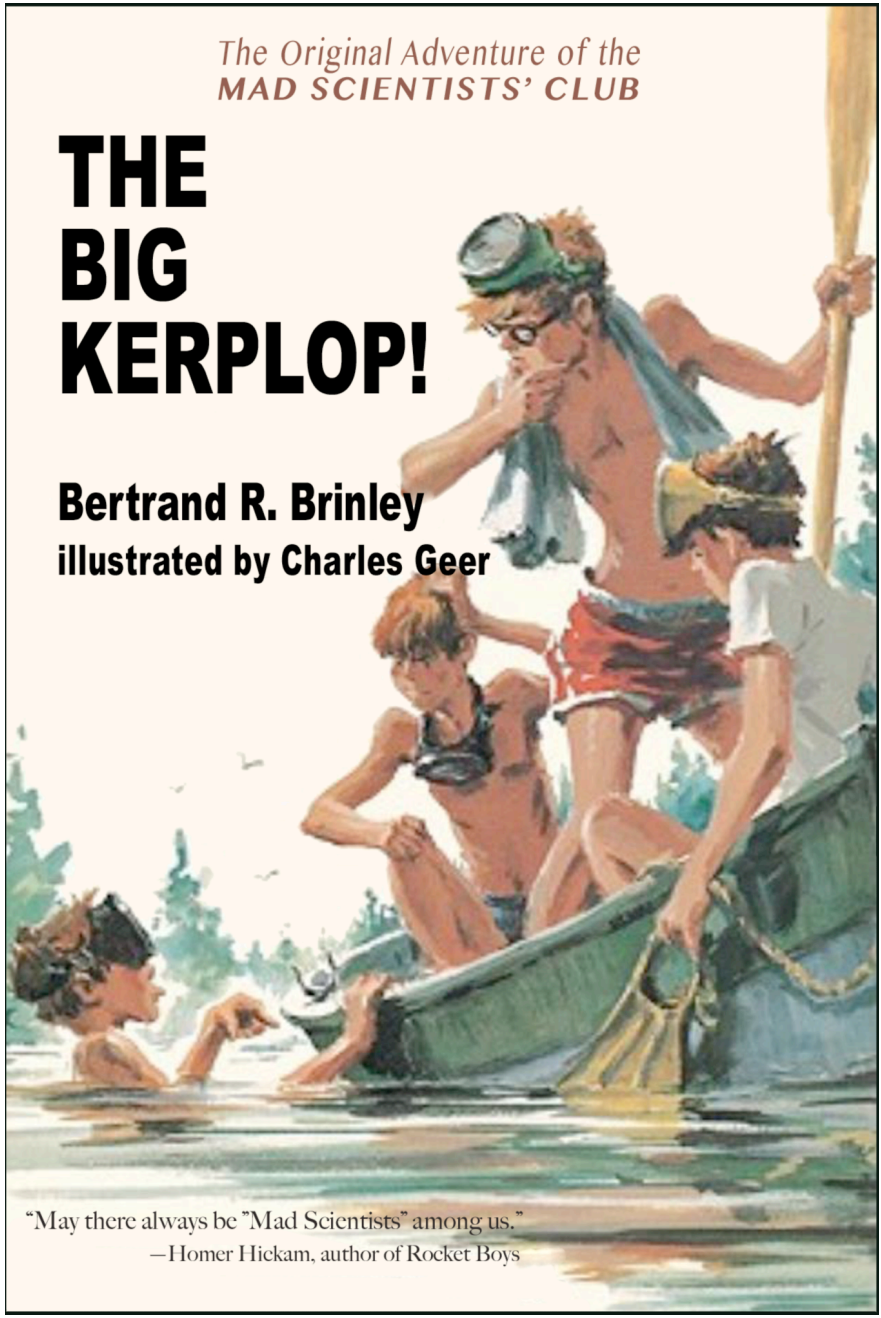
The Original Adventure of the
MAD SCIENTISTS' CLUB

THE BIG KERPLOP!

Bertrand R. Brinley
illustrated by Charles Geer



"May there always be "Mad Scientists" among us."
—Homer Hickam, author of Rocket Boys

The Big Kerplop!

Another Adventure of The Mad Scientists of Mammoth Falls

By Bertrand Brinley

with illustrations by Charles Geer

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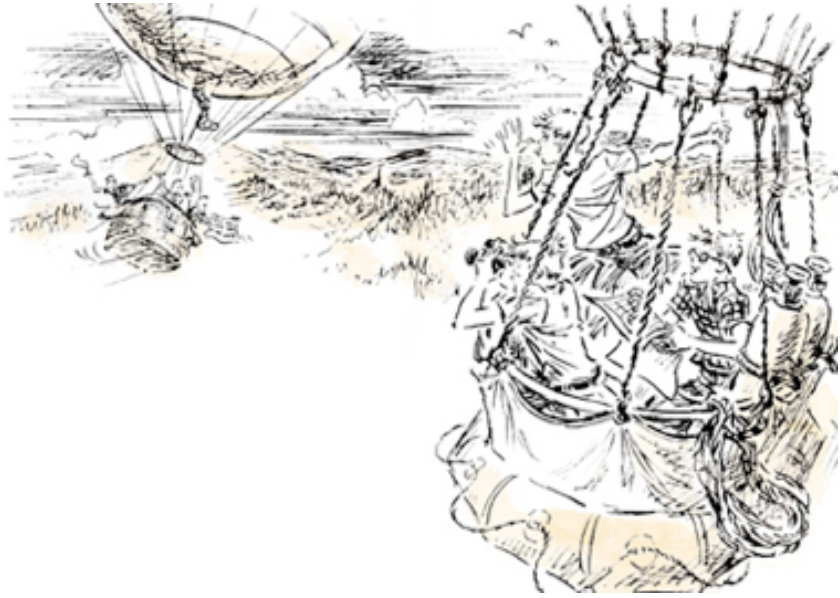


The Big Kerplop!

A LOT OF PEOPLE have asked me how the Mad Scientists' Club first got organized. And I usually ask them, "What do you mean, 'organized'?" Things like our club don't really get organized. They just sort of happen.

I guess if I had to pick a day the whole thing got started, I'd have to pick that creepy, overcast, fogbound day that Jeff Crocker and I made the mistake of asking Harmon Muldoon to go fishing with us on Strawberry Lake. That was the day of the big B-52 bomber scramble at Westport Field, when a mysterious object plopped into the lake and set in motion a chain of events that nobody in Mammoth Falls will ever forget.

As it turned out, the thing didn't really do much harm – like killing anybody, for instance — but it sure ruined the fishing for a week. And it set the whole town of Mammoth Falls on its ear for most of a month. But let me tell you how it all got started.

There is something about Harmon Muldoon that is just plain bad news. Not that he means to cause trouble; he just breeds it, wherever he is. We hadn't been out on the lake for more than fifteen minutes before he was digging into the lunch we'd stowed under the stem seat so it would keep dry and not smell too fishy when we ate it. "Excuse me, Harmon," said Jeff, pulling a crab with his right oar just in time to add a mouthful of water to the sandwich Harmon was biting into. "I just thought that peanut butter might be a little dry." Harmon choked and sputtered and coughed up half the mouthful he was trying to swallow.

"Jeepers! I didn't think you'd get seasick so soon," Jeff sneered.

I busted out laughing, and that made Harmon all the madder. He grabbed what was left of the sandwich and flung it the length of the boat at me. His aim was pretty good, and the biggest part of it splattered against the left side of my neck. But his foot must have slipped, because he catapulted over the stern and into the lake.

"Hey! Get out of there, Harmon, you'll poison the fish!" Jeff yelled at him. We were both laughing when he surfaced and started flailing his way back to the boat. He put both hands on the gunwale and started to pull himself over the side.

"Knock it off, you ninny." Jeff slapped one of his hands with the blade of an oar. "You board a boat over the stern, not over the side. You wanna capsize us?"

"I would, except it might get the rest of the lunch wet," Harmon sputtered, as he eased himself hand over hand around to the stem.

We helped him in and wrung his wet clothes out, and Jeff gave him a towel to rub down with. There wasn't a chance in the world of his clothes drying out unless the sun broke

through the overcast. And just then it was so foggy we couldn't see more than fifty feet from the boat.

Jeff and I set about baiting hooks and putting sinkers on our lines. We handed Harmon a rod, but he just sat there in his underwear with his knees knocking together, letting the end of it dip into the water. Harmon doesn't have the temperament for fishing. Fishing takes a great deal of patience and a lot of quiet contemplation, and Harmon is too nervous for that. If something isn't happening every minute, he wants to make something happen. We hadn't had our lines in the water for more than five minutes when he turned on the radio he'd brought with him.

"Turn that thing down," Jeff muttered between clenched teeth. "You'll scare the fish away."

"Go blow your horn," said Harmon. "Music is good for the soul."

"We're not fishing for sole, lunkhead, we're fishing for bass."

Harmon snorted. "Oh, you're a real panic! How come you're not on TV, like all the rest of the comics?" Instead of turning the volume down, he turned it up.

Just as he did, the program was interrupted for a public service announcement. The Air Force had scheduled a practice alert for the strategic bomber squadron stationed at Westport Field, the announcer said, and jet aircraft would be taking off from the field intermittently during the next two hours in flights of four or five. Jeff and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. We knew that the bombers always took off on a heading that took them right out over the water, so they could make for the gap in the hills at the northwest comer of the lake where all the swamps and marshes are.

When they passed over us, they'd be only a couple of hundred feet in the air, and the noise and shock waves would drive all the fish to the bottom.

"If we can't fish, why don't we eat lunch?" Harmon suggested.

"Is that all you think about?" Jeff asked him. "It's a wonder you're not as fat as your cousin Freddy."

"There's a difference," Harmon explained. "Freddy just lives to eat. I eat to live. And I burn it all off, so it doesn't go to fat."

"Must be a pretty slow burn," I said. "Or is that a money belt you wear around your waist?"

Just then we heard the pulsating roar of the first bomber rumbling over our heads. We all ducked instinctively. The sound was so magnified in the dense fog that the huge plane seemed to be not more than twenty feet above us.

"Whew-w-w!" Jeff whistled. "The wind from that one parted my hair. I hope they have their landing gear up by the time they get to us."

Three more planes thundered over our heads, each one seeming to create a more deafening bombardment of shock waves than the one that preceded it. The smell of JP-4 was everywhere around us.

"Whew, that stinks!" said Harmon. "I don't know about the fish, but it sure ought to make the mosquitoes scarce." Then the fifth plane in the flight came roaring at us, setting up a high-pitched clatter of sound that made the boat vibrate.

"That boy's in trouble!" shouted Harmon.

"Yeah! He's got a problem," Jeff shouted back, as the blast from the plane's engines tailed off in the distance.

Whatever the problem was… it landed in the lake with a

loud KERPLOP! It fell so close to us you could almost feel the force of the splash. But the fog was so thick we couldn't see a thing.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Harmon shouted. "They're bombin' us!"

"Keep your skin on, bathing beauty," Jeff cautioned him. "And stay in your seat."

Then the boat began to rock, and we knew that whatever had hit the water was large enough to make waves two or three feet high.

"Man the oars!" I shouted to Jeff, and he grabbed them in time to turn the nose of the boat into a wave big enough to capsize us. We sat there, pitching up and down for a few seconds, and then Jeff started pulling slowly toward the source of the disturbance.

Harmon had forgotten all about being cold and was half standing, half kneeling, on the stern seat, peering into the fog. "Maybe his bomb bay doors busted loose," he said.

"It was heavier'n that" Jeff grunted between pulls at the oars. "More like a whole tail section."

Finally the boat stopped pitching, and we found ourselves in smooth water. But there was nothing to be seen except some air bubbles breaking the surface of the lake. Whatever hit the water had long since sunk out of sight.

"Fish or no fish, I think we'd better head back for shore," said Jeff, "Whatever fell off that bomber might be something the Air Force wants to recover, and maybe we can give them a clue as to where it is."

"Give them a clue?" Harmon snorted. "It's obvious where it is. It's fight there!" And he pointed to where the bubbles were still rising to the surface.

Jeff groaned. "O.K., fathead! Maybe you'd like to step over

there and tread water for a few hours so we'll know where to look when we get back out here."

"Look out who you're callin' fathead!" Harmon exclaimed, swinging his wet pants at Jeff's head. Jeff pushed him back in his seat with the butt of an oar.

"Sit down and listen to me," he said. "We don't know where we are, and we can't see the shoreline from here. If we want to find this spot again, or come anywhere close to it, we've got to use our noodles. Now, we're going to row back to shore on a compass heading so we know what direction to take to find this spot again. And we're going to count how many strokes it takes to get there, so we have some idea of the distance. You get up front, Harmon, and count the strokes. Charlie, you sit in the stern and handle the compass."

Jeff has a no-nonsense way about him that makes everybody listen when he talks. I took the compass from him and put another oar in the stern oarlock to steer with. We headed off due northeast on a compass heading of 45 degrees. Jeff didn't choose this heading by accident. For one thing, he figured it would bring us to shore at about the point where Turkey Hill Road runs closest to the lake, and we could get to a telephone at a gas station if we wanted to. For another thing, it was approximately at right angles to the flight path of the planes taking off in the scramble, and this might give the Air Force a pretty good fix on the location of whatever dropped into the lake.

With Jeff rowing steadily, we reached a point on the shore a little to the west of where we expected, but we got there a lot sooner than we thought we would. We hadn't heard any more planes taking off, and though Harmon had kept his radio turned on all the time we hadn't heard any more announcements about the practice alert. As soon as we had beached, Jeff made his way up the shoreline to where he could

get onto Turkey Hill Road and find a telephone. When he got back we asked him what was up.

"I don't know what's going on," he said. "They wouldn't tell me anything."

"Did you tell 'em we saw something drop into the lake?"

"I told them we heard something drop in the lake, and this man I talked to said, 'Thanks, we'll check on it,' and that was all. He didn't even ask me my name or anything."

"Who was it you talked to?" I asked.

"Some sergeant at Westport Field. I don't know his name."

"That makes you even," Harmon chimed in. "He doesn't know yours, either. You shoulda talked to somebody in Flight Operations."

"That's what I asked for, but they said there was an alert on and they couldn't put any calls through to Flight Operations."

"Well, that's that!" I said. "What do we do now?"

Jeff shrugged his shoulders and kicked up some sand. Then we all sat down on a log and chewed the matter over for a while. We agreed that we should at least report what we knew to the Mammoth Falls police, and maybe they would report it to the Air Force. Harmon pointed out that if the Air Force was going to conduct a search for what was in the lake, they would have to work through the local police.

"You're right," Jeff observed. "We'd better go down to the station and do that right away."

"While we're there, I can run over to the Gazette and tell my uncle," Harmon added. "The paper oughta be interested."

"Good idea," said Jeff. "Maybe they can find out what's going on."

We pushed the boat out into the lake again, and with Jeff and Harmon both at the oars we headed for the dock down the

eastern shore of the lake where Jeff's folks have their summer cottage. I was sitting in the stern seat manning the steering oar and pondering the mystery of what fell into the lake, when an idea struck me that was so elementary I wondered why we hadn't thought of it in the first place.

"Hey, you guys!" I blurted out. "I got another idea!"

"Another idea?" Harmon puffed. "When did you have the first one?"

"Never mind smartin' off, Harmon. I haven't heard any brain-busters comin' out of you."

"Of course not. You gotta have a brain to recognize a brain-buster when you hear one."

"All right, all right, you guys!" Jeff interrupted. "Let's hear it."

"Well, it's simple," I said. "Why don't we go get our scuba gear and get back out there and find out what's at the bottom of the lake?"

There was a pause while Jeff looked at Harmon and Harmon looked at Jeff, and then they both turned and looked at me.

"Boy! Why didn't I think of that?" Harmon muttered.

"Great idea, Chazz," Jeff said hesitantly. "But we don't know how deep it is out there. It may be beyond our depth."

"We'll never find out unless we try," I shot back.

"Yeah… I guess you're right," Jeff admitted. "C'mon. What are we waiting for?"

"Yeah, man. Let's make waves!" And Harmon and Jeff started pulling water like a couple of one- man scull buffs, and we practically hydroplaned down the shoreline toward Jeff's dock.

Jeff and I went straight to the police station in the Town

Square to make our report, while Harmon went to see his uncle who operates a linotype machine in the composing room of the Mammoth Falls Gazette. Then we hightailed it home to get our diving gear. Fifteen minutes later we were all back at Jeff's dock and had clamped his outboard motor onto the transom of the fishing dinghy. I started the motor and revved it up good before I let the clutch in, so we shot away from the dock in a cloud of spray and exhaust fumes. Harmon stood in the prow and raised a clenched fist in the air.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune!" he shouted into the wind.

"It can also get you all wet!" Jeff shouted back. "Now get down in the boat before you get another dunking." The fog was definitely lifting as I steered the boat along the shoreline toward the point near Turkey Hill Road where we had landed earlier. It took us only a few minutes to get there with the motor; from that point on, Jeff would have to row, because that was the only way we could tell how far out in the lake we should go.

"How many strokes did I take coming in?" Jeff asked.

"Four hundred eighty-five and a half, right on the schnozzola," said Harmon.

"Where did the half come from?"

"You pulled a crab once. I counted it half a stroke."

"O.K.! Let's get it right on the schnozzola again," said Jeff.

"Yes, sir, admiral!" said Harmon, giving Jeff a snappy salute.

"What's our heading, Charlie?"

"We came in on forty-five degrees," I told him. "That means we go back out on two hundred twenty-five. Right?"

"Right!" said Jeff.

While we were waiting for the fog to lift a bit more, Harmon jumped ashore and broke off a dead branch of a tree, which he stuck upright in the sand. Then he draped his bright red jacket on it and clambered back into the boat. "If we're gonna do this right, we have to know where we came from as well as where we're going," he explained. "That'll give us something to sight back on, so you can make sure you're going in a straight line."

"Good idea!" said Jeff. "You know, you may turn out to be useful after all, Harmon."

We started off again, with Jeff rowing and me steering. I kept the prow headed toward a sharp notch in the profile of the hills on the far shore, where a patch of blue sky was just becoming visible. It read exactly 225 degrees from our starting point. We made good progress until Harmon suddenly spoke up from the bow seat.

"You're pulling too hard… ninety-four… Jeff. We'll overshoot the mark… ninety-five… by a mile if you keep this up… ninety six!"

"O.K., O.K.!" said Jeff, and he slacked off. "How's this?"

"That's fine… ninety-nine… that's fine."

For the first time that morning the sun burst through the overcast as Jeff back-paddled at the spot where Harmon finished his count.

Only faint wisps of fog still drifted about when we dropped anchor in thirty feet of water. Jeff was amazed.

"I thought it was a lot deeper here than that!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah. Maybe there's an underwater ridge or a small hill right here," I said. "I've been told the lake's at least a hundred feet deep in this area."

"Well, we'll soon find out," said Harmon, as he stripped down to his shorts.

We had just gotten our air tanks and flippers on, and Harmon was already lowering himself over the stern, when the staccato beating of whirlybird rotors echoed back and forth across the lake. From the direction of Westport Field, two Air Force choppers were winging their way toward us, skimming low over the water.

"Maybe they're out looking for floating debris," said Harmon.

"From what we heard splash in the water, I don't think they'll find anything," Jeff declared. "Besides, they're flying too low to be searching for anything. Hey, it looks like they're heading straight for us!"

By the time they were halfway out to us, there was no doubt about it. They were homing in on our boat like it was a target. Harmon pulled himself back in, and we braced ourselves for the blast of air and sound we knew we'd get when they came close to us. The lead chopper climbed about fifty feet in the air directly over us and hovered there, while the second one come in as close to our starboard side as it dared and settled a few feet above the water like a big flapping hen. A man in a bright orange suit leaned out the door hatch and started waving wildly at us. We smiled and waved back, saying, "Hi! How ya, fella? Nice day, isn't it?" and all sorts of inane things like that. But our voices were completely drowned out in the tumult of noise and air turbulence surrounding us. The man cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted something, and we put our hands up to our cars and hollered "What?" and "Can't hear you!" and shook our heads. Then he made broad sweeping gestures with his left arm, pointing back toward the shore. We looked where he was pointing, but we couldn't see anything, so we shook our heads again.

"I think he's trying to tell us something," said Harmon Muldoon.

Jeff eyed him scornfully. "It could be that they think we're

looking in the wrong place and want us to move in closer to shore," he ventured. Then he tried some Indian sign language on them, but the men in the chopper just looked blank.

"I think they're both palefaces," said Harmon.

Finally, the man who had been doing all the signaling looked up at the second chopper and waved it away. Then the first one moved in even closer and hovered right over us. The sound was even more deafening, and we had to put our fingers in our cars. The man scribbled a note on a piece of paper and threw it down, but it got caught in the blast from the rotors and sailed a hundred yards away before it settled onto the water. Jeff got hold of the oars and started rowing toward it. The whirlybird veered upward and peeled off to the right in the direction of Westport Field, with the man in the orange suit waving his arm for us to follow him.

"I guess they want us to move in closer to shore," Jeff surmised.

"But let's go get that note first." We rowed to where we thought the note had dropped, and Harmon spotted it and snaked it out of the water. But the ink on it had turned to a blurry smudge, and it was completely unreadable. By this time, the chopper had circled back and was heading toward us again. It was about halfway back to us when it suddenly veered off, gained altitude, and headed straight for

Westport Field. When the sound of its motor had died away, we heard another sound and realized why the chopper had left. A high-speed motorboat was coming toward us at full throttle from the direction of the public bathing beach. As it drew closer we realized it was the Mammoth Falls police launch that patrols the lake during the height of the boating season. It pulled up alongside us, and Chief Harold Putney reached out and grabbed the gunwale of our boat.

"Sorry, boys, but you'll have to get off the lake," he said, in

his usual calm fashion. "You'd better follow us back to the bathing beach."

"Why? What's up, Chief?" Jeff asked him.

"I don't know any more than you do," the chief answered. "All I know is that Colonel March called me and said he had some kind of emergency and asked me to clear the lake and keep people off the beaches. Probably has something to do with that alert they're having.Maybe they've got a plane in trouble. I don't really know."

"I think we know!" Harmon volunteered. "We were out here fishing when the scramble started, and we heard something big drop in the lake."

"The desk sergeant told me about that, but I wouldn't spread it around too much until we really know what happened," the chief said.

"Oh, we won't! Don't worry!" Harmon promised, not bothering to mention that he'd already told his uncle, so everybody on the newspaper knew about it.

Jeff started the motor up, and we followed the police launch back to the beach. Chief Putney agreed to let us go up on the shore to the dock at Jeff's cottage, where we had left our bicycles, and we noticed that other policemen and sheriff's deputies were checking the cottages all along the beach to see if there were any people.

"Whatever's going on, it must be important," Jeff said. "Turn on your radio, Harmon, and let's get into town and see if we can find out what's happening."

"Maybe a real live bomb dropped in the lake!" I suggested.

"If it did we'll see some excitement," Harmon said. "Hey, Jeff.

What'll we do with our diving gear?" Jeff thought for a minute.

"Maybe it's better if we take it up to my barn. We don't know what's going on, and if they're keeping people away from the beaches we may not be able to get back here when we want it." As it turned out, this was a good thought. But then, Jeff usually makes the right decision. That's why all the kids at school call him "Old Reliable," and that's why he's captain of the baseball team and the basketball team. When we got back into town, you could tell that something unusual had happened. The Town Square was full of people, and there were several state police and county sheriff's cars parked in front of the Town Hall, as well as two Air Force sedans and an Air Police vehicle. The radio station had just announced that the bomber alert had been terminated and the Air Force had asked all stations to warn citizens to stay away from the vicinity of Strawberry Lake.

We decided to split up, see what we could find out, and then meet at the Town Hall, which seemed to be the center of activity. Harmon went to the Gazette office, while I went to Ned Carver's barbershop, where 'most everybody goes if they want to find out what's going on in town. Jeff decided to nose around the police station some, on the pretense that he wanted to find out if they had checked up on the report we had given them. We met back at the steps of the Town Hall about ten minutes later to compare notes.

Harmon reported that the Gazette offices were busy as a beehive, sending reporters and cameramen out to the airbase, and to the Town Hall, and any place else they thought they might get some information. They were pretty sure a major accident had happened, but they had no idea what it was. The Air Force was being awfully cagey, a friend of Harmon's told him, and the editor was on the phone to Washington right then, trying to see if he couldn't get some information cracked loose from Westport Field.

"They took my picture while I was there, too," he said, a

little sheepishly.

"What for?" Jeff asked him.

"Because I told 'em all about what we heard, and about gettin' kicked off the lake."

"I thought Chief Putney asked you not to spread that around?"

"I mean before… when I was there this morning. I sure wouldn't tell 'em nothin' now."

"What about Jeff and me?" I asked Harmon. "Don't they want our pictures too?"

"I told 'em you was there, too," said Harmon, "but they didn't say nothin' about takin' your pictures."

Jeff looked at me, and I looked at him, and we both looked back at Harmon. But Harmon had decided it was time to blow his nose, and he wouldn't look straight at us.

"What about the police station?" I asked Jeff. "What did you find out there?"

"Zilch!" said Jeff. "Positively zilch," he added, giving the fire hydrant at the curb a kick with the side of his foot.

"Same here," I said. "Everybody in the barbershop was asking me what I knew. They're all just listening to the radio."

"I wonder what the Air Force is doing here," Harmon said, jerking his head toward the entrance to the Town Hall. "Maybe we could sneak inside and find out."

"Fat chance!" said Jeff. "They're not letting anybody in."

He was right. Constable Billy Dahr was blocking the entrance, and even the reporters from the Gazette and the radio stations had been told to stay outside on the steps. All they had been able to find out was that Colonel March, the commanding officer at Westport Field, was meeting with the Mayor and the members of the Town Council. "The Mayor

will make an announcement when he's ready," Constable Dahr assured them.

But Constable Dahr hadn't reckoned with Abner Sharples, who is one of the more loud-mouthed members of the Town Council. No sooner had he gotten the words out than Abner came bursting through the door, shoved Billy Dahr aside, and proclaimed in a voice loud enough to be heard across the square, "They say there's an atom bomb somewhere in Strawberry Lake."

The reporters clustered around him, all asking questions at once.

But Abner pushed his way through them and dashed down the steps two at a time.

"Hey! Where are you going, Councilman?" someone shouted after him.

"I just remembered I have to take my family up to Great Bear Lake for a week!" Abner flung back at them, as he hightailed it up the street and disappeared around the corner.

ABNER SHARPLES was gone. But the words he left behind him still seemed to hang in the air, and in a moment they had fanned out through the Town Square like a spreading wildfire. People were not quite sure what they had heard, but they repeated it anyway. And I hardly have to tell you what happened next.

Have you ever played the game of Gossip? It's great for parties.

You just seat about twenty people around a table and have one of them whisper a simple sentence into the ear of the person next to him.

After this sentence has been whispered from car to ear around the table, you compare what the twentieth person heard with what the first person actually said and the result is usually hilarious.

Sometimes it's downright embarrassing. It tickles the ear a little bit, but it's a great game.

Something like the game of Gossip happened that afternoon in the streets of Mammoth Falls. By the time Abner's words had reached Walnut Street, there was not only an atom bomb

in the lake but it had already exploded and the town was being blanketed with radioactive dew. By the time they reached Mike Corcoran's Idle Hour Pool Hall on Blake Street, Russia had declared war on the United States and the National Guard was being mobilized.

The reporters who had shouted vainly after the retreating figure of Abner Sharples turned in a body and practically exploded through the door of the Town Hall, heading for the council chambers. A litter of notebooks and microphones, left in their wake, covered the prostrate body of Billy Dahr.

Harmon Muldoon burst out laughing. But Jeff and I ran up the steps and helped Billy Dahr get back on his feet. I grabbed his hat and billy club and handed them back to him. And then I made a big thing of helping him brush the dust off his trousers while Jeff nipped inside to join the reporters. It was an old trick, but it was wasted.

No sooner had Jeff gotten inside than he found himself being ushered out again by Chief Harold Putney, who was herding the reporters back to the front steps.

"If you'll wait here a moment, gentlemen, the Mayor will have an announcement for you," he said firmly. "Now, please be patient."

There was some grumbling among the reporters, but they waited patiently enough until Chief Putney stepped away from the door to let the other members of the Town Council come out onto the steps. Mayor Alonzo Scragg led the group, with Colonel March from Westport Field at his side. The mayor was immediately surrounded by reporters from the radio stations, who thrust long skinny microphones into his face.

"Gentlemen," said the mayor, in a high-pitched, squeaky voice, "I have an announcement to make." He cleared his throat three times and consulted some notes he was clutching close to his middle coat button. Then he looked up and gazed

blankly at the array of anxious faces confronting him.

"Yes, Mr. Mayor?" one of the reporters prompted.

"Er... yes," the mayor repeated. Then he took a deep breath and shuffled the notes in his hands. "Colonel Westport has told me —" he began.

"Do you mean Colonel March?" one of the reporters asked.

The mayor looked flustered for a moment. "Of course I mean Colonel March," he said testily. "I don't know a Colonel Westport." Then he laughed nervously, and the reporters joined in.

"Colonel March has told me and the members of the Town Council that a strategic weapon has accidentally been jettisoned from one of the aircraft participating —"

"What do you mean by a strategic weapon?" he was asked.

Mayor Scragg appeared flustered again and turned to the colonel for help.

"The weapon is a nuclear device," the colonel stated matter-of-factly.

"You mean it's an atom bomb, Colonel?"

"I guess you could call it that if you want to," the colonel admitted. "Actually, it's a nuclear device."

"The Colonel assures me that it's a very small one, however," the mayor explained.

"How small?" asked the reporter from the Gazette.

At this point Lieutenant Graham, the Information Officer from Westport Field, stepped forward. "The size of the device is classified, gentlemen," he said. "I suggest we let the Mayor continue with his statement, and then we will answer questions — if it is possible to answer them within the limitations of national security." He nodded toward Mayor Scragg, who again held his notes up before him.

"A strategic weapon has accidentally been jettisoned from

one of the aircraft participating in this morning's training exercise," he continued. "An object is believed to have fallen into the waters of Strawberry Lake. I want to emphasize the word 'believed'. We have no direct evidence at this time that the object is actually in the lake."

"We've got evidence!" Harmon Muldoon cried out, pushing his way into the group of reporters. "We heard it splash in the water, and we know where it is!"

"That's fine. That's just fine," said Mayor Scragg, patting Harmon patronizingly on the head and pushing him back out of sight. "The Air Force will be conducting search and recovery operations in the vicinity of Strawberry Lake until the object is found," he continued. "Meanwhile, we have jointly taken steps to clear the area and to prevent sightseers and curiosity seekers from interfering with the search operation."

Then came the obvious question: "What about the danger of radioactivity?"

A chorus of voices followed.

"What about fallout?"

"Isn't this thing likely to explode before you find it?"

"How do we know it's safe?"

Mayor Scragg backed off from the barrage of questions and looked toward Colonel March. The colonel nodded and stepped to the microphone.

"There is absolutely no danger of radioactivity, either in the waters of the lake or in the surrounding atmosphere," he stated positively. "I wish to assure the people of Mammoth Falls that adequate precautions have been taken and are being taken-both in the design of the device and in the recovery procedures-to prevent any untoward incident from occurring. You can state unequivocally and categorically that there is no danger of harmful radiation."

"I hope that satisfies you gentlemen on that point." The mayor smiled. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to. I assure you that we will call another press conference as soon as we have further developments to announce."

With that, he strode through the knot of reporters and down the Town Hall steps to the sidewalk, where he glanced up at the sky. And even though the sun was now shining brightly and it was a beautifully clear day, he unfurled his ancient black umbrella and hoisted it over his head as he stalked off in the direction of Vesey Street. Before he reached the comer, however, he paused and turned back toward the reporters.

"I forgot one thing," he said, squinting at his crumpled notes. "The aircraft involved returned to its base without further incident."

Colonel March and Lieutenant Graham had taken advantage of the mayor's departure to move quietly toward the two Air Force sedans parked at the curb. They had almost reached them when the reporters recovered their senses and descended upon them in a body. One of them grabbed Lieutenant Graham's elbow.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, but could you answer one more question?"

"Certainly!"

"If there is no danger of radioactivity, why are you keeping people away from the lake?"

"That's a good question," said the lieutenant, looking toward Colonel March.

"Merely a precaution," the colonel answered from the back seat of his car. "We don't want anyone interfering with the search operations, and we don't want anyone to get hurt."

"What about this kid who says he knows where the bomb is, Colonel?" another reporter shouted.

The colonel smiled tolerantly. "We'll be making a full investigation and questioning all possible witnesses if we have any difficulty locating the device," he explained. And with that, his car pulled away from the curb and drove out of the square.

Harmon Muldoon gave the fireplug at the curb a vicious kick and howled in pain when he realized his big toe was sticking out through a hole in his sneakers. "Rotten old Air Force!" he complained. "If I busted my toe I'll sue 'em!"

By the next morning, Mammoth Falls was big news all over the country. The Air Force had flown divers and special equipment into Westport Field late the previous afternoon, and they had worked until nightfall without any success in locating the bomb. Now the town was in virtual turmoil. People who had some other place to go were packing up and leaving. The Town Hall and the Civil Defense Headquarters had been harassed all night by people wanting to know what they should do to protect their crops and animals. And the staff of the Gazette had been up all night answering requests for on-the-spot reports from newspapers and radio stations thousands of miles away. There was a good rumor going that the bomb had a time fuse that would automatically detonate it if the Air Force didn't find it and disarm it in time. There were all sorts of wild reports about what time the fuse was set for. But the story most generally believed was that the Air Force was keeping the time a secret in order to prevent a panic.

By midmorning it was hard to tell whether more people were leaving town or coming into it. The roads were clogged with traffic, and there were Air Force vehicles and brass all over the place. Reporters and TV camera crews kept showing up at the Town Hall, and by noontime every hotel room in town had been taken. The first question that nearly everybody asked was whether the water was safe to drink. It was almost impossible to make a telephone call out of town, because all the trunk lines were jammed with calls coming in.

Jeff and Harmon and I were sitting on the step in front of Snodgrass's hardware store, lagging pennies toward the edge of the curb and trying to figure out what we should do next, when Homer Snodgrass came out of the store, munching an apple.

"Hi!" said Homer.

"Hi!" we said.

"Whatcha doin'?"

Harmon looked at him contemptuously. Then he blew on the penny he was holding between his fingers and pitched it out toward the curb. It landed flat on its side and skidded to within three inches of the edge. Harmon blew on his fingernails and polished them ostentatiously on his shirtfront.

"Sit down, Homer," he said politely. "Maybe I can give you a few lessons."

"Naw," said Homer. "My old man don't like guys sitting on the step."

"You want us to move?" Jeff asked him.

"Naw," said Homer. "It's just my old man don't like it."

"Somebody complaining?" Harmon asked.

"Just the customers," Homer replied. "Hey! I seen your picture in the paper this morning!"

Harmon was busy polishing his fingernails on his shirtfront again. "Yeah." He yawned. "I had some important information for them. Trouble is, nobody will believe vs."

"All kiddin' aside. You guys really know where that bomb is?"

"We think we do," Jeff said, "but nobody will listen to us." Then he told Homer all about our fishing expedition, and the thing we heard drop in the water, and how we got kicked off the lake by the police. "They won't let anybody near the lake, so we can't find out whether there's really anything down there

or not. But it seems like it must have been the bomb."

"Yeah," I agreed. "The Air Force didn't mention losing anything else."

"Hm-m," Homer settled his skinny frame on the step beside us. "This may sound corny, but you've got a problem."

"Yeah! "

"What you need is a problem-solver."

"Yeah!"

"I know the best one in town."

"Who's that?"

"Henry Mulligan. He's the smartest kid I know."

"Oh, he ain't so smart!" sneered Harmon. "He just reads a lot."

Homer turned around slowly and glared at Harmon. "At least he can read!"

A lot of kids don't like Henry Mulligan. They think he's a smart aleck, because he always has his homework done and that makes the rest of us look bad. But the fact is, homework just comes easy to Henry, like a lot of other things do.

Jeff considered Homer's suggestion for a moment, but only for a moment. "Boy, I think you've hit it right on the button," he said. "Why didn't I think of that? If anybody can help us, it's Henry Mulligan. Let's go talk to him."

"Henry's kinda far out," said Homer. "You gotta catch him in the right mood."

"That's true if you're talking about fishing," Jeff said. "But if you've got a problem that has anything to do with — you know — science and all that kinda stuff, boy, Henry is old Ready Teddy and rarin' to go. C'mon, let's get movin'."

Jeff dashed to the curb where his bike was leaning against a streetlight and Harmon and I instinctively jumped up to follow him. Homer stayed behind on the step, scratching his mop of

red hair.

"Hey!" he hollered. "My old man won't let me off until twelve thirty."

"Meet us up at my barn!" Jeff cried, as he spun his bike around to head up Walnut Street. "We'll be there in half an hour, and Henry'll be with us."

Henry Mulligan was with us when Homer showed up at Jeff Crocker's barn about an hour later, puffing like a blowfish and mopping the sweat off his freckled face with a red bandanna handkerchief. We were in what used to be the tack room when Jeff's father had a lot of riding horses; now it was a musty old place where Jeff kept all his fishing gear, and his ham radio outfit, and just about everything else his mother wouldn't let him keep in the house.

"Look," Jeff said, when he let Homer in the door, "we decided to use my barn as a meeting place until this business is all over, so if you're gonna join up with us, you gotta take the oath and then I'll tell you the secret knock that'll let you in. Otherwise, nobody gets in the door."

"Count me in!" Homer gasped. "I ain't peddlin' back to town till I've had a chance to rest up a bit."

"You're in!" said Jeff, slamming the door shut.

Homer stood there, rubbing his eyes to adjust to the dim light of the tack room. "Where's Henry?" he asked.

"Here I am!" came a voice from the shadows in a dark comer of the room. Henry Mulligan sat there, propped on an old piano stool he had tilted back against the wall. His arms were crossed over his chest and his glasses were pushed up onto his forehead, while his eyes stared blankly up at the cobwebs festooning the rafters of the barn.

"He's thinking," said Jeff. "Don't bother him."

"I can practically hear it," Homer murmured, as he dusted off a box with his bandanna and sat down near the door. We all

just sat there, while Henry thought and Harmon practiced some of his favorite mumblety-peg shots on the barn floor. Every time he missed and the knife clattered on the floor, Henry's body would twitch and Jeff would glare at Harmon. We all jumped when Henry asked a question without even moving his eyes.

"Can we get a good map of Strawberry Lake?"

"My dad's got all kinds of maps from the county engineers," said Jeff.

"Get one," said Henry, without moving.

When Jeff returned with a huge map tucked under his arm, Henry let his piano stool fall forward and adjusted his glasses over his eyes. We suspended an old door between two packing crates and spread the map out on it. Henry asked Jeff to point out the spot on the shore of the lake where we landed in the. fog after hearing the bomb splash into the water. Then he sent him back into the house again for a protractor, ruler, and pencils.

"I think we can narrow this down pretty well, from what you've told me," he said, as he started drawing lines on the map, "and then I have an idea how we can pinpoint the location of the bomb, if you want to."

"If we want to?" said Harmon. "What do you think we brought you all the way up here for?"

"Apple pie!" said Henry.

Harmon looked at Jeff, and Jeff threw his hands in the air and darted out the door again and into his mother's kitchen. He came back with two pieces of apple pie on a plate; they still smelled warm, and we could hear Jeff's mother hollering at him from the kitchen window. We sat there with our mouths watering while Henry stuffed himself with apple pie and tried to explain what he was doing. He drew a line across the lake and asked Jeff if he agreed it represented the approximate line

of flight of the bombers taking off from Westport Field. Jeff traced the line with his finger and nodded assent. Then Henry drew a line parallel to the North indicator on the map and plotted a line at 225 degrees from the point on the shore where we had landed in the fog. Where the line intersected with the flight path of the bombers he placed an X Then he drew a small rectangle along the flight path, with the X in the center.

"We'll search this area first, and if we don't find anything we'll extend the search area out to here." Henry drew a larger rectangle outside the first one.

"What are you talking about?" Harmon exclaimed. "The Air Force won't even let us on the lake."

"We'll do it at night," Henry said quietly, "when nobody can see us. The Air Force may have the lake off limits, but they can't possibly patrol the whole shore twenty-four hours a day."

"How can we see anything at night?" Homer asked.

"We don't have to see anything," Henry explained. "We'll use radio beacons from the shore to find our position."

"O.K. But how do we find the bomb?"

"Do you know what a magnetometer is?" Henry asked.

Everybody looked blank, especially Homer.

"A magnetometer is an instrument that measures the strength and the direction of the flux lines of the earth's magnetic field," Henry continued matter-of-factly, while he went on plotting lines on the map. "Any metal object that has magnetic properties-especially iron and steel-will create a disturbance in the regular pattern of the magnetic flux lines around the earth. The magnetometer can detect these disturbances. All you do is move it over an area; when it tells you something is wrong, you know there has to be some kind of metal there."

"You mean it's like a mine detector?" Homer asked him.

"Sort of," said Henry, "but it's not the same thing at all. A

mine detector sends out signals, and when it gets a good strong signal bouncing back, it usually means it's found metal. But it won't work for any great distance. You know; maybe a few feet under the ground. The magnetometer does the same job, but it doesn't send out any signals. It just senses the magnetic field and tells you if something is disturbing it. You can fly one in an airplane, two or three thousand feet in the air, and discover iron deposits way beneath the surface."

"Wow!" said Homer.

"This is all very interesting, Mr. Genius," Harmon interrupted, "but I didn't happen to bring my magna — whatever you call it — with me, and I'll bet nobody else did, so what good does that do us?"

Henry looked at Harmon as if he were some kind of a worm. "It happens that I know where to borrow one," he said. "If Jeff can get his mother to drive us over to the Lake and River Salvage Company in Claiborne, I can get Mr. Henderson to lend us one."

Everybody nodded their heads and said "Yeah!" and cast scornful glances in Harmon's direction. Then Henry indicated two points on the map where he thought we should place the beacon transmitters. One was on the north shore of the lake, almost due north of the area where we thought the bomb was, and the other point was about where we estimated that the flight path of the bombers crossed the shoreline.

"I know where we'll put that one," Jeff said. "Our lake cottage is right about there. The bombers fly right over it whenever there's a scramble."

"Good!" said Henry. "We'll put Harmon there with one of the beacons and a walkie-talkie, and he can keep an eye on the police patrols in that area and let us know if they get the wind up."

"What if they send the police launch out after you?"

Henry scratched the thick black hair over his right car. "That's a good thought, Harmon. Some foxy old general once said that you never plan an attack without planning a line of retreat, and that's exactly what we've got to do. We'll take the outboard motor with us, Jeff, in case we have to use it."

"O.K. Now, who does what?" Harmon asked. "We only got a few hours to get ready." Henry scratched the hair over his right ear again and then jotted some notes on the margin of the map. "I guess we'll need somebody else," he said. "I figure we ought to have four men in the boat to do this right. Anybody got any ideas?"

"What about Mortimer Dalrymple?" I suggested. "He's an old radio ham, like Jeff; he's got a lot of equipment."

"Yeah!" Homer agreed. "He's a regular electronic bug. But you got to get him excited about what you're doing, or he won't be interested. He's funny that way."

"I guess that lets him out," sneered Harmon. "I don't see how we can get him excited about looking for an atom bomb in a big lake in the middle of the night with the police and the Air Force breathing down our necks. Better save him until we have something really hot going."

A lot of guys would have thrown a rabbit punch at Harmon for that one, but Homer isn't big on rabbit punches. He just looked sheepish, and his Adam's apple slid up. and down his throat as he gulped, and his ears got a little red. "O.K., O.K.," he said. "I'll go talk to Mortimer. Maybe he'll help us out."

"Maybe nothin'," Harmon replied. "I'll go with you. C'mon!" And he grabbed Homer by one of his red cars and propelled him through the door of the tack room.

When they had left, Henry handed me the map of Strawberry Lake. "Charlie, you're in charge of the map, and that also makes you the navigator," he said. "You've got to be able to tell us where we are and how to get to where we want to go. Can you do it?"

I swallowed once before I answered. "Sure. I guess I can."

"Good! Bring a hooded flashlight along with you, and a board you can spread the map on in the bottom of the boat. We can't risk anybody seeing us from shore."

"O.K.," I said, not really knowing what I was letting myself in for.

That night, Jeff and Harmon sneaked into Jeff's beach cottage and set up one of the beacon transmitters in an upstairs bedroom. Then they slipped the rowboat out of the boathouse, and Jeff rowed it quietly up the shore toward Turkey Hill Road, leaving Harmon behind to man the transmitter. Henry and I were waiting for Jeff there with Mortimer Dalrymple. We had hidden our bicycles in the brush back of the beach.

Henry had sent Homer off with the other transmitter with instructions to set it up at a cove on the north shore of the lake where we knew there was an elevation marker put there by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Elevation markers are called "bench marks," and all topographical maps are based on them because their locations have been calculated very precisely. Henry knew that this would give us the best possible reference point for determining where we were on the lake.

As soon as Jeff had beached the boat we started loading our equipment into it, and my spine started tingling as I realized we were actually going to do what we had been talking about all day.

"Hurry up!" Jeff said in a tense voice. "A police patrol might come along the road any minute and see us here." No sooner had he said it than a beam of light flashed by us and briefly illuminated the beach. But it came from the lake, not the road.

"Hit the dirt!" Mortimer Dalrymple cried, as he flung himself behind a huge boulder with his radio equipment cradled in his arms.

We all flopped down just as the light swept past us again. It probed back and forth for a few seconds, then passed on up the shore of the lake.

"They've got to circle the whole lake before they get back here again," Henry croaked, spitting sand from his mouth. "Now is the time to get out there! Once we're in the center of the lake, they're not likely to see us, because their job is to search the shoreline."

We all scrambled for the boat, and about ten minutes later we were out on the lake jockeying for position so Mortimer and I could get the right azimuth readings to the two beacon transmitters. We had wrapped the oarlocks in burlap, to cut down noise, and kept the receivers on very low volume. We could see the patrol boat sweeping the shoreline with its searchlight, but it was seldom any closer than about a mile.

We stayed out there about an hour and a half, with Jeff rowing us back and forth in what we figured was the area of the smaller rectangle Henry had drawn on the map. The magnetometer was swimming along behind us on the end of a towline, and Henry was crouched in the stem seat, using a pencil flashlight to scan the readout on the oscillograph. Once in a while he would hold his hand up and tell Jeff to stop. Then we would back up a bit and go over the same spot again until Henry was satisfied there was nothing significant showing on the graph. It was a bit sticky trying to keep Jeff on an even course, but it wasn't too important as long as we knew approximately where we were. If Henry found something startling, there would be time enough to figure out our exact position.

We were just a few hundred yards off the head of a heavily wooded peninsula that juts far out into the lake from the northeast shore when Henry let out a whoop that almost made us jump out of our skins. You know how it is when everybody is trying to be quiet, and somebody suddenly corks off with a

loud shout. It really startles you. Jeff was just giving a hefty tug on the oars when Henry shouted, and he fell flat on his back as one oar slipped out of the oarlock and clattered into the boat.

"Back up! Back up!" Henry shouted again.

"Anything you say, Maestro," Jeff retorted, "but do you have to be so dramatic about it?"

"Whatever it is, I think it'll stay there," came Mortimer's steady voice from the bow. "I'd suggest we sneak up on it quietly, so we don't attract any unnecessary attention."

Jeff gathered himself together and started pushing on the oars to get us back to the spot where Henry had apparently gotten an unusual reading on the oscillograph. Henry reeled in the magnetometer and held it at the stem of the boat until we were far enough back. Then he let out the towline again.

"Now go slow," he cautioned Jeff. "And if I hold my hand up, back water a bit till I tell you to go ahead." We retraced our original route, and sure enough, Henry held his hand up, and we all held our breath. Then he motioned Jeff forward again and waved his hand to stop.

"There's something here all right," he whispered excitedly. "Try to hold her still, Jeff, while I get a good reading to the two beacons."

Mortimer and I tuned our receivers as close as we could and adjusted the loop antennas until we got the highest amplitude signal from the beacons. Mortimer read 350 degrees to the transmitter that Homer had taken to the bench mark on the north shore of the lake, and I measured 100 degrees back to Jeff's beach cottage where Harmon was sending out the signal. I noted both the readings on the margin of the map.

"What do we do now?" I asked Henry.

"We've done all we can tonight," Henry answered, as he reeled in the magnetometer. "I suggest we get out of here."

No sooner had he said it than the big searchlight from the patrol boat swept past us once again. We'd been so busy we hadn't noticed it working its way toward our end of the lake. We all ducked instinctively, but there wasn't much point in it. The light came back from the other direction, passed us once more, then flicked back and caught us dead in the center of its beam. A loud voice from a bullhorn came blasting across the water at us, but we couldn't make out the words.

"Tell 'em we're just fishing," Mortimer said.

"It may not be all that funny," Jeff retorted, as he pulled the oars into the boat. "Let me get that outboard motor started, Henry!"

Henry was all thumbs, trying to get the magnetometer equipment stowed safely on the bottom of the boat and at the same time make room for Jeff to get the motor started. We could hear the motors of the patrol boat chum as the craft started to pick up speed, heading straight for us.

"What's all the fuss about?" Mortimer persisted. "All they can do is tell us to get off the lake."

"Yeah? And then ask what we're doing out here with all this radio equipment and stuff like that."

"So they put us in jail for the night. At least we'd get a free breakfast."

"I just don't want to get caught!" Jeff shouted, as the outboard motor sputtered, coughed, and then started to purr like a kitten.

"Head for the north shore of that peninsula," Henry cried, waving a free arm in that direction. "There's plenty of coves we can hide in, where they'll never find us."

"If we get there in time!" Jeff flung back at him, as he threw the motor into a right-hand turn.

From then on it was a race, with the patrol boat gaining on us as we rounded the head of the peninsula and slipped into

the shadow of its trees and craggy rocks. With no moon out we were in pitch darkness again, and Jeff had to throttle down until he could make out the dim outline of the shore. We could hear the siren of the patrol boat and the voice still hollering through the bullhorn.

"Pour it on, Jeff, they're gaining on us!" Henry urged.

"I can't see where I'm going," Jeff complained. "Hand me a flashlight."

I fumbled around in the bottom of the boat and came up with one that I passed to him. At the same time, Mortimer flicked on his own high-powered torch and trained it on the shoreline. The north shore of the peninsula we were skirting is steep and rocky. It is a tangle of tree roots, huge boulders, and fallen tree trunks at the water's edge; in some places there are sheer granite walls, twenty or thirty feet high, rising straight up to the tree line. And some distance out from the shore there are solid pinnacles of granite jutting just as high out of the water. It's one of the most picturesque parts of the lake in the daytime, but not quite the place to be at night with nothing but starlight to see by.

Jeff was keeping far enough out to avoid the rocks, but we had to get in closer to shore and find a place to hide before the patrol boat made its way around the head of the peninsula.

"There's a good place!" shouted Mortimer, who was probing the shoreline ahead of us with his high-powered beam. He trained his light on a narrow slip of water between two huge masses of rock about two hundred feet ahead of us.

"I hope we can get the boat through there," Jeff answered, "but we don't have time to be choosy. Charlie, get ready to take over with the oars when I throttle down."

I grabbed one of the oars and Henry grabbed the other, and we propped them on the gunwales. The two massive pinnacles of granite were fairly close to the shore, and it was possible there was a small cove in behind them. But even if there

wasn't, the rocks might give us enough concealment to escape the probing light of the patrol boat. It was the only chance we had. The engines of the patrol boat were growing louder, and we could already sense the darkness being dissipated by its powerful light as it drew closer to the head of the peninsula.

Jeff charged at the opening between the rocks with the throttle wide open, as Mortimer kept his light trained on it. About twenty feet from it he threw the motor into reverse, and the boat wallowed low in the water until he cut the power off. Then we slipped forward silently, and Henry and I paddled fast to nose the boat into the narrow crevice between the rocks. When we were in it, we all reached out and clawed the face of the rocks to pull the boat in out of sight.

But there was no cove! We slipped out from between the two rocks and into open water again.

"Back it up! Back it up!" Mortimer shouted, and we all frantically paddled water with our hands until we got the boat back in between the two rocks. We bobbed up and down there, clinging to the outermost rock with our hands and pressing our bodies close up to it. The light of the patrol boat suddenly turned the darkness into daylight, but the shadow of the rock covered us… almost.

It was easy to see that once the patrol boat had passed us, the prow of our boat would be sticking out in plain view beyond the other side of the rock. If they flashed their light back as they went by, they'd get a good view of the nose of our boat and Mortimer's bare face hanging out.

Jeff sensed the situation first. "When I give the signal, push to your left," he cried. "We've got to get the boat around to the other side of the rock."

We all braced hard against the rock, holding our breath as the patrol boat churned by us. It was going very slowly, picking its way carefully along the shore. It seemed to take forever, and its searchlight was deliberately raking back and

forth among the rocks.

"Push! Push!" Mortimer suddenly shouted, pressing hard against the rock face and not waiting for Jeff's signal. "They've got the light on me!"

I glanced to my right and saw Mortimer silhouetted against the bright beam of the searchlight. Instinctively, I started to shove against the gritty surface of the rock and found nothing there. My hands flailed helplessly in front of me, and I could feel the boat slipping out from beneath my feet. The next thing I knew, I hit the water in a spectacular belly whopper and went under heels up.

You know how it is when you hit the water unexpectedly. You always seem to be taking a breath at the time you go under, and you come up sputtering water in all directions and seeing stars before your eyes. My nose was chock full of Strawberry Lake when I got back up to the surface, and I shook my head and struck out for the nearest thing I could see. It was the granite wall of the rock we had been hiding behind. I clung to it and looked around for the others. One by one they came bobbing up and scrambled for a handhold on one or the other of the two rocks. The light of the patrol boat flashed by us once more, but harmlessly. We were all safe in the shadow of the rocks, and we clung there until the sound of the boat's engines faded into the distance. Then Mortimer's strident voice broke the momentary silence.

"Hey! Has anybody got a cake of soap? Might as well have a real bath while we're at it."

"Cut the comedy," Jeff sputtered and coughed up lake water. "Get the boat. They may be back here any minute."

He was right. Mortimer and I sprang out from the rock and corraled the rowboat before it drifted away from us. We pulled it back between the rocks, and sure enough, the patrol boat had circled back to take another look. We all stayed in the water, maneuvering the rowboat into the shadow of the outer rock as

the light probed back and forth around us.

Finally the patrol boat churned away on its search for the phantom rowboat it thought it had seen, and we swam for the shore, tugging our boat behind us. We crawled up on a narrow strip of beach and flopped down in the sand to get our breath.

"I can think of better ways to spend an evening," Henry Mulligan gasped, as he wrung the water out of his jeans.

"Did any of our equipment get wet?"

"Before we worry about that, let's get this boat out of sight," said Jeff. "We're not out of trouble yet."

"How are we gonna get back home?" Mortimer asked.

"On our feet," Jeff replied. "We can either follow the shore back, which is the long way, or we can cut over the ridge to Turkey Hill Road and walk back to where you guys stashed your bikes. We'll have to hide the boat somewhere, and what we can't carry with us we'll have to leave here until tomorrow night."

Then Jeff got on the radio and told Harmon and Homer to knock it off for the night and to meet us in the morning at his barn. We snooped along the shoreline until we found a little cove where we could pull the boat in out of sight among the rocks and bushes, and we covered it with a tarpaulin and left most of our equipment in it. We took the map and the magnetometer with us, and whatever else we could carry. We had to scale the cliff of the peninsula and make our way through some pretty rough woods strewn with boulders before we even got to the mainland. Then we had to clamber over the ridge of hills between the lake and Turkey Hill Road. After all the excitement we'd had, I thought we'd never make it. But we finally reached the hard surface of the road, and I was glad to see Homer come pedaling along on his way home. I volunteered to ride down the road with him and bring back two of our bicycles, and that saved us a little time.

As it was, I didn't get home until nearly midnight and had a long involved argument with my mother about where I'd been and why I couldn't get home earlier. But when I finally got to bed I felt pretty good. I stretched out between the sheets and fell asleep in no time, with the feeling that we had really accomplished something that night. Somehow or other, I felt sure we had discovered the location of the bomb.

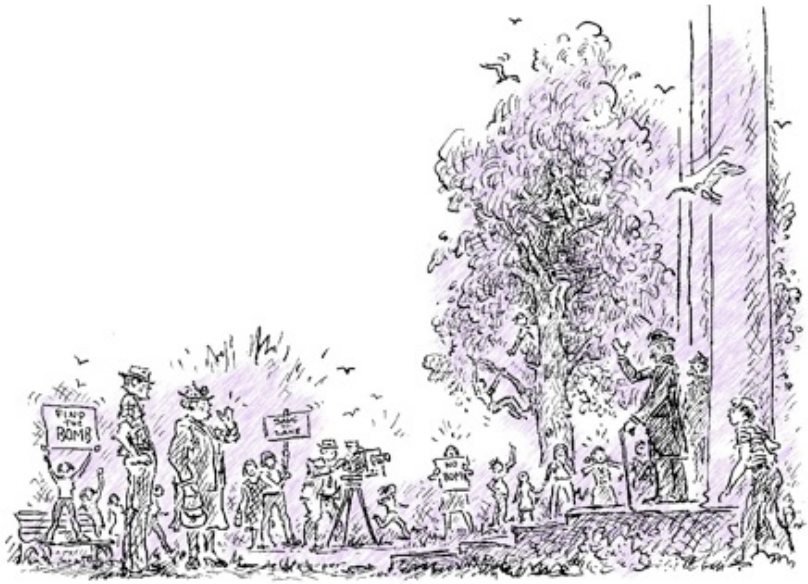
But we soon found out it wasn't so easy convincing other people.

THE NEXT MORNING we all met at Jeff's barn to decide what to do next. Henry very carefully drew on the map the azimuth readings we had measured to the two beacon transmitters, and he marked a tight red circle where they intersected.

"I think if we take this down to the Town Hall and show it to Mayor Scragg, he might convince the Air Force to send divers down and take a look," he said.

"And if they find the bomb there, that ought to make us look like big heroes," said Mortimer Dalrymple.

"Yeah! just like it did last time." Harmon Muldoon grunted. "All I got was a pat on the head and a busted toe."



"Too bad it wasn't the other way around," Mortimer observed. "I'm in favor of doing just what Henry says."

We took a vote and decided the best thing to do was go right to the Town Hall with our information, even though

Harmon Muldoon argued loudly for going down to the Mammoth Falls Gazette offices instead and telling them everything we knew. As things turned out, we probably should have listened to Harmon.

To begin with, it was almost impossible to see Mayor Scragg or anyone else of any importance. Both the Town Hall and the Town Square were crawling with people we'd never seen before, and the automobile traffic around the place was something you wouldn't believe. There were state cars and county cars and cars from the Department of Agriculture, the Air Force, the Red Cross, and you name it. Air Police from Westport Field were helping to direct traffic because Chief Putney didn't have enough men to handle the job.

In front of the Town Hall there was a white-haired old character in sandals and a flowing white robe walking up and down with a sign that said REPENT BEFORE THE BOMB GOES OFF! News photographers and a couple of TV crews were shooting pictures of him; as always happens, a raggle-taggle bunch of kids and stray dogs were parading along behind him. Every time they got in front of the photographers, the kids would stick their thumbs in their ears and waggle their fingers at the cameras, and the dogs would lift their noses in the air and howl. I don't know when I've seen so much excitement in the square, except for the day, later on, when we flew a life-sized mannequin off the top of Hannah Kimball's statue and broke up the Founders Day ceremony.

Things were booming in Mammoth Falls, despite the fact that a lot of people had left town out of sheer panic. For every person who had left, though, it seemed two more had come in — either because they had a job to do or because they saw a chance to capitalize on the situation. Seth Hawkins was a good example. We soon discovered he was the principal reason we couldn't get to see Mayor Scragg or anyone else in authority.

Seth Hawkins has been the congressman for Mammoth

Falls for thirty-seven years, and in all that time he's never had his picture in any newspaper except the Mammoth Falls Gazette and the Claiborne Times. Now, with Mammoth Falls the center of national attention, Seth was Johnny-on-the-spot. He had already announced he would hold a press conference as soon as he had conferred with Mayor Scragg and Colonel March. All we could do was cool our heels outside the Town Council chambers, and there must have been a hundred other people doing the same thing.

"Nuts to this!" said Harmon Muldoon. He snatched the map out of Henry's hand and stalked out the door with it, heading straight for the TV crews lounging under the elm trees. Jeff and I took off after him.

"Hey, you guys! You wanna know where the bomb is? It's right here!" he shouted, waving the map in the air.

A cluster of reporters and cameramen gathered around him while Harmon blurted out the story of what the lines and circles on the map meant.

"Where'd you get this map, kid?" one of the reporters asked.

"It's our map!" Harmon answered truculently.

"Well, who put all these marks on it? How do you know the bomb's there?"

"We put the marks on it. We were up all night, dragging a magnometer over the lake so's we could find the bomb."

"What's a magnometer?" asked another reporter.

"That's a mag-ne-tom-eter," said Jeff quietly.

"Yeah! That's a mag-ne-tom-eter, stupid," said Harmon. "Don't you guys know nothin' about science?"

By that time Henry had joined us, and Jeff pushed him into the center of the group. Then he elbowed Harmon into the background while Henry quietly explained what the map was all about. One reporter, a big rawboned man with a shock of

red hair and freckles, took a special interest.

"Is this on the level?" he asked Henry. "Did you kids really go out on that lake? What about the radiation?"

"Oh, pooh!" said Henry. "What's the police launch doing out there? If there was any radiation, they wouldn't be out there either."

"You're right. I never thought of that."

"C'mon, Jenkins," one of the other reporters grumbled. "These kids don't know what they're talking about. just because they got a map with a bunch of marks on it don't mean they know where that bomb is."

"I'm not so sure," said Jenkins.

"Don't be nuts," said a little man with a camera. "We got a story to cover. You start messin' around with these kids and we'll miss out if something really big happens."

"What do you mean, something big? I don't see the Air Force doing anything," said Jenkins. "Maybe a story about some kids who think they know where the bomb fell is the only story we'll get today."

"Suit yourself," said the cameraman. "But I think you're a sucker. These kids are pulling you leg."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Jenkins," said Jeff, stepping forward. "We're not pulling anybody's-" But he was interrupted.

"Hey, look, Jenkins! Look what's comin' up the street!" the little cameraman yelled. "Hey! I gotta get this on film!"

We all looked in the direction he was gesturing; there, coming up Vesey Street, was a column of black umbrellas that reached from curb to curb and stretched out of sight around a bend. At the head of the column marched Abigail Larrabee, president of the Greater Mammoth Falls Garden Circle and also president of the Mammoth Falls chapter of the Friends of the Wildwood. High over her head she brandished her umbrella with the words MARCH ON MARCH! painted on it.

Right behind her strode a ponderous woman proudly holding aloft a huge beach umbrella that had been dyed black. On it were painted the words "NO FISSION ALLOWED IN STRAWBERRY LAKE!"

Other umbrellas carried slogans like "FIND THE BOMB NOW!" "GET THE JET SET OUT OF TOWN!" and "BOMB IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD!"

When the procession reached the comer where Vesey Street dead-ends at the Town Square, a battery of reporters and photographers met it. But the women marched straight on without breaking stride, and the members of the press tagged along, pumping questions and snapping pictures. Mr. Jenkins's little cameraman was walking backwards in front of Mrs. Larrabee, shooting a close-up of her face. When he stopped momentarily to rewind his camera, Mrs. Larrabee brushed right past him and he stumbled into the path of the behemoth following her, was bowled over like a tenpin, and went down in a tangle of arms and legs, with his camera skidding across the pavement. The first four ranks of the column of marching umbrellas tromped right over him.

Around the square the procession wheeled and then drew up in a tight semicircle before the steps of the Town Hall. The women raised their umbrellas on high and started screaming out the slogans printed on them. Mrs. Larrabee, flanked by three women on either side, started up the Town Hall steps with the ponderous woman with the beach umbrella puffing right behind her.

"C'mon!" cried Jeff. "Let's get a good seat so we can watch the fun."

We dashed through the crowd of onlookers milling about in the street and clambered up the trees that border the walk in front of the Town Hall. Mrs. Larrabee had just reached the top of the steps when I settled myself in a crotch of one of the maples. She was immediately confronted by Constable Billy

Dahr, whose mustache was bobbing up and down in rhythm with the billy club he waggled back and forth behind him. On either side of him stood an Air Policeman at parade rest.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Dahr?" asked Mrs. Larrabee in her most imperious tone.

"I'm on duty, ma'am," said Billy Dahr, turning to one side to squirt a stream of tobacco juice between the polished boots of one of the Air Policemen. "The Mayor's in conference with Congressman Hawkins and the Colonel, and nobody's allowed in till the meeting's over."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Larrabee.

"Humph!" said the huge woman behind her.

"Matilda?" Mrs. Larrabee sang out with a rising inflection, as she stepped to one side.

"Follow me, Abigail!" cried the big- woman, as she bulldozed her way right between Billy Dahr and an Air Policeman, knocking them both aside like toothpicks.

Mrs. Larrabee did a right pivot, as expertly as any quarterback following a blocking guard through a hole in the line, and disappeared in the dim shadows of the Town Hall lobby.

The women gathered at the foot of the steps shrieked ecstatically and thrust their umbrellas into the air with cries of "Go get 'em, Matilda!" and "Atta girl, Abigail!" Matilda Pratt was a favorite of theirs and well known in Mammoth Falls for two reasons: she weighs over three hundred pounds, and she has thirteen children — all of them girls. At school, the teachers say they can always recognize a Pratt girl by the dress she's wearing. One teacher claims the same dress has been in her classroom for ten years, but there's always a different girl in it. One year, Lillian Pratt got held back in the fifth grade, and that caused a problem. The teacher didn't recognize her in next year's dress and sent her into the sixth-grade classroom

every morning, where she did pretty well for a couple of weeks, until they got the matter straightened out.

Anyway, when Matilda Pratt barges into a meeting, the meeting usually breaks up. The sheer bulk of her presence is enough to make the room seem crowded. And sure enough, it wasn't long before Chief Putney came outside and was greeted by shouts and screams from the women.

"Ladies! Ladies!" he called at the top of his voice. "Please be patient!"

"We want Mayor Scragg!" shouted several women.

"We want Colonel March!" shouted others.

Chief Putney didn't want to retreat. But what else could he do? You can't start pushing women around in public. The screaming mob backed him right up against the big front doors.

"Ladies, ladies!" he implored. "I just came out to tell you that His Honor the Mayor and Colonel March will be glad to come out and talk to you."

"He'd better come out, or he won't get any supper!" snapped a tall, gaunt woman in the crowd.

"Oh! How do you do, Mrs. Scragg," said Chief Putney, tipping his hat politely. "I didn't expect to see you among this bunch of — er… this group of fine ladies." Having already stepped in it, the chief had simply stuck his foot in farther.

"Well! The very idea!" said Mrs. Scragg, drawing herself up to full height.

"Another crack like that and you won't get any supper!" said a short stocky woman, pushing her way up front.

Chief Putney's mouth dropped open. Then he glowered at the woman. "What on earth are you doing here, Penelope?"

"I came down to hear the speech."

"What speech? Nobody's giving a speech."

"Somebody will give a speech before we leave here, Harold. Now you just nip inside and bring those nice gentlemen out here."

Chief Putney muttered something to himself and mashed his hat back onto his head. But he did as he was told and strode back into the Town Hall with the peculiar foot-swinging gait he affects on official business. In less than a minute, Abigail Larrabee and Matilda Pratt came out through the doors and herded the women back down the steps. They were followed almost immediately by Mayor Scragg, with Colonel March and Congressman Hawkins trailing behind him. Colonel March was the on ly one who looked composed and at ease, and I figured this was because he didn't have to worry about whether anybody voted for him.

Mayor Scragg paused at the top of the steps and ran his finger around the inside of his collar. "It's very nice to see you all here today, ladies," he said. "I'm sure the other —"

"We want to know what you're doing about the bomb, Mr. Mayor!" said Abigail Larrabee matter- of-factly.

"Er… yes," said the mayor. "Naturally you want to know about the bomb. Well, I can say —"

"We know about the bomb. It's in the lake. We want to know what you're going to do about it," she persisted.

"Ah… yes, indeed. Exactly!" said the mayor. "Well, the fact is, Mrs. Larrabee, we are not one hundred percent certain the bomb is in the lake. But I can assure you —"

"If it ain't in the lake, how come you can't find it?" came the booming voice of Matilda Pratt.

Mayor Scragg winced noticeably. "First of all, ladies, I want to assure you that there is no danger. Colonel March has assured me —"

And that sort of popped the cap off the fizz bottle.

"How come all my peonies have wilted?"

"Our chickens haven't laid any eggs for two days."

"The water don't taste good."

Then the strident voice of Abigail Larrabee cut through the clamor. "We want action, Mr. Mayor, not explanations!" she shouted.

"Please! Please! Ladies!" the mayor pleaded, pushing the palms of his hands out toward them. "Please listen to me." But his voice was drowned in the uproar.

"Our cow's milk was sour this morning!

"My grass is turning brown!"

"My baby has broken out in a rash!"

"And we can't flush our toilet!" shouted Mortimer Dalrymple at the top of his lungs.

Jeff Crocker gave Mortimer a vicious elbow in the ribs that almost unseated him. "Shut up!" he said, through clenched teeth.

"Well, how daffy can you get?" Mortimer complained. "These women are ridiculous."

While the women kept milling about and shouting their complaints, Mayor Scragg pleaded with Chief Putney to do something about the demonstration. But the chief just shook his head.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Mayor? Put them all in jail?"

"Well, there must be something you can do. You're the Chief of Police, aren't you?"

"Sure I am! But I haven't had any training in hitting women over the head."

Meanwhile a couple of TV cameramen had gotten up onto the steps and were having a regular heyday filming the proceedings. One of them handed one of the women a broken tree branch. "Shake that at the Mayor while we get a few

shots, will you?"

Once they realized they were being photographed, the women tried to outdo each other in thinking up spectacular things to do. And there was a lot of jostling going on, as everybody fought for a good position in front of the cameras. Finally, Matilda Pratt came down off the steps and waded into the throng. She grabbed two women by the arms and gave them a good shaking, and the hullabaloo suddenly stopped and the women settled down again.

Mayor Scragg cleared his throat and ran his finger around the inside of his collar once more. Then he caught sight of Mrs. Scragg in the crowd before him.

"Hello, dear," he said, with a nervous smile, wiggling his fingers at her.

"Speak up, Alonzo!" said Mrs. Scragg. "The ladies want to hear what you have to say."

"Er… yes, exactly," said the mayor. "H-r-r-r-umph! Perhaps it would be best if I just answered your questions. Do you have any questions, ladies?"

There was a stony silence.

"Somebody must have a question," said the mayor.

"We've asked all our questions," came the booming voice of Matilda Pratt from under the beach umbrella. "Now we're waiting for answers."

"I have a question, Mr. Mayor!" came a voice from behind the crowd.

There stood Mr. Jenkins, the redheaded TV reporter, brandishing our map of Strawberry Lake above his head. "I have a question for Colonel March," he said, as he moved up the steps with Henry Mulligan following him.

"I want to know, Colonel, whether your divers have searched this part of the lake." And he pointed to the rectangles Henry had drawn on our map.

Colonel March studied the map carefully. "Ah, yes!" he said. "I know that area. I received the report that some boys out fishing had heard something drop in the lake in that general vicinity… or thought they did. That was one of the first places we searched."

"Excuse me, sir!" came a high voice from behind Mr. Jenkins. "What did you find there?"

The colonel looked a bit surprised as Henry Mulligan stepped out to confront him. "What do you mean?" he asked, looking from Henry to Mr. Jenkins.

"I want to know, sir, what your divers found when they searched that part of the lake."

"Well, nothing, obviously," said the colonel with an amused smile.

"Nothing? But they must have found something!" Henry persisted. "There's a big anomaly in that area."

"There's a big what?" The colonel's smile broke into a broad grin.

"A big anomaly, sir!

"Well, whatever that is, we didn't find it."

"But it's almost got to be the bomb!" Henry insisted.

"I don't know what you're talking about, young man," said Colonel March, with a tolerant smile. "I can only say that we searched that area thoroughly and have eliminated it as a possibility."

At this point, Congressman Hawkins stepped forward obtrusively, as though he were afraid the meeting might break up before he had a chance to say anything. He thrust his hand out with the fingers spread wide apart and introduced himself to Mr. Jenkins with a toothy grip.

"If you don't mind, sir, I should like to ask this young man a question."

"Ask him anything you like," said Mr. Jenkins. "He doesn't belong to me."

"Ah, yes! Well, young man, what was it you said you found out there in the lake?"

"We didn't exactly find anything, Mr. Hawkins," Henry answered. "But we did detect a definite magnetic anomaly, right about there on the map."

"Ah, yes! That's what I thought you said. I just wanted to make sure."

"But I didn't exactly say that," said Henry. "All I said was we had found an anomaly."

"Oh, to be sure! But any fool would know what you meant."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Henry.

Seth Hawkins patted Henry on the head, and you could just about see the hair stand up on the back of Henry's neck. "You know, Mr. Jenkins, we who are native to this area know that Strawberry Lake is famous for its fish, and I, for one, take great pride in the knowledge that these young constituents of mine —"

"Do you want to make a statement, Mr. Congressman?"

"I certainly do," said Mr. Hawkins, without pausing for breath. "And I want to make it perfectly clear that I, for one, do not intend to stand idly by and see —"

"I'm sure you don't," Mr. Jenkins interrupted. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to ask you a few questions over here in front of the camera."

"By all means, sir!" said Mr. Hawkins, obligingly doffing his hat.

All of a sudden Congressman Hawkins was the center of attention. By this time, Harmon and I had managed to crawl through the crowd of women on our hands and knees and

squeeze into a spot at the base of one of the granite columns right behind Jeff and Mortimer. There was an air of excitement in the crowd, and Harmon got a little carried away. He started jumping up and down with his thumbs in his ears, waggling his fingers at the TV cameras. Then he stuck his chest out and made sweeping gestures with his right arm, as if he was giving a speech; pretty soon he was screwing his rubber face up into all sorts of contortions, and crossing his eyes, and making a general jackass of himself. It was too crowded to move away from him, so Jeff finally gave him an elbow right in the belly button and Harmon sort of collapsed against the column. Sometimes Harmon can be a problem.

Mr. Jenkins waggled the microphone in front of Congressman Hawkins's face. "I'll start off with the big question, Mr. Congressman: Do you feel there is any danger of this bomb going off?"

"That's a loaded question," said the congressman. "I have no comment."

"What about the danger of radiation?"

"Well… uh… I think Colonel March has already answered that one."

There was a loud grumbling sound among the women, and Matilda Pratt started shaking the big beach umbrella at him.

"However — h-r-r-r-mph! What I mean to say is," Mr. Hawkins went on hastily, "there are a great many factors that have to be considered. And I am sure these lovely ladies here have good reason for their complaints and — h-r-r-r- umph! — and their opinion has to be listened to also."

There were cheers and cries of "Hear! Hear!" at this. Congressman Hawkins was shifting from one foot to another as if he were standing on a hot plate.

"You haven't answered my question," said Mr. Jenkins.

"What's that? Oh! I haven't?"

"No. What do you think about the danger of radiation?"

"I thought I already answered that," said Mr. Hawkins, mopping his brow with a huge colored handkerchief. Mr. Jenkins could see the interview was getting nowhere. "Let me ask you one final question, sir," he said. "Are you satisfied with the search the Air Force has conducted up to this point?"

"Would you repeat that, please?"

"Do you think the Air Force has done a good job in trying to find this bomb, Congressman Hawkins?"

"Well, they haven't found it yet, have they?"

It was Mr. Jenkins's turn to mop his forehead. "Mr. Congressman, do you think these kids may actually know the location of this bomb?"

"I was just getting to that! As I was saying" — and Mr. Hawkins pulled Henry closer to him and patted him on the head again — "we must look to the youth of this country for answers to the problems of the future, and I, for one. . ."

But Henry had had enough. You could see his ears beginning to stick out from under the thick mop of blond hair that covered them. He slipped out of the congressman's sweaty grasp and snatched the map away from Mr. Jenkins. Then he stomped down the steps and took off across the Town Square. Half the reporters tumbled after him. Naturally, we all took off after Henry too, but we had to fight our way through what looked like an ocean of umbrellas with women hanging from them. Harmon, who doesn't care what people think of him, solved the problem quickly by hollering, "Look out! I gotta vomit!" He got a quicker reaction than a buffalo hunter splitting a herd; a path six feet wide opened up in front of him. Jeff and Mortimer and I managed to scramble through behind him, before the gap closed. But Homer is a little clumsy, and he got clobbered with umbrellas when he stepped on a woman's foot. When we caught up with Henry, the reporters had him backed up against the foot of Hannah Kimball's statue

and were peppering him with questions. Mr. Jenkins came puffing up behind us and pushed his way in among them.

"Henry," he panted, "do you really know where that bomb is?"

"I don't know for sure," said Henry, brushing aside another reporter's question. "A scientist is never sure until he has all the facts in hand. But we do know that there's a large metal object right in the area where Jeff and Charlie heard that splash. That much we can prove."

"How do you know that, kiddo?" asked a stocky reporter with his coat slung over his arm.

"Because of the anomaly," Henry answered.

"What's this anomaly you keep talking about, sonny?"

Henry picked his nose. "An anomaly is anything that's abnormal. In this case it's a disturbance in the regular pattern of the flux lines of the earth's magnetic field."

"That's just what I thought it was," quipped another reporter, and everyone gave him the horselaugh.

"Are you a scientist?" asked the stocky reporter.

Henry looked a bit sheepish. "No, I guess I'm not, yet. But I want to be."

"Well, how you gonna prove where this thing is?"

A gleam came into Henry's eyes and he looked at his watch. Then he gazed up into the topmost branches of the elm trees surrounding Hannah Kimball's statue and stroked his chin.

"Well? How you gonna prove it?" another reporter asked.

"Shut up!" said Harmon Muldoon. "You don't talk while a scientist's thinking! 'Specially Henry!"

"Oh! I beg your august pardon," said the reporter, with an elaborate, sweeping bow that took in both Harmon and Henry. "After this I'll ask your permission before asking a question. "

"Don't mention it!" said Harmon, blowing on his

fingernails.

Henry brought his eyes down from the trees, and the gleam was in them again. He turned to Mr. Jenkins. "Can you be at the dock in front of the Crockers' cabin at Strawberry Lake at eight o'clock tomorrow morning?"

"I'll be there if you've got something to show me," said Mr Jenkins, "but the police will probably run us off."

"I don't think they'll run us off if there are enough reporters there," said Henry, looking around.

"I'll be there," said the man with the coat slung over his arm. "I've never seen a real scientist at work," he added, with a wink to one of his colleagues. "Especially a mad scientist!"

"Count me in, too," said several others.

"What are we gonna see?"

"You'll find out tomorrow morning," said Henry. And he took off across the square to where we'd parked our bicycles, with the rest of us scrambling after him.

I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT NIGHT, nor the morning that followed. When Henry gets an idea stuck in his head he can be a real bear. As we pedaled away from the Town Square that afternoon, he was jabbering a blue streak. It was mostly directed at Jeff, but you could tell Henry expected all of us to listen.

"I didn't like that fathead calling you a mad scientist," I said to him, when he stopped talking long enough to catch his breath.

"I don't mind," said Henry. "Maybe it's better if they think we're a little kooky. Anyway, he gave me a good idea."

"Whaddaya mean? I didn't hear him say anything brilliant."

"He didn't. But when he asked me how we could prove where the bomb is, it started me thinking, and all of a sudden it just sort of came to me. If they think we're a little kooky now, wait'll they see what happens tomorrow morning."

"What's gonna happen?" asked Harmon Muldoon.

"Wait till we get to Jeff's barn," Henry answered. "We can't afford to let anybody

know what we're doing."

"You mean this is a Top Secret operation?"

"O.K., it's Top Secret… if that makes you feel any happier."

"Oh, boy!" Harmon chortled. "Wait'll I tell that dopey cousin of mine."

"Harmon, you've got a head like a Hubbard squash!" said Jeff. "Henry just told you we can't let anybody know what we're doing… and that includes your cousin."

"Horsefeathers!" said Harmon. "What good's a secret if you can't tell anyone about it?"

Nobody answered him. We just kept pedaling until we got to Jeff's place and locked ourselves in the tack room.

"What about this cousin of yours, Harmon?" Henry asked as he settled himself on the old piano stool and hooked his toes behind the legs. "Could we trust him? We're gonna need some extra help tonight."

"You can trust him as long as you feed him," said Harmon. "Like I told Jeff, he cats a lot."

"But if we let him in on what we're doing, will he go blabbing it all over town?"

"How's he gonna know what we're doing, if I don't know myself?"

"O.K., O.K.," said Henry. "I'll tell you what we're going to do as soon as I've figured everything out. Meanwhile, you go get your cousin. We'll need him."

"And don't forget to give the password when you get back," said Mortimer, "'cause you can't get in without it."

"O.K. What is it?"

"We haven't figured that out yet, either. But we'll know when you get back."

Harmon pulled a moldy old saddle off a peg on the wall and flung it at Mortimer's head. It went sailing right back at him,

but he managed to get out the door first and cut loose with one of his loudest raspberries as he mounted his bicycle and headed for town.

"That's enough horseplay," said Jeff. "We've got a lot of work to do. How about giving out with the plan, Henry?"

Henry was staring up into the darkness of the rafters again, but he came to right away and took his glasses off to wipe them. "Well, as I see the situation," he said quietly, "the first thing we have to do is to prove to ourselves that we know what we're talking about… and that means we've got to find the bomb!"

"How we gonna do that?" Homer sneered. "With the lake practically crawling with police launches, and maybe full of radiation, and the water probably more than a hundred feet deep out there, a fat chance we got!"

"Everybody says it's deep there," said Henry. "But we know that where Jeff and Charlie dropped their anchor it was only about thirty feet. As for the police, we've already proved they can't catch us at night.... Now, I say we've got to get organized and decide who's giving the orders and who's responsible for what."

"That's a good idea," said Mortimer. "Why don't we hold an election while Harmon's gone, so we can tell him who's president when he gets back?"

"Hey, I got an idea!" Homer chimed in. "Why don't we form a club? Then we can have a charter and a constitution and by-laws and all that stuff."

"What about a Bill of Rights?" I added. "If you don't have a Bill of Rights, you ain't got nothin'."

"Phooey on that," said Mortimer. "That causes too many arguments. What we do need is a secret grip. I know a dandy."

"What about a few campaign speeches?" Homer shouted, jumping up on a crate. "When in the course of human events

our fathers brought forth on this continent a more perfect Union, to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and create all men equal ..."

"Hey, you're all mixed up, Homer!" Jeff pounded a rusty stirrup on the packing crate in front of him. "Let's have some order here."

All of a sudden it was quiet in the tack room, and Mortimer said in a squeaky voice, "I cast one vote for Jeff for President!"

"I second the motion," I said. "And I nominate Henry Mulligan as Vice President and Chief Scientist."

"That's O.K. by me," said Homer, jumping down from his box.

"I move we make it magnanimous!" said Mortimer.

"I think you mean unanimous," Henry corrected him, with that faint smile on his face again.

"No, I don't! I mean magnanimous," said Mortimer. "But you're the Vice President. If you'd rather have it unanimous, we'll make it that way. Come to think of it, it'll sound better in the minutes of the first meeting."

And that's how the Mad Scientists' Club got organized… if you want to call it that. By the time Harmon Muldoon showed up with his cousin Freddy, we had everything settled and Homer was taking notes on the bottom of a soup carton.

When Harmon came busting through the door he had two kids with him, instead of just one. One of them was a skinny little guy with a thatch of stiff blond hair and some freckles on his nose. We all knew he couldn't be Harmon's cousin.

"The fat one's my cousin Freddy," said Harmon. "This here kid's Dinky Poore. He don't look like much, but he can crawl through a twelve-inch pipe or shinny up a flagpole before you can count ten. Freddy won't go nowhere without him, so here he is." And Harmon sat down on a box and fanned himself.

"How'd you manage to bust that door open?" Mortimer asked him.

"I didn't know the password, so I used my head!" Harmon shot back.

Freddy Muldoon perched on an old peach basket and started fanning himself too, but Dinky Poore just stood stiff against the wall near the door and rubbed his nose and kept looking out the windows and up at the ceiling and any place else, except at the rest of us. I wouldn't say he was self-conscious, or anything, but he just looked as if he'd like to drop through the floor or hide in a hole somewhere.

"How about telling us what we're supposed to do now, Henry?" said Harmon, still puffing for breath.

"Wait a minute," said Jeff, pounding the crate with his rusty stirrup.

"It almost slipped my mind, Harmon, but we had a little meeting while you were gone, and I was elected President. So I'll decide what the order of business is and who's going to talk."

Harmon grunted. "How many votes did you get?"

"He got five," Mortimer cut in. "We knew you'd vote for yourself, so we gave you one vote, and it came out five to one in Jeff's favor."

"That figures," said Harmon. "At least I know you guys can add."

"O.K.," said Jeff. "Now, how about telling us what we're supposed to do now, Henry?"

"That's exactly what I asked him," Harmon said.

"Shut up!" said Mortimer.

Henry cleared his throat. "Well, as I was saying, the first thing we have to do is prove to ourselves that we know where that bomb is. That means we've got to go out and dive where

we got that strong reading on the magnetometer. We know we can only do it at night, and I propose that we do it right away."

"You mean tonight?" came a chorus of voices.

"Tonight!" said Henry. "And we've got to move fast. We're going to need two boats, and the magnetometer, and the scuba gear… and we've got to set those beacons out again… and I've got to get over to Joe Frazier's in Clinton and borrow his underwater camera… and we've got to get something like a weather balloon with a gas pellet to inflate it, and… Jeepers! I can't read everything off, but I've made a list of it all."

Dinky Poore had stopped looking out the windows and was staring at Henry with his eyes bugged out like a frog's. He even forgot to rub his nose.

"O.K., O.K.!" said Jeff. "We still have my boat stashed in that cove on the peninsula, but where we gonna get another one?"

"Simple!" said Mortimer. "We'll borrow one. There's plenty of 'em tied at the docks near your cottage. Nobody can use 'em right now, so they won't even know we borrowed it. The only thing is, we'll need a motor." Dinky Poore raised his hand timidly. "My old man's got a motor," he said in a squeaky voice. Everybody turned to look at him, and he turned red right up to the roots of his hair.

"What kind is it?" Jeff asked him.

"I don't know, but it don't make much noise at all, 'cause he got it for bass fishin' in the bullrushes. I can lift it real easy."

"That's just what we need," said Henry. "Will your dad let us borrow it?"

"Sure!" said Dinky proudly. Then he frowned. "Only we better go get it before he gets home."

"Oh, by all means!" said Mortimer. "We wouldn't wanna disturb him."

"You go with Dinky and pick up his motor, Mortimer," said

Jeff. "Harmon and I can take it down to the lake with us tonight, and when it's dark enough we'll snitch a boat. What else, Henry? Where do we meet?"

Henry spread the map out, and everyone crouched over it on hands and knees.

"The rest of us will follow Turkey Hill Road out to where it curves around the north end of the lake. Right here, where the old railroad track from the zinc mine crosses the road, there's a little dirt trail that leads down into the swampy end of the lake. It's too shallow for the patrol boat to get in there, so I think it's an ideal place to operate from. We can all meet right there." Henry marked a spot on the shore of the lake.

"Sounds great," said Jeff. "But how do we get my boat over there from that cove?"

"Mortimer and Dinky can get it there," said Henry. "We can drop them off on the way out Turkey Hill Road, and they can climb over the ridge the same place we did last night. Mortimer knows where the cove is."

Freddy Muldoon was gazing at Henry with undisguised admiration. "You must be smarter'n Julius Caesar, the way you dope all this stuff out. What do they call you, Henry the First?"

At dusk that evening Henry, Mortimer, Freddy, Dinky, and I were pedaling along Turkey Hill Road with our bikes loaded down with diving and radio gear, and Homer was scrambling through the woods somewhere on the north shore of the lake to set up the beacon transmitter at the bench mark. Dinky was having a rough time, and I had to take part of his load and strap it to my handlebars. It was easy to see what his trouble was. His feet couldn't quite reach the pedals of his bicycle. Wherever he went, Dinky had to ride standing up, and that can get old pretty fast.

Fortunately, we soon reached the point where Dinky and Mortimer had to climb over the ridge to get Jeff's boat. We

dropped them off and took turns wheeling their bicycles along with us to the rendezvous point. When we reached the abandoned railroad track it was completely dark. Henry pulled us off the road and started down a narrow path that paralleled the track, leading into a deep woods on our left.

"Hurry up!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Everybody in the woods before a car comes along and somebody sees us!" No sooner had he said it than we heard the screeching tires of a car taking a curve at high speed, and the whole area was suddenly illuminated by its headlights. Freddy and I were still on the shoulder of the road, and I dove into the bushes, pulling my bike in after me. But Freddy Muldoon isn't used to moving that fast. He was still standing there with his fat face hanging out when the car rounded the curve and caught him in the full glare of its lights. It was an Air Force sedan, and the driver slammed on his brakes when he saw Freddy and came to a screaming stop about two hundred feet down the road.

"Stay where you are, Freddy!" I hissed. "Whatever you do, don't run! Tell 'em you're just on your way home from Clinton."

The car started backing up and somebody on the passenger side stuck his head out the window and trained a high-powered flashlight on Freddy. What he saw was Freddy leaning on his bicycle, munching a banana he'd pulled out of his shirt.

"What are you doing way out here, sonny?"

"I'm eating a banana," said Freddy.

"I can see that, smart aleck!" said the Air Policeman.

"What I want to know is what you're doing out here all by yourself?"

"I got hungry," said Freddy, "so I stopped to eat a banana before I got home."

"Where do you live?" the man behind the wheel asked him.

"In Mammoth Falls, mostly," said Freddy. "But sometimes I go over to Clinton to bother some people I know."

The airman with the flashlight was sweeping the bushes with it, making sure there was nobody else with Freddy. I held my breath and tried not to move a muscle, hoping the leaves I'd pulled over my bicycle covered all the bright metal on it that might send back a reflection.

"You are a smart aleck!" said the driver. "What's all that stuff you have on your bike?"

"You got a warrant?" Freddy asked, stuffing his mouth full of banana.

The man with the flashlight burst out laughing and flicked his light off. "He's got you there, Hardy! Come on, let's get going."

"O.K., O.K.!" said the driver. "But look, kiddo! Get yourself on home right away. We gotta patrol this road to keep people from getting through to Strawberry Lake. That's the only reason we're asking you questions. You heard about the bomb, I suppose?"

"What bomb?" said Freddy.

"Oh, forget it!" said the other Air Policeman. "Look, sonny. Why don't you stick your bike in the trunk and hop in. You have a long way to pedal yet, and we'll get you home a lot sooner."

"No, thanks," said Freddy. "My mother told me never to take rides with strangers."

"Oh, horsefeathers!" said the driver. And he put his car in gear and took off down the road toward town.

"They were pretty nice guys but kinda stupid," said Freddy, as he and I made our way down the path to join Henry again. Little did we know, at the time, how nice they were. Because they came back up the road later to see if Freddy was getting home all right, and they got a little upset when they couldn't

find him.

"That was close!" Henry whispered, when we got to where the path entered the woods. "But you did just the right thing, Freddy. You did just fine."

"I don't never have no trouble with cops," Freddy observed. "I like talkin' to 'em."

We rode cautiously through the dark of the woods, with the only sounds the squish of our tires in the sand of the path and an occasional burp from Freddy.

"I wish you'd stop burping," I hissed at him. "Every time you do, I can smell bananas. Cops have noses, you know. You wanna give away our position?"

"That's what I like about bananas," he said. "They still taste good, long after you eat 'em."

"By the way, what did you do with the skin from that last one?"

"I threw it in the back seat of the car while those APs were laughin' at me."

When we reached the place Henry had chosen as a rendezvous point, Homer was already there. It was a dry hummock that jutted out into a large pool of clear water in the swamp. There were a few large trees on it, and a lot of scrub growth that completely hid a small clearing out near the end facing the lake. Homer was sitting at one edge of the clearing with his back up against a big rock, rubbernecking nervously from side to side. We were about twenty feet from him when Freddy had to uncork another burp, and Homer sprang to his feet as though a red ant had bitten him.

"Who's that?" he wailed, in a thin high-pitched voice.

"Tippecanoe!" said Henry.

"Skinamaroo!" Homer sighed in relief, and we stepped out into the clearing. "Jeepers, but it's spooky here!" he said lamely. "I been waitin' more'n half an hour. Where you guys

been?"

"We were detained by military authorities," said Freddy Muldoon. "What's your excuse?"

"I don't need one. I been here all the time."

"You couldn't have been here more than ten minutes, Homer," said Henry. "It's just nine o'clock. Now, if the two boats show up soon, we'll be right on schedule."

"How they gonna find their way through this swamp?" asked Freddy.

"That's not too difficult," said Henry, as he rummaged through the dufflebag he had brought with him. "You see this?"

"Looks like some kind of a light," said Freddy. "What is it?"

"It's some kind of a light, all right," said Henry. "Specifically, it's an infrared light. You can't see it with the naked eye, but if you look at it through an infrared filter that absorbs all other light, then you can see it." "Last time I saw Jeff he had naked eyes," Freddy muttered, half to himself. "How's he gonna see this stupid light?" "He has a little telescope with an infrared filter. So has Mortimer. They'll see it all right."

"Holy Moses! You think of everything, Henry."

Henry hung the light in one of the trees, and I got on the radio. It wasn't long before we had contact. "Mugwump! This is High Mogul. Come in, please."

"This is Mugwump," came the reply. "Go ahead."

That was Jeff. Pretty soon "Walrus" came in, too, and we knew Mortimer and Dinky were on the beam. Between the infrared light and the radio we managed to guide both boats through the maze of channels and tiny islands in the swamp. After we got all our equipment loaded aboard, we sat in a tight circle in the little clearing while Henry gave us our final instructions.

"Jeff, Mortimer, and Charlie will do the diving," Henry said. "But there's just one hitch in our plans."

"What's that?" said Homer.

"If that police launch shows up while the divers are down, the only thing we can do is run for it. That means we'll have to cut the lines, and it's every man for himself."

"Thanks a lot!" said Mortimer. "I don't think we discussed this when you signed me up."

"We didn't," Henry admitted. "But… if I'd told you about it then, you might have decided not to come."

"Boy, that Henry!" Freddy whispered to Dinky Poore. "He thinks of everything!"

"Don't get all shook up," Henry went on. "Remember, the police launch will chase the boats. They won't even see the divers."

"I hope it's a fast chase!" said Mortimer. "We only have thirty minutes of air in each tank."

"That's enough, if you don't breathe," said Harmon.

"That'd be a good time to take up drinking!" Homer snickered, as Henry and Jeff led the way toward the two boats.

We had wrapped the oarlocks with cloth, so we hardly made any noise at all as we crept out of the swamp on our way toward open water. There was no moon, and a slight ground mist had begun to develop. There were wisps of it floating just above the surface of the water.

"This ought to get thicker when the temperature drops a little," said Henry, as we nosed out into the lake. "And I sure hope it does."

Between the silence and the mist I had the eerie feeling we were crossing the River Styx into another world. I was in a nervous sweat and beginning to feel a clammy chill creeping over my body, and I could see I wasn't the only one. But I

noticed Freddy Muldoon sitting in the prow of the boat I was in, just picking his nose.

When we got to the point a few hundred yards off the nose of the peninsula, where we had to start locating our position precisely, everybody was a little bit jumpy. Homer was in charge of the directional finders, and he kept jockeying back and forth and around in circles while he tried to home in on the two shore beacons. Finally, Henry had to show him how to do it: by homing in on one beacon, checking the compass reading, and then rowing directly along that line until we intercepted the signal from the other beacon. When we finally got to what we figured was the right place, Henry checked the reading on the magnetometer and raised his hand. We dropped anchor. Again we only had to pay out about thirty feet of line before both of them hit bottom.

"You guys were right," Henry whispered from the other boat. "It is shallow here. I wonder why everyone thinks it's so deep?"

We strapped on our tanks, and Jeff and Mortimer slipped over the side. I could see their lights sinking deeper in the water until there was just a dull glow to give us an idea of where they were. We sat there waiting and trying to keep quiet.

It was about ten minutes before Mortimer came up and clambered into the boat. "You go down for a while, Charlie," he told me. "I want to talk with Henry."

"What do you see down there? Anything?" I asked him.

"It drops off real deep right over there," he said, pointing over the stern of the boat. "Looks like a steep cliff. We went down pretty far, but we don't know how far it is to the bottom. May be a pretty deep hole."

"I don't think it's a hole," said Henry. "I think maybe the lake is pretty deep in this area. We're just sitting over an underwater ridge that's an extension of that peninsula. That's

why it's shallow right here."

"Maybe so," said Mortimer, "But Jeff wants you to drop a light on a plumb line, so we can tell where we are."

"Good idea," Henry agreed. "We should have thought of that in the first place."

I dropped over the side and followed Jeff's line down to where I found him resting on a ledge of the cliff Mortimer had told us about. In less than a minute we saw the light dropping slowly toward us. We watched it slide past us down the face of the cliff for twenty feet or so, and then Jeff signaled Henry to stop it, with two jerks on the line. He motioned to me, and we both dove downward. I could feel the water getting colder, and the pressure on my ears getting stronger, and pretty soon I just had to pull up short and wait to get used to it. I was glad to see Jeff giving the "level off" signal at the same time, because I don't think I could have gone any deeper just then.

I don't know how deep we were, but there wasn't any sign of the bottom when we shone our lights down. And the light on the plumb line was quite a distance above us. I looked at Jeff and he was motioning for us to knock it off. We started back up the face of the cliff very slowly, to allow plenty of time for decompression, and we stopped to rest on another ledge about halfway up toward the light. It was a pretty broad ledge with a lot of weeds growing on it, and as we sat there I couldn't help thinking about what a stupid flop our whole expedition was. Here we were, two puny little kids, about eighty feet underwater, looking for a bomb in a lake that was about ten million times as big as all of us put together. The bomb was obviously in such deep water that it would take hard-hat equipment to get to it-if it was there at all-and we had about as much chance of finding it as I had of growing another pair of ears. I could already hear all those reporters laughing at us and making wisecracks about Henry's fancy map and his magical "magnometer."

Just then something brushed past my face mask, and I looked up to see the tail of the biggest lake trout I have ever seen in my life disappearing into the darkness. It had come out of the weeds like a flash and darted right between Jeff and me. I figured it must be the giant trout that fishermen around Mammoth Falls call Old Pincushion. Nobody has ever been able to catch him, and they never have known what part of the lake he hides in. He just shows up occasionally, grabs somebody's line, and runs off with it. Some people figure he must have thirty or forty hooks in him.

I looked at Jeff, and he was looking at me and jabbing his finger back toward the weeds Old Pincushion had come from. Another giant trout came flashing out. He was the second biggest trout I had ever seen in my life, and he too slithered away into the darkness in no time.

All of a sudden I had forgotten all about the bomb. I figured Jeff and I had stumbled onto the hiding place of Old Pincushion and maybe a whole tribe of giant lake trout, for all I knew. We both started pawing at the weeds with our hands, and two more big trout came flying out. Then Jeff started crawling through the weeds with his light stuck out in front of him and I wriggled along behind him. When we got to the face of the cliff, it wasn't there! Suddenly there were no more weeds — but there wasn't any cliff either. We tumbled into a big black hole.

Both of us stuck our flippers out and backpedaled to slow ourselves down. You don't nose-dive your way into strange holes underwater unless you know where you're going. You might not be able to get out. We kicked our way back to where the thick growth of weeds had ended and flashed our lights around to get our bearings. It didn't take long to discover that we had stumbled onto what appeared to be the mouth of a cave, hidden from view by the tall growth of weeds on the ledge. Jeff signaled to me that he would stay at the mouth while I swam inside at the end of a line to take a look.

I wiggled my way inside cautiously, probing ahead with my light. Two more trout skipped out from behind an outcropping right beside me and dove downward. I swung the beam of my torch down after them, and what I saw made my heart flip over twice. There on the sandy floor of the cave, about twenty feet below me, was something that looked like a trout the size of a whale! It was just lying there, stone still, on the sandy bottom.

My legs suddenly felt as if they had been frozen stiff. But all I knew was I didn't want to be in the same cave with a trout that big, and I shot out of there like something out of a harpoon gun. I crashed right into Jeff at the mouth of the cave before I regained my senses, and I felt like a fool. I realized, then, that I had spooked myself. I had been thinking so much about Old Pincushion, and a secret hideout for giant trout, that I had forgotten all about what we were after. What I had actually seen on the sandy floor of that cave was probably the atom bomb!

I motioned frantically to Jeff, and he followed me back into the cave. Signaling him to stay high in the water, I beamed my light at the floor and we both looked at a bright metal object, about ten feet long, that looked something like a fat cigar. There was no doubt about it. It was the lost atom bomb, that had somehow hit the water at just the right angle to carry it into this cave before it could get to the bottom of the lake.

Looking at it there, as we treaded water above it, it seemed perfectly harmless. But then I began to realize what it actually was, and I had the same feeling that hit me when I thought it was a giant fish. I just wanted to get out of there before the thing went off. I looked at Jeff, and I could see he had the same feeling. He was already backing water toward the mouth of the cave. If there was anything that Henry had drilled into us over and over again, it was the fact that we shouldn't go anywhere near the bomb if we found it. Right then, both of us agreed with him.

Once out of the cave we snared the drop-light and tied it to a jagged rock at the entrance. Then we both went up the line to the surface. You can imagine the frustration of the rest of the gang when we told them we'd found the bomb. They wanted to jump and holler and shout "Whoopee!" but Jeff and Henry kept telling everybody to shut up and stop rocking the boats.

"Everybody cool it!" Henry said tersely. "We haven't really proved anything until we have a picture." And he handed me the underwater camera.

I checked out the camera and made sure there was still enough air in my tanks, while Henry went over his instructions with Mortimer three times. When Mortimer and I went over the side, we knew we had to work in a hurry. Freddy Muldoon had caught a glimpse of the patrol boat through a break in the mist; it was combing the shoreline with its searchlight where the summer cabins are located. We dove straight down, following the line of the drop-light, and Mortimer went in the cave with me. He held both our torches on the bomb while I took four pictures of it from different angles. Then we kicked out of there and I sent the camera up on a line.

The next thing to do was to set up the infernal apparatus Henry had invented to amaze the reporters with in the morning. The anchor from one of the boats was lowered to us, and we wedged it in among some rocks at the mouth of the cave and piled more rocks on it to make sure it wouldn't pull loose. Then we grabbed the drop-light, and cleared out of there.

When we got back up, Henry and Harmon had inflated an old tire tube and leashed the top of a peach basket to it. On top of this little raft they had mounted some kind of a black box and an orange-colored package that looked like a folded-up plastic bag. Henry was tacking down some wires on the basket lid when we surfaced.

"Make sure this doesn't get wet," he cautioned, as he and

Harmon lowered it over the side.

Mortimer and I towed the contraption out to a point approximately over the mouth of the cave and hooked it to the anchor line. Then we cut the line loose from the boat and got back aboard.

"What was all that junk you had on that inner tube?" I asked Henry.

"You'll find out in the morning," he answered. "Right now we've got to get out of here!"

Jeff and Harmon took the oars and we steered both boats slowly along the west side of the peninsula, keeping close to shore so we could duck into a cove in a hurry if we heard the patrol boat. But the mist had begun to settle in a lot thicker now, and there was very little chance the patrol boat would venture far out into the lake or be able to get up much speed. Still, I felt a tingling up my spine, and I could tell everybody else was a little jumpy and anxious to get off the lake as soon as possible. I guess it was because we really couldn't believe we'd actually found the bomb until we could get someplace where it was safe to talk about it.

When we got back to the hummock in the swamp and unloaded everything, Jeff and Harmon took off across the lake again to return the boat they'd borrowed. Since the mist had really socked in by then, they figured they wouldn't have any trouble getting by the patrols on shore. We decided to leave the beacon transmitter on the north shore and pick it up the next day. So Homer came along with the rest of us on the trail to Turkey Hill Road, and that made one more to help carry all the junk we had.

We hadn't quite reached the railroad track yet when we heard what sounded like a police radio turned up to full volume. We could hear the crackle and squawk of somebody coming on the air, followed by a lot of talk we couldn't make out.

"Everybody off the trail!" Henry ordered, and we made for the bushes.

We felt our way carefully through the brush to the left of the trail and found a little sandy knoll covered with juniper and bayberry bushes where we could lay the bikes down and crouch on our haunches without being seen.

"I guess we'd better reconnoiter what's going on up by the road, before we go any farther," said Henry.

"What's that mean?" asked Dinky Poore.

"You might be just the one to do it," said Henry. "Can you sneak through the bushes without making noise and shinny up trees?"

"I can do all that stuff," Dinky said, rubbing his nose.

Henry sent me with Dinky, and we circled through the woods to a point high on a steep bank just south of the railroad and overlooking the highway. There were no bushes near the edge, but there were two large boulders poised there, so close together there was only a narrow crevice between them. This was where Dinky came in handy. He wriggled through the grass in the shadow of the two rocks and squeezed in between them until he could see down onto the road with one eye. He came scrambling back right away with the news that he could see an Air Force sedan and a police squad car parked right where Freddy had been talking with the two Air Policemen.

"I saw two Air Police and two of the cops from Mammoth Falls," he said. "There might be more, though. I couldn't see everything."

Just then, the radio in one of the cars started squawking again. The transmission was too garbled for me to make out the words, but I could hear the answers of the officer on this end.

"Negative, sir. We've searched the woods about a hundred yards deep on both sides of the road, and there's just no sign of

the kid. The State Police car has already left the scene."

I knew in a flash what had happened. The two Air Policemen had probably come back up Turkey Hill Road a little later, and when they didn't pass Freddy still pedaling his bicycle toward Mammoth Falls they had started looking for him. The radio squawked again, and I knew I was right.

"We're positive, sir! Positive! Both Sergeant Hardy and I spoke to the kid, and we're sure it was right here. He couldn't have gotten all the way to Mammoth Falls before we came back up the road." The radio squawked again.

"Yes, sir! Yes, sir! That's possible, sir! but we didn't imagine that banana peel we found in the back seat!"

The radio crackled some more, and then I could hear the voice of the Air Policeman shouting to his friend.

"Hey, Hardy! The captain says we're to stay here. He's sending ten men out in a van, and there's another squad car coming from Mammoth Falls. We're to search the road from here into town."

Dinky and I beat it back to the knoll by the wagon trail and reported what we'd heard. Henry just sat there, running sand through his fingers and scratching his chin.

"How we gonna get home?" Freddy Muldoon moaned. "We gonna tramp all the way back through that lousy swamp?"

"That wouldn't do us any good, Freddy. But I do know a way we can get out of here… with a little luck." And Henry started drawing a diagram in the sand. "We've got to lug our bicycles up over this ridge across the tracks. Then, if we can get across the road a little bit north of the tracks without being seen, we can just follow the railroad to White Fork Road and get home that way. Everything depends on getting across that road."

We all nodded our heads. Then we made our way quietly across the tracks and slipped and floundered up the steep

sandy bank on the other side, tugging our bicycles after us. It was rough going, and Freddy Muldoon was cursing the Air Police under his breath all the way, but we finally made it over the ridge and down the other side. We came to the road about a hundred yards north of the tracks, where it curves to the west. But we couldn't get any farther up the road, because a big pond blocked our way. We could see the flashing red lights just around the curve.

"We'll have to cross here," Henry whispered. "We'll do it in a gang rush. Everybody line up in the ditch and wait for my signal."

"What's a gang rush?" Freddy asked.

"It means we all go together, six abreast," Henry explained. "If we try to go one at a time, they have six chances to see us. If we all go together, they only have one chance."

"That Henry, he thinks of everything," whispered Freddy to Dinky Poore.

Henry lined us all up in the ditch, and we waited tensely for his signal. Down the road we could just see the tail end of one of the patrol cars, and the surface of the pavement in front of us was being swept every half second with a flash of red light.

"Whatever you do, don't fall down," Henry warned us. "And when we get to the other side, just keep going right into the woods. There's no point in waiting to find out whether they saw us. Go on the count of three!"

When Henry got to three we scrambled up the bank of the ditch with our bicycles and dashed across the road. Homer Snodgrass fell flat on his face before he even reached the pavement and skinned his knees pretty good. But he managed to scramble to his feet and catch up with the rest of us as we hit the bushes on the other side. "Keep going, keep going!" Henry was muttering between clenched teeth. "And don't make any noise!"

Down the road toward Mammoth Falls we could hear the wail of a siren coming toward us, and we figured we had made it just in time. The police would soon be beating the bushes on both sides of the road. We plunged on through the undergrowth on the other side of the road, and then down a lightly wooded slope to where we found the old railroad track again. From there it was about two miles to White Fork Road, and we made it in good style, sometimes riding our bikes over the buried ties and sometimes pushing them where the tracks had been overgrown with vines and tall weeds. We rode home by way of White Fork Road, just as though we were coming back from the carnival at the Fair Grounds, and nobody bothered us.

When I got home, my mother wanted to know where I'd been and how come my clothes were so torn and dirty, and I told her we'd been playing touch football at the Fair Grounds.

"Touch football? At this time of night?"

"Yeah, we had a fluorescent ball," I told her, and I guess she believed me, because she didn't follow me down to my darkroom in the basement, where I developed the pictures I'd taken in the cave before I went to bed.

EVER SINCE I STARTED TELLING THESE STORIES people have been wondering what my last name is, and I never tell anyone — for a very good reason. It's Finckledinck! And the only reason I mention it now is that it was the first thing I heard the next morning when my mother hollered up the stairs, "Charlie Finckledinck, are you stuck to that mattress?"

There's something about that name that always wakes me up when I hear it. And there's something else about it that makes me wish I could stay in bed. But if I do, my mother's next move is to come upstairs with the kitchen broom and pretend she's sweeping the cobwebs off me. If you've never had a stiff straw broom brushed up and down your backside the first thing in the morning, you've got something to look forward to. Especially if you sleep in the raw, as I sometimes do when I'm really tired.

This morning I didn't wait for the broom treatment. I sprang out of bed like a man jumping out of a snake pit, wondering what time it was and where I'd left my clothes the night

before. I stumbled right over a chair, trying to get to the alarm clock on the dresser, and the photographs I'd printed before I went to bed went skidding across the floor. Jeepers! I thought. I bet Jeff and Henry are already at the dock by Jeff's cabin. I grabbed the clock and squinted at it, and it said three thirty! Then I really panicked!

"Hey, Ma! What time is it?" I hollered from the top of the stairs.

"It's time you were up, young man."

I should have known better.

"Hey, Ma! It's important. Don't you know what time it is?"

"If you'd get up at a decent hour you'd know what time it is."

"Please, Ma! What time does the kitchen clock say?"

"I'm not in the kitchen. I'm in the living room. You have a clock in your room. Did you forget to wind it?"

"I don't know, but I hope I did!" And I thumped down the stairs stark naked and dashed through the living room toward the kitchen. I heard a loud scream, and there in front of the refrigerator I saw Mrs. Appleby from next door throwing her hands up over her face, and I just kept going and skidded across the kitchen floor and down behind the stove and grabbed a dish towel off the rack and threw it around me. Then I cut out for the front stairway again, and by this time Mrs. Appleby was laughing so hard she was all doubled over and red in the face, and I guess I was red all over too, from top to bottom, and I made it to the top of the stairs in a leap, a step, and a jump.

"What time was it?" my mother called after me.

"I don't know," I said. "I forgot to look."

Then I could hear my mother laughing too, and I felt like a real chump, and I kicked the newel post at the top of the stairs and just about broke my big toe.

"Mrs. Appleby says it's seven thirty, Charlie, and she wants to know what time the next act comes on."

Mortimer would have had an answer for Mrs. Appleby, but I didn't, so I just stomped into my room and started jumping into my clothes. If I hurried, I'd just have time to make it to the lake. I got my clothes on and grabbed the photos and dashed down the stairs again and out through the kitchen.

"My! Doesn't he look nice with his clothes on," said Mrs. Appleby as I flashed by her.

"Charlie! Where are you going?" screamed my mother. "You haven't had a bite of breakfast." But I was already down the back steps and onto my bike and I pretended I didn't hear her. Women always want you to hurry and get out of bed; but if you want to hurry through breakfast, or skip it, the whole world can wait, as far as they're concerned.

"Charlie Finckledinck, what are you up to?" my mother shouted at me as I pedaled down the driveway.

"You wouldn't understand," I shouted back. "It's scientific!"

When I got to the lake, there was already a small crowd of reporters near Jeff's cottage arguing with two Air Policemen and a deputy from the sheriff's office. The police had put up road barriers all along the roadway, and I saw Henry and Jeff perched on one of them near Jeff's cottage.

"What's up?" I asked Henry. "I woke up late, but I got here as fast as I could."

"You're in plenty of time. We have to wait for Chief Putney to get here and settle the argument about whether we can go out on Jeff's dock. Did you bring the pictures?"

"They're in my shirt."

"How do they look?" Jeff asked.

"Pretty good. One of them is a beaut!"

"Wow!" said Jeff, when I showed them the shot I'd taken

looking down on the bomb from the front end. "That's great, Charlie. That oughta convince 'em." And he waved the photo at Mr. Jenkins, who was standing nearby.

"What's that you have there?" Mr. Jenkins asked as he came up to us.

Henry flashed the photo at him. "What do you think that is?"

"I've no idea. Looks like a tank of bottled gas. Or maybe a wing tank — Hey! That couldn't be an H-bomb, could it? This picture's kinda fuzzy. Where did you get it?"

"You might say we fished it out of the lake," said Henry.

"Henry, is that what you brought us out here to show us?"

"No! I brought you out here to show you where the bomb is. Now, if you can talk Chief Putney into letting us go out onto the dock, you might have a pretty good story. I think that's him coming now."

Henry stuffed the photo into his own shirt, and we started walking over to the crowd of reporters where Chief Putney's car and a state police car had just pulled up. Chief Putney got out of his car with an Air Force captain following him.

"Nobody's allowed out on the lake for any reason," the Air Force captain said to the reporters, "so you might as well go back to your Hotels, or wherever you came from."

"Uh... just a minute, Captain Whitehead," Chief Putney interrupted, putting a hand on the captain's shoulder. "I believe the town of Mammoth Falls is still within my jurisdiction. I put the lake and these cottages off limits at the request of the Air Force, but I don't remember handing over my badge."

"Now, gentlemen, if you'll just explain to me what you want to do, perhaps I can decide whether I can permit it."

"We don't want to go out on the lake, Chief," said Mr. Jenkins, stepping forward. "We just want to get out on that dock and take a few pictures."

"No cameras are permitted in a security area!" said Captain Whitehead.

"Well, now." Chief Putney cleared his throat. "I don't exactly remember anyone declaring this a security area."

"That's what I've been told, sir!"

"Well somebody forgot to tell me. I'm just supposed to keep people off the lake. Nobody ever said anything about pictures."

"These people would have to get permission from the base, sir."

"Well, Captain Whitehead, you go and check with your headquarters for whatever permission you think you need. But, as far as I'm concerned, these gentlemen of the press can go out there and take pictures as long as they convince me they have a legitimate reason."

"We have a reason!" said Mr. Jenkins. "It's simple. The Air Force claims they don't know where the bomb is. These kids claim that they know where it is and can prove it if we can just get out on that dock."

"How are they gonna prove it?"

"I don't know! But I'd be stupid if I didn't follow up on a story like this. Confidentially, Chief, these kids have already shown me enough to make me think they know what they're talking about."

"What did they show you?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Isn't that that Mulligan kid who was getting his hair all tangled up in Congressman Hawkins's fingers yesterday?"

"Yes, that's him."

"Didn't I see him on TV last night?"

"You may have. He was the one trying to get out from under the Congressman's arm."

"He's the one everybody's calling the 'mad scientist,' right?"

"Yeah! That's him all right!" said another newsman. "The one with the big map and the 'magnometer' and all that malarkey."

"Well, this I've got to see for myself," said Chief Putney. "Follow me, gentlemen!" And he lifted one of the barriers aside and strode toward the dock.

Harmon Muldoon, of course, had to run out to the end of the dock way ahead of everyone else, and he was all ready to give one of his speeches when the rest of us got there.

"Step right up, ladies and gentlemen," he chanted, with his lips pressed tightly together, while he beat a tattoo on the dock with a long willow branch he'd been whittling on. "You are about to see one of the most amazing feats of legerdemain ever demonstrated before the crowned heads of Europe. Not only will the Amazing Dr. Mulligan mystify you with his fantastic feats of memory, but he will also make a liar out of anyone who contradicts him, and once and for all prove that the hand is bigger than the eye —" and as Harmon made one of his sweeping gestures in the direction of the peninsula, he fell right off the end of the dock.

"Nobody's allowed in the lake!" Chief Putney shouted. "Get out of there, young man!"

But Harmon couldn't hear him. He was four feet under, on the bottom, and only his sailor cap and the willow branch were visible, floating on the surface. When he came up, two of the reporters helped us pull him up onto the dock and Mortimer slapped his sopping-wet hat back on his head.

"We oughta revoke your club privileges for conduct unbecoming a scientist," he said. "Now, run up and down the dock till you dry up!"

"And now, Dr. Mulligan," said Chief Putney. "Just what is it you brought us out here for?"

Henry stood at the extreme end of the dock and pointed out toward the peninsula. "If you'll all get your cameras focused on the nose of that peninsula, we're prepared to show you that we know where the bomb is located. Just let me know when you're ready."

"Can you give us some idea of what we're going to photograph?" asked one cameraman. "I'd like to be all set."

"It'll be a bright orange object," said Henry.

"Where is it? I don't see anything orange out there."

"I don't either," said Henry. "If I did, I'd be a little worried."

"What does that mean, wise guy?"

"It means there isn't any bright orange object out there right now, but there will be when you're ready."

"I'm ready, and I guess that means everybody is," said the little cameraman with Mr. Jenkins.

A big cheer went up from the other photographers — "You wouldn't kid us, would you, Shorty?" "Hey, everybody! Shorty's ready!" "O.K., Dr. Mulligan, Shorty says you can start the miracle!" — For some reason everybody called him Shorty, but I don't think that was his real name.

Henry walked to the end of the dock, and Jeff handed him a black gadget with a lot of buttons on it. Henry pointed the gadget toward the distant peninsula, looked back at the photographers to see if they were ready, then raised his left hand dramatically and pushed one of the buttons.

Nothing happened.

There was a long pause that got a little embarrassing.

The photographers kept looking through their viewfinders, then looking at Henry, then looking through their viewfinders again.

Still, nothing happened.

Henry pushed the button again and then shaded his eyes

from the sun to look out toward the peninsula. I strained my eyes, but there was nothing to be seen but water. Something was wrong.

"Hey! You got a no-hitter going, kiddo!" One of the photographers snickered.

"Hang in there, boy!" shouted another one.

Henry flushed red right up to the roots of his hair and turned his back on the reporters. "It's O.K., fellas," he said hoarsely. "I just forgot to turn on the transmitter, that's all." And he flicked a switch on the gadget. Then he pointed to the peninsula again and pushed the button. "Hey, look! Hey, look!" one of the photographers shouted. Then they all started looking through their viewfinders, and there was a lot of shutter snapping going on.

Far out on the lake, about three hundred yards west of the peninsula, something bright and orange started bulging out of the water, until it grew to about the size of a five-hundred-pound turnip. Then it started rising above the water, growing even bigger as it gained altitude above the surface of the lake. At about a hundred feet it came up short with a jerk and bobbed up and down a bit until it settled down and floated there, swaying gently.

Another cheer went up from the photographers and reporters. And this time it was a real one, with a different tone to it. "Attaboy, Mulligan! Go get 'em, doctor!" "Hey! What's that, an atom's apple maybe?" So many questions were being thrown at Henry that Chief Putney had to step forward to save him from being pushed off the end of the dock.

"One at a time, gentlemen, one at a time, if you don't mind," said the chief. "Now, young Mulligan. Would you mind telling me just what that is out there, and what it has to do with the bomb?"

"That's a weather balloon," Henry explained. "And it's anchored to the bottom right where the bomb is located. If

you'll get the Air Force to send their divers down to the end of that line, they'll find the bomb there."

"Holy mackerel! Is this for real, kid?" one of the reporters asked.

"You sure you aren't just putting on a sideshow for us?" asked another. "How did that balloon get out there, anyway?"

"We put it out there last night," said Henry. "Just after we found the bomb."

"Just after you found the bomb?"

"Yes," said Henry. "I told you yesterday we knew where the bomb was, and you asked me to prove it. There's the proof!" And he pointed at the balloon.

"But that's just a balloon!"

"We've got more proof, if you need it," said Jeff. "But all you have to do is send divers down there, and they'll find the bomb all right."

"All kidding aside, Henry," said Mr. Jenkins, pulling Henry off to one side. "How did you get that balloon out there, and how did you get it to go up?"

"It's simple," said Henry. Then he gulped. "That is, if you don't forget to turn on the juice. Have you ever been to a model airplane meet where they fly radio-controlled planes?"

"No, but I've read about them."

"Well, you probably know that you have a transmitter on the ground and a radio receiver in the plane. You can send signals to the plane and make it do anything you want: turn left or right, slow up, go into a dive... you know."

"Yeah! I know that."

"Well, this is a transmitter," said Henry, holding up the black gadget with all the buttons on it. "Out there on the lake we have the receiver mounted on a float that we rigged up last night. We used it to puncture the capsule that inflated that

balloon. That's all there is to it."

"Except, you have to remember to turn on the juice," added Mortimer.

"Very ingenious!" said Chief Putney.

"Now you know why I want to believe these kids," said Mr. Jenkins.

"You're starting to make a convert out of me, too," said the chief. "But there's just one thing that puzzles me. I can see that balloon, but how do I know there's a bomb at the end of that line?"

"We can prove the bomb is there, if it's necessary," said Henry.

"You mean that picture you showed me?" said Mr. Jenkins.

"Yes."

"Well — assuming it is a picture of an H-bomb — how do I know where you got that picture? Henry, I just can't believe you actually took a picture of a bomb the Air Force hasn't been able to find for three days."

"There's something about that picture you didn't notice, Mr. Jenkins."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," said Henry, looking out toward the balloon to hide a mischievous smile that had come over his face. "I'll let you know when the time comes."

Mr. Jenkins turned to the other reporters. "I say, let's go and put it up to the Air Force. Let's get out to the airbase."

There was a big cheer, and everybody started moving off the dock.

"If you don't mind my butting in, I don't think Colonel March is at the airbase," said Chief Putney. "He was due at the Town Hall to meet with the Town Council about the time I got

called out here."

"Thanks!" said Mr. Jenkins. "Maybe we can catch him there. Mind if I ride back into town with you?"

"If you don't mind people thinking you're under arrest," said the chief, and he held the door open for Mr. Jenkins to get in.

We all got on our bikes and pedaled as fast as we could after the disappearing cars. When we finally got to the Town Square, there was a minor hullabaloo going on. A huge truck, loaded with watermelons, was blocking traffic right in front of the Town Hall. The driver just happened to be Jasper Okeby, who is about as cantankerous a character as we have in Mammoth Falls. He runs a pretty good truck garden farm out on the White Forks Road, and he isn't famous for taking any lip from anybody. Constable Billy Dahr was shaking his stick at Jasper and having a hard time convincing him that he couldn't block the street in front of the Town Hall forever, with traffic piling up behind him.

"I ain't blockin' traffic!" said Jasper. "I'm jest waitin' fer that car to pull away from the curb, so's I kin back in there and make a delivery."

And he pointed to a car standing at the curb with its engine running. Behind it were parked three Air Force sedans, and I knew the first one was Colonel March's car, because it had a blue plate above the front bumper with chicken wings on it.

"Delivery?" said Billy Dahr. "You can't make a delivery here! Besides, there ain't nobody at the Town Hall ordered any watermelons. What in tarnation are you talkin' about, Jasper?"

"You ain't in the watermelon business, you're in the police business, Billy Dahr. So how come you know so much about it?"

"I'll show you some police business if you don't move this truck out of here!" said Billy Dahr, shaking his stick at the window of the truck.

While the argument was going on, a man came running out of the Town Hall with a tray full of coffee cups and drove off in the car that had been standing at the curb. Jasper put his truck in gear and started maneuvering it into the empty space, while Billy Dahr directed traffic around him. He pulled into the curb and then backed to within a foot of the front bumper of Colonel March's sedan. An airman sitting in the driver's seat got out and walked up to the door of Jasper's truck.

"How about pulling it up a bit, so I can get out, buddy? The Colonel will be coming out any minute now."

"That's fine by me," said Jasper. "Matter of fact I'll jest be here a minute. Now stand back, sonny — unless you're danged fond of watermelons!"

And with that, Jasper revved up the motor of his truck, and the dump body started tilting upward, and watermelons came cascading off the top of the load and plummeting onto the hood of Colonel March's car.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing, you old fool?" the airman shouted. "Stop it! Stop it! You're dumping your load!"

"I know it," said Jasper. "Jest wait'll I get her all the way up!"

The torrent of melons plumping onto the roof of the car sounded like the rumble of thunder, and people came running out of the stores and eating places around the square to see what all the commotion was about. Kids materialized out of nowhere, like worms coming out of the woodwork, and came scrambling across the square to grab the watermelons that popped open as they hit the pavement. Billy Dahr had halted all the traffic in both directions and was jumping up and down in the middle of the street, waving his stick in the air. But the dump body kept going up, and the melons kept tumbling out of it, until there was a heap of them ten feet high, and Colonel March's car had completely disappeared somewhere under the pile. Billy Dahr hoisted himself onto the running board of the

truck and shook his stick in Jasper's face.

"Jasper Okeby, I'm placing you under arrest for destroying government property!"

"You can't arrest me, Billy Dahr. I ain't destroyed nothin'!" said Jasper, pushing his hand in Billy Dahr's mustache. "I'm just deliverin' some melons, like I told you."

"I warn you! Anything you say may be held against you."

"And I warn you, Billy Dahr! Don't say nothin' to make me mad, or I might do somethin' stupid that I'd be sorry for."

"I'd hate to see Jasper when he was really mad," said a bystander.

Just then Chief Putney came striding down the steps of the Town Hall with Mr. Jenkins following him. He stopped in mid-stride, when he saw the huge mound of melons, and scratched his head. Then he came trotting up to Billy Dahr.

"What's going on here, Constable Dahr?"

"I don't rightly know, Chief," said Billy.

"I can tell you what's going on," said the airman. "Look at Colonel March's car!"

"Looks all right to me," said Chief Putney. "Which one is it?"

"That's the problem," said the airman. "You can't see it! It's the one under the watermelons."

"Under the watermelons? Constable Dahr! Is there a car under those watermelons?"

"There was about two minutes ago, Chief, but right now I wouldn't be sure of anything. It's the dad-blamedest thing I ever did see. I just don't know what this town is comin' to."

"Well, what are all these melons doing here, anyway? Who dumped them here?"

"Jasper Okeby done it," said Constable Dahr, gesturing toward Jasper's truck. "I tol' him not to do it, but he went

ahead and done it anyway."

Chief Putney walked slowly over to the truck, where Jasper was fastening down his dump body.

"I'm gonna ask you just one question, Jasper Okeby. And I want a straight answer."

"You don't have to ask me no questions," said Jasper. Then he stuck his thumbs under the straps of his overalls and leaned back against his truck. "You ever been in the melon business, Harold?"

"You know danged well I've never been in the melon business, Jasper."

"Then you wouldn't know nothin' about gettin' up at four o'clock in the mornin' to get a load of melons over to the market at Clinton, and then havin' them tell you they ain't buyin' no melons from Mammoth Falls 'cause everything that grows here is contaminated and they can't sell it 'cause nobody will eat anything that comes from Mammoth Falls and you can just take your load back where it came from and let the people in Mammoth Falls eat it. I know you wouldn't know nothin' about that, 'cause you ain't in the melon business. Anyways, I figured if anybody ought to eat these melons it oughta be the Air Force, 'cause they know all about atom bombs and all that stuff and they're probably used to eatin' food that's been contaminated. And that's all I know about them consarned melons, so there! 'Ceptin' you ought to be glad you're in the police business and not in the melon business!"

"Hot dang! Will you get a load of this character," said one of the photographers who had flocked across the street to hear the argument. "Hey, Jasper! Would you mind moving over in front of that pile of melons while I get a few shots?"

The photographers took over, and for a while Chief Putney lost control of the situation. They were practically manhandling Jasper as they tried to get him to climb up on top of the pile of melons while they took pictures. During all the

commotion, the meeting in the Town Hall broke up, and Colonel March came down the steps with several other Air Force officers.

"Hey, Colonel! Would you mind posing for a few pictures in front of that pile of melons?" a photographer shouted at him.

"What for? What is this? Where is my driver? What happened to my car?" the colonel asked.

"Your car is under that pile of melons, Colonel," said one of the reporters. "Some character dumped his load right on it. He claims he couldn't sell his melons because they're contaminated, so he's giving them all to you. Do you have any statement to make?"

"Just a moment, gentlemen," said Lieutenant Graham, stepping forward from the group of officers. "The Colonel will have a statement to make just as soon as we have ascertained all the facts."

He led the colonel aside, where they conferred for a moment and then motioned for Chief Putney to join them. The colonel kept looking back over his shoulder at the pile of melons and shaking his head in disbelief. Then he held a whispered consultation with Lieutenant Graham and nodded his head up and down several times.

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, as he returned to the group of reporters, "I understand that I have been presented with a rather handsome gift from a local citizen."

There was a big laugh, and a lot of people in the crowd surrounding the melons started making wisecracks like "You can say that again, Colonel!" and "With friends like you've got, who needs enemies?" and "You sure them melons wasn't dropped from a plane, Colonel?"

"I also understand that the gentlemen who left these melons here is very concerned about the possible contamination of his

crop," the colonel continued.

When the colonel mentioned the word contamination, a lot of the people who had been standing around with a watermelon under their coats sort of let them slip down onto the ground again when they thought nobody was looking.

"I want to emphasize once again," the colonel went on, "that there is absolutely no evidence of radiological contamination in this area — at present. You can rest assured that your water is safe to drink and that the fruit and vegetables grown in this area are safe to eat. Now, I've been told you should never put a gift horse in your mouth... but I just can't resist the temptation."

Then the colonel brought out a jackknife and picked up the largest and ripest melon he could find. He cut a big juicy slice from the center and started gnawing on it as if he was playing a harmonica.

"My! That is delicious!" he said.

Flashbulbs were popping all over the place as the photographers started shooting pictures. The colonel walked over to where his staff officers were standing and started handing out slices of watermelon. Lieutenant Graham bit off a big mouthful right away and agreed with the colonel that it was delicious. But some of the other officers made wry faces and looked at each other as if they weren't so sure.

"Take a piece!" said the colonel. "You'll enjoy it!"

Faced with a choice between possible death and disobeying the colonel, the officers all chose death and sank their teeth into the piece the colonel handed them.

Some of the people in the crowd started clapping their hands, and there were a few cheers here and there. Colonel March picked up another melon, split it open, and began offering succulent chunks to the newsmen and all the bystanders. A couple of other men in the crowd pulled out

their knives, and pretty soon it seemed as though everybody was either cutting open a watermelon or lugging one home with him. We stood there and watched the mound of melons slowly disappear until the car had been completely uncovered, and we all had to admit the colonel had made a pretty good move.

While the photographers were still taking pictures of the colonel with his face half buried in a big piece of melon, Mr. Jenkins and the other reporters started throwing questions at him.

"Any new leads on the bomb, Colonel?"

"Colonel, can we quote you on that statement about no radiation in the area? Is that for certain?"

"Have you definitely eliminated the lake as a possibility, Colonel?"

"Colonel, can you give us some idea of your plans for the immediate future? Where is the search concentrated now?"

The colonel waved off the questions good-naturedly, pulled out his handkerchief, and wiped his mouth. "Gentlemen, I'd like to help you, but the fact is I have absolutely no news for you right now."

"Well, we may have some news for you, Colonel," said Mr. Jenkins. "We have good reason to believe the bomb has been located."

"I can assure you we have not located the bomb, gentlemen."

"We know you ain't found it, Colonel," said the reporter who always had his coat slung over his arm. "But we've been told it's been found. And, what's more, we know where it is!"

"You know where it is?"

"Let's say we think we know where it is," cautioned Mr. Jenkins. "What we want you to do, Colonel, is prove to us, once and for all, whether these kids know what they're talking

about."

"What are you saying? What kids? Oh! That's the young man who was here yesterday with the map, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I already told you gentlemen we had searched that part of the lake thoroughly. I have nothing to add to that statement."

"Uh, just a minute, Colonel," said another reporter, shifting a big cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "Out there on that lake we just saw a great big orange balloon come up out of the water when nobody was within a mile of it. This kid here made it come up out of nowhere with some kind of a radio gadget and a lot of hocus-pocus. He claims that balloon is anchored right where the bomb is. After what I saw this morning, I gotta believe him — unless you can prove he's wrong. In other words, Colonel, if you don't check this out, my paper's gonna print a story about how these kids know where the bomb is and the Air Force refuses to do anything about it."

"Wait a minute!" Lieutenant Graham interrupted. "That's not exactly what the Colonel said."

"That's what I'm hearing," said the reporter. "I don't care what words he's usin'."

"What's all this about a big orange balloon?" asked the colonel.

"Go down to the lake and see for yourself," said the reporter. "It's still there."

"Is this some kind of a prank?" the colonel asked. "That lake has been off limits for three days. How could anyone anchor a balloon out there?"

"I don't know how they did it," said the reporter, "but there's a balloon out there right now. And these kids say if you'll send divers down to the end of that line, you'll find the bomb. Now, what are you going to do about it, Colonel?"

"Well," said the colonel, "I'll take your word for the fact there's a balloon out there. But that doesn't prove anything. I don't plan to do anything, unless someone can show me some evidence that justifies sending divers down in that part of the lake again."

"Thank you all, gentlemen," said Lieutenant Graham, stepping into the breach. "If you'll keep in touch with my office..."

It was then that Henry plucked at Mr. Jenkins's elbow and pulled the photo out of his shirt.

"Just a moment, Lieutenant," said Mr. Jenkins. "I have something here I think the Colonel should see." And he took the photo from Henry and held it up in front of Colonel March.

"What is that?" the colonel asked.

"That's what I want you to tell me, Colonel. Is that an H-bomb?"

"It certainly looks like one, but" — the Colonel hesitated — "this is a pretty murky picture."

"It was taken underwater," Mr. Jenkins explained.

"That picture is classified!" said Lieutenant Graham, peering over the colonel's shoulder. "Where did you get it?"

"Never mind where I got it. Is that an H-bomb?"

Several of the other officers peered over the colonel's shoulder to look at the photo and then stared at each other in amazement.

"Well, Mr. Jenkins?" the colonel said slowly. "I would like to know where you got this photo."

"I can't tell you that, Colonel. But I'm told that this photo was taken last night out in Strawberry Lake."

The colonel snorted, and several of his officers laughed outright.

"You're not seriously asking me to believe such a story, are you, Mr. Jenkins? I don't know where you got that photograph, but I think you should turn it over to my staff and let them find out where it came from."

Lieutenant Graham reached out to take the photo, but Mr. Jenkins pulled it back out of reach.

"Not so fast, Lieutenant! This picture doesn't belong to you."

"Frankly, Mr. Jenkins, I think somebody has been pulling your leg," said the colonel. "That picture has probably been copied from an Air Force manual. I think you're being victimized by someone who's trying to pass that off as a picture of the bomb that was lost."

"Could you repeat that, Colonel?" several reporters asked. "Could we get that on tape?"

Mr. Jenkins felt somebody plucking at his sleeve again, and he turned to find Henry offering him a small magnifying glass.

"I told you there was something about that picture you hadn't noticed, Mr. Jenkins," said Henry. "Take a close look, right where my finger is."

Mr. Jenkins squinted through the magnifying glass. "Looks like some kind of a number," he said. "And there's a whole bunch of gobbledygook letters, too. Is this your trump card, Henry?"

"If you want to see them really flip their lids, get the colonel to read that number. And if it turns out to be a serial number, like I think it is, how about buying hamburgers for the whole gang? We're getting hungry."

"You're on!" said Mr. Jenkins, as he strode over to where the other reporters were taping Colonel March's statement. "Colonel March, sir! Before you go on record with that statement, I think you ought to take a closer look at this photograph... right here!" And he held the photo in front of the

colonel's face again and handed him the magnifying glass.

The colonel squinted with one eye through the glass. Then he looked up at Mr. Jenkins. Then he looked up again, and his eyes were bugging out.

"Richardson!" he roared. "Take a look at this picture!"

A harassed-looking major stepped forward briskly and scrutinized the photo carefully, in the area where the colonel was holding his finger.

"Is that the number of the weapon we're looking for or isn't it?"

The major hastily pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket and fingered through the pages. Then he looked carefully at the photo again.

"I don't understand it," he said. "I don't understand it. It can't be!"

"Well? Is it the number or isn't it?"

"It is!" said the major, nodding his head. "But I don't understand it! How could anyone have gotten a picture of it?"

"There seems to be a lot going on that we don't understand," said the colonel. "Mr. Jenkins, it seems to me you have a lot of explaining to do. I ask you again: Where did you get this photo?"

"I told you I can't tell you that," said Mr. Jenkins.

"Pardon me, Colonel," said the reporter with the big cigar, pushing his broad frame into the tight circle that had gathered around the colonel and Mr. Jenkins, "but it seems to me that you're the one who has a lot of explaining to do. Now —"

"Where is the negative of that photo?" the major named Richardson demanded. "You said it was taken out on the lake last night. That's classified information, and I demand that you produce the negative!"

"Just a minute, buster!" said the big reporter, jabbing his

cigar right under the major's nose. "I believe I was asking the Colonel a very important question, when you chose to butt in. You're just going to step back and keep your nose out of this until I have an answer from the colonel!"

"Lieutenant Graham, I think this is getting a bit out of hand," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir!" the lieutenant agreed.

"Now, as I was saying," the big reporter continued, "these kids have been trying to tell you they know where that bomb is ever since yesterday morning. This morning I saw a big orange balloon come up out of nowhere. Now I see a photograph of a bomb that your own officer admits has the right serial number on it. Let me give you some advice, Colonel! If you want to get your nose rubbed in printer's ink all over the country, you just keep on harrassin' Mr. Jenkins here about where that photo came from. But my editor wants to know what you plan to do about recovering that bomb! So suppose you tell us, in twenty-five words or less, just what your immediate plans are!"

"We plan to send divers down immediately, in the area where that balloon is anchored!" said the colonel, fixing a furious eye on Major Richardson.

"And just when is immediately, Colonel?"

"This afternoon!"

"Thank you, Colonel. I think I can go file a story now." And the big reporter turned away as a rousing cheer went up from the rest of the newsmen and the hangers-on left over from the watermelon debacle.

"Thanks for helping me out, Mac," Mr. Jenkins said to the big man. "The Colonel had me on a spot there, and I didn't want to press him too much."

"Any time, Jake!" said the big man. "I don't mind leanin' on 'em. Sometimes it takes some of the starch out of 'em."

"By the way, Mac, have you met 'Professor' Mulligan? Henry, this is Earl MacComber. He's covering the story for the Associated Press."

"Professor? I thought it was Dr. Mulligan," said Mr. MacComber, with a big belly rumbler of a laugh. "I'll have to send a correction in to the office."

"Pleased to meet you!" said Henry, very sheepishly.

"You kids are putting on a great show, sonny," Mr. MacComber went on. "But now we come to the moment of truth. We'll soon know whether you've been pulling our leg."

And he stuck the big fat cigar in his mouth and strode off across the park toward the Bristol Hotel to phone his story in.

AS SOON AS MR. MACCOMBER HAD LEFT, Mr. Jenkins buttonholed the colonel to get him to repeat his statement for the TV camera, and the reporters with the tape recorders got in on the act too. Meanwhile, the crowd in the Town Square practically evaporated. Everybody seemed to want to get home, or to a telephone, and spread the latest news as fast as they could. About all that was left was a crew of firemen that Constable Dahr had brought over from the Fire Station to hose down the sidewalks and clean up the mess left over from the watermelon feast.

Harmon Muldoon tried to make their job as easy as possible by starting a game of melon-in-the- car with two friends of his who had shown up in the crowd. They kept dodging in and out among the trees, throwing big juicy hunks of watermelon rind at each other, until one of them finally knocked the helmet right off a fireman's head with a big chunk. His name was Stony Martin, and he started laughing like a hyena. But he forgot to keep his eyes open. Two of the other firemen aimed the high-pressure hose at him and knocked him flat on the grass.

Stony struggled back to his feet, with the breath knocked half out of him, and he and his friend took off across the square like two scared rabbits.

"Are those some of the kids who claim they found the lost bomb?" Colonel March asked.

"I don't know who they are, Colonel. I never saw them before," said Mr. Jenkins.

Harmon came sauntering back toward us, with his thumbs stuck in his trouser pockets and a big fat grin on his face. For Jeff and the rest of us club members, his performance was the last straw.

"Get out of here, Harmon!" Jeff bit the words off out of the side of his mouth. "And don't ever come back!"

The grin faded from Harmon's face. He started to bluster, and the thumbs came out of his pockets to form two fists. But when he saw the angry glare in Jeff's eyes, he put his hands back in his pockets and contented himself with a loud, juicy raspberry that spattered a couple of watermelon seeds on my arm. Then he turned on his heel and waddled off toward Vesey Street. And he never did come back — except to haunt us.

As Colonel March walked toward his car, he stopped in front of Jeff and Henry.

"You know, something puzzles me, Richardson," he said to the major, who was hovering at his shoulder. "You claim your divers searched the lake bottom thoroughly, all along the line of flight — and they're supposed to be professional divers. If these kids did find the bomb, and I still don't know how they did, how come your divers missed it?"

The major gulped noticeably. "It's very, very deep in that area, sir. Maybe two hundred feet."

"I don't care how deep it is. The point is, did they search the bottom?"

"The bomb's not on the bottom, sir," Jeff volunteered. "It's

in a cave."

"In a cave?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You see, sir," Henry explained, "there's an underwater ridge that runs out into the lake right off the nose of that peninsula. It isn't very wide, but it goes quite a distance, and about three hundred yards out it's still only thirty feet or so under the surface. Right there is where our magnetometer registered a big deviation of the magnetic field. And we found this cave about another twenty feet down the south slope of that ridge."

"You can't see the cave at First," Jeff added, "because the mouth is all covered with tall weeds. But if you'll just have your divers go down the line that balloon is tied to, they'll find my anchor right at the entrance."

"And watch out for them trout!" said Freddy Muldoon. "Charlie says there's some real big ones in there."

The colonel smiled. Then his face got very stern. "Just how did you get out on the lake to do all this? That is, if you did do it."

"That's classified information," said Mortimer quickly, and even Major Richardson managed a snickering kind of a laugh.

"Well, gentlemen, I'll take that up with you later," said the colonel, looking very serious again. "Right now we've got a lot of work to do." And he started toward his car.

A few reporters were still hanging around, and they kept pestering the colonel as he was getting into his car about whether they could go along with the divers and observe the recovery operations. But the colonel just kept shaking his head.

"Absolutely not!" he said. "Not only is this a classified device we're looking for, but I cannot be responsible for any possible injury to a civilian. It's just too dangerous."

"You mean this thing might still go off, Colonel?"

"The Colonel didn't say that!" Lieutenant Graham interjected.

"These devices are not armed on training flights," the colonel explained. "They would only be armed in the event of an actual tactical mission flown in a national emergency — and even then, only when the flight had reached the target area. I thought I had already explained all that. But these weapons also carry a conventional explosive that is detonated to trigger the nuclear device. It is the conventional explosives that I am worried about. You just can't take too many precautions when you're handling ordnance items of any kind."

"Does that make the situation clear to you gentlemen?" Lieutenant Graham asked.

There was a little grumbling, but the newsmen nodded their heads and the three Air Force sedans pulled away from the curb with their tires spinning a little. There was still some melon rind and slippery goo left in the street, and Colonel March's car looked pretty wet and sticky. But otherwise it was all right, and I imagine it got a good bath as soon as it got back to the air base. As the cars drove out of sight, Henry looked up at Mr. Jenkins, and Mr. Jenkins started counting noses.

"I think I owe you all a hamburger. Let's see... four, five, six, seven... I thought there were eight of you. What happened to the kid who fell in the lake?"

"He never came up," said Freddy Muldoon.

"Oh, yes, he did. I saw some of you helping him up on the dock."

"Oh, that kid," said Freddy. "He ain't in our club no more. He was such a loudmouth we voted him out for conduct unbecoming a scientist."

"He was givin' our club a bad name," said Dinky Poore.

"O.K., O.K.! Have it your own way. I just wanted to make sure I didn't miss anybody. Well, lead on, gentlemen. You know the best eating places in town." And we all walked across the square to the Ye Olde Beef and Coffee Shoppe in the Bristol Hotel.

The Bristol hotel used to be a pretty grand place in the days when salesmen and other people came to Mammoth Falls on the train and had to stay overnight to get the train out the next day. But nowadays it's kind of seedy and rundown, because hardly anybody stays overnight in Mammoth Falls any more. The Bristol used to have a magnificent dining room with tremendous crystal chandeliers, and white damask tablecloths and napkins, and chairs with red velvet upholstery. But old Mr. Pritchard, who runs the place, says he couldn't make the dining room pay any more. He says you can't have nice things and progress too. You just have to keep up with the times.

The old Mammoth Falls Arms, that was even bigger and fancier than the Bristol, is a good example. It was a beautiful big granite building with marble columns across the front and a circular drive where people could drive their carriages in and hitch the horses to hitching posts. But almost nobody uses carriages any more, and the Mammoth Falls Arms was demolished by a wrecking crew before I was even born. There's a gasoline station on that corner now, and it's sort of a smelly eyesore in the Town Square. But as Mr. Pritchard would say, "That's progress!" After all, what would you rather smell, gasoline or horse manure?

But in spite of all the progress in Mammoth Falls in recent years, there are still a few good things left in town, and the Bristol's Ye Olde Beef and Coffee Shoppe is one of them. When we trooped into the place we saw Mr. MacComber sitting all alone in a booth, sipping a cup of coffee and lighting up a fresh cigar. Mr. Jenkins asked a waiter to pull a table up to the booth so we could all crowd in with him, and Dinky Poore, of course, ended up sitting out in the aisle, where

everybody bumped into his chair or hit him in the head with an elbow as they walked by.

"How do you want your hamburgers?" said the waiter, without even asking what we wanted.

"I don't want a hamburger," said Freddy Muldoon. "Just bring me a tuna fish and peanut butter sandwich and a lemon soda."

The waiter looked a little green, but he wrote down the order and said, "I'll see. I don't know whether we have that on the menu."

"And could I have some salt, please?" said Freddy.

The waiter reached over everybody's head and skidded the saltcellar down the table toward him. And while the rest of us were giving our orders, Freddy pulled a big slice of watermelon out from under his shirt, salted it liberally, and started slurping it down as if he hadn't eaten anything all day. Mr. MacComber sat there, quietly stirring his coffee and shaking his head slowly from side to side as he watched Freddy wolfing down the melon.

"You gotta see that kid to believe him," he said to Mr. Jenkins, with a jerk of his head in Freddy's direction. "Did I hear him say he wanted a tuna fish and peanut butter sandwich?"

"I think that's what I heard," said Mr. Jenkins, "but I was trying to forget it."

"Hey! I hear the Colonel really shut off some of the boys who wanted to go along and watch the diving operation. That right?"

"Yeah, that's right. All they got was a good lecture on how atom bombs are triggered."

"Well, they were kinda stupid," said Mr. MacComber. "You got to know when to stick your nose in and when not to. All the same, I'd sure like to be there when they bring that bomb

up. That's the story the whole country wants. But I guess we've got about as much chance as a pig in a slaughterhouse."

"Would you really like to watch them raise the bomb?" Henry asked very quietly, as the waiter showed up with a three-foot tray full of hamburgers.

"What do you mean, Henry?" said Mr. Jenkins, as he and Mr. MacComber exchanged glances. "Have you got some more magic up your sleeve?"

"There's no magic to it," said Henry. "All it takes is some brains. That is, if you have the necessary equipment."

Mr. MacComber got caught with a mouthful of coffee and started choking, and he got all red in the face trying to stifle a laugh.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way," Henry said quietly. "What I mean is — well, Mr. Shorty has a telescopic lens with him, doesn't he?"

Mr. MacComber got caught again, and this time he spurted coffee all over his end of the table and Mr. Jenkins started pounding him on the back. "Mr. Shorty! Will you get a load of that!" the big man sputtered. "Professor Mulligan, you're a real card. Don't be so formal. The rest of us just call him Dr. Shorty!" And he bellowed again and slapped the table.

"O.K., O.K.!" said Mr. Jenkins. "Shorty has a lot of lenses. It all depends on what you want to shoot."

"We'll need the biggest one he has," said Henry. "Do you have a tape deck and a monitor with you?"

"No. We use mostly film on these jobs, and they review it at the studio. What have you got in mind, Henry? If it's important, I can get WSEE to send the equipment down here, but it wouldn't get here until tonight, some time."

"We can do better than that," said Henry. "There's a TV station in Clinton — WEYE-TV — and I bet they'd lend you a tape deck and a monitor if you promised them a copy of the

tape. You can drive over there and back in an hour."

"I know about WEYE," said Mr. Jenkins. "They feed my stuff back to WSEE for me. What would be on this tape that I promise to give them?"

"It would be the recovery operation," said Henry. "It's really very simple. All you have to do is go up in the hills west of the lake — someplace like the old zinc mine. There's an old ore crusher there with a catwalk around it, and you can see the whole lake from there. It's too far up in the hills for the patrols to cover, but with a telescopic lens you could photograph the whole recovery operation."

A gleam started to come into Mr. Jenkins's eyes. "Say, Henry! I think you've hit on something. Why didn't I think of that? But why do we need the video recorder and the TV monitor?"

"Well," said Henry, getting a little red in the face, "I thought — maybe — since I suggested the idea, you might let us all go along. If we just plug Shorty's camera into the tape deck and hook up the monitor, we could all sit there and watch it... just like it was on TV."

There was a soft splash, followed by a clatter of crockery, as Mr. MacComber's cigar fell into his coffee cup. He sat there looking at Henry, with his jaw flopped open.

"Is this kid for real, Jake?" he said. "I don't know enough about your game to know whether he knows what he's talking about. Could this be done?"

"Of course it could be done. It's done every day. That's how they broadcast football games, and anything else that's done live. Why didn't I think of it myself? The only question would be whether we have enough battery power. This operation could last all afternoon."

"Don't worry about batteries," said Henry. "Jeff's father has a three-kilowatt generator — you know, one of those surplus

Army jobs mounted on a trailer. That's enough power for you, isn't it?"

"That's more than we need. Could we borrow it?"

"You'll have to borrow the jeep to tow it with, too," said Jeff. "But we'll need that anyway. You'd never get up to the zinc mine with that station wagon of yours."

"You guys are a regular gold mine," said Mr. MacComber. "Is there anything you don't have?"

"We're short on food," said Freddy Muldoon. "Yesterday I hardly ate anything, except some bananas."

Mr. MacComber choked on his coffee again. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "If I can go along and watch this show, I'll bring the soda pop and hamburgers for lunch."

Two hours later we were all pushing the jeep to help it get up the last steep incline to the crusher by the old zinc mine — all of us, that is, except Jeff, who was driving, and Shorty the cameraman, who kept running around the jeep to make sure his camera and recording equipment weren't falling off. We parked the generator at the base of the crusher and ran the power line up to the catwalk. Pretty soon we were all sitting up there watching the TV monitor, while Mortimer and Dinky shinnied up two trees and cut back some branches that were blocking Shorty's view of the lake.

"Boy! This is just like having seats on the fifty-yard line at a Chinese funeral," said Mr. MacComber, as he propped himself up against the wall of the crusher and took out a fresh cigar. Then he tipped his hat down over his eyes and left the unlit cigar dangling from the side of his mouth. "Wake me up when the first act comes on, will you, Shorty?"

It was after two o'clock and the hamburgers were long gone before we saw any activity on the lake. Finally two patrol boats showed up. A little later they were joined by a small tug, towing what looked like a big raft with a derrick on it. We'd

never seen anything like them on the lake before, but Mr. Jenkins explained that they were Army Engineer equipment that had been brought in on railroad flat cars the day after the bomb was lost.

We sat and watched for hours while divers kept going over the side of one of the patrol boats and coming back up to have their air tanks refilled. Shorty had a good zoom lens on his camera, and whenever something seemed to be happening on one of the boats he would zoom in and give us a close-up of the action. It was pretty exciting. You could almost read the lips of some of the characters on the decks of the patrol boats. But it was also pretty dull. Nothing seemed to be happening that could give us an indication of when they would start raising the bomb. Colonel March was on board the boat the divers were using, and they kept coming back up and reporting to him with a lot of gestures we couldn't figure out. But it was apparent they had run into some kind of a problem.

"Ain't you got no sound on this thing?" asked Freddy Muldoon.

"Maybe you'd like to swim out there with a mike and hold it under their noses!" said Shorty. "You look like you'd float pretty good."

"They sure should have found that bomb by now," Mortimer muttered. "Maybe we should have drawn them a map."

"Maybe the bomb just 'sploded and disappeared," said Dinky Poore.

"Nuts!" said Freddy. "If it had 'sploded, we'd of heard it."

"Under all that water?" Dinky challenged him.

"Yeah! Ain't you never seen one 'a them mushrooms from an atom bomb? It's bigger'n a house and goes way up in the sky!"

"Sure, I seen 'em. Lots of 'em. But maybe this mushroom

went down instead of up."

Freddy Muldoon's lips curled in contempt, and he sort of snorted. "Boy, how dumb can you get? Fat lot you know about science. You wouldn't know a mushroom if you saw one."

"Least I know a fathead when I see one!" Dinky retorted.

We watched while the divers made another descent, and when they came back up they had a long conference with Colonel March and an Army officer who had two men in civilian clothes with him. While they were talking, one of the patrol boats left. It came back in a while, towing a big red buoy in its wake. The divers went over the side again and anchored the buoy right where our balloon was tethered. Then they hauled in the balloon, deflated it, and all three of the boats headed back for shore with the big raft trailing behind them.

"I wonder what that was all about?" said Mr. MacComber. "Seems to me they didn't do anything but have one gab fest after another."

"Beats me!" said Mr. Jenkins. "Maybe we'd better get back into town and see if they have some kind of statement for us."

We all felt disappointed that we hadn't seen the bomb brought to the surface, but at the same time we were burning with curiosity as to what all the lengthy conferences were about. When we got back into town we went straight to the Bristol Hotel, which was the headquarters for the reporters who had flocked into town. A lot of them were lounging around the lobby, playing gin rummy and poker, or watching TV, or just snoring in the lounge chairs.

"Where you guys been?" one of them asked. "You missed all the excitement."

"Uh... we just went out in the country for a picnic," Mr. Jenkins answered. "What's the excitement? What happened?"

"Farrell, over there, just drew a pat royal flush and broke up

the poker game, that's all! You shoulda been here. You coulda lost some money."

"Oh, is that all? I thought maybe something important happened."

"You'd think it was important if you'd been sitting there with a full house, like I was."

"Did you take all those kids on the picnic?" one of the gin rummy players asked.

"No, they took us!" Mr. MacComber answered, with a loud guffaw. "It cost me eight bucks for soda pop and hamburgers. What do you hear from the Air Force? Anything?"

"Nothing!" said the gin rummy player, looking at his watch. "We gotta call that lieutenant pretty soon, though. It's almost deadline time."

"Wonder if they found that bomb yet?" said one of the other players.

"Yeah! I wonder!" said Mr. MacComber, as he wedged himself into a telephone booth next to the one Mr. Jenkins was using.

Both he and Mr. Jenkins were a long time on the telephone, and before they finished the other reporters were banging on the doors, trying to get them out so they could place their own calls. When Mr. Jenkins finally came out, he held his hands up to quiet the crowd in front of the booth.

"It's no use, boys," he said. "I finally got to talk to Colonel March himself, and he absolutely refuses to make any statement at this time."

"Well, did they find the bomb?" a dozen reporters asked at once.

"If they did, they won't admit it."

"But what about that big orange balloon those kids staked out on the lake? Did they send divers down there?"

"Yes, they did," said Mr. Jenkins.

"And they claim they didn't find anything?"

"The whole thing was just a hoax, then?"

"You mean we suckered for some kind of a magic show that kid put on?"

The questions were coming thick and fast.

"Hold on a minute! Hold on!" said Mr. Jenkins, putting his hand up again. "They didn't say they hadn't found the bomb."

"Well, you just said they did."

"No, I didn't. I said they wouldn't make any statement. They wouldn't say they had found the bomb, and they wouldn't say they hadn't. They just said, 'No comment!' Personally, I think they did find it."

"Why? How come you know so much?"

"Because they took down the balloon and towed a red buoy out there to mark the spot. They wouldn't anchor a buoy there unless they were intending to go back again."

"That makes sense. But how come you know all this?"

"I just know it, that's all," said Mr. Jenkins. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

"In a pig's neck I will!" said the sloppy-looking reporter who always had his coat over his arm and his necktie undone. "How do we know you're not trying to put us off the scent, Jenkins? How do we know you ain't already filed the story and got a big jump on us?"

"Hey! Holy Moses!" cried another reporter. "I bet that's why you took so long in that phone booth. You weren't talkin' to no colonel! You were talkin' to your home office, puttin' your story on tape!"

"Now, wait a minute, wait a minute!" Mr. Jenkins pleaded. But he might as well have whistled into the wind. The other reporters were climbing all over him in a rush to get into the

phone booth.

"You got a nerve, Jenkins!"

"I'm gonna call the colonel myself."

"What a bunch of patsies we've been!"

"Nuts to the colonel! I'm gonna call the Pentagon."

"Thanks a lot, Jenkins! Remind me to do you a favor sometime."

Then the group sort of exploded in all directions — up the stairs, down the stairs, out in the street — searching for telephones. Mr. MacComber came out of the next phone booth and stood there quietly, rotating a fresh cigar between his lips.

"What's all the excitement?" he asked casually.

"Nothing," said Mr. Jenkins. "The boys think we're pulling the wool over their eyes. They think I know something they don't know, and I won't let them in on the story."

"You do know something they don't know."

"What's that?"

"You know how old your mother is!"

Mr. MacComber stalked off toward the registration desk, but before he got there he felt Henry Mulligan's fingers grabbing his sleeve. Henry was gesturing frantically toward the other side of the lobby. A tall man with a heavy black mustache was disappearing through the doorway marked MEN'S BAR AND GRILL. Mr. MacComber turned around just in time to see him. Then he looked at Henry, and Henry looked at him.

"What do you think?" said Mr. MacComber.

"I think it's one of the divers we saw on the deck of the patrol boat," said Henry, "but I can't be sure."

"I can't either," said Mr. MacComber, "because Shorty didn't always have his camera in focus on those close-ups."

"But I noticed a red line across his forehead," said Henry. "That could mean he'd been wearing a tight helmet."

"You're a smart kid," said Mr. MacComber. "I think it's time I bought somebody a drink." And with a wink to Henry and a flourish of his cigar, he strode across the lobby and was swallowed up by the crowd in the Men's Bar and Grill.

That night, the town of Mammoth Falls slept on tenterhooks — that is, if anybody slept at all. By late evening, the Air Force had still refused to make any statement at all about the bomb, and all sorts of rumors were flying about the town again. I guess some people figured the Air Force hadn't found the bomb and didn't want to admit it. A lot of others figured our balloon stunt was just a hoax and we'd led the Air Force on a wild goose chase. But most people would rather believe something spectacular, if they have a choice, and the people of Mammoth Falls are no exception. So there was a lot of talk on the street corners and over backyard fences about a rumor that the bomb was about to explode and the Air Force couldn't do anything to stop it. The people who believed this were packing a little bedding and food into their cars and taking off for anywhere they thought was far enough away from the danger zone. There were streams of cars and pickup trucks clogging the roads leading out of town: east, west, north, and south. And every gasoline station in town had pumped its tanks dry by early evening.

I guess most everybody left in town had his nose glued to the tube when the late TV news came on at 11 o'clock that night, hoping the Air Force would clear up the mystery one way or the other. The Air Force didn't. But Mr. MacComber must have bought more than one drink for that big man with the black mustache that Henry Figured was one of the divers, 'cause he blabbed pretty good.

I was sitting in the middle of our living room floor in my skivvies, with the volume on the TV turned down low so my

mother wouldn't hear it, and all the lights out, trying to munch potato chips without making any noise. The first five minutes of the news was all about the lost bomb, of course, and I sat there cheering under my breath and slapping the floor while they showed Mr. Jenkins interviewing Jeff and Henry on the end of the dock, and Colonel March's car buried under Jasper Okeby's watermelons, and about thirty-seven seconds of the four hours of tape Shorty shot on the diving operations. Then there was a lot of gobbledygook about why the Air Force wouldn't talk, and how come they hadn't found the bomb yet, and what the latest congressman who wanted some publicity had to say about the situation, and junk like that. I was just about to turn the thing off and get up to bed when the words SPECIAL BULLETIN flashed on the screen, and an announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our regularly scheduled news broadcast to bring you this special bulletin from the wires of the Associated Press. Mammoth Falls: The Associated Press reported tonight it has learned from an unusually reliable source that the nuclear device reported missing by the Air Force four days ago has definitely been located by Air Force divers working in an area of Strawberry Lake that had previously been searched without success. The missing bomb is reported to be lodged in a small cave, or crevice, in a submerged ridge about three hundred yards offshore, precisely where a group of local youngsters had predicted it would be found."

"Whoopee-ee-ee!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. Then I clapped my hand over my mouth. Sure enough, my mother's sleepy voice came from upstairs.

"Is that you, Charlie? What on earth are you doing?"

I didn't answer. I had my ear pressed against the TV so I wouldn't miss anything.

"The informant, who is not identified in the dispatch, told the Associated Press that removal of the bomb posed a severe

safety problem for the Air Force and the U.S. Army Engineers assigned to the search and recovery operation. Officials are fearful that any attempt to remove the weapon from the narrow crevice could result in a rupturing of the bomb casing and the possible release of fissionable materials into the waters of the lake. According to the source, Air Force officials are faced with the dilemma of risking contamination of the lake and the immediate surrounding area by attempting to recover the bomb or leaving the town of Mammoth Falls with a twenty-megaton time bomb forever sitting on its doorstep."

"So far, Air Force officials have been reluctant to make any statement about today's search operations. Spokesmen at nearby Westport Field tonight refused to confirm or deny reports that the missing bomb had been found. A terse 'No comment' was their only response to queries about the Associated Press story."

"We repeat: The Associated Press in a late bulletin tonight reports that Air Force divers have found the nuclear bomb accidentally dropped from a SAC bomber four days ago in the vicinity of Mammoth Falls. Air Force officials have refused to confirm or deny the report."

"We now return you to your local programming."

I switched the set off and started tiptoeing out of the room. Then I tiptoed back and stood in the middle of the living room, wondering whether I should call Jeff or Henry. Maybe they hadn't heard the news. I started toward the telephone but stopped. Maybe they'd be in bed, I thought. Just then my mother called again.

"Charlie! Charlie! What are you doing down there? Why don't you answer me?"

"I was just letting the cat in," I lied. "Come on, kitty, kitty, kitty!" I let the front screen door slam a couple of times.

"That's funny! The cat's up here with me."

"I guess that's why he wouldn't come in," I said, slamming the front door shut. Some days nothing goes right, I thought to myself, as I tromped up the stairs.

I was dead tired, but for some reason after I flicked the light out I could no more get to sleep than I could shovel steam with a steamshovel. I kept thinking about what that news announcer had said: "a twenty-megaton time bomb forever sitting on its doorstep!" just like the Sword of Damocles, I kept saying to myself. I started worrying about how that old Greek character felt, sitting under a sword while he was trying to enjoy his supper. And I guess I just plain worried myself to sleep, because all I remember is that I had one of those horrible nightmares where I was sitting among hundreds of people in a big banquet hall in nothing but my underwear, trying to cover myself with the tablecloth and still keep out from under a big sword that was swinging back and forth above my head.

I don't know why it is, but we run around half the summer with nothing covering our hides but a scanty pair of shorts and think nothing of it. Yet when we have a dream about getting caught out in public in our underwear, there's something downright embarrassing about it. This dream was no exception. I can remember grabbing a banana off the table and trying to stick the peels on the front of my undershirt so they'd look like a gold M and people might think I was on the Mammoth Falls High School track team, but it didn't work. The peels just kept falling off to the floor. Then Mayor Scragg climbed up on the table right in front of me, and he was not only fully clothed but was wearing a big heavy overcoat to boot and was brandishing his umbrella in one hand. He kept swinging the umbrella at the sword as it came by, and I kept ducking my head every time he swung, hoping he wouldn't split any hairs. Finally he tossed the umbrella aside, grabbed a huge watermelon off the table, and held it in the path of the swinging sword, which cut off a big slice each time it passed by. I kept dodging right and left to keep the slices from

plopping onto my bare shoulders. And every time I did, I'd lose my grip on the tablecloth and everybody at the banquet table would turn and point at me and laugh uproariously. But nobody tried to stop Mayor Scragg, who was cackling with fiendish glee every time the sword cut off another slice.

Then four lackeys came trudging into the hall with the whole carcass of a roast ox suspended between two truncheons, and they brought it right up to the head table and plopped it right in front of me. And there inside the carcass sat Freddy Muldoon, tearing big chunks of roast beef off with his fingernails and stuffing them into his mouth. Every time I'd open my mouth to plead with Freddy to do something about the sword, no sound would come out, and Freddy would just sit there and rub his stomach and burp in my face. I got so mad at him I got to tearing at the tablecloth, trying to pull Freddy and the ox carcass closer to me or get out from under the sword. But the tablecloth kept tearing into shreds, and then something sharp stabbed me right in the back, and I must have jumped twenty feet straight up in the air.

Somehow I landed on my feet, and suddenly everything was light. And there was my mother standing in front of me with the kitchen broom in her hands.

"What time is it?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"It's time you were up, sleepyhead!"

I could have kicked myself for asking the question, but I guess I'll never learn.

The Bubble Bursts

WHEN THE TV NEWS BROADCAST ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY of damage to the bomb hit Washington it must have lifted the dome right off the Capitol a few feet, because all kinds of politicians and other creatures started scampering out of the place and heading for Mammoth Falls. You'd have thought radiation was good for people, the way high-ranking moguls came pouring into town next morning. While I was eating breakfast it seemed as though a plane buzzed our house every three minutes in the approach lane to Westport Field. "What's going on?" I finally asked my mother, after four or five planes had rattled the windows.

"If you'd get up in time, you could hear the seven o'clock news. Then you wouldn't have to ask people." And she plopped another bowl of cereal down in front of me.

"C'mon, Ma! What is it? What'd they say?"

"Eat your cereal first."

Holy mackerel, it makes me mad when women do things like that.

"Gosh, Ma, I already ate a whole bowl. Pretty soon I'm

goin' to have oats growin' out of my ears."

"So what? Who could see them?" She laughed. "When are you going down to Mr. Carver's to get your hair cut?"

"As soon as I find out what's going on," I said, with sudden inspiration, and she laughed again.

"O.K., goose. Then I'll tell you."

My mother and I usually have a good time together, but she can be a pest sometimes.

"They said on the radio that all kinds of people from Washington were coming here to investigate about the bomb. I guess they think they found it, but there was something about they think it had a rupture, or something, and that could be dangerous. I remember your father had a rupture once, when he was a young man, and Dr. Danberry said there wasn't anything dangerous about it at all, but I guess it's different with a bomb —"

"C'mon, Ma! I heard all that already. What about all these people coming from Washington? Anybody important? Like the President, maybe?"

"You heard all that already? Oh, that's what you were doing up late last night. You sneaked downstairs and turned the TV on, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. I sneaked downstairs and turned it off," I said, trying to keep from choking on my cereal.

"Char..l..i..e!"

"Yes, I did. Scout's honor!"

"Well, who left it on?"

"I did. But that was earlier."

"When was that?"

"The first time I sneaked downstairs."

A wet hot-pot holder hit me in the back of the neck and I spilled some oatmeal and cream all down the front of my T-

shirt; and when I coughed, some of the oatmeal went up my nose, and I figured this was just gonna be one of those days. Boy! Did I have a premonition!

"Well, what big shots are coming in here from Washington?" I asked, when I could get the words out.

"Practically everybody. The man on the radio said people from the Atomic Energy Commission, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Secretary of Defense, The Postmaster General, and I don't know who else."

"The Postmaster General? What's he gonna do, sell stamps?"

"They didn't say," My mother laughed again. "But I heard the other day he was thinking of running for President next year, and I guess he thinks the trip will do him good."

Friday morning is a crazy time to get your hair cut, but I figured I might as well — not only because I'd promised my mother I would, but also because I might have a chance to pump some of the old geezers who hang around Mr. Carver's shop and maybe find out more about what was happening. Talk about great minds with but a single thought! Dinky Poore and Homer Snodgrass were already sitting in line, waiting to get their hair cut, when I got there. I plopped into the seat next to Homer, who was picking his nose, and stared at Dinky, who was gazing at the far wall as if he was in a trance. He looked pale as a ghost.

"What's the matter, Dinky? Are you sick?" I asked.

"Nope."

"How come you're so pale, then?"

"My mother made me take a bath after I got home last night."

"Oh!"

"I told her she'd rub all the tan off if she scrubbed that hard — but she went ahead and did it anyway." Dinky gulped hard,

once, and a tear started to trickle out of his left eye.

"That's too bad," I said.

"Yeah!" said Dinky, gulping again and fighting hard to told back the tears. "A fella works hard all summer to build up a good tan, and some creepy woman has to foul the whole thing up."

"That's women for you," I said, giving Homer a dig in the ribs.

"Yeah! I hope the President sends a woman to the moon pretty soon. Then maybe there'll be one less on earth," said Dinky, getting his handkerchief out to blow his nose.

Old Ned Perkins was sitting in the front barber chair and Mr. Carver was fussing around his half-bald head as if it were some kind of a work of art. I don't know why it is, but every time I go to the barber I sit there and watch him work over some old geezer for thirty-five or forty minutes — just snipping away endlessly with the tips of his scissors at hairs you can't even see on a head with so little on it you wonder why the old coot thought he needed a haircut in the first place. When it finally comes to my turn, he lops all the hair off my head in less than ten minutes, snaps the haircloth out in front of the chair, and holds out his hand for the money.

Come to think of it, I guess I do know why it is. Mr. Carver sizes up his customers pretty shrewdly, and if he thinks some old character has thirty-five minutes of good information in him, he wants to give him plenty of time to get it all out. When a kid gets in the chair, he figures he isn't going to hear anything he hasn't heard before, and it gives him a chance to show everybody how fast he can cut a head of hair when he really wants to. All the same, I hope they pass a law some day giving kids equal time in barber chairs.

We just sat there for a while, twiddling our thumbs and leafing through the old magazines and the dog-eared copy of the Farmer's Almanac Mr. Carver always has in his shop, with

our ears wide open. Ned Perkins was giving his opinions about the atom bomb to Mr. Carver, but loud enough so he could be sure everyone in the shop could get the full benefit of what he had to say.

"I figger them contraptions is dangerous enough, all right," he was saying, "but I also figger the Air Force knows what it's doin'. My son was in the Air Force when it was jest called the Army Air Corps," he added, moving his head away from Mr. Carver's scissors long enough to look around the room, "and he knows that outfit from top to bottom. And he says they know what they're doin'!"

Just then, Charlie Brown, the town treasurer, came in and placed his straw hat carefully on one of the hooks. Everybody said "Good morning" to him, but nobody kidded him about his new shoes — which they usually do, just because he's also the only undertaker in town and is always wearing shoes that look brand new, except they're always black. This particular morning they were more interested in what Charlie might have to say about all the people coming in from Washington, because as a member of the Town Council he was supposed to know everything that was going on.

Charlie didn't disappoint them. He didn't even sit down — although one of the other customers moved over one seat so Charlie could have his favorite chair. He started spouting out just about everything he knew about the situation, while he strode up and down the room, either wiping his glasses or relighting his cigar at every turn.

"I feel kind of sorry for Colonel March," he said. "You fellas don't know him like I do, but he's a real gentleman. Now he's got all these bigwigs from Washington breathing down his neck, and about all they want to do is hold a press conference and get out of town as fast as they can — and leave him with the problem."

Charlie took two good puffs on his cigar and coughed three

times.

"Now, as I see it, we've got a very touchy situation here in Mammoth Falls. Maybe this'll put us on the map... if it don't blow us off of it. But I guess we're the only town in the whole country — maybe the whole world — that ever had an atom bomb sitting right beside it that nobody can get to."

"We got to it, Mr. Brown," said Dinky, raising his hand.

"Shut up, sonny!" said Charlie Brown. "Like I was saying, everybody keeps criticizing Colonel March. But he's doin' the best he can, and he's a fine man. Now he's got all these rinky-dinks from Washington flyin' in here, and what they know about handling atom bombs you could probably stick up your nose and it wouldn't even make you sneeze."

"You can say that again!" said Ned Perkins from the chair.

"O.K., I'll say it again," said Charlie Brown, not even pausing for breath. "What they know about handling atom bombs you could probably stick up your nose and it wouldn't even make you sneeze."

Old Elmer Crabtree, sitting in the rocker in the corner, cackled loudly at that one. Elmer doesn't have a hair on his head, and why he hangs around the barbershop so much is a mystery to me. But I guess he's a pretty good listener, so Mr. Carver likes to have him on hand.

"Go get 'em, Charlie!" said Elmer.

"Yeah! You give it to 'em, Charlie!"

"Let's hear it, Charlie!"

Everybody in town likes to see Charlie Brown get his dander up. He won the state oratory prize when he was in Mammoth Falls High School, and he was captain of the debating team at Slippery Rock College for three years. He can sure lay the language out when he gets wound up, and it makes people whistle and cheer and stomp their feet. This time he was wound up good, and the words were just tumbling

out of his mouth as though he didn't even have to think about what he was saying. The faster he talked, the faster he paced up and down; the cigar in his mouth was getting chewed to ragged brown shreds.

"Now, I didn't sleep too much last night, and I guess nobody else did. It's not a very comfortable thought that you might get blown to smithereens before you can even get the bedclothes off. But then I fell to thinkin' about how Colonel March felt. And all those other fellows out there at the airbase. How much sleep did they get? If we're gonna get blown to Kingdom Come, they're gonna get blown right along with us — they live here too, you know — and besides that, they've had everybody in the country yakkin' at 'em about how come they couldn't find that bomb. I'm tellin' you, I woke up feeling sorry for the whole bunch."

"How come you woke up if you didn't get no sleep, Charlie?" said Elmer Crabtree.

"Shut up, Elmer!" said Charlie Brown. "On second thought, that's not such a bad question. Remind me to buy you a haircut sometime!"

The laughter that greeted that one practically rattled the mirrors on Ned Carver's walls, and Elmer's bald head turned red all over. The pipe dropped from his mouth and clattered on the floor as he opened his mouth again.

"I heerd tell they might just have to leave that bomb right where it is. Forever, maybe."

"I heard the same thing on the radio this morning," said Charlie. "But those politicians in Washington won't let them do it. You know what I heard out at the airbase this morning? When we went out there to meet all those people comin' in?"

Everybody said "What?" even though they knew Charlie was going to tell them anyway, because they know Charlie likes to be teased a little bit before he gives out important information. Besides, it gives him a chance to wipe his glasses

and settle them back in the notch above his nose. But they always slip down again, right away. I bet I've seen Charlie Brown wipe his glasses eight or ten times in five minutes.

"What was it, Charlie?"

"What'd you hear?"

"Well, I heard one of those bigwigs tellin' the press — I think he was from that there Atom Commission, or whatever they call it — he was tellin' them he'd gave the Air Force just two days to get that bomb out of that hole, and if they couldn't do it the Commission would take over and get somebody in here who could."

"Hey, that's good!"

"No, it ain't good," said Charlie Brown. "Like I said, Colonel March is a fine man, and he's got his career in the Air Force to think about. He's been a good commander out there, and I'd hate to see him go. And —"

"See him go?"

"Is he leavin'?"

"Is he gettin' out of town like them other nuts and leavin' us here with that infernal contraption in the lake? He's got a nerve!" said Jasper Okeby, who had just come in the door.

"Jasper, you're a nut!" said Charlie Brown, spitting the words out of the side of his mouth the cigar wasn't on. "When you come in to get fitted for a coffin, remind me to get your head stuffed. We might want to hang it on the wall somewheres in the Town Hall."

"I didn't say he was leavin', leastways not right now. But you boys don't realize the spot he's in. The townsfolk are bangin' him on the head, the newspapers are bangin' him on the head, and now half the big shots in Washington are bangin' him on the head. He's been banged on the head so much I'll bet it hurts him to get a haircut!"

Charlie waited for the laughter to die down and then went

on.

"You ever been in a spot where no matter which way you turn you can't see a friend? That's the kind of spot Colonel March is right now. Not bein' able to find that bomb, and then havin' them smart- aleck kids show everybody where it was, didn't make him look too good, you know. So I expect when this is all over the Air Force'll find some other job for him. That is, unless he can figure some way to get that bomb outa there without any trouble. And if this atom fella means what he said, the Colonel hasn't got much time."

All of a sudden I started feeling sorry for the colonel too. I figured I'd better get out of there and let Henry and Jeff know what was going on.

"I'm gonna beat it," I said to Homer. "I can't waste any more time here."

But Homer grabbed my elbow and pointed out to the street. Mr. Jenkins and Shorty, the cameraman, were heading for the barbershop, lugging their equipment with them.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Mr. Jenkins, with his most professional smile, as he held the door open for Shorty to squeeze in with all his gear. Then he introduced himself to Mr. Carver. "We'd just like to get a little local color, if you don't mind." And Mr. Jenkins smiled at everyone in the shop.

"Ain't much color 'round here this time of year," said Elmer Crabtree. "You'd best come back in the fall. 'Long about mid-October them hills west of the lake is jest gorgeous."

Mr. Jenkins gave him a polite nod. "I hope we can come back," he said. "Right now we'd like to get a few opinions on how you people feel about the lake being drained."

"Lake being drained?"

"What lake?"

"What you talkin' about, mister?"

Everybody in the shop had risen from his seat. Mr. Carver

dropped his scissors on the floor, and Charlie Brown's glasses had dropped right to the end of his nose. Mr. Jenkins hastened to explain.

"You mean you don't know about it yet? No, I guess you couldn't have heard. But the story's gone out on the wires already. Commissioner Johnson from the AEC said he'd ask the Department of the Interior to take charge if the Air Force doesn't have the bomb out of there within two days. And the Secretary of the Interior in Washington said he'd order the Army Engineers to drain the lake so they can get into that cave and get the bomb out safely."

"You mean drain the whole lake?"

"Would you mind repeating that?" said Mr. Jenkins, sticking his skinny microphone right up to Charlie Brown's nose.

"Get that thing outa here!" said Charlie, brushing the microphone aside. "I don't talk through my nose, you know."

"I'm sorry! I just wanted to get your reaction to the report that the lake might be drained."

"I'll show you my reaction," Charlie Brown snorted. "There ain't gonna be no lake drained. Leastways, not while I'm alive and able to kick!" And with that, Charlie Brown slapped his hat back onto his head so hard he bit right through his cigar, and the biggest part of it dribbled down the front of his shirt and rolled onto the floor as he stomped out of the barbershop.

To say that pandemonium broke loose in Mammoth Falls at the news of the possible draining of the lake is to put it mildly. Outraged citizens besieged the Town Hall, and protest meetings were held all over the place. Abigail Larrabee got busy and began organizing her women to march on the airbase. We heard that a group of them were petitioning Congressman Hawkins to walk barefoot with them all the way to Washington, but his office said that he had suddenly been called back to Washington and couldn't be reached. Like most

everyone else in town, the Mad Scientists' Club had an emergency meeting as soon as Jeff could call us all together.

"Phew!" said Freddy Muldoon, fanning his nose with his skull cap. "Imagine all them dead fish!"

"Specially Old Pincushion!" I said. "We never would get a chance to catch him."

"O.K.! Everybody quiet down!" said Jeff, rapping for order. "I called this meeting because Henry had another brainstorm. Give out with it, Henry."

Henry leaned forward, and the front legs of his piano stool hit the floor. "Well, I think I've figured out a way to get that bomb out of there without draining the lake," he began. "Now, Colonel March has only got two days —"

Just then there was a knock at the door. Freddy opened it, because we had appointed him Sergeant-at-Arms, and there stood Mr. Jenkins and Mr. MacComber.

"May we come in?" Mr. Jenkins asked.

"No!" said Freddy.

"Well, isn't this the Mad Scientists' Club?" he asked, shading his eyes from the light so he could peer inside. Freddy closed the door halfway.

"Do you know the password?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Then you can't come in," said Freddy. "And tell those photographers to get out of here, too. This is a security area."

"Knock it off, Freddy, knock it off!" Jeff called out. "Come on in, Mr. Jenkins. You're welcome any time."

"Except when we're in executive session," Mortimer added.

Mr. Jenkins and Mr. MacComber squeezed inside, followed by a couple of other reporters and three photographers, but they had to come in single file because Freddy kept the door half closed.

"We just wanted to thank you for breaking the story for us," Mr. Jenkins said, "and a couple of the boys that didn't believe you wanted to apologize."

"We didn't break the story," said Henry modestly. "The diver that Mr. MacComber cornered in the bar is the one who really did it."

"Yes, he sure did!" said Mr. MacComber, with a rumble of laughter. "That guy spends too much time in the water. He couldn't stand anything stronger!" And he laughed so hard he inhaled a lot of cigar smoke and ended up in a coughing fit.

"Also, the wire services are asking for pictures of you," said Mr. Jenkins. "Could we take them right here in your clubhouse?"

"If I'd known that, I'd have taken a bath," said Homer Snodgrass.

"I don't think the dirt'll show in this light," said one of the photographers, as he began snapping shots at random.

"What do you think about them draining the lake?" Mr. Jenkins asked, after the picture-taking had finished.

"It's stupid!" said Freddy Muldoon.

"It's not really necessary," said Henry. "I know a way they could get that bomb out of there without going to all that trouble."

"I see the Professor's been thinking again," said Mr. MacComber, nudging Mr. Jenkins with an elbow. "I know what you're gonna do, Professor. You're gonna part the waters and drive a truck right out to that cave and haul that bomb in, aren't you? Could we watch this time, if I promise to buy the hamburgers again?"

You could see Henry starting to burn red behind the ears. Henry doesn't take kidding too well, but he did manage a little laugh. "No. That's too much like work. But that cave is a sealed cavity. All you have to do is pump air into it until you

have enough pressure to force the water out of the cave. Then divers can go in there and build a crate around the bomb to protect it. Then all you have to do is inflate a couple of life rafts around it, and when you let the water back in, you can float the bomb right out."

Mr. MacComber's eyes had bugged out. But Mr. Jenkins looked very serious. "Is the mouth of the cave big enough for that?"

"Sure it is," I said.

Mortimer agreed. "You might bump the sides a little, but if the bomb is protected that wouldn't matter. It'd be a lot easier than tryin' to winch it out of there with a cable."

Mr. Jenkins and Mr. MacComber looked at each other. "Maybe we got another story," said Mr. MacComber. "Are you sure this would work, Henry — er — Professor?"

Henry thought for a minute. Then he said, "It would be very interesting to find out. Because if it doesn't work, they'll have to rewrite all the textbooks on basic physics."

"I see what you mean," Mr. MacComber grunted. "Please excuse me for asking such a stupid question."

Then he and Mr. Jenkins made their way out the door, followed by the other reporters and photographers. But Mr. MacComber stuck his head back in and winked at Henry. "If I were you, I'd let Colonel March know about your idea. Right now he needs all the help he can get, believe me!"

"That's just fine!" said Jeff, after they had all left. "But how do we get to Colonel March?"

"We could write him a letter," said Dinky Poore.

"Great idea!" sneered Freddy Muldoon. "By the time he gets it he'll be commanding a supply base somewhere in Alaska."

"I know how to get to Colonel March," said Mortimer. "It's easy."

"How's that?" asked Jeff, as we all turned to look at Mortimer.

"It just takes a little brains, that's all," said Mortimer. "Not the kind Henry has — but somebody's got to do the nonscientific thinking around here."

"I can't think of anybody better qualified," said Homer. "Let's hear it!"

Half an hour later we were all on our bikes, heading for the main gate at Westport Field. We had a lot of signs with us, with silly sayings like: "JOIN THE AIR FARCE!" "UNCLE SAM DOESN'T WANT YOU!" "SUBMARINE FOR SALE, CHEAP!" "ONE OF YOUR CYLINDERS IS MISSING!" When we got there, we started doing a figure-eight in front of the guardhouse at the gate, waving the signs in the air, and singing "Anchors Aweigh." All except Mortimer. He got off his bike and started snapping pictures of the guardhouse and the gate with a camera that didn't have any film in it.

Two of the Air Policemen on guard at the gate came out and tried to stop us, but we just circled down the road a bit and came right back when they went back to the guardhouse. Finally, one of them got on the phone, and pretty soon an Air Police van pulled up at the gate and a skyscraper of a sergeant stepped out of it. He walked up to us and stood right in the middle of the road while we did the figure- eight around him. Freddy Muldoon got a little too close to him, and the sergeant grabbed Freddy's bike by the handlebars.

"Say, Fatty!" said the sergeant. "You wouldn't happen to have a banana on you, would you?"

I'd never seen Freddy Muldoon's Adam's apple before, but I saw it this time. It fluttered up and down his throat like a yo-yo. "I don't know what you're talking about," said Freddy. "My mother won't let me eat bananas. They make me burp."

"Are you tellin' me!" said the sergeant. "I can still smell 'em."

"In that case you won't mind me leavin'," said Freddy. And he managed to wrench his bike free of the sergeant's grasp and scooted off down the road toward town.

Meanwhile, one of the other Air Policemen had managed to grab Mortimer by the collar and take his camera away from him.

"Shucks!" said Mortimer. "I shoulda known better."

"If you don't get out of here I'm gonna take you to the base commander's office!" said the big sergeant, standing in front of Mortimer with his hands on his hips. He looked about seven feet tall.

"You wouldn't dare!" said Mortimer, pushing his chest right up against the sergeant's belt buckle. "I got my rights!"

"What you've got is a big mouth." said the sergeant. "Get in that van!"

By this time the rest of us had gotten off our bikes and gathered around the sergeant, offering Mortimer moral support.

"Don't let him push you around, Mortimer!"

"Tell him off!"

"He's not as big as he looks!"

"Don't worry, Mortimer! We'll get you out."

"Hey, Sergeant! Your mouth is open!"

"Get in that van!" the sergeant ordered, grabbing Mortimer by the elbow. "And the rest of you, too!"

"You can't do this to me!" screamed Mortimer. "I'm an American citizen!"

"So am I!" said the sergeant. "Now, get in there!" And he pushed him in.

He didn't have to push the rest of us. We jumped into the van like scared rabbits, and a few minutes later we were being ushered into the Base Headquarters building where Colonel

March had his office.

"What's all this?" asked a young lieutenant sitting at a desk outside Colonel March's door.

"These are the kids that were demonstrating at the main gate," said the sergeant. "One of them claims he's an American citizen. I don't know about the rest of 'em."

"My! They do look pretty dangerous," said the lieutenant, knitting his brow into a frown. "That'll be all, Sergeant. Thank you."

"Yes, sir!" said the sergeant, saluting smartly. Then he did an about-face and walked out of the office like a ramrod, except he had to duck his head when he went through the door.

The lieutenant pressed a lever on the intercom on his desk. "Colonel, sir, there are five or six young citizens out here that I think you wanted to see."

"Yes! Send them in!" came the crackling response.

"Right this way," said the lieutenant, as he held open the door to the colonel's office.

There, behind a huge mahogany desk, sat the colonel, and at first I didn't recognize him without his hat on. But we all recognized the two men sitting in leather armchairs right beside the colonel's desk: Mr. Jenkins and Mr. MacComber.

"Well, this is indeed a pleasure," said the colonel, rising from his chair and extending his hand. "I think I recognize you young gentlemen. How on earth did you get through the gate?"

At this, everybody laughed, and we got sort of red in the face, and the colonel came around and shook all our hands while he got the lieutenant to bring more chairs into the office.

"I understand you wanted to see me about something," said the colonel, after we had all been seated. "I hear they call you the Mad Scientists of Mammoth Falls."

We all sort of looked at each other and nobody seemed to know what to say. Finally, Henry managed a timid "Yes, sir."

"Tell me about this plan of yours. You're Henry Mulligan, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir!... Well, it's really pretty simple... It just sort of came to me. And I thought maybe..."

While Henry was doing his best to explain his idea the colonel pressed a button on his intercom and said, "Send Major Cramer in here." In a few minutes an Army major with Engineer insignia on his lapels came in and took a chair.

When Henry had finished, the colonel asked, "How far down did you say this cave was?"

"About fifty feet, sir."

"Find out what the pressure is at that depth, Major."

"I will," said the major, making a note.

"That would be about one and a half atmospheres, sir," said Henry.

"Well, check on how much air pressure we'd need to get that water out of there, Major."

"Yes, sir!"

"About twenty-three pounds would do it," said Henry. "It's really not a very big cave. I imagine you've got a big enough compressor on that Army dredge to do the job."

"Is there anything else you need to know, Major?" said Colonel March, with a big grin on his face.

Everybody laughed again, and Mr. MacComber, as usual, got caught with his cigar in his mouth and sprayed ashes and bits of tobacco all over Colonel March's desk.

"Boy! I can see right now that this is gonna cost me a lot of hamburgers," he said, when he had stopped choking.

"Now!" said the colonel, running his fingers through the thick mane of wavy white hair on his head. "I didn't get this

white hair by running away from problems. And I didn't get it by not taking chances, either. I've been shot down twice in my career — once over Bremerhaven, and once over North Korea — so I know what it feels like. Incidentally, there's a saying in our business: 'The last time you get shot down, you don't even feel it!'..."

The colonel laughed, and everybody laughed with him, but there was a different tone to it this time.

"Anyway, I don't know whether I should stake my career on a scheme dreamed up by a group called the Mad Scientists of Mammoth Falls — but the fact is, I've got just two days to get that bomb out of there or this town is going to have an awful mess on its hands. So I'm going to give it a try!"

"Whoopee!" cried Dinky Poore. "Excuse me, sir!"

"That's all right, son, but don't get too excited. We may not be able to pull it off. It's just that I think it's the best plan I've had suggested to me so far, so we'll give it a try. Might as well get shorn for a sheep as a lamb — as the saying goes."

"Can we print that, Colonel?" said Mr. MacComber.

"You mean the part about the sheep?"

"I mean the whole ball of wax. I mean, these kids were right about where the bomb was; now you're gonna take their advice about how to get it out of there. I think it's a great story."

"It's a great story, all right, if it works," said the colonel. "But what if it doesn't? It would make me look pretty foolish... and it wouldn't make the Mad Scientists' Club look so good, either. After all, it isn't fair to ruin their reputations too, is it?" And the colonel winked at Henry.

"I see what you mean," said Mr. MacComber.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask your cooperation on that," the colonel went on. "If we get the bomb out, you can print the whole story. But right now we're just working on a theory —

and any scientist knows a theory is no good until you've proved it. Right, Henry?"

"That's right, Colonel... sir," said Henry. "There's just one other thing, though. Could we possibly —"

"Absolutely not!" said the colonel. "I know what you're going to ask. But I'll tell you what." And he winked at Mr. Jenkins. "If you want to set up that spy camera of yours in the hills, like you did before, I'll send a communications sergeant along with you, and you can keep in touch with me by radio... just in case I need any advice."

"Whoopee!" said Dinky Poore again. "Excuse me, sir!"

The colonel smiled. "That's all right, son," he repeated. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, we have to get moving. We have only two days, and a good part of this one is gone already."

After shaking hands with the colonel, and thanking him, we tore out of there and ran all the way to the main gate without even waiting for the lieutenant to call for the AP van to take us back. The AP at the gate had stacked our bicycles behind the guardhouse, and while we were pulling them out the tall sergeant showed up in the van.

"Hey!" he hollered. "Do you mind if I confiscate those signs you brought with you? We're having a fan dancer at the NCO Club tonight, and I thought I might be able to use them."

"Sure!" said Mortimer, tossing the signs at him. "I'll even autograph one for you."

Then we pedaled off down the road as fast as we could, heading for Jeff's barn.

"By the way," the sergeant shouted after us. "Give my regards to Banana Fats, will you?"

"O.K.!" Mortimer hollered back. "Give my regards to the fan dancer!"

As we pedaled through town it was evident that the mood

of Mammoth Falls had changed. American flags were flying in front of nearly every house and storefront, and there were signs and banners everywhere saying things like "GET OUT OF THE MARCH HAIR!" "DRAIN OUR LAKE AND WE'LL SHUT YOUR WATER OFF!" "DOWN WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INFERIOR!" "WE'LL NEVER LET WASHINGTON SLEEP, HERE!" There was even one little sign on a house saying HENRY MULLIGAN FOR PRESIDENT! Charlie Brown had organized a public meeting in front of the bandstand in the Town Square, and he was urging people to write to everybody including the Pope to intercede and save the lake. And we heard that Abigail Larrabee had been on the radio pleading for women from all over the country to come to Mammoth Falls and form a petticoat blockade around the lakeshore. Suddenly, all fear of the bomb and radiation had disappeared, and people were only concerned about Strawberry Lake. Instead of a heel, Colonel March had become a hero.

Mr. MacComber was true to his word. He and Mr. Jenkins showed up at our clubhouse with enough hamburger patties and rolls to feed a platoon and with an outdoor cookstove, to boot. Along with them came an Air Force sergeant named Skidmore, but when he introduced himself he said, "Just call me Sparky. Everybody else does." He had with him an Air Force jeep with a command net radio mounted in it.

"Let's get moving," said Freddy Muldoon. "I'm hungry!"

"I guess that's a good enough reason," said Mr. MacComber.

We all piled into the two jeeps and the station wagon and headed for the old zinc mine. With the help of the sergeant's jeep we had an easier time getting the generator up the last leg of the road to the crusher, and Shorty got to ride with his camera cradled on his lap. Freddy and Dinky were really more interested in the cookout than they were in whether the bomb

was recovered, so they helped Mr. MacComber cook hamburgers while the rest of us set up the TV equipment. Sergeant Skidmore drove his jeep into the brush right up against the crusher and jacked in two lines for a speaker and a mike. He ran these up to the catwalk so we'd be able to speak to Colonel March right from there. Before we'd finished setting up we could already see the patrol boats and the big Army barge, with all its dredging equipment, about halfway across the lake, heading for the peninsula.

We were even more excited than we had been the day before, because this time we felt we had a part in the operation. We worked like beavers getting the equipment set up and then discovered we'd fallen into the old Army trap of "hurry up and wait." There just wasn't anything to do but sit there and stare at the lake, and munch hamburgers and sip soda pop, while we watched the boats move into position off the peninsula. Dinky was wearing himself out climbing up and down the ladder with two hamburgers at a time, and finally Sergeant Skidmore got a helmet out of his jeep, tied a piece of commo wire to the chin strap, and used it as a hoist to bring up six or eight at a time.

"Brilliant! Positively brilliant, Sergeant!" said Mr. MacComber. "Where'd you get the idea?"

"Off the top of my head," said the sergeant.

Mr. MacComber gave us another one of his belly rumblers. "You know, Sergeant, when I was in World War Two, the most useful thing we had was that old steel pot. You could cook a great stew in it, or take a bath, or use it for a seat, or raise geraniums in it when you were in reserve."

"Yeah, I've heard about it," said the sergeant.

"You ain't heard it all," said Mr. MacComber. "You know, sometimes our water ration was only half a canteen a day. We'd pour it into the old steel helmet, and the first thing we'd do was brush our teeth. Then we'd shave with it, and after that

we'd wash our hands and feet. You know what we'd do with what was left?"

"What?" said Dinky Poore, his eyes as big as silver dollars.

"We'd use it to make the coffee!" said Mr. MacComber, cutting loose another one of his rumbling laughs.

"That's enough war stories, Mac," Mr. Jenkins hollered down. "You'd better come up here. Sparky's going to make contact with the colonel now."

Mr. MacComber lifted himself up the ladder and shook the catwalk a bit when he flopped his big frame down beside the TV monitor. The boats had gotten into position, and Shorty had zeroed his camera in on the deck of the patrol boat he figured Colonel March was on. He zoomed in and picked up the colonel talking to Major Cramer on the rear deck. Sergeant Skidmore called in to the radio operator on board and told him we were all set up. We could hear the operator tell the colonel, "Remote unit in position and contact established, sir." Colonel March turned and waved in our direction, and everybody on the catwalk cheered. I felt something like an electric shock run down my spine. It was like watching a football game on TV and being able to talk to the quarterback and tell him what to do.

Then there was another long wait. Finally we saw Colonel March move toward the pilothouse, and the radio squawked. The colonel wanted to talk to Henry.

"We just want to let you people know that we're all set and ready to begin pumping," said the colonel. "We've sent divers down and have the hose secured in the cave. We'll soon know whether we can pull this off."

"Thank you, sir," said Henry. And we all sat back to watch and wait.

And it was a long wait... just like the day before, only this time we felt more involved in what was going on. We fussed

and fidgeted and made small talk, while we kept our eyes glued to the monitor. After what seemed like an hour, we saw two divers go over the side again, and we figured they must have finally pumped enough air into the cave to force the water out. But still we heard nothing on the radio.

"Maybe we ought to call the Colonel," said Homer Snodgrass.

"Sorry!" said Sergeant Skidmore. "But the Colonel told me definitely, 'Don't call me, I'll call you.'"

Just then the colonel called.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I don't know what the trouble is, but we're not making any progress."

"You mean you don't have the water out of the cave yet?" Henry asked.

"That's right," said the colonel. "I don't understand it. We get pressure for a while, and then we lose it. Maybe this won't work, Henry."

"It should work. It's got to work!" said Henry.

"I'm sorry, Henry. But something's wrong. We've sent divers down to see if they can find any leak in the hose."

Henry pondered that one for a minute. "I don't understand," he said finally. "Are there any bubbles coming to the surface?"

"I don't believe so. At least, I haven't seen any."

"That's funny," said Henry. "You'd probably get a few big bubbles if you're getting pressure. But if there's a leak in the hose there should be a steady stream of bubbles coming to the surface. I don't understand it."

"I don't either," said the colonel. "But I'll check on that."

"Maybe they're using the wrong textbook," said Mr. MacComber, rolling his cigar to the other side of his mouth.

Henry just looked crestfallen. There was another long wait while we watched the colonel conferring with Major Cramer.

Then the two divers came up and there was a lot nodding and shaking of heads as they all talked together. Finally, the colonel came back on the radio.

"Let me talk to Henry."

There was no answer, and we all looked around for Henry. We saw him at the end of the catwalk with his back against the wall of the crusher, gazing up into the trees.

"Yes, sir," he said, when we got him back to the mike.

"Henry, we don't know what's wrong. The divers say there's no leak in the hose. I'm afraid it just isn't going to work."

"It's got to work!" Henry repeated.

"Well, we'll give it another try. But it's after four clock, and I wouldn't want to get caught in the middle of this operation when it gets dark."

"Don't bother," said Henry. "Don't bother. There's something I've got to do."

"What do you mean, Henry?" the colonel asked.

But Henry had walked away, and we all watched in amazement as he wrung his hands and kicked the wall of the crusher. Mr. MacComber walked up to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"I don't mean this to sound funny, Henry, but it looks as though your bubble has burst."

Henry turned and looked at him in a very funny way. "You know, Mr. MacComber, you may be exactly right!"

Then he turned to Mr. Jenkins, and there was a pleading look in his eyes.

"Mr. Jenkins, could you drive me over to the State University right away? I've got to get there just as fast as I can."

"Well... sure, Henry. But I don't understand what's going on. Aren't you going to wait and see if they have better luck on the

next try?"

"They won't have," said Henry. "We've only got one chance, and we've got to take it. The time is getting short. Please drive me over to the university!"

"Whatever you say, Henry," said Mr. Jenkins, shrugging his shoulders.

And he and Henry took off to scramble straight down the hill to where we had left the station wagon.

I WISH I COULD HAVE BEEN WITH HENRY on his visit to the State University, but he and Mr. Jenkins left so suddenly nobody even had a chance to ask why they were going there. So I can only give you Mr. Jenkins's account of what happened.

It's only about fifteen miles to the State campus, and he and Henry were probably there before the rest of us had packed up and gotten all our stuff back down the hill. They went straight to the office of Dr. Igor Stratavarious, who is a world-famous geologist. In case you never heard of him, he's the one who developed the theory that the continent of Atlantis did not sink into the ocean, as most historians and geologists have always claimed. Professor Stratavarious maintains that Atlantis is just where it always was, and that the rest of the world sort of grew

up around it, and eventually it became covered with water. Other scientists keep challenging him to present proof of his theory, but he always says, "How about proving yours first? Show me the continent of Atlantis, and I'll show you an ivory tower full of fools!" He's a great favorite with the press, because he occasionally gets off a good one like that and makes the rest of the scientific world look a little silly.

Anyway, Professor Stratavarious wasn't at his office. He was still lecturing to a class of two students over at the university assembly hall, and Henry and Mr. Jenkins tracked him down there. Henry didn't want to interrupt the lecture, of course, but after it had gone on for more than half an hour, and it was after five o'clock, he started waving his hand in the air to attract the professor's attention. The professor would adjust the monocle in his one good eye — he lost the other one during a revolution in Rumania, and this is what decided him to come to America, where he claims people are not such good shots, and for this reason some of his students call him Cyclops — and then he would smile and wave back at Henry and gesture for him and Mr. Jenkins to take a seat in the class. This went on for another fifteen minutes, until one of the two students crept out of his seat and scampered up the aisle all bent over, as if he had to get to the restroom in a hurry. The professor abruptly picked up the notes he had been lecturing from and slapped the lectern with them.

"Und so, I weel continue ze lectchaire on Tuesday," he concluded. Then he stalked off the stage and extended his hand to Henry.

"'Enry, my good frand! What can I do for you?"

Mr. Jenkins noted that the professor's accent was much less noticeable in conversation than when he was on the platform.

"Professor Stratavarious, you've got to help us," said Henry. "It's important. It's about the bomb."

"What bomb, 'Enry?"

"The atom bomb. The one the Air Force lost."

"Oh! Have zey lost one? Zat is good. Zat is very interesting."

Mr. Jenkins couldn't believe his ears. "Don't tell me you haven't heard about it, Professor. Don't you read the papers?"

"Papers? What papers? Oh, you mean ze newspapers! No, I never read zem. Zey are so depressing. Everysing is always going wrong. In my country we have a saying, 'No news is good news!' So every week ze government puts out a newspaper. It is just a big blank piece of paper zat says 'NO NEWS' in big letters. You can buy one if you want, but almost nobody does. Ze government finds zat sings move much smoozer zat way." Then the professor burst into a hearty laugh and clapped "'Enry" on the back, and "'Enry" told him all about how the bomb had been lost and we had found it, and how the Air Force couldn't get it out of the cave, and about how all the town was worried about the radiation and about the draining of the lake and everything.

"Ah, so!" said the professor. "Perhaps zat explains why I have had so few students zis week. You know, Mr. Jenkins, I usually have many more. Maybe five or six, sometimes."

"Seriously, Professor, I need your help," Henry explained. "You know the rock formations and substrata in this area like the back of your hand, and we need to find out —"

"'Enry!" the professor interrupted. "Put your hands behind your back." Henry did so. "Now tell me, 'Enry, what ze back of eizer hand looks like."

"I... I don't really know," Henry stammered. "It's hard to describe."

"Exactly!" said the professor. "'Enry, I have told you time and time again zat in science we must be precise. We must know precisely what we are saying. So don't use stupid expressions like zat. If you want to say I know zis area like I

know my own grandmother, zat is a little closer... but it is still a stupid statement."

Mr. Jenkins walked over to a dark corner of the assembly hall during all this and fanned himself with his hat. What would Henry get him into next? he wondered. When he walked back again within earshot of the two, the professor was nodding his head and stroking his chin whiskers thoughtfully.

"Zat is very interesting, 'Enry! Very interesting! So! Now we must find where ze air is going to. Correct?"

"Yes, sir! And we must hurry."

"Science takes its own time, 'Enry," said the professor. "But we will give it ze old Bucharest College try, as you say in zis country. Hokay?"

"Hokay!" said Henry.

"First we will go to my laboratory and decide which geological charts we should take wiz us. Zen we shall go to your laboratory and look at zis engineer's map you have told me about. Hokay?"

"Hokay!" said Henry. "Only I wish you wouldn't call it a laboratory."

"Never mind, I can be more precise after I have seen it. Zen, we must make an accurate survey on ze ground. Hokay?"

"Hokay!" said Henry.

"Hokay!" Mr. Jenkins chimed in. "But let's get moving. I've got to file a story, and poor Colonel March..."

"Ho, yes!" said the professor. "I almost forgot. You must tell ze people about all ze trouble, right?"

"I guess you could put it that way," Mr. Jenkins grunted.

"Hokay!" said the professor. "Hokay! We go!" And he led the way out of the assembly hall.

On the way to the professor's laboratory, Henry filled in Mr. Jenkins on what was going on.

"You see," he said, "when they kept losing pressure in the cave, and yet the Colonel said he didn't think there were any air bubbles coming to the surface, I knew there was something radically wrong. It couldn't happen, but it did. So there just has to be another air passage out of that cave that's letting the pressure escape. The big problem is: How do you find it? Do you see?"

"Oh, sure! I see!" said Mr. Jenkins.

"Now, I've read that underwater caves were originally formed, sometimes, by underground springs. You know. As the water flows out of them it gradually erodes the ground away."

"Sure! Sure!"

"So naturally I thought of Professor Stratavarious. He's had his geology classes making diggings around here for years and years, and he's developed the best geological profiles of the substructure in this part of the state that you'll find anywhere."

"Naturally! Naturally!"

"So if there's any chance at all of finding out where that air is escaping to, he's the one man who can do it. It's a long chance, but it's the only thing we can do."

"It's a long chance, all right," said Mr. Jenkins. "But even if you find where the air is going, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," said Henry. "But I'll think of something."

"I'm sure you will!" said Mr. Jenkins. Then he laughed out loud. "You know, if it turns out to be a hole in the ground somewhere, you might try stuffing Freddy Muldoon into it and just keep feeding him bananas until the leak stops."

That night was one of the wildest we've ever had around our clubhouse. Professor Stratavarious had brought a regular mountain of charts and maps with him, and he and Henry kept crawling around on the floor with calipers and magnifying glasses, looking for things that we couldn't even pronounce the

names of. The rest of us sort of stood around and helped spread charts out on the floor or roll them up again when the professor was finished with them.

"Look for water-bearing strata, 'Enry. Zey're in blue," he said. "By ze way, how deep did you say zat cave was?"

"About fifty feet," said Henry.

"Let's see! Zat would be... Zat would be... let me see... we need ze watershed charts for ze last ten thousand years. Oh, my, my! I forgot ze watershed charts!"

Four times that night Mr. Jenkins drove the professor back to the university to get something he had forgotten. And Mr. MacComber would keep running in with cold drinks and snacks he'd brought from downtown, and Jeff's mother would keep running in with cocoa and coffee. Our clubhouse looked like the floor around an automatic vending machine. It was a mess!

Professor Stratavarious had a funny habit. If anybody said anything to him over his shoulder, he would spin around with his eyes popped open, and the monocle would drop out of his left eye. He would catch it expertly on the toe of his shoe, before it could hit the floor, and automatically stick it back in his eye. One time Mr. MacComber tapped him on the shoulder to offer him some coffee, and the monocle plopped right into the cup.

"Excuse me, Professor! That was clumsy of me," said Mr. MacComber.

"Zat is no problem," said the professor, sticking his fingers into the hot coffee to retrieve the monocle. "Coffee is a good cleaning agent. If you don't believe it, spill some on your kitchen floor some time — Ouch, zat smarts! The trouble comes when ze monocle hits ze floor. You can't buy zem here any more. Last time I broke one, it took me eight months to get a new one from London."

And so it went. Henry and the professor kept checking back and forth from charts to maps, and back to charts again, and then checking Henry's markings on the engineer's map of the county. The professor agreed with Henry's theory that the most likely escape route for the air was through a dried-up water-bearing stratum that formerly fed fresh water into the cave. The point of the exercise was to determine what the watershed in the area looked like at the time the cave was formed and then figure out which of the water-bearing strata on the charts represented the most likely possibility. Then they had to try and determine the point in the hills surrounding the lake where the terminus of that stratum might be located today. The professor explained, for everybody's benefit, that a water-bearing stratum was nothing but a channel where an underground stream could run downhill, and a terminus was just a place where the water first went underground or came up out of it. We were all so tired that we didn't much care, and most of the fellows had gone home to bed by the time the professor stepped up to the county engineer's map and drew a red circle northeast of the lake.

"I sink zat is ze most likely possibility, 'Enry," he said. "But we must check it with a ground survey in ze morning. Hokay?"

Henry placed the point of his calipers inside the red circle the professor had drawn. "There's a big abandoned quarry on the side of that hill, right there," he said. "Maybe we should look there first."

"Zat's a very good possibility," said the professor. "You dig a big hole, you disturb ze natural watershed. Zat could be why ze stratum dried up."

"If our ground survey in the morning checks out, maybe we should go right up there," said Henry.

"Good idea!" said the professor. "Why don't you do zat, 'Enry."

"Me? What about you, Professor? I'll need your advice."

"I sink I should get some sleep, 'Enry. Good night!" And the professor pulled an old saddle off the wall, propped his head on it as he stretched out on the floor, and began snoring almost immediately. Then, without opening his eye, or breaking the rhythm of his snoring, he plucked the monocle from his left eyesocket and slipped it into the breast pocket of his coat.

At the break of dawn most of us were back at the clubhouse, and Mr. MacComber brought coffee and hot chocolate with him so we wouldn't have to wake up Jeff's mother. He apologized for being a little late.

"I stopped at three different all-night coffee shops, and I couldn't get any of them to make up a tuna fish and peanut butter sandwich for Freddy," he explained.

For the next three hours we were scrambling all over the foothills northeast of the lake, helping Henry and the professor check the exact locations on the ground that they had gone over on the professor's charts the night before. The professor cut quite a picture, squinting through the eyepiece of a surveyor's transit, with his coattails flapping in the morning breeze, his monocle held between two fingers behind him, and a black homburg set at a jaunty angle on his head. "Ah, so!" he would say, after getting Henry to put the sighting stick in exactly the right place. Then he would make a note on his tablet and smooth his waxed mustache, which got mussed every time he leaned up to the transit.

"'Enry!" said the professor finally. "I sink zere is no doubt about it. Zat quarry up zere is ze only place where water feeding into ze cave could come from."

"The only place?" Henry asked.

"Ze only place!" the professor repeated. "I will stake my professional reputation on it."

"Gee! That's great," said Henry. "It sure makes things a lot

simpler."

"It sure does!" said Jeff. "What do we do now, Henry? Let's get up there and take a look. Maybe we'll find a hole, or a cave, or something."

"Supposing you did find a hole?" Mr. MacComber asked. "What could you do about it?"

"Right now, we couldn't do anything," said Henry. "But we've got to look."

Up the hill we went, with Jeff and Mortimer pushing Professor Stratavarious up the steep places, and Mr. MacComber huffing and puffing along behind, with only Freddy Muldoon to keep him company. When we got to the rim of the quarry, the professor spread his arms wide and exclaimed, "Look at zis, 'Enry! Zis is marvelous! What did I tell you?"

We all looked, and there was no doubt about it. It was marvelous! The walls of the quarry on all sides were literally pockmarked with holes, fissures, caves, and just plain lateral slits in the rock face of every description.

"Zis is marvelous! Just marvelous!" the professor repeated. "Zis was a major distribution point for ze watershed in zis area. And it has been uncovered for me by zose peasant stonecutters. Zis is a major discovery. I shall come here and document every inch of it. I mus' sank you, 'Enry, for making me discover it. Professor Stratavarious shall lecture here for years and years to come!"

We all looked at Henry. His face had almost dropped to his knees. "That's just fine, Professor," he complained. "But how do we know which hole leads to the cave where the bomb is?"

"Zat is for you to figure out, 'Enry," said the professor. "I have shown you where to look. Zat is all I can do for my students. How much you learn from what I have taught you is up to you! Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen, I must get

back to my office and get ready for next week's lectures."

And the professor stalked off down the hill toward Turkey Hill Road.

"You'd better go after him," Henry said to Mr. Jenkins, "and drive him back to the university."

"But what about you, Henry? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find out which one of those holes leads to the cave."

"Are you nuts, Henry?" said Jeff. "How can we possibly do that?"

"I just had an idea," said Henry. "If Colonel March goes along with it, maybe they can get that bomb out of the hole before the day is over."

"If they don't, it's all over for Colonel March," said Mr. MacComber. "What's your idea, Henry?"

"If you can get me in to see Colonel March, I'll tell you all about it," said Henry.

"You're on!" Mr. MacComber grunted. "Follow me!" And he led the way, slipping and sliding down the hill to catch up with the professor and Mr. Jenkins.

Mr. Jenkins dropped us off at the airbase and then took the professor on to the university. This time there wasn't any problem getting through the gate. Mr. MacComber called Colonel March from the guardhouse, and a jeep showed up to escort us to his office. The lieutenant sitting outside was wearing a long chin and looked pretty glum, but he greeted us politely.

"The Colonel's not in a good mood this morning," he said. "He's been on the phone with Washington for almost an hour already this morning. If you have any bad news for him, I wish you'd just put it in a letter."

"I hope we have good news for him," said Mr. MacComber,

"but I don't know what it is yet."

The lieutenant gave him a double take and looked at him as if he were a nut, as he ushered us in the door. Colonel March looked tired and worried, and I felt very sorry for him, but he did manage to smile as he gestured to us to sit down. Just as we did, Major Cramer, the Army Engineer, came in.

"I asked Major Cramer to join us," the colonel explained, "because I figured Henry had another one of his zany ideas he wanted us to listen to. Fire away, Henry. You can't tell me anything sillier than what I've been hearing from Washington all morning."

Then Henry explained his theory about why the air escaped from the cave, and how we had spent most of the night with Professor Stratavarious, trying to determine whether an underground stream bed had once fed water into the cave, and about the walls of the quarry that looked like petrified Swiss cheese. Through it all, Mr. MacComber kept nodding his head and grunting in corroboration of everything Henry said.

"I'll admit it's a long shot. Maybe the odds are a thousand to one against us," said Henry. "But we've got to do something. And if we could just find out whether one of those holes in the quarry wall really does lead to the cave, you might be able to block it up with stones and mortar, and then maybe you could build up pressure in the cave."

Colonel March was sitting at his desk with his head between his hands.

"How on earth could you ever find out which hole we should plug up?" he asked.

"That's where we need your help," said Henry.

"What do you want me to do, have men crawl down all those holes and see where they come out?"

"No," said Henry. "It's much simpler than that." And he turned toward Major Cramer. "Sir, do you have chemical

smoke and a smoke generator?"

Major Cramer looked at Colonel March with a puzzled expression. "Well," he said, "we don't happen to have any here in Mammoth Falls."

But Colonel March's head had come up out of his hands. A gleam came into his eyes, and he stood up. "How fast can you get a smoke generator here?" he practically thundered at Major Cramer, pointing his finger at him.

The major bolted out of his chair, out of habit, and stood at attention. "I can get one here from Aberdeen in a matter of two or three hours, sir, if there is a plane available to bring it."

"There will be a plane available!" said the colonel. "Get on the phone!" And he plopped his phone down on the corner of the desk. "And make that two hours."

"Yes, sir!"

"Henry, I think I know what you have in mind, and it's a brilliant idea. We'll pump smoke into that cave under pressure and see if it comes out of one of those holes in the quarry. Right?"

"Or anywhere else between the cave and the quarry," said Henry. "I think you should have a couple of helicopters fly over that area while you're doing the pumping. But the most likely place is the quarry. The Professor says so. You ought to have a team there ready to plug up the hole if that's where the smoke comes out."

Colonel March spoke into the intercom on his desk. "Get Major Appleton and Captain Cunningham in here right away!" he told the lieutenant. Then he turned to Major Cramer. "Tell Aberdeen to send two smoke generators. We can't afford any lost time, if one breaks down. And plenty of smoke, too. We don't know how much we'll have to pump in before it comes out the other end."

"Make sure the smoke they send isn't soluble in water,"

Henry added. "That's important. And that bright orange color, if they have it. That's easiest to see."

"Henry, you think of everything!" said the colonel.

"That's what I keep tellin' people," said Dinky Poore.

Mr. MacComber rose to his feet. "Colonel, I think it's best if I get these kids out of here now. You've got a big day ahead of you, and we don't want to be in your way. I just want to let you know that I wish you every success in getting that bomb out, not only for the sake of the people in this town but for your own sake as well. Believe me, I know what you've been going through." And he stepped over and shook the colonel's hand.

"Thank you, Mr. MacComber," said the colonel. "And believe me I have the feeling you'll get the story you want this time. If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know."

"We'll take care of ourselves all right, Colonel. I'll be wherever these kids are, 'cause I figure that's my big story. But I should ask if there's anything I could do for you, to help out in this business."

"Matter of fact, there is," said the colonel. And he fished in his pocket and spun a half dollar toward Mr. MacComber. "Buy that fat kid enough bananas to get him through the day."

"Half a buck won't do it," said Mr. MacComber, "but I'll chip in with you."

From that point on, things really moved. We took off for our clubhouse, and Sergeant Skidmore soon showed up there with his jeep.

"The Colonel says I'm to stay with you all day," he said. "He's already sent some men up to the quarry, and they're flying a squad of mountain troops in from Fort Carson. They oughta be here before noon."

Mr. Jenkins showed up too, and we filled him in on what was going on.

"Sounds like a great idea, Henry," he said. "But it gives me

a problem. I wanna be there to shoot that smoke coming out of the quarry — if it does — but I also have to cover the recovery operation from up at the stone crusher. I'd better get another camera crew down here!"

Jeff took him into his house so he could telephone WEYE-TV in Clinton and put the arm on them for an extra crew. He came back all smiles, saying they'd not only lend him a crew but they were chartering a helicopter to fly a cameraman over the area most of the day.

"That won't do them any good," said Jeff. "I'm sure the Air Force won't let anybody fly over the lake while they're recovering the bomb, and I'll bet they don't let any aircraft within five miles of here."

"That's for sure!" said Sergeant Skidmore. "This has been a restricted air zone all week."

"I realize that," said Mr. Jenkins. "But if I hadn't suggested the idea to them, they might not have loaned me the camera crew."

"What do we do now, Henry?" said Mr. MacComber.

"I guess we can just relax and enjoy the show," said Henry. "I don't really know what else to do. It's all up to the Air Force now. But I won't relax until I see some orange smoke coming out of that quarry."

"That's for me, too," said Jeff. "Let's get up there."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Jenkins. "I can't get my station wagon up to that zinc mine so Shorty can get set up. I'll need your help."

"O.K.," said Jeff. "I almost forgot who's been helping us out all week. You'll need our jeep and the generator. But let's hurry, so we can get back to the quarry in time."

"You still got about two hours," said Sergeant Skidmore. "They don't expect those smoke generators here before noontime."

By noontime, both Jeff and Mr. Jenkins had joined us at the quarry, and Shorty was left at the zinc mine with Dinky to help him set up his equipment. They told us the recovery crew had been in position on the Lake since ten thirty, and they had just seen another boat leaving the town dock, where a big Air Force truck was parked. They figured this might be the boat taking the smoke generators out to the Army barge.

"Hot dang!" said Homer. "Maybe we'll see some action soon."

We did. Somehow the word seemed to have gotten around town that something was going on up the quarry, and we began to see little groups of people straggling up the hill, gaping over the rim of the quarry, and asking the airmen and soldiers lying around if they knew what was going on. Like most soldiers, nearly all of them said, "Beats me, Mac! But if you find out, how about letting me know?"

Pretty soon, even Mayor Scragg and Charlie Brown struggled up the hill with a few other members of the Town Council. They seemed to know what was going on, because they didn't ask any questions. We knew, of course, that Colonel March had a liaison officer at the Town Hall whose only job was to keep the mayor informed of what the Air Force was doing.

The radio in Sergeant Skidmore's jeep crackled, and the sergeant ran over and answered the call. It was Colonel March, letting us know that the smoke generators had arrived and that as soon as the engineers had them properly hooked into the compressor, and had run a few tests, they would be ready to start pumping smoke into the cave. The colonel estimated they'd be in sometime before one o'clock. We all corked off with a small cheer at this news and jumped up and down a bit, and people all around the quarry looked in our direction, and some of them came wandering over.

The other airmen assigned to the quarry got the same

message over the operations net, and we heard one of them relaying the information by walkie-talkie to the men they had stationed on the quarry floor. A lot of people gathered around him to hear what he was saying, and he had to elbow them back so they wouldn't push him over the edge. The squad of Army mountain troops began stirring around and checking all the climbing tackle they had laid out on the ground. Overhead, a big cargo-carrying chopper suddenly appeared and made a practice landing in an area where the airmen had cleared the scrub growth and rocks away and spread out nylon panels painted international orange. The place had suddenly come to life. You could almost feel the electricity in the air.

I could feel something else, too. It was Mortimer, slapping me on the shoulder and gesticulating wildly toward the woods to the cast of the quarry. From a narrow path among the trees there emerged the figure of Professor Stratavarious, complete with black homburg and walking stick, and behind him straggled a motley assortment of students dressed in every conceivable kind of regalia — except that there wasn't very much of it on any of them. The professor marched the group right to the quarry's rim and indicated with a sweep of his walking stick where they should seat themselves. Then he apparently became aware that they were not alone. He plucked the monocle from his eye and stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the various groups of people gathered around the chasm. Then he swung around to face his students.

"You see. Ze place is already famous!" he practically shouted. "Someday you may come back here and find it is called Stratavarious Quarry." Then he proceeded to lecture the class on the geological features exposed on the quarry walls and paid no more attention to the people around him.

In a few minutes the radio crackled again. It was Colonel March, telling us that they were ready to begin pumping. I felt my heartbeat pick up, and then it started to thump, and I guess everybody else's did, too. We all moved instinctively to the

rim of the quarry and peered into it, trying to keep our eyes on all the holes at the same time. This was obviously stupid, so we quickly split up in pairs and took positions at different places on the rim so that we could concentrate on the south and west walls of the quarry. Henry and I plopped down together and shared a pair of field glasses I had brought with me.

On the floor of the quarry, and at various places around the perimeter, the airmen and soldiers were doing the same thing, plus a lot of other things. Three teams of men were walking along the edges of the quarry, dangling smoke detectors over the side on the ends of long cables. And on the floor three other teams were scanning the walls with detectors mounted on long poles.

The minutes just crawled by, as they do in such situations, and my heart just kept on thumping. The airmen kept walking the rim and the floor of the quarry, sweeping their smoke detectors past the face of every hole they could reach. The curiosity seekers who had come to see what was going on kept shifting their eyes from one hole to another as fast as they could, hoping not to miss anything. And Professor Stratavarious kept lecturing his class, stabbing his walking stick in the air and waving it at the great maw of the quarry.

The operations net radio squawked several times, as an officer on one of the patrol boats wanted to know if any smoke had been sighted, and the communications sergeant replied negatively each time.

Then, suddenly, an airman on the floor of the quarry shouted, "I'm getting a reading, Sergeant! I'm getting a reading!"

Everyone's eyes turned toward the southwest comer of the quarry, where the airman stood with his smoke detector held to the mouth of a jagged hole about thirty feet up the quarry wall.

"Are you sure?" the sergeant shouted back from his perch

on the rim. "Check it out! Harrison! Get over there and see if you can confirm that reading! I don't see anything."

One of the other airmen stumbled over the rocks on the quarry floor to get his detector over the same hole. But before he got there, a faintly yellowish vapor became visible. Slowly, it changed in density and color until there was no doubt about it. A curling wreath of bright orange smoke was rising up the quarry wall!

A tremendous cheer went up from the rim of the chasm and echoed back and forth between the walls. By the time it had died down, the wraith of smoke had become a thick, billowing cloud, spreading slowly in every direction.

Professor Stratavarious had spun around at the sound of the cheering and stood silhouetted against the sky with his arms outspread, the monocle in one hand and the walking stick in the other. In the silence following the echoes of the cheer, he cried out, "I have discovered a volcano! I have discovered a volcano!"

The radios crackled again as both Sergeant Skidmore and the sergeant in command of the troops called in to say, "Cut the smoke! Cut the smoke! We've found it! We've found it!"

Henry and I were jumping up and down and hugging each other, and on the other side of the quarry we could see Mayor Scragg and Charlie Brown shaking hands with each other and with the other members of the Town Council. Even the people who didn't know what was going on seemed to realize that something momentous had happened.

We raced back to Sergeant Skidmore's radio in time to hear Colonel March say, "Tell Sergeant Adams we won't cut the smoke. off until you're certain that the smoke is coming out of only one hole. We don't have time to make any mistakes."

Sergeant Skidmore hollered over to Sergeant Adams, who was already getting the same message over the operations net, and Sergeant Adams hollered back to him, "O.K., O.K.! We'll

double-check it!"

We all peered over the rim as the smoke continued to billow out. There was no doubt about it. The smoke was only coming out of one hole.

"Good!" said Colonel March, when this information was reported back to him. "That makes the job simpler. We'll cut off the smoke. Get that hole plugged up and let us know when to put the pressure on. Now, get cracking! We don't have all day!"

"Roger, sir!" said Sergeant Skidmore. And we could hear Sergeant Adams already starting to crack out the orders.

"O.K., mountain troops! Over the side! Get that scaffold slung! Hop to it! Let's move! C'mon Sergeant! Order up the first chopper, and stand by!"

The place sprang alive. Men started running all over, and the mountain troops began seating grappling hooks and slinging lines over the side. Something that looked like a painter's scaffold was lowered down to the hole, and two men scrambled down the wall on ropes. Others on the quarry floor were gathering rocks and loading them into buckets slung on ropes from the rim. It was only two minutes, it seemed, before we heard the throbbing of the big chopper. And when it appeared over the trees, two men guided it to a sitting-duck landing in the cleared area. Out of it came buckets of freshly mixed, quick- setting cement, which were immediately carried to the rim of the quarry and lowered over the side. The two men on the scaffold worked like beavers, jamming rocks into the gaping hole and tamping wet cement around them.

It wasn't long before the hole had been filled up and the front of it looked like a smooth plaster wall. Then the men inserted a variety of small sharp objects into the cement and hooked wires to them.

"What on earth are those?" I asked Henry.

"I can only guess," said Henry, "but I imagine they're sensors. Some of them are probably moisture detectors and temperature gauges, so they can tell when the cement has dried. Then I'd bet they've put some strain gauges in there. If they didn't, they'd better. Because when they start to pressurize that cave, they're going to have to know whether the cement job will hold pressure."

Once the patch job had been done, there was no reason to hang around the quarry any longer, unless we wanted to see whether the patch blew out. So we all made our way back down the hill to Turkey Hill Road, and so did everybody else except the airmen and soldiers, who had to stay there, and Professor Stratavarious, who just kept on lecturing his class, oblivious of the fact that most everyone had left and the smoke had stopped pouring from the hole in the quarry wall.

"Well, Henry," said Mr. MacComber, as we picked our way down the hill, "we come to the moment of truth again. We'll soon know whether the textbooks are right, huh?"

Henry blushed a little. "Let's hope that was the only place the air was escaping. We haven't heard any report from the helicopters that were supposed to be flying between here and the lake."

We soon did. Colonel March came on the radio as soon as we got to Sergeant Skidmore's jeep. He told us there had been no other sightings of smoke, and they would start pumping as soon as the engineers decided the cement was dry enough. He figured it would be about an hour yet.

As soon as Mr. MacComber had filed his story at the Bristol Hotel and Mr. Jenkins had sent his film off to Clinton, we made our third expedition up to the ore crusher at the old zinc mine. The place was beginning to feel like home.

"I hope this is the last time I have to climb up here," Mr. MacComber said as he heaved his huge bulk from the top of the ladder onto the catwalk. "You know something? I forgot to

bring any hamburgers."

Everybody laughed except Freddy, who pulled a banana from his shirt and made a big point of eating it in front of the rest of us.

"Is there anything you don't like to eat, Freddy?" Mr. Jenkins asked him.

"Yeah," said Freddy. "The doctor says I should have more iron in my diet, but I have trouble chewing the stuff!"

Mr. MacComber laughed so hard he actually collapsed right on the catwalk and we had to help him to his feet and sit him down by the TV monitor.

True to the colonel's prediction, the pumping started right at two thirty, and we all sat there with our eyes glued to the monitor. For Henry's sake, we all kept our fingers crossed, praying the cement in the quarry wall would hold.

The pumping went more slowly this time, and Colonel March called in to explain why. They were building up pressure slowly, stopping periodically to get strain gauge readings by radio from the crew at the quarry. We watched and we waited.

Finally, we saw a slight commotion on the deck of the patrol boat, and Colonel March stepped over and shook Major Cramer by the hand and clapped him on the back. Then he turned and ran to the pilothouse.

"Henry!" his voice came over the speaker beside us. "I should shake your hand, too! We think we have full pressure. We're sending divers down right away to check the cave. Cross your fingers, Henry!"

"That won't be necessary," Mortimer chirped. "My knuckles are white right now."

I've tried holding my breath underwater, and I think the best I ever did was about two minutes. But I know I broke the record right there that afternoon, because it took the divers a

lot longer than that to get down into the cave and back up again. But when they did there were signs of jubilation on the deck of the patrol boat. We almost knew what the colonel would say when his voice came over the radio, but we kept our fingers crossed until we'd heard it.

"Henry, we've done it!" he practically shouted. "Or maybe you've done it, I don't know. But the divers say the water is out of the cave, and we're ready to proceed. Keep your fingers crossed!"

"I can't! I can't!" screamed Mortimer. "I'm a nervous wreck already!"

The rest of the operation took about three hours. It got pretty boring looking at the deck of the patrol boat, and the deck of the barge, and the surface of the water, trying to visualize what was going on fifty feet below. But the great moment finally arrived, and with a little advance notice from Colonel March, we watched intently as a definite turbulence became apparent on the surface of the water. And then two life rafts lashed around a crate bobbed to the surface and bounced up and down for a few seconds.

How the old catwalk on that ore crusher withstood it, I don't know, but we all leaped in the air at once and screamed and hollered and shouted and jumped up and down. Even Mr MacComber got his heels off the floor once, and he mashed his cigar into an unrecognizable mess as he clapped his hands. Everybody was pounding Henry on the back at once, and his knees started to buckle under him.

Then the radio squawked. "Henry! We've done it!" the colonel shouted. "From here on in, it's clear sailing. I want to thank you, Henry, but I don't have time right now. Will you all come out to the airbase at noontime tomorrow?"

Henry could hardly answer, but Mortimer blurted out, "Yes, sir!" and he snapped off a smart salute to the TV monitor.

By the time we had gotten all of Shorty's stuff down off the

crusher and made it into town, it was obvious everybody knew the bomb had been recovered. The streets were thronged with people hoping to get a glimpse of the truck that would undoubtedly have to carry the bomb from the town dock out to the airbase. They saw the truck all right. But there wasn't any bomb in it, as we found out later. It wasn't that Colonel March wanted to fool anybody, but he was too smart to haul an atom bomb down the main street of any town. So he had the Army Engineer barge take the bomb up to the northeast corner of the lake, where Jeff and Harmon and I had landed in the fog the day the bomb had plopped into the water. A truck waiting there took the "nuclear device" back to the airbase. Meanwhile, the truck that had delivered the smoke generators to the dock paraded slowly through town, deadheading it back to the airbase with two military jeeps escorting it, to give the townspeople a thrill.

We were all so dog-tired by this time that all we wanted to do was get home to bed. And the next thing I can remember is my mother jabbing my backside with a kitchen broom.

"Get up, sleepyhead! You'll make me late for church!"

"Aw-rr-rr... what time... what time it is, Ma?"

"Do you mean what time is it?"

"Aw-rr-rr... I don't... aw-rr-rr... blooey!"

"You should know better than to ask a question like that! Anybody would think you were married to that mattress, the way you hold on to it. Get up and wash your face with some cold water."

"Aw, Ma!"

I didn't have the strength to get up, but I did manage to roll off the bed and onto the floor.

"You can do better than that," said my mother, jabbing me again with the broom. "Mr. Jenkins called, and he's going to be here at quarter to twelve to take you to Westport Field."

"Jeepers!" I cried, spring to my feet. "What time is it, Ma?"

"Quarter to twelve," she said, and went out of the room.

It wasn't, really, but it was eleven fifteen, and I barely had time to get my hair slicked down, and put on my best Sunday suit. When Mr. Jenkins arrived, there was an Air Force sedan along with him that already had half the gang in it, so I got to ride out to the airbase sitting up, instead of lying on the floor in the back of the wagon like I usually did.

We went straight to Colonel March's office, and he spent about fifteen minutes thanking us for all the help we had given him and joking about some of the funny things that had happened during the week.

"Now that it's all over," he said. "l can laugh a little bit about things like Mr. Okeby's watermelons and the petticoat parades. The townspeople certainly did a good job of getting their message across to us. Well, if you'll follow me, gentlemen, we have some more formal business to take care of."

He led the way out of his office to a line of Air Force cars parked at the curb in front of the headquarters building. We rode in style, with a motorcycle escort leading the way, and pulled up in front of a building with a sign over the door saying WESTPORT FIELD OFFICERS CLASS "A" MESS.

"They oughta take that sign down," said Dinky Poore. "I don't think they're that bad."

"You're a dumb nut!" said Freddy Muldoon. "A mess is a place where officers eat."

"Why can't they eat at a table, like other people do?"

"Hoh, boy!" said Freddy, clenching his fists. "Hey! You know what? I betcha they're gonna feed us!"

That was an understatement. We were ushered into a huge dining room where about two hundred people were already sitting down at long tables set for a banquet, and when

Colonel March led us to chairs at the head table, everybody in the room stood up and applauded. I felt like dropping through the floor, and I know I was all red in the face, and so was everybody else in the gang. My dream about the Sword of Damocles came back to me, and I instinctively locked my arms in front of me to make sure my pants didn't fall off. Colonel March made a short speech to welcome everyone and explain that the luncheon was being held to celebrate the recovery of the bomb and also to honor the members of the Mad Scientists' Club of Mammoth Falls — and all of us blushed bright red again, and all I could do was look down at the floor. Then he invited everyone to start eating, and waiters came streaming in with everything from soup to toothpicks. Sure enough, there was roast beef on the menu, and plenty of Jasper Okeby's watermelons, and I watched Freddy Muldoon wolfing his down, but I couldn't eat a bite myself.

Mayor Scragg and all the Town Council were there, and Congressman Hawkins, and Abigail Larrabee, and most of the reporters and photographers we had seen in town, and there was an Air Force general with eight inches of ribbons on his chest sitting at the head table next to Colonel March, and a lot of other important-looking people who were later introduced as officials from Washington, including one who Colonel March claimed was the Acting Deputy Assistant Under-Secretary of the Air Force. This guy was pretty important, because even the general kowtowed to him.

After everybody had stuffed themselves, the speeches started, of course, and there were plenty of them. Every speaker wanted to expound his own unique version of the momentous thing that had happened; the way the bouquets and compliments were being passed back and forth you'd never think the town had ever been upset about anything at all. I had to go to the bathroom so bad my toes were aching, but I didn't dare get up out of my seat, so I just sat there gritting my teeth and sweating through it all. Dinky Poore had the best idea. He

just fell asleep with his head on the table and nobody paid any attention to him.

Congressman Hawkins was especially flowery, of course, and he took occasion to praise everybody in the room by name.

"What a hypocrite!" said Mortimer, with his hand over his mouth.

I nodded my head, but Freddy Muldoon blurted out, "What's a hypocrite?" in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Shut up!" Mortimer told him, between clenched teeth.

"Well, what is a hypocrite, anyway?" Freddy persisted in a whisper.

"It's somebody like a guy who turns off his hearing aid while he's in church!" Mortimer whispered back. "Now shut up!"

Finally, Colonel March introduced the general, who got up and read a letter he had sent to the Air Force Committee on Awards and Decorations recommending that all seven members of the Mad Scientists' Club be awarded the Medal for Meritorious Service for their part in locating and helping recover the bomb. And he said he had every confidence the committee would approve the awards. Then everybody stood up and applauded and cheered, and several people shouted "Speech! Speech!" and we all looked at each other and jabbed our thumbs in Henry's direction. Henry was finally persuaded to get up on his feet, and he blushed and stammered a bit, but all he could think of to say was, "Thank you! And I hope you enjoyed your lunch." Then he sat down and everybody clapped some more.

Then we were escorted out the door and Henry was asked to ride with Colonel March and the general in the fanciest jeep you ever saw. It had chrome wheels and bumpers, and three

silver stars on it, and two blue flags on the fenders with three white stars. The rest of us were escorted to a flatbed Air Force truck, all decorated with blue and yellow bunting and big signs on the sides that said WE LOVE YOU, MAMMOTH FALLS! WE LIVE HERE, TOO! The next thing we knew, we were in a parade. We sat on a raised platform in the middle of the truck, surrounded by an Air Force honor guard standing at attention. And we rolled into town with all kinds of vehicles and bands and marching units joining the procession as it moved.

Mammoth Falls had never seen anything like it. It still hasn't, because there were so many in the parade that there were only three or four people left over to watch it from the sidewalks... plus a pack of dogs. But it was fun, anyway, and we whooped and hollered and threw peanuts at the dogs as they ran along yelping and barking at everything passing by.

When it was all over, Mr. MacComber asked Mr. Jenkins to drive him to the county airport outside Clinton so he could catch a plane to New York, and we all rode along to see him off. On the way we had a great time comparing notes and jokes about all the events of the week, and Mr. MacComber practically had tears in his eyes when we finally pulled up at the airport passenger ramp. While we were all shaking hands and saying good-bye, Freddy Muldoon tapped Mr. Jenkins on the shoulder.

"Hey, Mr. Jenkins! Could we stop at Mr. Parson's farm on the way back?"

"Well, I guess we could, Freddy. What for?"

"Well, he usually dresses his chickens for market on Sunday afternoon, and I want to see if I can get some chicken heads for my mother."

"Chicken heads?" Mr. MacComber gulped. Then he put his head between his hands and groaned. "Freddy! I know I shouldn't ask this question, but what on earth can you do with

chicken heads?"

"Ain't you never heard of chicken noodle soup?" said Freddy, gazing at him in wide-eyed wonder.

Mr. MacComber closed his eyes and bit down hard on his cigar. He groped for Mr. Jenkins's hand and shook it.

"Jake!" he said. "Remind me never to come back here, will you?"

Then he picked up his bags and slouched off toward his plane, where he disappeared in the darkness beyond the doorway.