps that will clear itself up when you tell me what you were doing on my property when Williams discovered you.”

“We weren’t *on* your property!” Sandy burst out. “He—”

“Wait a minute.” Brinkly held up a hand, and then turned. “Williams,” he said, “were these young men trespassing on my property, or weren’t they?”

Williams, still kneeling beside Horn, lifted his head. “Well, no, boss. But you see, he—” He gestured toward Horn.

“They weren’t!” Brinkly cut him off short. “You mean

you actually hauled them in off the road?” He looked the boys. “Then I’m afraid we *do* owe you an apology. I simply can’t understand . . .” He shook his head. “Perhaps when this—what did you call him? Horn?— becomes conscious, he’ll tell us what he was trying to accomplish by all this.”

“What he’s supposed to be doing, Mr. Brinkly,” Ken said quietly, “is searching for evidence that will clear our neighbor, Mr. Frank Brown, of a conviction for bank robbery.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you.” The gray eyebrows drew together. “Evidence that will clear Frank Brown, you say. I don’t know Brown myself—though I’ve corresponded with him briefly in connection with my efforts to purchase his land—but I’m certainly sorry to hear that he’s involved in such serious trouble.” He paused a moment. “You think then that that man’s actions here tonight have something to do with his efforts clear Brown of this charge?”

Ken shook his head, “We think that Horn is doing exactly the opposite of what he’s being paid to do—that helping the people who framed Mr. Brown in the first place.”

“Framed him! But that’s appalling! Why should anyone have done such a thing as that?”

“To get possession of Mr. Brown’s property here,” Ken said, “by putting him in a position where he has to sell in order to get money.”

Brinkly put a thin hand over his mouth, but the smile behind it was evident. “You don’t think that all sounds a little fantastic? People don’t do things like that just because they want a piece of property, you know.”

The contrast between Brinkly’s air of apparent amazement, and his past record of unethical land deals, jarred Ken’s whirling thoughts into some kind of pattern. Perhaps Brinkly *was* entirely innocent in the Brown affair; or perhaps he was the brains behind the whole “fantastic” scheme. There was no way of settling the question at the moment; the evidence they had so far was completely

inconclusive.

And, Ken felt, they would never obtain any further evidence from the oil magnate himself—if that evidence were detrimental to Brinkly’s interests—because Brinkly was far too clever a man to reveal anything he didn’t want known.

Unless, perhaps, a jolt of some kind . . .

Swiftly Ken made up his mind. “People don’t do things like that? What about Cabco Petroleum, Mr. Brinkly?”

The man eyed him with suddenly amused speculation. “I see you know much more about me than I know about you. But I’m afraid,” he went on, “that I don’t quite follow your reasoning. Cabco Petroleum, like any business of its size, is involved in a highly competitive market for land rich in valuable resources—such as oil, for example. Whereas Brown’s home and his few acres of resort property . . .” He dismissed them with a shrug.

“They’re valuable too,” Ken said. “There’s uranium ore there.”

Ken got his reaction; Brinkly’s startled surprise was too obvious. But an instant later it dissolved in a frank burst of laughter.

The room rang with it. Williams swung around and looked up. Sandy half rose out of his chair and then sank back again.

“Uranium!” Brinkly gasped. “Uranium! In Connecticut!”

Baffled and angry, Ken opened his mouth, shut it again, and then heard himself say weakly, “What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry.” Brinkly pulled an immaculate white handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed at his eyes “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I’m sure it’s not funny to you. I can distinctly remember feeling very serious about prospecting myself when I was your age. It was for gold, of course, in those days.”

“Uranium . . . uranium . . .” Horn mumbled.

“Good grief,” Brinkly murmured, as they all swung toward the figure on the floor. “Another one? Help him up Williams,” he added, in a patient voice.

Williams lifted the rotund body by the arms and propped it in a sitting position against the wall.

“Doctor! Get doctor!” Horn said, twisting his head from side to side. “Tell him—uranium burn!” Then he opened his glazed eyes and they were staring straight at Brinkly. “You did this to me!” he said in a suddenly clear voice. “You didn’t warn me!”

“Here,” Brinkly said brusquely, “let me see him.” He crossed the room and knelt down in front of the detective. “Can you hear me?” he asked. “Tell me what’s wrong with you.”

“My hand—it’s burned!”

Brinkly lifted the stained hand briefly in his own and then dropped it again. “I don’t see anything,” he murmured, half to himself, half over his shoulder toward the boys. “Seems to be stained with something—but that’s all. However”—he stood up and brushed the knees of his trousers—he’s clearly suffering from shock. Williams, I suppose you’d better bring the car around and get him to a doctor.”

“But wait a minute,” Sandy began. “He—”

“I know.” Brinkly nodded. “He’s got a lot of explaining to do, but he’s certainly useless to us in his present state. And whatever our suspicions of him, we can hardly deny him medical aid.” He glanced at Horn again, pursing his lips. “He might have a serious head injury that demands immediate attention. You’d better hurry, Williams.”

“Yes, sir.” Williams disappeared obediently.

Brinkly’s concern for Horn’s welfare seemed very sudden, Ken thought. He walked over to look down at the detective himself. For an instant Horn’s eyes were open and alert. Then they closed and he began to mumble again.

Ken turned away, his thoughts racing. If these two

were working together, it would serve Brinkly's purpose to have Horn removed immediately to protect him from questions he wouldn't know how to answer. Probably Brinkly had managed to signal as much to Horn in that brief moment when he knelt beside him. But wait—working together or not, there was friction between two men. Horn's bitter "You did this to me" was sure evidence of that. If that friction could only be increased Ken thought, Horn, might make other interesting disclosures.

Ken spoke to Brinkly. "He might be right, you know," he said, gesturing toward the detective. "If those are uranium burns, he needs a specialist."

It seemed to him that Horn's slack body stiffened slightly.

"Uranium! The idea is apparently epidemic, isn't it?" Brinkly laughed shortly. "But if he's another prospector" — he nodded toward Horn—" he must know perfectly well that even if he's walking around with his pockets full of ore, it couldn't burn him. Only the refined product is dangerous. No, I think all he needs is a doctor to look after that knockout blow I gather one of you boys gave him. I still haven't heard the details yet of everything that went on here tonight."

By the time he had finished speaking, Ken could see Horn seemed to have relaxed again.

Ken tried once more. "I hope you're right, of course. But if he *has* been burned by uranium, minutes count."

Brinkly showed irritation for the first time. "The idea is ridiculous!" he snapped. "I think I know a little more about things than you do, and I assure you it's utterly preposterous."

Ken looked at Horn. He was quite sure the detective was perfectly conscious now, but he seemed unworried. Clearly Brinkly's words had carried more weight with him than Ken's. And if Horn, reassured about his own safety, were willing to keep quiet at Brinkly's orders—.

The outside door opened. In another minute now

Williams would take Horn away.

“Got here as quick as I could, Mr. Brinkly.”

Ken swung around, startled, at the sound of the voice. It was not Williams who had entered. It was the familiar middle-aged figure of Clark, whom they had first encountered in a rowboat on Black Lake.

Clark too was surprised. His eyes swung from the boys to Horn and back to Brinkly again. “What’s—?”

A hoarse cry from Horn silenced him. The stubby figure was struggling up from the floor, one arm out-thrust dramatically toward Clark.

“Look!” Horn gasped. “His thumb! He’s been burned too!”

CHAPTER XVII

TOO EASY

CLARK, EVERY EYE fixed on him, followed Horn's pointing finger to his own hand and held it up, spread wide. Its thumb and index finger were stained almost black, and on the palm there was a large brownish area. Clark looked from his hand to Horn and then to Brinkly.

"Burned?" he asked confusedly.

"Uranium burns!" Horn told him. "I've got them too." He waved his own right hand. "He'll try to tell you they're not, but—"

Brinkly stopped him with a coldly scornful look. "Let's see, Clark," he said, rounding the table to take the man's stained hand in his own. A moment later he let it fall. "Ridiculous. How could you believe such nonsense even for a minute? Can't you recognize a paint stain when you see it?"

"A paint stain will come off," Sandy interpolated. "Will these?"

"No!" Horn rasped, shoving his hand toward Brinkly. "It won't! I tried with that yellow soap."

"Car's outside, Mr. Brinkly," Williams said from the doorway. "Oh—hello, Mr.—"

"Williams, never mind the car a minute. Bring me some turpentine on a rag."

"Yes, sir." Williams disappeared again.

"I don't know what to think of you, Clark," Brinkly said

quietly. "It's no particular concern of mine if strangers"—he emphasized the word slightly and nodded toward Horn—"and romantic young boys fill their heads with nonsense. But that you should take such a ridiculous idea seriously. Here, Williams," he interrupted himself, as the caretaker returned with a damp looking rag, "I'll take that." The pungent odor of turpentine filled the room as Brinkly caught up Clark's hand and applied the cloth to the stain.

"It doesn't come off!" Horn sounded both terrified and triumphant. "It is a burn! And you—"

"Is it, Mr. Brinkly?" Clark's voice was quieter, but he too was clearly frightened.

"Don't ask him!" Horn almost shouted the words. "He'll keep telling you it's paint. *I'm* heading for a hospital."

"Maybe I'd better go too," Clark said. He was holding his hand a little away from him, staring at it as if fascinated.

"Oh, all right!" Brinkly turned abruptly away from him and then back again. "I'm amazed at you, Clark, but go ahead. If a doctor tells you the truth, maybe you'll believe him. And take"—he jerked his head toward Horn—"take him with you."

"We'll go along," Ken said, stepping forward.

"*You'll* go along?" Brinkly looked at him, and suddenly nodded. "Of course—you have an interest in talking to this Horn fellow when he becomes rational. So have I. Clark, when you and this man Horn have been satisfied that you're not suffering"—his mouth twisted disdainfully—"fatal injuries, I want you to bring him back here to me. And you'd better come," he added coldly to Horn, "or I'll see that the police pick you up in no time. All right—go along now."

Ken moved forward after them. If Horn were to be spirited away under their very eyes. . .

But Brinkly interposed himself smoothly between Ken and the door.

“On second thought, Clark,” he said, to the two men already in the little passage, “both of you come to the inn afterward. This place is a pigsty. These young men and I will wait for you there.”

“Yes, Mr. Brinkly.” The words were flurried, and in another instant the outer door had slammed behind them.

Brinkly stepped back away from the door, as if his position there had been entirely accidental.

“Now,” he said briskly. He was his cool, urbane self once more. “I didn’t want to delay them further while I discussed with you the best location for our little investigation into Horn’s activities. But I assume you too would prefer the inn to this?” He glanced around with distaste. “Someday I expect to have a very pleasant home here—a country estate such as I’ve always looked forward to retiring to in my old age—but I must admit that at the moment it doesn’t seem to have very great possibilities.”

Outside a car roared down the driveway. Horn and Clark were gone.

“Mr. Brinkly,” Ken began firmly. He was not very clear about what he intended to say, but his mounting sense of frustration at the smoothness with which Brinkly was handling matters was prodding him to some definite activity. Brinkly didn’t allow him to continue, however.

“Of course,” he said, smiling. “You’re hardly interested in my old age, are you? But I do hope you accept my suggestion about the inn. Perhaps you’d like to stay there for the night too. I don’t know what your plans were—”

“But—” Sandy too attempted to interrupt the even flow of events, with equal lack of success.

“If it’s the expense you’re thinking of—forget it.” Brinkly smiled deprecatingly. “I do owe you an apology on Williams’ behalf. Williams,” he turned his head, “you drive them to the inn and explain there that they’re my guests and are to have anything they want—which may include a full-course dinner, if they have the appetites I had when I was their age.” He smiled at the boys again. “If the chef

has to be waked up for it—wake him.”

A full-course dinner! Ken was raging inwardly. That wasn't what they wanted from Brinkly. Ken wouldn't have been surprised if Brinkly had attempted to hold them in the house, as Horn had done; that at least would have proved that the boys had learned something Brinkly didn't want them to know. But instead he seemed to be willing to let them go as casually as if. . .

Ken's jaw clenched. Brinkly had told Williams to take back to town. Maybe Williams had other, secret, orders.

“I'll meet you at the inn shortly,” Brinkly was saying. “I came down here to make a few measurements for my architect. I've had a few new ideas since I was here last, I—” He was actually, in amazing support of this unlikely explanation, drawing a tape measure from his pocket when Ken broke in.

“Williams doesn't have to drive us,” he said. “We've our own car.”

“Oh?” Brinkly smiled. “Well, let him take you to wherever it's parked, in any case. It's a dark night to be wondering around in these parts.”

Ken, with Sandy beside him, was moving toward the door. It seemed to him now that their only hope lay in getting quickly to the police to tell their story, and—But what story? What did they actually know? That there was uranium on the Brown property? But even if they were sure of that—and they had only Horn and Clarks fear to bolster that theory; Ken could not even certain that the little black box had been a Geiger counter—what good would that do? What would the presence of uranium prove as to Mr. Brown's having been framed?

“The car's not far away. We can walk,” Ken said.

Now, if Brinkly insisted upon Williams accompanying them— And apparently that was what he meant to do.

“He'll have to drive you as far as the gate in any case,” Brinkly explained. “We keep it locked, you see. So he might as well—”

The telephone rang.

Williams looked questioningly at his employer.

"I'll take it." Brinkly stepped to the old-fashioned instrument and picked it up. "Yes?" Yes, and this is Brinkly speaking. . . . Who?. . . Oh." He smiled over his shoulder at the boys. "They're just leaving now, as a matter of fact. On their way to the Stage Coach Inn. And I'm afraid I'm partly responsible for any delay, but I'll let them explain that to you yourselves. There's been quite a mix-up here . . . Oh, no. They're fine. And they should be there very shortly now. . . . Not at all. Good night."

He hung up and turned toward Sandy. "That was a Mr. Allen—your father, I gathered. He seemed rather upset. Said he'd been waiting for you for quite some time. Perhaps he'll want to join us in our little discussion." He glanced at Williams. "You won't need your gun, just to drive these young men to their car." He smiled apologetically at the boys. "Williams is something of a romantic too—likes to carry that thing around. Well, I'll see you shortly at the inn." He gestured toward the door and Williams obediently moved toward it, waiting for the boys to precede him through.

"Did you want me to go all the way in, boss?" he inquired. "You told me to tell them up there to look after—" He nodded toward the boys.

"That won't be necessary. I'll phone the inn myself from here. Since they do have their own car, just see that they get through the gate and started off all right. Then you'd better come back here and"—his eyes met Williams'—"do a little cleaning up."

He nodded once more, pleasantly, and the next moment the boys found themselves following Williams of the house, around the corner to an old shed that served as a garage, and entering a shining new station wagon. Williams took the wheel, Sandy sat beside him, Ken was on the outside.

They would reach the inn safely now, Ken knew;

assurance to Pop settled that.

He ducked his head to get a good look at the house as they drove past, as if its dark bulk could somehow lighten the mysteries that grew more confusing each minute. Suddenly he craned his neck. For an instant he thought he had noticed— The car ducked into a tunnel of overhanging branches, and beyond it, there only a brief stretch of open road before they swung around a curve. But Ken's eye had been focused on the right location, and this time he had no doubt—a single window up under the roof showed a light.

"You look after this place alone?" Ken asked, as Williams straightened the wheel. "Or is there a whole staff?"

"What's he want a staff for? He don't live here—yet, I mean," he added. Then Williams bent forward briefly to send Ken a suspicious look. "What are you so interested for?"

"Nothing—just curious. Empty houses always interest me," Ken murmured.

Williams grunted. They reached the gate, and he stopped the car, removed the key ring from where it hung on the dashboard, and got out to walk toward the gate.

"We've got to get back there," Ken whispered swiftly, as Williams busied himself with the lock. "When we're down the road a way, grab him. I'll take care of the car."

Sandy stared at him, but nodded once quickly to show that he understood, just as Williams got back into the car and started through the now wide-open gate. On the road he stopped again, once more left the car, and walked back to relock the gate.

Sandy looked at Ken, but Ken shook his head. There was no time now to explain that he had suddenly realized why Brinkly had let them go so easily—had, in fact, hurried their departure as quickly as was consistent with his suave manners.

"Brinkly planning to remodel the attic?" Ken asked

idly, when Williams had returned to the car once more and was driving them, at the boys' request, toward the powerhouse lane where their own car was parked.

Williams looked suspicious again. "Why? What's it to you?"

"Nothing. I just noticed a light in the attic as we drove past, and—"

"You're crazy! There's nobody up there!" The denial was too quick and too violent.

Ken was sure now. He nudged Sandy. The big redhead dropped his arm across Williams' shoulders and forced it down between the man's body and the seat. His other arm stretched across Williams' chest, and he clamped the man in a bearlike grip. In the instant that Williams' hands flew off the wheel, Ken reached over and grabbed it, and shut off the switch. Then he snaked his foot under Sandy's and pressed down on the brake pedal. The car slowed and stopped.

Williams was gasping for breath and freedom.

"Take it easy," Sandy advised him, "and you won't get hurt." And he continued to hold the man's arms useless against his sides. "What'll we do with him?" he asked Ken.

"Hold him a minute." Ken was opening the door on his side and leaping out. "See if I can find something to tie him with. We've got stuff in our own car, but—O.K." he called, from the rear of the station wagon, where he had found a sound length of rope among a jumble of odds and ends. "This'll do."

He rounded the car to the driver's side and opened the door. "Put your feet out," he commanded Williams.

"You won't get away with this," Williams grunted, thrusting his legs through the opening with a force that was clearly intended to knock Ken down.

But Ken side-stepped and Sandy tightened his grip. "I said take it easy. O.K., Ken?" Sandy slid along the seat, pulling the upper part of Williams' body with him, so that the man was stretched almost at full length.

“Fine.” Ken whipped the rope around the ankles and knotted it fast. “That’s done. Now can you turn him over and get his hands behind him? Then we can tie them too.”

“Sure.” Sandy heaved. Williams flopped and struggled like a great fish, but Sandy’s strength was too much for him in his awkward unbraced position. “Quiet down now.” Sandy said a moment later, pulling the hands around and holding them together in the small of Williams’ back. “Arms break easy in this position, you know.”

In another minute Williams was completely helpless.

“I’ll get you for this!” he declared loudly. “When the boss finds out—” The words died to a gurgle as Ken thrust a handkerchief in his mouth and knotted another one over it to hold it in place.

“Good,” Ken gasped. They were both out of breath. “Now let’s carry him into the underbrush here on this side of the road. He’ll be safe there for a while.”

Sandy hauled Williams out of the car, swung him across one shoulder, and followed Ken across the narrow ditch and into the woods opposite Brinkly’s property. Some hundred feet from the road they deposited him near a small tree. Ken had brought another length of rope from the car, and he looped it through the bonds around Williams’ wrists and then tied it to the tree, close enough to the ground that Williams would be unable to stand up.

“Now come on.”

Sandy followed Ken back to the car, waiting until he was out of Williams’ earshot before he asked, “What’s it all about? Or are you just making this up you go along?”

Ken grinned at him briefly. Both of them were feeling a lift of spirits now that they were active again, rather than passively submitting to Brinkly’s velvet gloved directions.

“I’m still guessing,” Ken admitted, “but I think it makes sense.” He slid under the wheel of the station wagon, started it up, and drove ahead. “Have to go to the lane so we can turn around,” he muttered.

Then, swiftly, he explained to Sandy his own

conclusion that they had discovered nothing as yet which could be considered proof of a plot to frame Frank Brown.

"I still think there's uranium on the property," he said "but even that's no *proof* of anything. And I think Horns been working for Brinkly. But if Brinkly's going to go on denying he ever knew Horn, he's probably smart enough to get away with it. Look at how he handled that whole business just now—and he couldn't have known what he was walking into until Williams warned him at the gate."

"Maybe Horn will talk"

"Why should he? What have we got on him? He was scared there for a while and he still seemed scared when he and Clark left—about being burned by uranium—"

"It was a good trick just the same," Sandy declared.

"Until Brinkly stepped in and took it over," Ken admitted with a wry grin.

"So where are we?"

"Right back where we started—almost," Ken admitted. "We've got a good motive and lots of suspicions. But we can't prove anything without Old Tom."

"And"—Sandy's voice was a groan—"we've got no more idea of where *he* is than we ever had."

"Haven't we?" Ken swung into the lane, stopped, and shifted into reverse.

Sandy grabbed his arm. "The light in the attic! So that's why he got us out of the house so fast! Let's go, fellow!" He leaned out of his side of the car to check on the safety of the road before Ken backed out. "O.K. on my side." He ducked his head in again as Ken gave it the gun. "Hey! You're going the wrong way! We're going to get Pop, aren't we?"

Ken moved into forward speed and stepped down hard. "We killed too much time already, I'm afraid. If they're going to get Tom out they must have started by now."

Sandy sank back against the seat. "You're going to drive right in? Just like that?"

Ken nodded. "Maybe not all the way, but if the coast is

clear . . .”

They had no trouble with the gate; the locks were well oiled and the hinges moved smoothly. Ken turned his lights as they started up the long driveway. “We’ll put the car just where it was. Let them think Williams came back—maybe they’ll waste time looking him.”

Running almost silently in second speed they swung around the circle and nosed the station wagon into the shed.

“One minute.” Sandy slipped toward the front of the car. There was a soft clink and then the hood lifted. Sandy bent over the motor for an instant. Then he closed the hood again. “Wait until they try and start that baby. They’ll think an artillery battery opened fire.”

“Nice going,” Ken murmured. “Now do the same thing to that beautiful chariot over there.” He indicated a long, low, custom-built convertible parked in the driveway just beyond the shed door.

“Brinkly’s, huh? This is a pleasure.”

“Have a good time,” Ken whispered. “I’m going over here to fix Mr. Horn’s wagon.”

A moment later they met near Brinkly’s car. “Now,” Sandy said, “let’s take a look through the kitchen window and see what’s cooking.”

Ken grabbed Sandy’s arm and pulled him away from the car. “Get down! Car coming!”

They fell prone behind a ragged privet as headlights appeared at the far end of the driveway. The car came up fast, swinging around the circle with a great scattering of gravel. The headlights wiped their hiding place with blinding light before the car swung and came to a stop. Its lights gleamed for an instant on the station wagon, and then flicked out.

“I hope Brinkly’s still got them here.” Horn’s voice was quivering with rage. “I’ll show them a burn or two. Pyrogallo! I’ll bet they dusted it on every page of that phony notebook.”

“Sure—sure,” Clark jeered. “You’ll show them! If you hadn’t been snooping around on your own, trying to double-cross Brinkly, we wouldn’t have searched their room separately. We’d have known how we got black fingers without making fools out of ourselves. Brinkly’s going to be plenty sore about that.”

“Brinkly!” Horn snorted. “He may scare you, but. . .”

The men rounded the corner of the house and their voices faded away.

Ken was at the car in an instant, opening the hood and clawing at the distributor wires. “Only got a minute,” he grunted. “If they mention seeing the wagon. . . .” He closed the hood and grabbed for Sandy’s arm. “Around the back of the house—the woods’ll cover us if—”

They got no farther than the corner of the house when the front porch light flashed on and Brinkly came out.

CHAPTER XVIII

TOM TURNS UP

THREE FEET FROM COVER the boys froze, hoping that the dark coveralls and complete immobility would keep them from being seen. Brinkly kept his eyes straight ahead, the flashlight in his hand bisecting the circular drive to point an illuminating finger at the shed.

“It can’t be!” He spoke over his shoulder. “Williams has it. He took the kids.”

“Well, it is, boss,” Clark said.

The light picked up the station wagon’s taillights and was thrown back in brilliant red pin points.

“It is!” Brinkly sounded incredulous. “But where is Williams?”

“Maybe he took off.” Horn sounded a little smug, as if Brinkly’s discomfiture was making up for the stupid terror he himself had displayed a short time before. “Maybe he figured it’s too warm for him around here.”

“Shut up!” Brinkly’s suavity was not in evidence. “When I want your advice I’ll ask for it.”

“Listen, Brinkly,” Horn blustered, “I’m not one of your—”

“I said shut up!” Brinkly turned his light on the detective. “You’re not in the clear, my fat friend, so don’t *you* get any ideas about leaving.” He spoke to Clark. “Get the old fool out of here and get him off the place. If those kids pulled a fast one on Williams we may have the police

here at any minute.”

Ken nudged Sandy as the men went inside again. They moved around the corner and kept their eyes fastened on the patch of light that fell on the weedy driveway.

From the porch came the sound of scuffling—feet dragged across the uneven boards. “I don’t want to go.” The voice was thin and querulous—an old man’s voice.

The boys tensed, and Sandy made an involuntary move forward. Ken pulled him back.

“I want to go back to Brentwood. I don’t know why—”

“Keep quiet!” There was more than irritation in Brinkly’s tone. There was doubt and worry. “Hurry up, Clark. Drag him if you have to, but get him out of here.”

“O.K.” Clark’s brevity had an edge to it. “Come on.”

“I don’t—” The words stopped abruptly. Clark, dragging an old man after him, came into view. They stopped a few feet from the porch steps and Clark turned around. “I’ll need someone to hold him in the car. How about Horn?”

“Take him along.” Brinkly sounded as if he were happy to rid himself of Horn’s presence. “And see if you can manage this job without messing it up.”

Horn got behind the old man and pushed him roughly. “In the car.” He waited until the unwilling passenger had crawled into the rear seat and then got in after him.

Clark slipped into the driver’s position and the starter hummed.

For a second or two everything seemed normal. And then a terrific report split the air as blue flame rocketed out of the exhaust pipe. Clark stopped the starter and the silence closed in on them. He tried it again and once more the night was shattered.

Brinkly clattered down the porch steps and ran up to the car. “Don’t waste time. Take the station wagon and get going!”

Clark turned a puzzled face toward him. “Can’t understand it,” he said. “It was running fine a few minutes

ago." He tried a third time and Brinkly jumped inches off the ground at the cannonade.

"Take the station wagon!" he ordered savagely.

Clark slid out of the car and ran across to the shed, leaving Horn to pull Tom out of the back seat. The station wagon bucked and shuddered under the impact of the violent backfiring.

"Never mind," Brinkly shouted when the din stopped. "Come here."

"*They did it!*" horn cried. "They fixed the cars!"

"It looks like it." Brinkly was calmer now. The new setback seemed to have steadied his nerves. "Clark," he went on, "if those kids did this they must still be around here." His voice was loud and clear. "They couldn't have got very far in a couple of minutes."

"Sure," Clark agreed. "My car was running fine when—"

"O.K." Brinkly had half turned around and his words reached Ken and Sandy. "You two armed?"

Horn and Clark nodded.

"Take the old man in the house for a while," Brinkly continued. "I'll get Williams' shotgun and we'll go looking." He seemed to raise his voice to an even higher level. "Can't blame a man for shooting a couple of trespassers in the dark, can you?" As he urged the men back to the house he added, "We'll work the back woods first—they'll try and hide there."

The slam of the front door was a period to Brinkly's words. The light went out and once more they were in complete darkness.

Sandy waited for Ken to make the first move, but after a moment of taut waiting he stirred. "Well, let's go. We can cut around the shed and—"

"Too easy," Ken mumbled. "Brinkly wanted us to hear that."

Sandy waited a second. "You're right," he muttered. Then he began to move toward the rear of the house

instead of the front. At the rear corner he hesitated momentarily to take a quick look around. "All clear."

They ran, half crouched, across the ragged lawn and ducked into the protection of the trees, penetrating the heavy growth for ten feet before stopping and turning around. From their new vantage point they could see the back window of the lighted kitchen, but they could see nothing of what was going on inside. A minute went by and then another. Indistinct shadows crossed the lighted rectangle in an aimless pattern.

"I hope you're right." Sandy's mouth was almost touching Ken's ear.

"Have to be," Ken answered. "If Brinkly wanted us to go toward the front, there must be something going to happen out *here* that—"

A flashlight popped into view at the far corner of the house almost beneath the kitchen window. It probed the darkness briefly and then vanished. An instant later it sprang into life again and almost at the same time a second one joined it.

"Spread out." The voice was Clark's and the words were accompanied by a gesture that sent the ray of light swinging in an arc.

"We guessed wrong." Sandy had a tight grip on Ken's arm. "They *are* searching the back first."

"Are they?" Ken breathed. "Look again."

The two lights were close together, one behind the other. They were moving in a line.

Sandy exhaled slowly. "There're only two lights and they're not searching—they're moving toward the lake."

"And so are we." Ken slid off between the trees taking a course parallel to the one being set by the two lights, but several hundred feet to one side. They moved slowly—they had to keep their progress silent. But even so they made much better progress than the moving lights. Already the distance between the two groups had been increased appreciably.

Ken veered toward the left, taking a diagonal that would soon put them directly in a line with Clark now some distance behind. Ken stopped suddenly. Under their feet the brush had vanished and overhead the stars shone through a narrow break in the heavy foliage.

“Thought so,” he murmured. “A path.”

They could double their speed now that there was no danger of crackling leaves and snapping twigs, and the narrow strip of sky above served as a guide. The lights behind were lost to view by the time Ken came up against the fence. Some fifty feet beyond the barrier the waters of the lake gleamed faintly.

Ken was fumbling at the woven-wire obstacle, his probing hands making small sounds. “Here—gate.” He pulled Williams’ key ring from his pocket and tried the keys. The third one fitted. The gate swung open silently and was relocked just as quietly.

They were standing on a small beach—man-made—just like the Browns’. The white sand threw back some of the starlight, and their eyes, accustomed to the darkness of the woods, saw the rowboat almost immediately. It was pulled up on shore, half out of water, and secured by a line running across the sand to a tree stump.

Behind them on the path they began to hear sounds of approaching footsteps and an occasional indistinct word.

“Oars in the boat,” Sandy whispered. “Shall we—”

Ken ran across the beach to the stump and when he ran back he was gathering up the line. “We’ll stick around—just want to make sure they do, too.” He threw the line into the boat and took hold of the bow. Together they floated the small craft.

“Now,” Ken said. “A good shove.”

The rowboat surged backward, rippling the water as the blunt stern plowed through. The boat vanished—melted into invisibility.

“Behind the rocks,” Ken whispered. He trotted along the water’s edge in the direction of the Brown land. When

the flashlights reached the gate, Ken and Sandy were crouched behind a big boulder whose friendly bulk promised adequate protection from the most inquisitive rays of light.

The gate opened and slammed back against the fence. The sand gleamed and sparkled in the sharp beams of light.

“Where’s the boat?” Horn seemed to waddle as he plunged over the deep sand. “Let’s get going. Those kids’ll get wise and come back here.”

“Brinkly’ll keep them busy up front,” Clark said. “And the boat’s right in front of you some place.” He turned a little and his light picked up Old Tom’s drooping figure. “Come on, old-timer. We’re going for a row.”

Old Tom was a pitiful figure as he stood there outlined in the light. His shoulders sagged, his arms hung limply at his sides. “Row?” he repeated dully. “I want to go back to Brentwood. I don’t like this place. You said—”

“Can’t you stop that whining?” Horn asked irritably. “And where is that rowboat?”

“Look around for it, can’t you?” Clark snapped back. “It’s tied to a stump.”

Horn’s light searched in quick jabs. “This stump?”

“There’s only one stump on the beach.”

Horn swung around pinning Clark and Tom in his light. “Well, there’s no rope here. Maybe you’d better find it since you’re so smart.”

“All right, all right.” Clark came across the sand dragging Tom after him. “It must be—” He broke off as he saw the stump innocent of any line. He dropped Tom’s arm and pointed his light directly downward as he crouched over to see better. “Did you walk along here?”

“No.”

“Hold on to him.” Clark pushed Tom toward the detective and wheeled to trot toward the shore. His light moved around in small circles picking up the footprints Ken had left and then finding the deeper indentations

where both boys had dug their feet into the sand while pushing the boat away.

Clark looked out over the black water for an instant and then looked down again.

“Well?” Horn was impatient. “Where is it?”

“Gone.”

Horn seemed on the point of strangling. “Gone!”

“That’s what I said. Those kids have been here—and not long ago.” He pointed to the water. “Still muddy.”

Horn forgot Tom momentarily in his panic. He ran to the water’s edge awkwardly, his round body rocking back and forth like a penguin’s. “Then we’re trapped— no car, no boat.” He wheeled around to throw his flash on Tom. “You stay there!”

“Look,” Clark said. His flashlight pointed out the indentations in the sand and then lifted to follow the tracks the boys had made in reaching their hiding place. “They can’t be far ahead. This time we’ll get them.”

“Never mind them, you fool.” Horn had grabbed Clark’s arm. “How are *we* going to get away?”

Clark shook the arm off. “There’s a boat at the Brown place. I’ll go get it.” He gesticulated again. “That’s where these footprints are headed.” He slipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew it clutching a gun. “And if I find them. . .”

“No, you don’t!” Horn planted himself in Clark’s path. “You’re not leaving me here. How do I know you’ll come back?”

Clark looked down at the short detective. “I’ll come back, don’t worry.” He lifted one side of his mouth in a lopsided grin. “You wouldn’t be afraid, would you?”

“We’ll all go.” Horn ignored the insulting question. Clark laughed. “You think you can drag him over those rocks?” When Horn stood silent in the face of this irrefutable argument, Clark pushed past him and began to follow the footsteps toward the rocks, his light in one hand, his revolver in the other. He was heading straight

toward the boys' hiding place—another hundred feet would put him beside them.

CHAPTER XIX

CLEANUP AT THE LAKE

FOR THE TIME it took Clark to make ten slow steps the boys watched him, their eyes riveted to the muzzle of the gun that glinted so brightly. Ken made a sudden move—a silent leap that carried him six feet from Sandy. Here he ducked behind another rock. Now they were on opposite sides of the path Clark would follow if he continued on his present course. There was just a bare chance that together they could jump the armed man and put him out of combat before he could suspect their presence.

“Wait!” Horn was running after Clark. “I’m coming with you.”

Clark didn’t even turn his head. “Don’t leave him.” He kept on walking, his head down, his eyes taking in one telltale mark after the other.

Sandy fumbled at his feet; his fingers groped among the small stones until they found one the size of an egg. He gripped it firmly and half rose. Clark was only a few yards away—it would be hard to miss. But if he did. . .

From the left there was a faint swish of air and an instant later a faint splash out in the lake. Clark spun around, his light zooming over the water. For perhaps ten seconds he kept that position and then he turned and moved forward again.

Sandy heaved his missile, not at Clark, but far over his head into the lake as Ken had done.

This time the splash was unmistakable. Both flashlights searched the water's surface. The beams diverged, converged, and crossed back and forth. Then both came to a point and remained still. A faint streak of white had picked up the light.

"It's the boat!" Horn cried.

Clark raced across the beach to join him, the footprints forgotten. Both men watched the craft as it floated serenely on the quiet water.

"It's coming in—the wind's doing it." Clark's relief was apparent. "Those kids didn't figure on that."

Horn moved restlessly, his shoes almost in the water. "How long will it take? It isn't moving very fast."

A hundred feet offshore the boat, now broadside to the beach, seemed motionless. But it wasn't. It had come visibly closer since the light had first found it. Only the faintest disturbance of the glassy water betrayed the gentle movement that was slowly but surely carrying it to the waiting men.

Clark dropped to one knee and began to unlace his shoes. "I'll go after it."

"Now you're talking," Horn said. "We'll be out of here in five minutes. And once we take care of him"—he gestured toward the old man—"we won't care what those kids do." He knelt down beside Clark. "Need any help?"

"Go away." Clark pulled off his shoes and began to remove his socks. "Feel brave again, don't you?" He stood up and began to remove his coat. "Cover me from the beach and keep your eyes open for anything in the water. Keep both lights going. Those kids . . ."

Sandy turned swiftly; the sibilant sound of a zipper had struck his ear. He jumped to Ken's side. "No, you don't," he whispered. "You're not going in that water."

"Have to take the chance," Ken answered tersely. "If they ever get Tom out on the lake. . ."

"You can't!" Sandy grabbed Ken's arms. "Those lights'll pick you up."

Ken moved out of reach. "They won't. Horn'll keep them on Clark and I'll cut way out and come around behind the boat." He slipped out of his coveralls. "I can take care of Clark in the water. Your job's taking care of our fat friend if you get the chance." He paused for a second. "Can do?"

"Can do," Sandy mumbled, but he was speaking to himself. Ken had melted off into the darkness leaving behind only the faintest of ripples when he submerged.

Sandy swung around and his eyes opened wide. Clark was already in the water, swimming with a strong crawl stroke that was cutting the distance between him and the boat by a yard at each stroke. There was no doubt that he'd reach the boat even before Ken could turn to swing around behind it. Sandy clenched his fists helplessly. There was nothing he could do about that. But maybe. . .

Sandy began to move toward the open beach, his big body moving around rocks and between them. He was heading toward the back of the beach—toward the fence. Down below him, Horn had forced Tom to sit on the sand while the detective kept both beams of light concentrated on Clark's rapidly moving body and on the rowboat.

Sandy was clear of the rocks now, creeping along the fence to a point directly behind the detective. His eyes were fastened on his target, his hands feeling the way ahead carefully.

"Good!" Horn cried jubilantly.

Clark had reached the boat and had both hands on the bow, poising himself for the leap. On the beach Horn crouched as if he could help.

Sandy eyed the distance that separated him from Horn. He began to run, lengthening his stride as he gained momentum. Horn took a step sideways, and Sandy, going too fast to shift his course, saw that Tom was now in his way. But there was no stopping now. Far out in the water Clark had heaved himself across the gunwale, his body flashing in the brilliant light. That was all Sandy had time

to notice. He took to the air five feet behind Tom, his body hurtling over the obstacle in a long, looping dive. Horn half turned, warned by some sound. He was sideways when Sandy's flying shoulder hit him just above the hip.

Horn bent double like a hinge, his arms clawing at the air, both flashlights falling to the sand. His plump body was lifted up and flung toward the lake—the half-cry he managed to utter changed to a gurgle as he landed in two feet of water on his back.

Sandy landed on top of him, the hundred and ninety pounds completing the job started so well by the impact of a brawny shoulder. He locked his hands on Horn's shoulders and forced the wide-open mouth under water. Horn struggled helplessly. His hands clawed at Sandy's throat, his feet kicked convulsively.

Sandy pulled him out of the water, and once more slammed the head back under. Still holding him down, Sandy got to his knees, and then struggled to his feet hauling Horn with him. He drew him up on shore behind him.

There was no fight left in Horn. He staggered to his feet, his chest heaving, coughing water out of his gaping mouth. Sandy measured the swaying figure for an instant and for the second time that night his fist connected with the double chin. Horn slumped over backward, the soft sand cushioning the thud of his landing.

Only then could Sandy turn. Clark was in the boat backing water furiously to keep the craft twenty feet offshore.

"Sandy—Sandy Allen!" Tom's voice had wonder in it. "How—?"

"Hold it, Tom." Sandy took a step toward the water and Clark got to his feet holding one oar menacingly.

"Brinkly!" Clark's full-throated yell sent echoes racing back and forth. "Brinkly!"

Sandy picked up one of the flashlights and focused it full on Clark.

“Brinkly!” Clark’s voice was desperate.

Sandy groped for the second light and added its glare to the light he was throwing into Clark’s blinking eyes. If Ken was out there ready to start action the lights would help him.

Clark shaded his face with one hand. “Brinkly! Hurry up!”

Sandy spoke over his shoulder, his eyes searching the water for some sight of Ken.

One hand came over the side of the boat just behind Clark. A second joined it. They closed on the gunwale. Sandy held his breath.

“Brinkly!”

This time a faint answer floated through the trees. “Hurry. Watch—” Clark’s words were shut off as the boat lurched, came up, and dipped again. Clark dropped to the seat and clutched for support, the oar swaying wildly. He looked around, saw Ken’s hands, and slashed viciously at them with the edge of the blade. The hands vanished just in time.

But a moment later they clutched the boat again, this time on the other side. Once more the boat dipped and rose and dipped again. Water cascaded over the side. The hands left the gunwale and grabbed the oar. Half its length slid through Clark’s hands before he stopped it. Ken pulled harder and Clark leaned dangerously. Then Ken swung the oar so that the butt rested against Clark’s stomach. He stopped pulling and pushed ahead with all the force he could muster.

Clark’s grunt reached Sandy clearly. The man staggered, his arms making great circles as he fought to keep his balance. Ken jabbed again and Clark went over the side backward.

“Coming! Hold on!” Brinkly’s voice sounded dangerously close.

Ken didn’t even attempt to get into the boat; he dropped the oar inside and shoved hard. The light craft

skimmed shoreward as he flopped after it in water that was chest-deep, half swimming, half walking.

Sandy moved out to meet it, calling for Tom to hurry. He almost lifted the old man into the boat, waiting only long enough to indicate the bow before he turned back. Then he lifted the detective like a sack of flour and dumped him in, shoving him down on the floor between the rowing seat and the stern.

A second later Sandy was in the rowing position and fitting the oars to the locks. One heave brought the stern alongside of Ken. Sandy reached forward, hauled him in, and then threw his full weight against the oars. The boat was sluggish with its overload; it had less than three inches of clearance at the stern, and each time Sandy heaved, the three inches shrank to one.

“Straight out,” Ken gasped. He listened intently. “Clark’s making for shore.”

Back at the gate, Brinkly had stopped, his light swinging across the beach and then into the lake.

“Heads down,” Ken said quietly.

The light pointed toward them but the distance was too great for it to bridge. A splashing pulled the ray closer to shore. Clark was making the water foam as his arms rose and fell.

“Where are they?” Brinkly ran down to the water.

Sandy dug the oars in again and the boat moved off toward the center of the lake. Ken kept his head turned shoreward where Clark had reached bottom and was staggering up on the beach.

“They got away!” His words carried faintly.

Brinkly kept the light full on Clark. “Got away? Where’s Horn?”

“They got him too.”

The light turned toward the fence. It found the gate and went through.

“Give them a minute,” Ken said.

Sandy waited until the light had disappeared from

view, then he pulled the bow around until it headed back to the beach. When he was a few feet offshore he pulled on his left oar and headed downlake toward the powerhouse whose lights gleamed at them through the trees. The current helped and the boat picked up speed.

“Keep close to the shore,” Ken reminded.

“Don’t worry,” Sandy grunted. “I know what’s out there.”

Tom, silent until now, broke into the conversation. “How did you find me, Sandy?”

“It’s a long story, Tom,” Sandy said.

“Tom,” Ken said. “Answer two questions before we go any further. Were you paid not to go to work for the Browns a month ago? And who paid you?”

Sandy held the oars poised as they waited. “Sure,” Tom said. “He said it was a joke-a joke on the Browns. And then he said he’d pay me twenty dollars if I’d stay away from Brentwood for a while. He said it was part of the joke.”

“Who did?” Ken asked.

“Don’t you know?” Tom sounded surprised.

“Tom,” Sandy said. “Who was the man?”

“Him.” The darkness hid Tom’s pointing finger, but there was no doubt that it was directed at the bottom of the boat.

Ken sighed. “That does it, I guess.”

CHAPTER XX

A NEW VERDICT

TWENTY MINUTES LATER Ken pulled the convertible to a halt in front of an old building marked by a green light. Between him and Tom sat the conscious, but securely bound, Horn. In the rear seat Sandy kept a watchful eye on a similarly helpless Williams, now ungagged but speechless nevertheless.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Sandy said, eyeing the green light. “We’re not policemen—we can’t arrest people.”

Ken grinned at him. “What do you mean, we can’t? We did.” He got out of the car and came around to the other side. After Tom had gotten out, Ken dragged Horn across the seat and helped him stand. “Tom’s going to charge them with kidnaping or abduction or something. They took him across a state line, so it’s a Federal offense and a serious one.”

Horn snarled. “I didn’t kidnap him—you’ll never make it stick. I paid him to go to Rockville. Clark took him across the state line when he brought him up here.”

“And your friend Williams held him up here against his will,” Ken answered.

“You’re not going to dump it all on me!” Williams cried. “I only did what Brinkly and Clark and this guy told me to.”

“That’s fine,” Ken said, winking at Sandy. “Tell it to the

judge.”

Sandy began to crawl out. “I’m going to call Pop at the inn. He and Waddel better get down here to bail us out.”

They made a strange procession going up the walk. Horn led, his hands tied behind him, with Ken on his heels. Then came Tom, and finally Sandy with Williams across one shoulder, his feet still tied.

Ken stepped around when they got to the door and opened it. Then he turned to Sandy, a wide grin across his face. “Won’t have to call Pop. Listen.”

There was no mistaking that bellow. “I don’t care if Brinkly’s the King of Siam,” Pop was shouting. “He said those boys would be at the inn an hour ago. They’re not—and there’s no answer at the Brinkly house. Now, I ask you once more, are you going to send an officer up there with me, or do I go alone? If you’re so worried about your precious Brinkly you’d better send somebody with me to protect him.”

“Now look here, Mr. Allen,” a voice replied. “You can’t—”

“Don’t give me any more of that stuff! Hand me that phone. I’m going to call the governor!”

“Now wait a moment. There’s no need to call the—”

Ken pushed Horn through the doorway.

Three heads swiveled around. Behind the desk a red-faced, uncomfortable-looking sergeant seemed glad of the interruption. In front of him, Pop and Waddel stared at Ken and his captive and at Old Tom who blinked sheepishly in the light. When Sandy entered and dropped Williams on one of the benches, the amazement was complete.

“What’s going on?”

“You stay out of this!” Pop’s bellow cut the policeman off short. “You two all right?”

“Fine,” Sandy answered. “Tom’s O.K. too. And these are the two gentlemen who kidnaped him.”

“I want a lawyer!” Horn yelled suddenly. “I know my

rights.”

“Me too,” Williams parroted. “Call Brinkly. He’ll take care of us.”

“You’ll have to go get him.” Sandy grinned. “There’s something wrong with all the cars up there.”

“Listen!” The sergeant was banging his fist on the desk. “I’m in charge here!”

Waddel stepped quickly forward. “Certainly, officer. I represent this man here.” He indicated Tom. “We want these men charged with kidnaping. My state will also want to extradite them on a charge of armed robbery.”

“Listen, please.” The policeman was completely bewildered. “There’s no judge around at this time of night. I’ll have to hold all of you until we get this straightened out.”

“Fine.” Waddel smiled pleasantly. “I’ll put a call through to our district attorney and get the extradition started.”

“We’ll fight it!” Horn cried. “You’ve got no case.”

Waddel turned to Tom. “Are these the men who kidnaped and held you prisoner?”

Tom blinked. “Well,” he said, pointing to Horn, “he took me away from Brentwood. And he,” this time he pointed to Williams, “made me stay in the house by the lake.”

Waddel turned back to the sergeant but spoke for Horn’s benefit. “Maybe we’d better omit the extradition and hold them on the kidnaping charge. That’s a Federal offense—a capital offense,” he added slowly.

“Wait a minute!” Horn shouted. “You’re not going to pin a kidnaping rap on me. All I did—”

Waddel cut in smoothly. “In that case, maybe you’d prefer to waive extradition and stand trial in Brentwood on a charge of complicity in an armed robbery?”

“I want a lawyer,” Horn said after a moment.

“Good,” Waddel answered. “You get yourself a lawyer—a good one, I’d suggest. I’m going to call Brentwood and

start the wheels turning.”

“Now listen here,” the policeman said, making another attempt to control the proceedings. “I’m in charge here, and—”

“You talk too much,” Pop told him. He joined Sandy and Ken, and dropped his voice. “Go on—what happened?”

The sight of the almost apoplectic policeman reminded Sandy of his pet hobby. “You tell him, Ken,” he said, trying not to laugh out loud. “I’m going to get the camera—I want a picture of him before he blows up.”

“Never mind the pictures,” Pop said.

“Got to get some.” Sandy was running off. “Global will want some and we can use the money after the way Ken threw ours away at the inn.”

“Don’t *you* run out,” Pop said to Ken. “Start talking.”

“Brinkly’s behind the whole business,” Ken said. “There’s uranium ore up there and he wanted all the land he could buy. The reason we got confused is that Horn didn’t know what Brinkly was after. They seemed to be working against each other and we couldn’t connect them. If we had realized that earlier—”

Sandy came in on the run, his camera and flash gun ready. “Sure,” he added on his way past. “Their right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing—but they both got black.”

Pop looked after his son helplessly. He shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder about him. What’s he talking about?”

Ken was smiling. “A little trick he figured out to spot a snooper. But he’s right. Horn didn’t know how much was involved, and when he found out, he tried to hold Brinkly up for more money.”

Pop held up his hand. “Look, Ken. I’ve had a long day. Take it easy. Start from the beginning.”

Waddel joined them in time to hear Pop’s speech. “I got things started,” he said. “Now, Ken, let’s hear the whole story.”

Back at the desk a flash bulb flared. “That’s fine,

officer,” Sandy put another bulb in the holder. “Now one more with the prisoners. These’ll be in all the big papers tomorrow. I hope,” he added.

“Well,” Ken said, “it’s a long story.”

It was. Sandy had all the pictures taken before Ken finished, and before they’d got halfway through a hurried meal several hours later, a Global News man had appeared to write the story and rush Sandy’s undeveloped film back to New York.

The main courtroom in the Brentwood courthouse was almost empty when Ken and Sandy slipped inside two days later. Besides the boys, there were six people present, the judge, the district attorney, Waddel, and all three members of the Brown family. The boys sat down in the seat nearest the door. Standing before the judge’s bench, the district attorney was speaking.

“The case is so involved,” he said, “that if it please Your Honor I will limit it to those portions essential to the motion to vacate the judgment against Frank Brown.”

“Proceed.”

The district attorney cleared his throat. “The plot against Frank Brown was instigated by C. A. Brinkly, who discovered that there was uranium ore on some of the land bordering Black Lake. He had succeeded in purchasing most of the potentially valuable property around the lake front, and, in fact, other properties in the village, for he evidently foresaw a future land boom. He was, however, unable to acquire the Brown property, and since the richest ore seemed to be on this land, Brinkly determined to force the sale. A technique, Your Honor, Brinkly seems to have used successfully in the past.”

Sandy fidgeted in his seat. “He sure likes to talk, doesn’t he?” he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

“Brinkly,” the district attorney continued, “engaged a private detective of dubious reputation—David Horn—to bring Frank Brown to financial desperation. Horn achieved this by getting two men to rob the Brentwood bank and

implicate Brown in the process. The scrap of paper that played so large a part in Brown's conviction was secured from the Brown house by a window cleaner substituting for Tom Simpson. Simpson had been duped by Horn into leaving Brentwood on the grounds that a joke was being perpetrated on Brown."

Once more the district attorney stopped, this time to drink some water. "Brown's defense cost a great deal of money. And after his conviction—to complete the depredation of Brown's savings—Horn offered his services to Mrs. Brown, declaring that he could clear her husband. This was scarcely his true intention. He did, however, obtain a considerable amount of money from Mrs. Brown and might eventually have driven her to sell the Black Lake property to get more. It was at this point that young Holt and Allen discovered the whereabouts of Simpson. When Horn learned of this, he notified Brinkly who sent one of his men, Clark, to remove Simpson to Black Lake."

The district attorney turned around, saw the boys, and smiled at them. It seemed quite obvious that he was finding his present task highly gratifying. "Unfortunately for Brinkly," he continued, facing the judge again, "the afore-mentioned Holt and Allen were puzzled by Tom Simpson's fortuitous second disappearance, and further were not satisfied with Horn's explanation of certain of his activities." He smiled up at the judge. "Your Honor may have heard of these two before."

"The court has," the judge answered solemnly. He coughed and held up a newspaper with large headlines across the top. "It would appear that their actions have been adequately described by the press." He bent down to look at the paper and then looked up with a trace of a smile. "Well illustrated, at that." He resumed his judicial air. "Proceed."

"The grand jury, Your Honor, has indicted Brinkly, Clark, Horn, and Williams. Additional indictments may follow. Also indicted are two men—both of known criminal

record—for the actual robbery of the Brent-wood bank. I have here signed confessions from Horn and Williams which make it certain that all concerned will pay for their part in this crime. However, that is for the future. Of importance to this motion are the sections of these confessions which completely clear Frank Brown of complicity in any of the criminal activities. It is my pleasure, Your Honor, to join Mr. Waddel in a motion to vacate judgment against Frank Brown.”

“Granted.” The judge made a notation and then looked up. “Proceed.”

“We further move, Your Honor, for an acquittal.”

There was a long pause while the judge shuffled some papers on his bench.

“Can’t he hurry up?” Sandy whispered. “It’s all cut and dried.”

“Judicial dignity.” Ken grinned. “And shut up.”

“Frank Brown.” The judge spoke suddenly. “You have been the innocent victim of a fiendishly clever plot—so well formulated that the jury who convicted you could have done no less. The court is grateful to the”—he looked over his glasses at the boys—“aforementioned Holt and Allen, and thankful that further evidence has been unearthed to clear you of this crime. It is the decision of this court that the verdict of guilty be set aside and a verdict of acquittal be entered.”

He banged the gavel down on its block and stood up to extend a hand. “Congratulations, Frank.”

Mrs. Brown and Roger had risen, and, after clinging for a moment to Mr. Brown, had turned and were rapidly coming up the aisle toward the boys.

Sandy jumped out of his seat and headed toward the door. “Got to get the story to Pop,” he mumbled over his shoulder. “Come on, Ken.”

“Wait!” Mrs. Brown called. “Wait!”

“No time now,” Ken answered as he sprinted after Sandy. “We’ll see you later.”

Outside, and safe from the tearful thanks both of them feared, they slowed down to a walk. Sandy mopped his face with a handkerchief.

Ken grinned at him. "You're as red as a beet. What's the matter? Can't you take it?"

"I notice you didn't stay there, either," Sandy retorted. "And *you* look like a boiled lobster if you want—"

"Lobster!" Ken exclaimed. "I forgot." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled envelope. "Got a letter from a boy I knew at school. His father owns some lobster boats out on Long Island. He wants to know if we want to spend a couple of days there."

Sandy cast another apprehensive glance over his shoulder. "If the Browns can't get at us, and if there's no uranium there, I'll go."

"Nothing but lobsters and fish—fish and lobsters," Ken answered.

"No clams? I like clam chowder."

"Sure," Ken said. "There must be clams."

"Good. When are we going? Clams, lobsters, and fish sound good to me."

There were other things there, too, but the boys had no way of knowing that, as their minds turned in welcome relief to the thought of a few days of sun and salt air. Neither of them had the slightest idea of what awaited them in the adventure that was to be known as *The Clue of the Marked Claw*.