

**A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE
STORY**

**THE
MAGIC TALISMAN**

BY JOHN BLAINE



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Please note: due to the added length of this manuscript—nearly 10,000 words longer than the average book in this series—the publisher has opted to use a slightly smaller font size to keep printing costs at a reasonable level and to allow the book to be sold for the same amount as others in the Rick Brant series. Your understanding is appreciated.

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THE MAGIC TALISMAN

CHAPTER I

A Corpse in Velvet?

Under a gray windblown sky the early November surf beat with white-tipped hammer blows against the sea wall of Spindrift Island. Driven by winds from a storm far at sea, spray rocketed into the air like molten buckshot. Rick Brant looked up from the workbench in his second floor bedroom and watched the spray shoot high, to be caught by the wind and carried almost to his window.

After a moment's hesitation he unplugged the soldering iron with which he had been attaching a maze of hair-like wires to tiny terminals inside a rectangular aluminum tin. No use continuing, he decided, he'd only end up making a mistake. He pushed back his chair and bent to pet Dismal, the little curly-haired dog who napped under the bench. Diz thumped his tail on the rug and yawned.

Rick didn't know what had broken his concentration and made him feel uneasy. He felt tense, as though waiting for something to happen. For a minute or two the tall, athletic, brown-haired boy watched the surf from his window on the northeast corner of the island and tried to sort out his thoughts.

It should have been a perfect day for working on his new gadget. His home island off the New Jersey Coast was as quiet as it ever could be, because, of the eight scientists who made up the Spindrift Scientific Foundation, five were gone for several weeks. The other three, including Hartson Brant, Foundation president and Rick's dad, were in the long, gray laboratory building on the island's southeast corner, working long hours on a difficult problem for the U. S. Navy.

Each of the Spindrift scientists had his own interests and activities, but when a project arose which required the special abilities of others in the group, it was given priority. This problem, an urgent matter of anti-submarine warfare, had taken big Hobart Zircon and little Julius Weiss, both of whom had rooms on the third floor of the big Brant house, to sea for many weeks with a Navy task force. John Gordon, a reserve Navy captain, was on submarine duty working on the same problem. The three were in daily communication with the island by secure scrambled radiotelephone. The other two scientists, Briotti and Shannon, were on field expeditions not connected with the Navy project.

Usually Rick and Scotty were involved in Spindrift projects, but during the school year, each had more than enough of his own work to do.

The momentary quiet, during which Rick had hoped to work, was due also to the absence of the three others who made up what friends called "the Spindrift four." Donald Scott, whose room was next to Rick's on the other side of a connecting bath, had gone to the mainland early. Rick's sister, Barbara Brant, with Jan Miller, had borrowed the car he and Scotty owned jointly and they were visiting friends in Whiteside, a usual Saturday activity when nothing exciting was happening on the island.

Rick tried to let his mind go blank, to see what might surface and give him a clue to his uneasiness, but he kept thinking about the girls. Could they have been involved in an accident? Possible, but not very likely. He and Scotty had taught them defensive driving, and both were excellent drivers with fast reflexes. There were few kinds of trouble they could get into in peaceful Whiteside. He couldn't think of any that seemed at all probable, but the thought persisted that the girls were the source of the sudden tension.

Being over-imaginative had its penalties, and Rick grinned at his own musings. These feelings of pending doom came now and then and usually meant nothing. But even as he laughed at himself, the phone rang and he ran to answer it. By the time he reached the upstairs landing and the phone, his mother was calling from downstairs.

“It’s Barby, Rick. She sounds pretty excited.”

“Barby?” A torrent of words poured forth the moment Rick spoke her name. She was not only excited, but upset. “Slow down,” he pleaded. “I’m not getting it.”

“Oh, Rick, it’s Scotty!”

“What about him?” Rick held his breath.

“You know the old Mirella estate north of Whiteside on the shore road?”

“Yes. What about Scotty?”

“We turned in there, Jan and I, and we got to the front door and... oh, Rick! What will we do?”

“Easy, Barb. What happened?”

“Scotty was there with another man, and Rick—they were carrying a dead body into the house!”

“A what?”

“A body! I know it’s unbelievable, but it was, it was! It was a corpse. And Scotty saw us. He put a finger to his lips, then waved us off. You know... a real beat-it-quick kind of wave. So we stepped on it—I was driving and went right around the driveway circle and out again, and we hurried here to the landing to call you, and Rick you’d better come quick because I don’t know what Scotty’s into, but it’s awful!”

“Be right there. Sit tight.” Rick hurried downstairs to his mother. Dismal bounced after him to keep from being left behind just in case a snack was in the offing. “I don’t know what it’s all about, but Barby’s upset about Scotty carrying a body into the old Mirella estate. I’ll go and see what’s up.”

Mrs. Brant shook her head. “I’m sure Barby misunderstood what she saw. I can’t imagine it’s really serious or Scotty would have found a way to phone us.”

Rick grabbed a jacket and gloves, then ran for the boat landing. As he rounded the corner of the house, he caught a quick glimpse of his plane, the Sky Wagon, staked down at the runway’s end near the lab. “I’m a dope!” he exclaimed. If only he’d put his brains in gear instead of just reacting, he could have told Barby to meet him at Whiteside airport, only

a few hundred yards off the highway they would take to the Mirella estate. It would have saved a lot of time.

The Spindrift fleet had grown to several boats of assorted sizes, and Rick saw that the fastest one, used mostly for water skiing and joy riding in calm weather, was still at the dock. He cast off all but a bow line, unsnapped enough of the cover to let him into the cockpit, turned the key and started the engine. Pulling forward by hand, he reached the remaining bit to which he was tied, cast off, shifted into forward and fed gas. Although the ocean outside was rough, the trip to Whiteside Landing was in the lee of Spindrift, and Rick kept the boat at top speed, ignoring the bounces and the spray.

Scotty's trip to the mainland had been to give their good friend Jerry Webster a hand fixing up a second-hand motorcycle the *Morning Record* reporter bought through a want ad in his own paper. Rick couldn't imagine how that could have led to Scotty lugging a corpse into the Mirella estate. The only thing about which he was certain was that Scotty had a sound and sensible reason for doing whatever the girls had seen him doing. The big ex-Marine was rock solid, not the least bit given to wild or erratic actions.

Originally, Scotty had rescued Rick from what might have been a bad beating, and was hired by Hartson Brant as a guard. He had just left the Marine Corps, and was still in uniform. As time passed, Scotty grew naturally into a member of the family. He was one of the most helpful and considerate people Rick had ever met, and one of the most mechanically skilled. The Spindrift folks had come to depend on him to keep the island's machinery running. He and Rick had become closer than brothers, sharing fun and adventure, and the Brants treated him exactly as they treated Rick and Barby. It was adoption without the formality of court action.

Dr. Brant pointed out once to Rick and Barby that the most positive evidence of Scotty's stability and depth of character was that he had developed into the person they all cared for so deeply after the kind of childhood that too often produced addicts, drop-outs and criminals. Scotty didn't know who his parents were because he recalled only a

succession of the kind of foster homes where kids are taken in solely for the money it brings.

Lack of parental care and neglect had in one important way, been an opportunity, not an obstacle. He learned to read early, loved books, and lost himself in written worlds. Even more, he loved to work with his hands, and he had acquired skill after skill, through observation, reading, and sometimes helping workmen for a few kind words, a bit of teaching, or a small payment. By the age of fourteen he was very big for his age, well-muscled from working for fun or money, and street-wise. He was placed by social welfare with a carpenter's family to learn a trade, but the man turned out to be a drunken bully, and Scotty, as he once told Rick, had the choice of leaving or hurting him badly. So, a few days short of his fifteenth birthday, he decided to join the Marines, even though he was two full years short of enlistment age.

Scotty's research was done at Beaufort, South Carolina, and nearby towns where recruits arrived by train and bus to be taken to the famous Parris Island base where raw civilians were turned into Marines. Listening to Marines who had completed training and were waiting for transportation home on leave, occasionally buying one a cup of coffee and asking questions, he found out how the system worked. More important, he found out how it didn't work. It was not unusual for a recruit to arrive ahead of his enlistment papers, and now and then the papers never did show up, to the enraged and colorful comments of the first sergeants and the base sergeant major.

The boy waited patiently until a night train brought a large contingent of recruits from northern cities, and when they were loaded on buses for Parris Island, Scotty, small canvas bag in hand like the others, joined them. When his name wasn't read at roll call, he stepped forward and announced his presence. No, he didn't know where his papers were. He had just been told to get on the train, nothing about papers.

Pending correction of the bureaucratic foul up, he was processed with the rest, handed clothes and gear, and placed

with a recruit platoon. He completed the grueling training as one of the top three in his platoon, and the base sergeant major, uttering vast and picturesque descriptions of the recruiting service bureaucrats, made out a service record for Private Donald Scott, USMC, giving his age as seventeen, and noting in his report to Headquarters, Washington, that he had fired “Expert” with both rifle and pistol, and had earned favorable notice from his drill instructor, a tough veteran not noted for kindly comment. When Scotty was discharged after a three year hitch, he was a sergeant who had been urged to reenlist, and had he not fallen in with Rick and found a warm and loving home at Spindrifft, he would certainly have done so.

After a time at Spindrifft, with the Brants’ enthusiastic support, Scotty began to fill the gaps in his education. By hard work, sometimes carrying a double load, he caught up and would graduate with Rick from Whiteside High School, holding a proud 3.9 average. In the Fall, he planned to go for a university degree in mechanical engineering.

Rick was anxious to get to the Mirella estate and find out what his pal had gotten into, and he kept the boat at top speed. As soon as he rounded Spindrifft and started across North Cove, he saw the slender figures of the girls. They ran down the pier to meet him, and Jan Miller, a lovely brunette, caught the line he tossed and made fast. Like his sister, Jan was about a year his junior. Barbara Brant, an equally attractive blonde, began talking the moment he stepped to the pier.

“Hold it.” Rick held up his hand. “We’ll talk in the car. I’ll drive.”

Barby handed him the keys and he slid into the driver’s seat, adjusted the seat and mirror, and started the car. Jan got in next to him with Barby on the window side. As Rick put the car in gear and moved out of the parking slot, he turned briefly to the girl at his side.

“How about it, Jan?”

“It’s as Barby told you on the phone. We pulled into the estate just in time to see Scotty helping to carry a body from

a panel truck.”

“Start at the beginning,” Rick urged.

“You tell, Barb,” Jan requested.

“All right. Well, we went to Helen’s, only we took the long way because Grace asked us to drop her off, so we didn’t go by the Mirella estate.”

“Why is that important?”

“Because maybe Jan would have wanted to turn in there on the way up instead of on the way home.”

Rick glanced at Jan but didn’t interrupt.

“We started home early because Jan and I have decorations to make for Thanksgiving. So we had plenty of time when we got to the Mirella place and Jan said we should turn in. I was driving, so I did.”

Rick looked at Jan again. She obviously was not listening, her eyes straight ahead. Clearly, something was bothering her, something other than seeing Scotty with a body.

“We couldn’t see anything from the road,” Barby went on, “and when we turned into the driveway the trees kept us from seeing anything until we got near the house. Then we saw a panel truck and a motorcycle that must have been Jerry’s. Scotty and a man were carrying something from the truck.”

Barby shuddered. “We weren’t sure it was Scotty until we got close because he was partially shielded by the truck, but by the time we pulled up he and the man had carried the... the thing clear and we could see that it was a body. We... well, I’m not sure what Jan thought, but at first I wondered if it was a store window mannequin or something like that.”

Rick asked, “What did you think about the body, Jan?”

“What... oh, the body? I didn’t think anything, Rick. I wasn’t thinking.”

Not thinking? Rick’s feeling of something very wrong deepened. Jan had a quick intelligence and curiosity. He couldn’t imagine her going blank in any situation, much less one like that.

“Well, I changed my mind in a hurry,” Barby continued. “It was a body, all right. Its eyes were open and it was limp.”

“Clothing?”

“It was dressed kind of funny, all in black. It looked like velvet.” Rick shook his head. A corpse in velvet! What had Scotty gotten into?

“Well, the man with Scotty saw us, and his eyebrows sort of went up, but he didn’t say anything. He was young, maybe in his twenties, with dark hair that was kind of long, and he was rather nice looking.”

Rick smiled. Corpse or no, Barby’s powers of observation hadn’t been impaired by shock.

“He didn’t look like the type to be hauling dead men around. Anyway, Scotty had the thing by the legs, and when he saw us he let go of one leg and it sort of thunked down, very limp. The other man had the body by the armpits, and it was bent almost double. The head was lolling back and we could see its eyes. It stared right at me. Honest, I felt kind of sick.”

“How did Scotty look?”

“Surprised, at first, then he frowned, and when he let the leg drop he put a finger to his lips, then waved hard. You know, motioning for us to beat it, quick. So we did. That’s all, Rick. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.” What was Scotty doing at the Mirella estate anyway? Who was he helping? Barby’s recital hadn’t contained enough information for a guess.

The shore road was narrow, and Rick trailed a truck until it was safe to pass, then turned to Jan. “Why did you want to go into the estate?”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t know. Suddenly I just felt as though I should go there. I can’t tell you why. It was an urgent feeling that hit me all of a sudden, as though someone were calling me.”

“How did you feel when you got near the house?”

“Sort of breathless. It was like waiting to get some kind of

message.”

“Did you get a message?”

“N... no, not exactly. But for a moment before we took off, I had the warmest feeling, as though someone was glad I had come.”

“How do you feel about going back?”

For the first time, Jan smiled. “Good. I’m glad we’re going back.”

“In spite of Scotty lugging a dead man around?”

Jan sat up straighter. “Do you know, I haven’t been taking that very seriously? I’ve been so... well, preoccupied with the strange feeling that I didn’t get half as excited as Barby did. Maybe not as excited as I ought to be. Anyway,” she finished calmly, “if Scotty’s in trouble you’ll get him out of it.”

“Of course he will,” Barby said emphatically.

Rick wished he shared their faith. Because he had been pretty lucky a few times, the girls had developed the flattering but inaccurate view that he and Scotty could accomplish just about anything.

It wasn’t long before the early winter darkness closed in and he didn’t want to have to hunt for Scotty and a limp corpse in a dark house. He speeded up. So far as he knew, the Mirella estate hadn’t been occupied in years. Suddenly it occurred to him that a limp corpse must be a fresh one. Didn’t rigor mortis set in a short time after death? He hadn’t had much experience with newly deceased victims, but he had read his share of detective mysteries.

The estate was on the shore side going north. He turned into the driveway, passing through iron gates that usually were closed. Rick had flown over the estate many times, but he had never been into the place at ground level. He looked around with interest. Just inside the gate was a large gatehouse. The driveway was black-topped, wide enough for two cars. So far as he could see, the estate was ringed by a six-foot chain link fence topped with barbed wire and overgrown with vines. An extensive planting of arbor *vitae* along the driveway effectively concealed the mansion. The

car emerged from the wooded area to a vast expanse of still green, neatly trimmed lawn. Obviously, someone had been taking care of the place.

The mansion was huge, rather boxlike, built of dressed stone, standing three stories high above a portico which could have sheltered a small fleet of limousines. The driveway passed under the portico, swung in a circle and connected to itself like a loop in a screw-eye. An access road led off behind the north wing of the house, probably to a service entrance and parking area.

Under the portico Rick saw the panel truck and Jerry's motorcycle. He drew up parallel with the truck, placing the car in a position for a fast getaway. He asked, "Want to wait out here while I go in for a look?"

The girls answered in unison. "No!"

"Then let's go, but stay behind me."

Rick led the way through the wide entrance doors, which were standing ajar as though in invitation.

Inside, the entrance hall was huge, two stories high, the floor covered with deep-pile gold carpet. The decor was lush oriental, the walls hung with tapestries and art objects. The furniture and lamps were classic Chinese in style, heavily carved and accented with gold leaf and touches of Chinese red. The effect was exotic and dramatic.

A gasp from Barby made Rick whirl. She pointed to a niche at the right of the door where two boxes lay. They looked very much like coffins, and their lids were open.

Rick hadn't really believed the wild yarn until that moment. He walked over and looked down, horror creeping through him. Sightless eyes stared at him from both boxes. In one was a man, a corpse in velvet, as Barby had described him. In the other, dressed in harem trousers and embroidered jacket, was a woman, little more than a girl, her face expressionless in the rigor of death.

"Double trouble," Rick said hoarsely. "There are two bodies!"

CHAPTER II

The Magicians

For a long moment Rick stood frozen, then his forehead wrinkled in a frown as he sensed something odd about the two in the boxes. He studied the faces, and suddenly he had it. The skin was unlined, smooth, healthy-looking, and the colors were those of life, not the waxen pallor of death. He stepped forward and heard Barby gasp as he bent and touched the male figure's face.

The skin was flexible, and the dent made by his finger disappeared as soon as pressure was withdrawn. "These aren't bodies." He let out his breath with a sigh of relief. "It's a pair of dummies."

"But dummies are rigid," Barby objected.

"Not these. They're not store window dummies; they're for something else. Come on, let's find Scotty."

Rick started for the nearest doorway, then stopped as he realized that Jan wasn't following. She was in the middle of the entrance hall, her face tilted upward, as though listening for a distant voice.

"Jan!" Rick reached her side in a few long strides. When she heard her name, she turned slowly.

"I'm sorry, Rick. Did you say something?"

"I said they're not bodies. They're dummies."

"That's good." Then, as his meaning penetrated, her eyes opened wide. "That means Scotty isn't in trouble."

"Yes. Let's go find him." He was disturbed, but this wasn't the time to find out why Jan wasn't acting like herself. The first order of business was to find Scotty.

He surveyed the wide doorways and chose the one nearest the entrance. It led into a bar and cocktail lounge. The decor was Middle Eastern, the theme established by a mural above the bar. Desert horsemen, Arab or Bedouin, were clustered together looking upward to the top of a sand dune

where a jet black camel with fiery red eyes stared down at them.

“The Black Camel,” Jan murmured.

Rick looked at her. “What does it mean?”

“In some parts of Arabia the legend is that Death comes as a black camel. I read about it in a book of folklore.”

“It’s a cute camel,” Barby laughed. “He looks friendly, not deadly.” Rick smiled. Barby was right.

A familiar voice called, “Well, aren’t you going to come and say hello?”

Scotty! As they stepped farther into the room they saw him seated at a corner table having a Coke. With him were two men who looked exactly alike and a petite, very attractive girl. The men and the girl were duplicates of the dummies in the boxes!

The four at the table rose and walked to meet the three Spindrifters. The big, husky black-haired ex-Marine was obviously pleased with himself. “What took you so long?” He demanded.

Rick was still somewhat bemused by seeing the two dummies in the flesh, as it were, one of them in duplicate. He blinked. “Were you expecting us?”

“Of course.” Scotty was clearly enjoying himself. “I wanted you to meet some old friends of mine.”

He introduced his surprised chums to Derek and David Cameron, and to Karen, David’s wife. With the introductions complete, Scotty added, “I know I’ve told you about Derek the Magician, and Rick will remember that we used a couple of simple tricks I said he taught me.”

“How could I forget?” Rick replied. “I know you’ve been corresponding now and then since you left the Marines. Which one is Derek?”

“Both the twins are Derek for stage purposes, and Karen is an important part of the act, too.”

“And so are the dummies in the hall,” Barby concluded. Rick could tell that she was furious with Scotty.

The twins chuckled. Karen frowned. “I hope these two

nuts didn't upset you too much. I scolded Scotty when Derek told me he'd waved you off. You obviously thought the replica was real."

Scotty wasn't at all repentant. "It got results," he pointed out. "I knew the girls would fly to a phone and call Rick, and they'd be here in a hurry. It was the quickest way of getting us all together."

"You might have chosen a less nerve-shattering way," Barby said tartly. "Maybe something like a telephone."

"That's the problem," one of the twins replied. "Our phones won't be connected for several days because we're having a multiple line cable put in."

"What brought the girls into the estate in the first place?" Karen asked.

Rick decided to avoid complicated explanations and spoke before the girls could answer. "Jan wanted to look the place over, and the gate was open. Incidentally, what is all this? And how did Scotty connect up with you?"

One twin responded. "By accident. We were going to call Scotty when our phones got connected, but he found us instead. By the way, to make things easier, I'm Derek and I always wear a blue tie. David wears a red or maroon one."

"Thank you." Barby nodded. "That does help." She looked at Scotty. "How did you find them?"

"I was trying out Jerry's bike and heading back to Whiteside when I passed them in the panel truck. I was pretty sure it was them, so I turned and followed into the estate. By the time you and Jan arrived, David and Karen had carried the Karen figure in and I was giving Derek a hand with the male figure."

Rick had been curious about one point. "Why didn't you carry them in right in their cases?"

"Because they're so heavy," David explained. "They weigh exactly as much as we do. The boxes are heavy, too, to protect them when they have to be shipped."

"They're pretty convincing," Barby was smiling now. She had too sunny a disposition to stay angry for long, and she

was beginning to see the funny side of Scotty's practical joke. "But you haven't told us what this is all about."

The twins spoke in unison. "Welcome to the House of Illusion."

"We're creating a restaurant-theater club," Karen explained. "We'll serve food and magic together. How about a quick tour? We're not quite ready, but things are shaping up." She led the way to the entrance hall.

Rick moved close to Jan. She hadn't said a word since acknowledging the introductions, and that increased his uneasiness. Usually she was an interested participant who asked good questions and contributed to the conversation.

"Will people come to such an out-of-the-way place?" Barby asked. "You'll have to draw people from Newark and New York, as well as the closer cities like Red Bank, Atlantic City, and Monmouth."

"We hired a marketing research firm," Derek told them. "The report was pretty enthusiastic. Besides, we'll only be open on weekends and holidays, which will make it easier for people to drive from the big cities."

"Let's start in the restaurant and theater part," David suggested.

Jan spoke for the first time. "Please, who else is in the house?"

Karen moved to face her and took her hands. For an instant, with the two of them framed against the exotic tapestries of the entrance hall, Rick's active imagination pictured them as priestesses in an ancient oriental temple. Both were slender, dark of hair and eyes, and at the moment, both had the same expression, one of searching for something other-worldly.

"Who else do you feel in the house?" Karen asked.

Jan gave an uncertain smile. "I'm not sure. Is there an old man? Quite old?"

Karen shook her head. "Not in our group, Jan. Our staff isn't here just now, except for the chef and his assistants. They're in the kitchen planning menus. But none of them is

old. I don't know of an old man... but yet... never mind. Shall we go on tour?"

Though Rick had never been in the estate before, he had seen from the air that the mansion was shaped like an L with a large wing on the north side. It was that wing which housed the restaurant-theater part. There were four dining rooms. Three, David explained, had been a reception room, a den, and a library. Each would accommodate from fifteen to twenty tables for two and four. Decorating already was complete, done with taste and imagination on oriental, medieval, and Egyptian themes.

The fourth dining room was huge, two stories high. It had been the mansion ballroom, complete with stage. The theme was ancient Persian, and on the inner wall was a great mural, a vast caravan of horses, camels, turbaned or fezzed riders, veiled men and women, children, goats, and dogs, all in a long line that trailed off into darkness at either end. In the center of the mural was a well from which bearded men were drawing water. The entire scene was misty, as though shrouded in purple twilight. Rick had to pull his eyes away. It was hard to focus on the mural.

"We're in the Phantom Caravan room," David told the group. "It's where we'll perform. The room and stage are actually the reason we selected this place to lease. The setup is just perfect for us, but I have to admit the stage has us really puzzled."

Rick was examining the ceiling, which was about twenty feet above the floor. It was unusual, because, on the mural side, and at the front close to the stage arch, there were channels about four feet deep and wide between the bottom of the ceiling and the walls. It was almost as though the ceiling were suspended from a higher ceiling.

Along both of the channel sides, facing the stage and the mural, were long banks of lights of several different kinds and shapes. Rick could see why so many lights faced the stage, but why so many focused on the mural?

"What's puzzling about the stage?" Barby asked.

David smiled. "Without giving away the family secrets, I

can tell you that magicians need a stage with some special features. This one has everything we could possibly need. It's a magician's dream."

"Do you know the history of the house?" Jan asked.

"Only that it stood empty for years with a bank taking care of it. An agent found it for us just a week after it had been put on the market for lease, a bit more than four months ago. We've no idea who the magician was, or much else."

Karen explained, "We've been on tour in the south, and until last week, we've depended mostly on our stage manager and principal helper, Archy Sullivan, to supervise our contractors here. We took turns flying into Newark for one and two day trips to check up until just ten days ago when we arrived to stay. We've rented a house near Shrewsbury. Later, we may move in here, if we're a success. We'll know in two or three months. We also have a firm in Red Bank which will handle reservations and publicity."

"Anyway," Derek added, "we've had no time for research or much else except getting ready. The rest of our staff arrives on Monday, and from then on it will be crash ahead until we open."

Derek led the way through swinging doors that led to the kitchen, then around through corridors to backstage where there were dressing rooms, storage, and a lounge for the staff. Finally they reached the entrance hall again and went up the wide stairway to a large hallway from which doors opened on several rooms.

The magician took them into a room directly back from the top of the stairs and explained, "This was the master bedroom."

"It's beautiful!" Barby exclaimed. The decor was French Provincial, the walls made of panels framed with mouldings of sculptured fleur-de-lis. There was a fireplace in one wall with a magnificent mirror above the marble mantel. French doors opened onto a small balcony. Other doors opened into a large walk-in closet and a very large bathroom.

Instead of bedroom furniture there were a couch, two stuffed chairs, and two desks with desk chairs. In one corner

were four-drawer oak file cabinets with combination locks.

“We’ve taken it for our office,” Derek explained.

Karen and David had paused in the doorway. Karen suggested, “Show them the view from the balcony, Derek.”

“Yes. When warm weather comes, we may also serve cocktails out back, and perhaps even offer a small *alfresco* magic show.” He opened the doors and stood aside for the Spindrifters to move onto the balcony and look down at a broad formal garden of green lawn, flagstones, trimmed shrubbery and several statues. In the center of the expanse was a large fountain with a heroic statue of some figure from mythology. From the huge weapon, like a sledge hammer, in the figure’s upraised hand, Rick guessed it probably was the Scandinavian god Thor.

As they returned to the hallway, Derek pointed. “The men’s lounge for the public will be the room on the left of the office. The ladies will have the room to the right.” He led the way downstairs.

Rick looked at his watch as they reached the entrance hall. “Kids, it’s time for us to be leaving.”

“Yes, but first we want to extend an invitation.” Karen smiled warmly. “We knew Scotty was nearby, and we were looking forward to seeing him and meeting his Spindrift folks. We planned to send invitations to our opening on Thanksgiving Eve for both the Brant and Miller families.”

“But that would be eight of us,” Barby protested.

“A good round number,” David said. “A nice tableful. Will you extend the invitations to your parents, or shall we make it formal with a letter?”

“We’re not formal people,” Rick assured him. “We’ll accept with pleasure, if you’ll agree to a condition.”

“Name it.”

“That you come and have Thanksgiving afternoon dinner with us, if your schedule permits.”

“Don’t you have to consult your parents?” David asked curiously.

Rick smiled. "My parents taught Barby and me never to hesitate when Brant hospitality is concerned. I know they'd love to have you, and they'll be as excited about coming to your opening as we are."

"He's right," Barby echoed.

"I can speak for my parents, too," Jan added. "Thank you so much for inviting us."

Derek laughed. "If only other people could make up their minds so quickly! We're agreed, then. You'll come to the opening and we'll go to Spindrifft for afternoon dinner if we can get back here by six to prepare for our evening show. It will be wonderful to see Spindrifft. Scotty isn't a frequent letter writer, but when he does write it's a long, newsy one with lots of details, so we feel that we know you."

As they shook hands all around, Barby announced that she was riding to Whiteside on the motorcycle with Scotty.

Rick and Scotty protested simultaneously. "You are not!" Rick exclaimed. "Not only don't you have a helmet, you're not dressed for it. You'll freeze."

Scotty shook his head. "Sorry, Barb. I can't take you without a helmet."

Barby started an angry protest, but Karen hastened to calm the incipient storm. "A moment please, all of you. Dave, that helmet I wore in the cannon shot illusion is in the big box by the train wreck set. It will fit Barby."

David nodded, and hurried off.

Rick grinned at his sister. "You win, Barb." He slipped out of his heavy jacket. "Put this on. No, don't take yours off; put mine over it and cinch the belt tight."

Barby took the jacket. "Thanks, Rick."

David appeared with a helmet painted in wild poster colors that whirled to a crest at the top. He chuckled. "You'll not only be safe, Barby, you'll be too visible to get lost."

Scotty took the helmet from David and put it on Barby's head. It was a good fit. "With that on, no one will even notice the driver. Climb aboard and let's fly."

Barby thanked Karen and promised to return the helmet soon. With Rick's jacket over her own making her bulky as a bear and the helmet concealing most of her face and head, she was almost unrecognizable, but the delighted smile was pure Barby Brant.

"Come on, corpse toter. The kids can pick us up at Jerry's."

Rick, Jan, and the Camerons watched as Barby got on the postern seat behind Scotty, put her arms around him in a death grip, and called, "Let's go!"

Scotty kicked the starter. The cycle roared into life, spun around the driveway loop like a jet taking off, and was gone.

"Time for us," Rick said to Jan.

The girl turned to the Camerons. "Thank you for the tour. I'm truly glad to have met you."

Karen took her hand. "Jan, tell me, please. Why did you want to come into the estate?"

"It's very difficult to explain. It seemed as though I were daydreaming that someone needed me and was calling me. I know that doesn't make much sense."

"Perhaps it does," Karen replied. "Or will, when we can understand a little more."

Jan smiled. "Perhaps. Goodbye for now. We'll see you Thanksgiving Eve." She walked to the car.

The magician's wife turned to Rick, but her eyes were still on Jan. "Take good care of her," Karen said softly. "She's one of the rare ones."

Rick knew very well that Jan was a rare type of girl, but he didn't think the word meant exactly the same to Karen. "I'll do my best," he assured her.

As they rode south toward Whiteside and Jerry's house, Jan put her hand on Rick's arm. "I know you're worried about me, Rick, but don't be. It's all right. I'm puzzled, and sort of... well, call it enchanted. But I'm fine, really."

"Tell me."

"I can't just yet because I don't know what's happening."

It's only a vague feeling. But I can tell you this: there's someone else in that house that the Camerons don't know about."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know how. I just feel it."

"An old man? The one you asked Karen about?"

"I'm not sure, but I think so. Karen feels something, too. She doesn't seem to feel it as strongly as I do, but she knew right away when I asked who else was in the house."

"Yes," Rick agreed. "What's the feeling like? Besides being some kind of presence?"

"It's a nice feeling. It isn't menacing or evil. It's sort of warm, and as I told Karen, I feel as though someone... or maybe something... needs me. But I can't imagine what for."

"Is it a friendly ghost? You know, the Mirella estate is said to be haunted just because it's been empty for so long."

Jan chuckled. "Yes, but if it's a ghost, it's the first one I've ever wanted to meet."

"If you're not upset or worried about it, I'll try to relax."

"I'm just puzzled, and very intrigued. We'll find out together what it is, like always, and I'll tell you everything that seems to fit."

"Okay. We'll let it drop until there's something more to say."

They would be going back for the grand opening, and that would take Jan within the influence of whatever was trying to communicate with her. How far did the influence reach? What did it want of her? The whole thing was very strange.

Had it been anyone but the girl at his side, Rick would have been tempted to dismiss the odd feeling as the product of an over-heated imagination. But this was Jan! She was his delightful and witty girl companion in the adventures and fun of the Spindrift four, his lovely and charming date on social occasions, his regular chess opponent who consistently beat him an average of six games out of ten. Worse, they had been learning the even more complex oriental game of Go, where strategy requires keen foresight and the ability to

analyze an almost infinite number of possible future moves—and Jan was beating him seven out of ten.

Not that Rick really considered it “worse.” Jan’s high intelligence included a better natural aptitude for math than his and the ability to work through possibilities step by step to the desired result. Rick, on the other hand, tended to look at things holistically and to be satisfied with a good approximation of the overall picture; he didn’t have Jan’s patience.

Although she was a year behind him in school, she was taking the same advanced math courses, and he had to study hard sometimes to comprehend concepts that she seemed to absorb intuitively. He often called on her with an especially tough problem, and he enjoyed asking for her help. To Rick, this was part of the natural order of things.

It was true that Jan had a vivid imagination, but it was coupled with sound common sense. Time and shared danger in the past also had shown her intense loyalty and her great courage. She truly was one of the rare ones. But what Karen had meant was rare in a sense that Rick did not yet understand.

The Millers had arrived at Spindrift under sudden and stressful circumstances, smuggled out of Washington on a Coast Guard vessel by the Special Security agent who had often called on the Spindrift scientists for help. Dr. Miller was head of a scientific team of four charged with developing the concept for an advanced new missile system when two of the team and later a third, suddenly were struck by acute mental disaster, losing their ability to reason or speak coherently.

The agent showed up late on a Sunday evening to ask sanctuary for the Millers and Spindrift help in rebuilding the team. The Brants agreed immediately, and the Millers, who were offshore in the Coast Guard vessel, moved into the big Brant house that same night. Weeks later, with the project finished, the scientists recovering, and the saboteurs in Federal hands, time came for the Millers to return to Washington.

Fortunately, within days after the parting, Dr. Miller agreed to a permanent position at Spindrift, and the family moved into the last of the new houses behind the orchard, closest to Pirate's Field and the beach. For Barby, Rick, and Scotty, it was as though the sunshine on Spindrift had suddenly returned to full brightness.

From about the second week of Jan's initial arrival on the island, all other girls had become just people to Rick. With her return, they became good friends, with the same tastes in music, books, entertainment, and more serious interests. They saved little surprises for each other, like a funny cartoon, an interesting idea from some publication, a nice turn of language, or a magazine article. They became as close as him and Scotty, though in a different kind of way—but no closer.

At times when they were enjoying something and each other, Rick tried to shift their friendship to a somewhat more intimate boy-girl plane, only to meet a skillful and non-hurting defense which kept things exactly as they were. That this exceptional girl apparently had no romantic interest in him despite their deep friendship, bothered Rick more than a little, but there was nothing he could do about it except hope. A future without Jan was something he didn't even want to imagine.

Now there was this new facet of Jan. Who, or what, was trying to communicate with her at the estate? And, above all, how? Rick didn't totally reject extra-sensory perception; he had come close to experiencing it himself too many times, or so it seemed. But he had the skepticism of one whose main scientific interest was in physics. In essence, show him how the message got from one person to another, and he'd believe. The difference now was that he did believe Jan. If she said it was so, it was.

What that left was a big mystery. Who, why, and how? As Rick turned into Jerry's driveway, he knew he wouldn't let the matter rest until he had some sensible answers.

CHAPTER III

The House of Illusion

The Spindrift party arrived for the Cameron opening in two cars, with Rick driving his parents and Scotty while Barby rode with the Millers. New signs along the highway pointed the way, and at the estate entrance was a large sign which spelled out, THE HOUSE OF ILLUSION in changing colors. At the gate was a man in white tie and tails, complete with cape and top hat, who waved them through with an elegant bow.

As Rick's car emerged from the line of trees he saw that the estate was lighted very cleverly to give it an air of brooding mystery within the bright illumination of the grounds. Uniformed attendants waited to park the cars. Turning his car over to one, Rick accepted a numbered ticket while Scotty opened the back door for the Brants. Other cars already were moving toward a parking lot behind the north wing, and still others were stopping under the portico with their loads of illusion seekers.

Rick went immediately to Jan's side as the Spindrifters walked to the entrance. Earlier, he had held a short meeting with Barby and Scotty.

"Until this strange business about Jan and the Mirella estate gets cleared up, we do not leave her alone even for a minute. Okay?"

"But she says the whatever-it-is is friendly," Barby pointed out. "Do you really think she's in any danger?"

Rick shrugged. "Maybe not. But I don't intend to take any chances. If you have to go powder your noses, both of you go, and either Scotty or I or both of us will be standing by until you reappear."

"He's right," Scotty agreed.

Barby nodded "She and I always stick close together anyway unless we're with one of you."

Just inside the mansion entrance the Spindrifters exchanged coats and wraps for claim checks, then walked to a reception desk occupied by a lady in the colorful costume of a Hungarian gypsy. “Your table will be number fifteen in the Phantom Caravan room, Dr. Brant.” The gypsy handed him a card. “An attendant will seat you when you are ready to go in, but first we hope all of you will enjoy the fun here in the hall.”

Rick had been looking around during the brief exchange. A clown was showing a group some remarkable dexterity with cards, sending cascades from one hand to the other. Waiters in black trousers and white mess jackets were offering trays of hors d’oeuvres and champagne to guests. A male gypsy, holding a crystal ball on a velvet-covered tray was telling fortunes—apparently funny ones, because those around him were laughing. A young magician in a tuxedo stood behind a small table, producing an assortment of odd objects from within a silk kerchief.

While the elder Brants and Millers were accepting glasses of champagne and some appetizing tempura shrimp, Rick asked quietly, “How goes it, Jan?”

“I don’t feel any kind of... emanation, I guess you’d call it. I’ll tell you if it happens. Ooh, look!”

Barby had just been accosted by a huge Mongol, shaven-headed except for a scalp lock, sleeveless jacket showing muscles like a weight lifter, and baggy trousers gathered at the ankles over heavy leather sandals.

“A golden girl of great beauty,” the Mongol exclaimed. “I think you must pay forfeit for all your company.” He held out open hands. “You have hidden on your person a tiny creature as golden as your hair! I must have it. But in that pretty gown there is no hiding place, so I think it must be—here!” His hand darted to Barby’s hair, and he triumphantly held on his palm a tiny golden hamster, which blinked sleepily.

Barby’s eyes opened wide. She barely hesitated. “So there you are, Socrates!” Before the Mongol realized what she intended, Barby took the hamster from his hand. “Thank you for finding him for me.”

The Mongol made a salaam. “My pleasure, Miss Barbara. Perhaps it would not be well to take him to the dinner table with you. He might be mistaken for a bit of antipasto or a fuzzy dinner roll. If you wish to take him home with you, he will be waiting at the reservation desk. Meanwhile, allow me to care for him.”

Barby handed the hamster back. “Thank you. That’s very nice.”

The Mongol closed his hand. When he opened it, the hamster had vanished.

The Brants and Millers rejoined the young people at that moment. Barby greeted them with, “Guess what? This nice man found a little friend for me. Would you please show him to our parents?”

“With pleasure, Miss Barbara.” The Mongol held out his hand and turned his palm upward. The little hamster nestled there, blinking. The Brants and Millers exclaimed.

“But where do you keep him hidden?” Mrs. Miller asked.

The Mongol turned his hand over, front and back, twice. There was no hamster. “But I don’t keep him hidden, Mrs. Miller. His disappearance is just an illusion.”

Hartson Brant laughed. “It’s what you should expect in the House of Illusion, Kate.”

The Mongol bowed. “Scientists seek the keys to knowledge, Dr. Brant and Dr. Miller, but do you know there are doors to knowledge that have no keys? Ah Boon of Bangkok will be pleased to show you.” He gestured toward a doorway a few yards past the stairway where a Buddhist monk was just ushering a couple through the door. The monk saw the Spindrift party and bowed invitingly.

As the group approached, the monk bowed again. “I am very pleased that you have come. Through my doorway are four doors without keys, as Omar said. Yet, the doors do have keys of a kind, to your personalities. Only one of the doors will be attuned to you and will open wide for you. The others may open part way, because all persons are a mix of goals, interests, and talents. Try each door until you are accepted.

Only one person may go through a door at a time. Please to enter.” He bowed three times.

Between glances at Jan, Rick had been examining the monk with interest. He was clad in a saffron-colored floor-length robe with wide sleeves in which his hands were hidden as he held them together. His eyes, wrinkled with laughter, were very wise and knowing. His head was shaven. Around his neck he wore a golden choke collar an oddity for a Buddhist monk in which was set an ivory Buddha.

Most unusual, the monk appeared to be a Caucasian, and Rick suspected that, if he allowed his hair to grow, it would be reddish blonde. Although it wasn’t impossible for a Caucasian to be a Buddhist monk, it was probably pretty rare. Rick concluded that the monk was an actor.

He followed the other Spindrifters through the wide doorway into a foyer in which there were four doors, side by side.

“What fun,” Mrs. Brant exclaimed. “Who will be first?”

“I’ll volunteer.” Dr. Miller tried the first door, and it opened wide for him. “Easy,” he said, and walked through.

Rick’s mother was next. Three doors opened only part way. Not until she reached the fourth did it open wide for her.

Hartson Brant followed, and went through door one, which had accepted Dr. Miller.

To Mrs. Miller’s surprise, the first door also opened for her. “Walter and I must be more alike than I thought.” She laughed and went through.

“I’m next.” Barby tried the doors. Each opened only part way until she reached the fourth. “Like mother, like daughter.” She waved and was gone.

“I’ll follow her.” Scotty’s door was number two.

When they were alone, Rick asked, “Still no message, Jan?”

“Not even a little bit. Find your door, Rick.”

Rick wondered if the strange presence had left the house. The third door opened for him. He stepped back. “Now find yours.”

Each of the first two opened slightly for her as they had for him, then door three opened wide. Jan chuckled. “I had a hunch it would be like that. A real Rick Brant hunch.”

Rick laughed. The others enjoyed kidding him about his hunches, but he knew they believed in them, even more than he did. He waited until the door had barely closed behind Jan, then followed her into a short tunnel of blue and green moving shadows. A voice spoke out of the changing twilight.

“You have been chosen by the door of the dreamers. The greatest deeds are accomplished by those who dream and then make the dreams come true. Neither of you is content with dreams alone, and you mix action, practicality, and the search for knowledge with dreaming. Out of your dreams, together, you will weave the fabric of tomorrow. Go now, and seek illusion.”

Rick shook his head in wonder. He and Jan went through a door into a small room where Barby and Scotty waited. The four followed an arrow to the entrance hall and found their parents just as a deep gong sounded and a voice cut through the noise of conversation in the big hall.

“Guests of the House of Illusion, it is time to dine. Your dining room and table number are shown on your cards, and the diagram on the back will show you where to go. Eat well of real food—and prepare for illusion!”

“Lead the way, Scotty,” Dr. Brant invited.

“Aye, aye, sir. Please follow me.”

As the group started off, Jan paused. She linked her arm through Rick’s and whispered, “It’s back. A nice, happy feeling. I wasn’t dreaming about that, anyway.”

“So you’re a dreamer.”

“Of course. Didn’t you know? I knew you were.”

“Did you?” It was a little shock to Rick, who prided himself on his hard-headed practicality.

“I’ve never known anyone who dreams up such great ideas. Don’t you call that dreaming?”

“I never argue with doors,” Rick told her, grinning as a tuxedo-clad waiter led them to a table for eight in the center of the Phantom Caravan room. Rick held a chair for Mrs. Miller, then for Jan, and slipped in between them. “We dreamers gotta stick together.”

“Uhuh. Maybe dreaming will help us see behind the veil.” It was an odd phrase. He raised his eyebrows. “Meaning?”

“I mean the veil from Omar.”

Scotty leaned across the table. “Do you mean Omar McGuire, the great quarterback?”

Jan laughed. “No. I mean Omar Khayyam.

Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the spirit of the Rubaiyat all around us. The Buddhist monk quoted Omar, too.”

“Ruby’s a funny color to paint a yacht,” Scotty said dryly.

“A Khayyam must be a female kayak,” Rick joked.

“At last we’ve found something these two don’t know about,” Barby crowed. “I’ve been waiting for the day.”

Mrs. Miller suggested, “Why don’t you boys switch from science to literature for awhile with Jan and Barby? You might enjoy it.”

“We do enjoy it,” Rick told her. “Jan’s got me knee deep in Marlowe at the moment.”

“I’d still like to know how Omar came into this,” Scotty reminded.

“Omar Khayyam was a Persian astronomer and mathematician who lived about ten centuries ago,” Jan explained. “He wrote verse, too, in a form called the rubai, which has four lines like a quatrain. Then, about a hundred years ago, an English poet named Edward Fitzgerald translated some of Omar’s verses and rewrote them into English.”

“So what’s the connection?” Scotty asked.

Jan motioned to the mural on the wall. “That’s one, and the doors without keys were another. They’re both from Rubaiyat verses.”

Rick had read the Rubaiyat long ago, but remembered only one of the verses, about a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou. “Tell us about the doors, Jan,” he requested.

“They’re in the first two lines of one of the verses along with the veil I mentioned. It goes, *‘There was a door to which I found no key; There was the veil through which I might not see,’*”

“That’s certainly clear enough,” Dr. Brant observed. “When it comes to metaphysics and speculation about the hereafter, there are many doors without keys and many veils that hide truth. What’s the one about the mural, Jan?”

“As you can see, the mural is a caravan that begins and ends in darkness, or nothingness, with light only at the well, which represents life or being. It’s just as the verse says:

‘A moment’s halt—a momentary taste Of BEING from the well amid the waste—And lo! The Phantom Caravan has reached The Nothing it set out from—Oh, make haste!’”

Dr. Miller frowned. “That’s rather negative, isn’t it darling? Do you believe it?”

Jan laughed, “No, dad. I just like the poetry of it.”

Barby spoke up. “Now that Jan has contributed to our male education project, I want to know what the doors said to you. I’ll start. The one mother and I went through said we were in touch with reality every moment. We may dream a little and be good at many things, but our essence is realism.”

Rick said softly, “Wow!” Being a realist was about the last thing of which he would have accused Barby. Yet, as he thought about it, in all their lives and adventures her contribution usually had been a very practical one. She could be astonishingly matter of fact about things, but on the other hand, she was an incurable romantic. He had to conclude there was nothing incompatible between realism and romanticism. The door had been more perceptive than he, and about his own very special sister, too!

The scientists had been greeted as seekers after knowledge, but Mrs. Miller had gone through the same door. The Spindrifters knew she was an accomplished artist, and the door had known it, too, because it told her that artists and scientists are seekers with the same goal: to understand and portray the truth about nature and life, one through mathematics and principles, the other through the artist's hands and eyes.

"That's a profound observation," Hartson Brant commented. "A very useful insight. How about you, Scotty?"

"I'm geared for action, sir. I dream a little, and search a little, and I'm a realist, but mostly I'm a doer."

"That's very good," Mrs. Brant said warmly. "And the things you do are important to us."

"To all of Spindrift," Dr. Brant added. "Now you, Jan."

"Rick and I are both dreamers," Jan reported. "We're a mix of other things like everyone else, but basically we dream and then try to make our dreams come true."

Everyone at the table nodded or spoke agreement, another small shock for Rick to realize that his own self-image did not coincide with the way others saw him.

"It's pretty remarkable." Dr. Brant shook his head in admiration. "We've seen some great staff work. We were greeted by name by different people, our personalities were tagged very well, and the Mongol even had a hamster that matched Barby's hair. I'm anxious to meet your friends, Scotty. And forgive me if I suspect that, because they are your friends, our treatment is quite special."

Scotty smiled. "I doubt that's an illusion, Dad."

"Where did the Mongol have that hamster?" Mrs. Brant asked. "It certainly wasn't up his sleeve. He had none."

"No sleeve," Scotty agreed. "It was just marvelous manipulation. He had the little critter in his hand all the time, and kept it out of sight until he wanted us to see it."

"And then I stole it," Barby said smugly.

"He gave it to you," Scotty corrected with a grin. "Don't

you remember how he held it out? It was an invitation no red-blooded golden girl could resist.”

Barby’s chin dropped. “I never thought of that. Fast as he was, he could have pulled it away easily.”

“We’re in the hands of masters of psychology as well as the black arts,” Dr. Miller summed up. “Now let’s see how the culinary arts are. I see a waiter coming. Has anyone taken a look at the menu?”

Rick opened his and held it up for Jan to see, and felt the strong shudder that ran through her at that moment. He leaned close and asked anxiously, “What is it?”

Jan’s fingers bit into his arm painfully. She whispered, “The warmth is still there, but just then I felt something else, farther away, but close. Oh, Rick, it was awful... so... so hate-filled, so vicious!”

CHAPTER IV

Hour of Magic

Dinner was excellent, accompanied by good conversation and the underlying music of an electronic organ in a corner in front of the stage. When coffee came, Rick leaned close to Jan. He could feel that she was still upset by the blast of vicious hatefulness she had felt. The idea that there was something malevolent nearby worried him, but he wanted to take her mind off it if he could.

“Jan, was the voice in the tunnel male or female? It was hard for me to tell.”

“I’m sure it was a man, Rick. Why?”

“I’ve been wondering if it could have been Karen, but I dropped that idea when I realized she’d be much too busy backstage. Anyway, whoever it was knew there were two of us, even though we were supposed to go through only one at a time.”

Jan agreed. “Yes, and the language was for us, because he said neither of us is content with just dreams.”

“So, unless you believe in magic, we were being watched by someone who knew enough about us to make those statements.”

Just then the deep note of the gong sounded.

“Look to the rear of the room,” Scotty called.

The group turned, to see that the rear wall had opened. The people who had been in other dining rooms were now seated in rows atop platform-like bleachers, but in chairs with backs. They would have a fine, clear view of the stage.

As room lights dimmed, people in the Phantom Caravan room turned chairs toward the stage. When the rustle died, the curtains parted, disclosing a large room decorated almost entirely in black except for a few hangings and small red and gold tables.

A tall, distinguished-looking black man wearing a turban and a white suit walked out on the right side of the stage and was picked up by a spotlight. He bowed to the audience, then spoke in a rich, deep voice.

“Salaam, guests of this house. I, Hassan of Aleppo, welcome you. You have dined, you are comfortable, you are in the proper mood for illusion, for illusion is the specialty of the house. And the master of the house is—Derek, the Magician!”

As the guests applauded, Hassan clapped his hands. There was a brilliant flash, a puff of smoke, and Derek stood there, bowing to the audience.

Barby whispered, “Where on earth did he come from?”

It was a terrific beginning, and Rick shared Barby’s wonderment. Derek had simply appeared like... like a magician. He was dressed in a black velvet dinner jacket with a white dress shirt and red tie.

“We live in a world of illusion,” Derek began, as the applause died, “where things are seldom exactly what they seem. Too often, when the illusion fades, the reality is painful. That is not the case within this house, because the illusions we create are to amuse and entertain you. Part of the fun for you will be to pierce our illusions, to discover how they were done. To help, I tell you that we will present three kinds: some are based on scientific principles, some on misdirection which causes the eye to perceive wrongly, and some—perhaps—on magic! Behold... illusion!”

The organ struck a weird chord. The lights went out and slowly returned to a very dim level. Mrs. Miller exclaimed, “Look! The wall!”

The Phantom Caravan was in motion! Rick saw and heard the soft sound of camel pads on sand, the coughing grunts of the beasts, the thud of horses’ hooves and their neighing. The caravan was a crowded line of animals and people moving toward the well, which glowed incandescent in the desert wastes. There was the slap of leather harness, the cries of people and children. The caravan moved past,

paused to circle the well, rushed on with a wind that could be felt, and merged with darkness.

The house lights flashed up full—and the mural was still there, unchanged. For a moment the audience sat still in stunned silence, then burst into thunderous applause, in which the Spindrifters joined with gusto. It was a terrific illusion.

Hartson Brant murmured, “Absolutely beautiful. The most skillful and imaginative use of black light and paints I’ve ever seen or heard about.”

“Simply fantastic,” Dr. Miller agreed, and the others echoed the two scientists. The whole audience was murmuring about the illusion.

“What a fabulous beginning,” Jan breathed.

“That’s the right word.” Rick knew the illusion had been created with ultraviolet and infrared light of several frequencies, the mural painted with special pigments which reacted to those frequencies as a timing circuit switched the lights off and on in a carefully planned sequence. But even knowing in principle how it was done, he was awed by the imagination and skill it represented. Anyway, he knew now what all the lights were for on that side of the ceiling.

On stage, Derek acknowledged the applause.

“I’m sure many of you recognized the name of the Phantom Caravan room from a verse in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.” He quoted the lines Jan had told them about earlier, and ended with, “And Lo! The Phantom Caravan has reached the Nothing it set out from. That, my guests, was a scientific illusion. Now let us turn from science to magic, for magic still exists.”

Hassan of Aleppo came forth and placed a small chest on a lacquered table. The Mongol who had accosted Barby appeared pushing a cabinet about eight feet tall and five feet square. It was mounted on wheels a foot in diameter. A third helper, dressed as a Hindu Swami, pushed a second cabinet from the other wing. The cabinets faced each other 25 feet apart. Hassan returned carrying a large frame, about four

feet wide by six feet high. He set it in the center of the stage, so that the audience could see it was covered with what looked like off-white paper.

“Magic is elaborate,” Derek stated. “It must be done by the rules of the master magicians, or it will not work. This bit of magic is based on another verse from Omar:

‘We are no other than a moving row
Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the sun-illumined lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show.’

“Suppose we could block out the illumination of sun or lantern for just a moment,” Derek asked, “wouldn’t we shadow-shapes vanish? After all, only light can throw a shadow. Let us see if what I suppose is true.”

Hassan carried the small chest to him, cover open. Derek reached inside, and drew out—nothing. He held up nothing with thumb and forefingers. There were laughs from the audience.

“I have here the rarest of fabrics, a veil of invisibility woven by witch doctors in a cavern in Africa’s Mountains of the Moon. The medicine men use the webs of the few spiders who spin invisible silk. Of course, you see nothing. The fabric is not visible.” He waved one hand. “Oops. I dropped one side, Hassan, help me to fold it again.”

Hassan groped around, then straightened up and the two folded the ‘invisible fabric’ as though folding a blanket. The audience laughed. Derek laughed, too. “There is nothing serious about magic, except to the magician. Let me explain how this works. The fabric has the property of letting light flow around it, as water in a stream flows around a rock. The light rays rejoin after passing the fabric. So the fabric and everything in it is invisible.”

He held out his hand. “Watch as I put my hand into a fold.” He groped for a moment as though finding the silk, then thrust his hand downward. The hand vanished! The audience gasped. Derek pulled his hand upward and it reappeared. Rick joined in the applause.

“I call your attention to three objects,” Derek went on. “Two cabinets and a screen.” The Mongol and Hindu opened cabinet doors on all four sides and swung the cabinets around to show they were empty, and that they were lined with red silk. “Note also that we have set the cabinets on high wheels so that you can see under them. We want you to be sure you are not being tricked.” He joined in the laughter.

“Now the screen. It is simply a frame containing Japanese rice paper, and in a moment two more will be brought out.” The Mongol brought one and placed it before the doorway of the left cabinet. The Hindu brought the third screen and stood waiting.

“Please think with me,” Derek requested. “If light curves around the veil of invisibility, no light reaches the inside. A person inside the veil is in total darkness. I will wrap myself in the veil and go from cabinet to cabinet, but because I will be blind, I must aim myself like an arrow. So that you may see my passage, I will go through the three rice paper screens. You will see them break open.”

The magician walked to the cabinet on the right, Hassan following, holding the “invisible veil” by his fingertips. “To help me stay on course,” Derek explained, “we place a sound at the door of the opposite cabinet. We use my travel alarm clock.”

The Mongol held it up for the audience to see.

Derek paused in the cabinet doorway. “I almost forgot. The veil does not cut off sound. I’ll say something while I’m crossing so you can keep track of me. What is it magicians are supposed to say? Who has a suggestion?”

Several persons in the audience shouted, “Abracadabra!”

“Very good,” Derek agreed. “I don’t know what it means, but I’ll say it. Are we ready?”

“Yes, Master.” Hassan handed him the ‘veil,’ and Derek went into the cabinet. The Mongol turned on the alarm and set the little clock at the foot of the left cabinet. The Hindu put the third screen in front of the cabinet occupied by Derek. The organ struck a sustained chord.

“Coming out-now!” Derek called.

The rice paper screen before the door burst open and Derek’s voice repeated “Abracadabra” to the middle screen, burst through it still repeating the word, and went through the final screen. In a moment he stepped from the cabinet, scooped up the alarm clock and bowed to thunderous applause.

Rick grinned at his family and friends. A great illusion if you didn’t know Derek was twins.

Derek—now David—stepped to center stage. “Magic,” he intoned. “The illusion of magic. But what is illusion and what is truth? Sometimes it’s hard to decide. In our religious heritage, as expressed in the words of Omar, man was made from clay by the great potter. Omar asks, ‘Who is the potter, pray, and who is the pot?’ Let us see what can be done with a special clay.”

The magician clapped his hands and the Hindu emerged from the wings rolling a cart on which the figure of a girl was lying. Karen! Or was it?

“For this illusion, I need a witness from the audience.” Derek walked to the edge of the stage, looked down into the audience, and then pointed. “You, sir. The gentleman with the deep tan. Will you be our witness?”

The man stood up and nodded, then went to the stairs at one side of the stage and joined Derek. Scotty exclaimed, “For cat’s sake, look who he picked!”

They all knew the witness, who, on request from Derek, faced the audience and announced his name. “My name is Edward Douglas. I am a captain of State Police, in charge of the Whiteside Barracks.” The audience applauded and laughed, clearly thinking that Derek had picked the worst kind of witness, a too-keen observer.

“Excellent, Captain. How many in the audience know the captain by sight?” Several hands went up besides those of the Spindrifters. “I congratulate you, my guests. You have a witness who will be your insurance against trickery. Will you examine this clay on the cart, Captain?”

The officer did so, touching the figure. "It's a dummy, the figure of a girl. It looks very real, but it's a dummy."

"Exactly, sir. However, the material is what magicians call surrogate flesh. It has the appearance of life, and the ability to live, under special circumstances."

The captain smiled. "Show me."

"As you say, sir. I will show you." Derek explained that bringing the figure to life sometimes caused unpleasant writhing and muscular contractions, and had the captain help strap the figure down, with padded straps across ankles, thighs, chest, and forehead. Now, the magician said, they needed a symbol, and he knew of none more appropriate than a white dove. He raised his hand and Hassan brought a long handled net, which Derek gave the captain for examination.

The captain handed the net back. "Just a net."

"Yes. Please observe." Derek ran back and forth across the stage twice, looking upward, then swung the net. There were gasps from the audience. A white dove was struggling in the mesh.

The magician soothed the bird and returned the net to Hassan. As the officer watched closely, he placed the bird in the upturned hand of the figure. Captain Douglas commented, "I see you placed the dove's legs between the dummy's fingers."

"You are observant, sir. I did so to prevent the dove from flying up at the wrong moment, simply so that it will not be harmed. Note that the bird has settled down and is content to remain in place."

Hassan wheeled in a small cart on which rested an aluminum globe mounted on a cylinder that rose from a square base. An electrical cord trailed behind. Rick exclaimed softly, "Hey! That's a small Van de Graaff generator."

"Exactly right," Dr. Miller agreed.

"This device," Derek explained, "generates very high

voltage. When we turn it on, it will fire a bolt of man-made lightening to this antenna.” He raised a tube into position at the head of the cart. “Have you noticed, Captain, that a wide metal strip runs all around the outer edge of the top? It will conduct our bolt of electricity all around the figure. Now, we must step back, you and I. Hassan, start the generator.”

The machine started up with a whine that built into a near-scream. Suddenly a spray of mist shot from the end of the antenna tube and a crackling arc of electricity flashed across the gap. The top of the cart seemed to explode with a white, blinding flash and a puff of white smoke arose. Hassan rolled the generator away.

The captain and the magician walked to the cart, and the expression on the officer’s face was sheer disbelief. He gasped, “She’s alive!” The audience gasped, too, because the figure’s breast was rising and falling as though breathing after great exertion.

Derek and the captain unstrapped the girl and helped her to her feet. She still held a white dove. As she stood upright, she tossed it into the air and it flew up into the stage arch.

“Her name is Karen,” the magician announced. He shook hands with the captain. “Thank you, sir, for your help.”

Shaking his head, Captain Douglas left the stage as applause continued for a long minute.

Jan leaned close to Rick and whispered, “Now we know why the figures weigh the same.”

Barby giggled. “The flash blinded the captain just long enough. No wonder he looked so dazed.”

Both girls had known instantly how the trick worked. To pivot that way, bringing Karen up and swinging the dummy down into the cart, the top had to be perfectly balanced. Rick thought the bright flare was probably magnesium, set off by the electric bolt. He suspected that Karen had held a different dove, and that the one Derek had ‘captured’ was safe inside the cart as Hassan rolled it offstage. Although he knew that the magician was now David, it was less confusing to think of whoever was on stage as Derek.

Jan seemed to have recovered, at least outwardly, from the flash of viciousness. Rick murmured, “Any feelings, Jan?”

“It just stopped a few minutes ago. I’m fine now, Rick.”

Rick thought it strange how the feelings came and went. The logical explanation was that the unknown presence was not trying to signal Jan continually—if there was any logic at all to the situation. He wondered if, when not transmitting to Jan, the presence was trying to communicate with someone else. Was the vicious one trying to reach her, too?

On stage, Derek and his assistants, including Karen now, went through a variety of illusions. Some were mechanical, using equipment, others were pure manipulation. Rick was sure Derek and David changed places two or three times. Then, as the male assistants cleared the stage of all except the two large cabinets, Derek stepped forward.

“One of the most difficult illusions is levitation, in which a person, entirely unsupported, rises into the air sustained only by the will or magic, if you prefer—of the magician. Karen, my dear, are you willing to trust yourself to my magic?”

“As you command, Master.”

“Very well. To begin, we must have a launching platform.” He clapped his hands. The Hindu and Hassan brought in a pair of ordinary ladderback chairs and set them down at center stage, back to back and about six feet apart. The Mongol brought a wooden plank, which he placed across the chair backs.

“For some reason I do not understand,” Derek said with a smile, “a simple plank makes the best platform and the chairs the best support. Anyway, you can tell we’re not resorting to trickery.” He joined in the laughter.

Derek picked up Karen, who caught his lapels and kissed him. He placed her on the plank. Hassan brought a long, white wand which Derek took and waved over the girl. “Up, Karen,” he commanded. She rose about two feet above the plank. Derek walked completely around her, the wand

outstretched so that it passed above her reclining body, then he walked around again, the wand held under her. The audience applauded. The wand had passed through all spaces that might have held any form of support—or so it seemed.

“Up, Karen,” Derek said again. The girl rose until she was above the level of his head, a bit more than six feet above the stage. “Now, Karen, please show our guests a bit of acrobatics.”

Rick had seen levitation tricks before, but he stared as Karen stretched out her arms, sat upright, and continued bending forward until her fingertips touched her toes. Then she threw herself backward in one graceful motion that sent her in a complete loop that made the audience gasp, then burst into prolonged applause.

Karen floated down to her straight-out position on the plank platform, and Derek stepped forward to make an announcement.

Then, as Rick would say later, “The lights went absolutely crazy!”

CHAPTER V

The Broken Illusion

Suddenly the stage was almost but not quite concealed by an intense flickering that confused vision and caused people to turn away. Rick had a blurred impression, as though seen through surging dark water, of Karen flying away and a dark form hurtling down. Derek seemed to be staggering backward and vanishing.

For a long moment the flickering continued to disturb and block vision, then the lights flashed to normal. The murmur in the audience rose to a near shout, then they broke into applause. Karen was gone! Where she had been on the plank was either one of the twins, or the David-Derek dummy.

Rick couldn't believe his eyes. There was no way such a switch could have taken place... was there? And Derek seemed stunned. He hesitated, then moved slowly forward from the left cabinet, seemingly more bewildered than Captain Douglas had been... or was it part of the act?

The magician waited until the applause died, then stretched his arms wide. "My friends, we have had a slight mishap. What you see on the plank before you is my tailor's dummy, the one on which my costumes are fitted. We call him Sam, and he's a nuisance, because he's always trying to get into the act. Apparently he was caught by a little leakage in the magic force, and that same leakage caused Karen to vanish. Now we must get her back." Derek turned to the right wing and called, "Hassan, Tombo, your help please."

Hassan and the Mongol appeared. "We must clear the stage. Tombo, if you will please take Sam, Hassan and I will remove the platform."

Organ music swelled while the stage was fully cleared, even the cabinets rolled away. Derek and Hassan returned from the wings. The magician carried an armload of golden silk, and the assistant a large ring of aluminum, like a hula

hoop. Derek shook out the silk, and he and Hassan clipped it to the hoop, creating a tall cylinder of cloth.

“Now we must try to bring Karen back to us,” Derek announced. “If we are successful, she will appear in this cocoon of silk. Our problem is that sound does not carry well in the realm of the invisible, and I must ask your help. All of you. Will you help me?”

There was a chorus of agreement and applause, in which the Spindrifters joined.

“Thank you. What we must do is shout her name, Karen, all together, on the count of three.” The cylinder was held high by Hassan with both hands, and by Derek with one. He used the other to lead the count.

“One. Two. Three!”

There was a concerted shout of KAREN!

Derek and Hassan dropped the hoop, and Karen stood there, erect, the folds of silk at her feet.

Applause continued for long minutes as Karen and Hassan left Derek alone on the stage. Finally he held up his hands for silence, and when the audience quieted, he smiled and bowed.

“Guests of the House of Illusion, we leave it to your good judgment. What was real and what was not? You may believe me when I tell you that even I do not always know. In the words of Omar Khayyam, ‘A hair perhaps divides the false and true.’ We hope you will visit our house again.”

Derek held out his hand and Karen ran to join him. They took several bows, then Derek called forth the three assistants for their share of applause. The curtain closed and the show was over.

Rick sat up straight, feeling as though he had just awakened. He stared at the faces of his family and friends. “I just don’t believe they could do some of those things.”

Scotty shook his head. “Neither do I. That levitation and the substitution were the most baffling things I’ve ever seen in a magic show.”

“Pretty incredible,” Hartson Brant agreed. “But isn’t that the purpose of magic, to baffle and bewilder?”

Jan’s soft voice answered him. “Usually, sir. But that last trick... something went wrong, really wrong. I wish we could go to see them. Karen was badly shaken. I could tell.”

Mrs. Miller asked, “How do you know, dear?”

“I could feel it, Mom.”

Scotty stood up. “Let’s go backstage. I know where they’ll be, and if Jan is right—and I’ll bet she is—they’ll be glad to see us.”

“In a moment.” Hartson Brant reached into his pocket. “I know we’re guests, but there’s our waiter to take care of.” He put down a substantial tip. “All right, Scotty. Lead the way.”

Scotty led the group to the staff lounge in back of the stage, knocked on the door, then opened it and stuck his head in. “Care for a bit of company?”

“Of course.” Derek opened the door wide. “Please come in, everyone.”

Jan hurried to Karen. “Are you all right? I felt something strange... I was scared. I knew you were very frightened.”

Karen rose and put her arm around the girl. “It’s all right now, Jan. I was terrified for a few moments because I didn’t know what was happening to me.”

Rick stared. “Do you mean the switch of you and the dummy wasn’t part of the act?”

Derek laughed without humor. “I wish it had been. But something, or somebody took over control. Please, won’t you all sit down? I recognize Dr. Brant because Rick looks so much like him. How do you do? Scotty, how about introducing everyone?”

“Delighted to meet you,” Dr. Brant said. “Are you Derek or David?”

“I’m Derek, sir.”

Scotty introduced Mrs. Brant and the Millers, then Derek introduced his helpers. Hassan of Aleppo was Archy

Sullivan, the stage manager of whom the twins had spoken earlier. Tombo the Mongol was Tom Burns, and the Hindu Swami was Joe Melano.

After the visitors refused the offer of refreshments and thanked and congratulated the magicians on a great performance, with special praise for the mural, Derek explained, “We had one bit where we planned to use the replica—the dummy, as you call it—but we had to scrub because we couldn’t find it. Archy, Tom, and Joe looked everywhere, but it was just gone.”

“Could you see where it appeared from?” Scotty asked.

“No. The lights went wild and we couldn’t see much of anything. When Karen vanished and the replica appeared on the plank I was shocked silly. I staggered back and bumped into the cabinet, and Dave whispered, ‘Karen’s here with me. Improvise, quick. We’ll go below and you can bring her from center one.’ That’s a stage position.”

David picked up the tale. “I was waiting in the left cabinet when the stage blurred. I tried to make out what was happening, but my eyes were all confused by the flickering. I heard someone behind me, and stepped out of the back of the cabinet and there was Karen. She fell into my arms and whispered that she was all right, then began to sob, from shock and fright.”

“No wonder,” Barby said angrily.

“What was the blur?” Dr. Miller asked. “We saw a fast shimmer that effectively blocked the view, although I could faintly see motion. I couldn’t make out what was happening.”

“I thought I saw Karen fly away,” Rick told them, “and it seemed as though something dark descended. It must have been the replica.”

Derek agreed. “That’s about all I saw, too. The shimmer was completely disorienting. But to answer your question, Dr. Miller, we have no idea what caused the shimmer.”

“What was supposed to happen, Dave?” Scotty asked.

“Derek would levitate Karen over to the right cabinet,

explain that he was going to make an invisible crossing while Karen floated overhead, then I would step out and catch her just as the harness released.”

“But the cabinet was empty,” Mrs. Brant protested. “We could see the entire inside of both cabinets.”

David smiled. “Thank you, Ma’am. The cabinets look honest. Of course they’re not. You’d be surprised at how much room you can’t see.”

“You haven’t told us what happened to you, Karen,” Jan reminded.

“What Rick saw was what actually happened. I was swung to the rear, behind the left cabinet, and lowered to the floor. The harness released and I was left standing there.”

“That harness must be a true marvel of engineering,” Dr. Miller commented. “I can’t even imagine how Karen could go through those maneuvers without bumping into wires or cables.”

“Nor can I,” Dr. Brant agreed.

“It’s pretty tricky,” Derek smiled. “Dave made some brilliant design changes in an earlier type of apparatus. I should also add that he designed the Phantom Caravan mural and lighting system. Karen supervised the artist.”

Karen spoke up. “Scotty has written and told us a great deal about the Spindrift scientists, and if ever anyone needed scientific help, it’s the Camerons.”

“And you shall have whatever help we can give,” Hartson Brant assured her.

“Tomorrow we’ll make a start right after Thanksgiving dinner. Right now I suspect you could use some well-earned rest.”

Jan hugged Karen. “While our dads work on the shimmer and the switch, we’ll get Rick and Scotty on the job here. This house has a mystery that must be solved, and you watch them do it”

After witnessing the last act of the show, Rick was far from sure that he and Scotty could do anything but stand

with mouths open like a pair of dopes. He warned, "Don't promise too much, Jan."

"Of course I won't." She gave him a radiant smile. "I've only promised that you'll find the answers, that's all."

"Let's go home," Scotty pleaded. "I feel confusion coming on."

Rick said feelingly, "And to that, ditto!"

As Scotty led the way back to the main entrance, Jan moved close to Rick and whispered, "It's back. It started while we were on our way to the lounge to see the Camerons."

Barby demanded, "What are you two whispering about?"

"We were wondering whether you're going to feed that little hamster to Dismal or keep it as a pet," Rick told her, grinning.

"Dismal would probably adopt it," Barby retorted. "Anyway, I've decided to leave it so Mr. Tombo, the Mongol, can give it to some other golden girl."

About four o'clock the next day, fire crackled in the fireplace of the big Brant library, a comfortable room lined with books and oak paneling that Hartson Brant used as a study. The family and guests were well fed, and Rick hoped, in the mood for some useful conversation.

Karen sat on the leather couch, flanked by Barby and Jan. The girls had taken to her like an older sister, and Rick could understand why. She had a quality of serenity, combined with an intuitive understanding of people much like Jan's.

Derek, easily identified by a bow tie of red dots on a blue background, was seated on a camel saddle near the fire. David, in a bow tie of blue dots on a maroon background, was in a leather armchair that was Rick's favorite. The Millers and Mrs. Brant shared another couch. Hartson Brant was in his chair behind the desk. Scotty was stretched at full length in front of the fire, while Rick was perched on another camel saddle. The two saddles were souvenirs of a trip to

Egypt.

Hartson Brant broke into the buzz of conversation with a question. “Who’s going to lead the talk about our investigation? I’d prefer to listen for a bit.”

Scotty rolled over and pointed at Rick. “How about Old Man Curiosity himself? I could hear him bouncing around in bed all night trying to figure out what had happened.”

“Did you figure it out, son?” Hartson Brant asked.

Rick shook his head. “I went around in tight circles.”

“Too bad,” Dr. Miller observed smiling. “I was sure Spindrift’s leading advocate of the deductive detective method would have the answers by today. Never mind. I’m sure you’ll have the solution in a short time.”

Rick didn’t mind being teased by Jan’s dad. They were good friends. He grinned.

“Then suppose we follow Scotty’s suggestion?” Mrs. Miller offered. “Let Rick lead.”

The group applauded, and Rick smiled, pleased. “Okay. I’ll start. So far, we have two mysteries, and they’re surely connected somehow. The first is Jan’s strange feeling about the Mirella estate, which Karen shares, at least to some extent. Let’s take that first one.”

Rick ticked off the points. “Item one: Jan had a sudden desire to go into the estate. She had never been in there, and hadn’t even been past it for months. She had a feeling that someone, or something, was trying to communicate with her, even that it needed her. At least part of the impression was that of an old man. Jan’s impression was of friendliness and warmth until last night. Then, just before the show started, she had a strong, upsetting feeling of something hateful and vicious in addition to the nice feeling. She said it was not in the house, but close by.”

Rick smiled at Jan, then looked around at the others. “How useful is a feeling? Or even two different ones? Believe me, if it were anyone but Jan, I wouldn’t take this seriously. But when Jan says she feels something, you can be sure it’s

exactly as she describes it.”

Mrs. Brant said quietly, “We all know Jan, at least those of us on Spindrift. No one on this island would disagree with you.”

“Nor would we Camerons,” Karen agreed. “But wouldn’t scientists reject such non-specific mental impressions?”

“I’m naturally biased in favor of my daughter,” Dr. Miller replied, “but apart from her feelings, I’m quite prepared to keep an open mind.”

“So am I,” Hartson Brant added. “I agree with Rick.”

Rick looked at Karen. “Tell us about your feelings.”

“Mine are not intense like Jan’s, but I agree there’s a presence in the house. I’ve sensed the presence, and I’ve had a feeling of being watched sometimes when there was no one else in the room. I feel that someone—or something we don’t know about, is in the house with us.”

“A ghost?” Mrs. Miller asked.

Karen gave a little shrug. “I don’t know. Are there such things? I only know there’s some sort of presence. How about you, Jan?”

Jan agreed with Karen. “A presence, yes. But a ghost? I don’t think so.”

“Karen, where were you when you felt someone watching?” Rick queried. “Was the feeling restricted to any particular places?”

Karen frowned thoughtfully. “Now that you ask, I’d say yes. I’ve felt it mostly in the upstairs office, and in the Phantom Caravan room.”

“All right. Now, point two: The feeling Jan gets switches on and off. It wasn’t there when we arrived, and it turned on just as we exited the doors without keys. Then it cut off again after the bad jolt Jan got, and didn’t come on again until we were on the way to the lounge after the show. Jan, are you sure that the bad stuff wasn’t in the house?”

“I’m pretty sure. It’s really hard to be precise, but it

seemed farther away.”

“So what that leaves us, is two separate presences, a friendly one in the house and a nasty one close by. Has anyone else noticed anything unusual?”

“Yes,” David answered. “We lost a night watchman about ten days ago. He said his dog was going crazy bit by bit, and he was getting too nervous over hearing the house’s heart beat.”

The Spindrifters stared. Rick asked, “What did he mean?”

“I don’t know. We asked the new man after a couple of nights and he’d heard a regular deep thump-THUMP. He assumed it was the house furnace running, maybe with a bent blower shaft, or maybe a sump pump was operating.”

“Tell us how the watchman works,” Scotty requested.

“We got a man with a trained dog. He patrols inside the fence, using the gate house as his main station. He’s supposed to make rounds once an hour from the time we close until the housekeeping staff gets there in the morning.”

“He doesn’t go in the house?” Barby asked.

“No. Between rounds he stays in the gate house.”

Rick asked, “Did you go through the house thoroughly when you all moved in?”

“Room by room,” David replied. “We didn’t miss a thing, and there was no sign of human occupancy. The film of dust in the unused rooms would have shown footprints. There were none. Now the entire third floor is locked up and so are unused rooms on the second floor.”

Rick looked around. “Anything else from anyone? Okay, then let’s sum up this part. Jan and Karen agree on a presence in the house, and Jan felt a second presence, apparently not in the house. That’s a puzzle, because there’s no other structure near the house. I’ve been wondering if what she felt is some bad person hanging around on the outside, and if that’s so, maybe the dog ought to be turned loose to hunt around.”

Rick looked at the twins for a reply. “Is there anything to

cause the thumping sound the watchmen heard?”

Derek shook his head. “Nothing of ours. The furnace is quiet and so is the kitchen equipment. We haven’t heard the thumping ourselves.”

“Okay, so we have three major unknowns: two presences and an unknown thumping sound.” Rick took a deep breath. “I wish those three were the only mysteries, but there’s a bigger one. How is the friendly presence communicating with Jan? And how did she feel the blast from the vicious one?”

Hartson Brant smiled. “Good for you, Rick. I hadn’t intended to bring that up, because it gets us into really deep water. We don’t have a lot of time today because the Camerons have to get back, so I suggest we leave that particular mystery for another time. Except for one question: Why did you decide the friendly presence is deliberately trying to communicate with Jan instead of just—let’s say—broadcasting the message to just anyone who can receive?”

“It’s because the feeling turns off and on. It isn’t a steady feeling. Maybe I’m jumping too far for that conclusion, but it’s what came to mind.”

“Fine, son. Maybe it is too big a jump. We’ll have to wait and see. Anything else on the presences?”

“No, Dad. And that leads us into the weird events of last night. Any ideas?”

David gave a wry laugh. “Only one. We’ve agreed it couldn’t have happened.”

Rick grinned sympathetically. “If you want witnesses, there are eight from Spindrift who will agree.”

“Thank you. But, if it did happen, some unknown person overrode our controls from some unknown place. Joe—the helper who dresses as a Hindu—had just lowered Karen to the plank, and he swears it wasn’t he, and our controls didn’t move in his hands. But someone lifted Karen and swung her back to the cabinet, then released the harness and reeled the cable in.”

“Is there another control panel that you know about?”

“No, Rick. But doesn’t all this tie in with the presences Jan and Karen feel? One of those presences must have controls somewhere. I doubt that a ghost could manipulate physical gear.”

Jan asked, “Where did the male replica come from?”

Derek picked up the discussion. “Rick and I both had the clue. We thought we saw a dark figure descend. Now, have you ever noticed that, when we hunt for something, we almost never look up? We don’t expect to find what we’re looking for on top of things or hung in the air. I’m sure the replica was high overhead in some shadowy area.”

“And what that means,” David added, “is there’s another cable and winch arrangement we didn’t know about. And Heaven knows what else might be up there.”

“But didn’t you rig your own equipment overhead?” Scotty queried.

“Sure. But the light isn’t great up there, and we were fully focused on what we were doing, because we can’t afford any gear problems. Karen’s safety depends on perfect apparatus. Anyway, we did not make a thorough examination of the overhead.”

“Perhaps the mysterious presence was watching from above with controls in his hands,” Rick suggested.

Barby shuddered. “What a spooky idea!”

“Maybe I should take a shotgun on stage tonight and do a little hunting.” Derek shrugged. “Or maybe we should leave our unknown controller alone. That switch last night was pretty effective from the audience viewpoint.”

Rick paused for a sip of coffee and made a face, it was cold. “Okay. Somewhere there’s another control panel and someone to work it and whoever worked it caused the shimmer. But how? Dad?”

“I’ve thought about it.” The scientist looked at Dr. Miller. “I’m sure Walter has, too. In principle, the shimmer would not be hard to produce. For example, here’s a light that

operates on alternating current at sixty cycles per second.” He pointed at the bulb in his desk lamp. “Suppose we took a disc and cut it so that the slits and the material were evenly spaced. By rotating that disc in front of the bulb we would produce a shimmer, either fast or slow, depending on the speed of rotation.”

“A stroboscopic effect,” Dr. Miller contributed. “By synchronizing the rotation of the disc with the sixty cycle current, in theory you could produce any effect from full light to darkness.”

“Just for an experiment,” Hartson Brant suggested, “Let’s all look at this lamp and blink our eyes just as fast as we can.” After a moment he said, “I’m sure you all saw a slow version of the shimmer. If we could blink fast enough, we would come close to duplicating last night’s effect. Enough speed is easy to get in front of a light, either with a rotating disc or a fast shutter. Was your spotlight manned?”

David answered. “No. We use fixed spots controlled from the light panel backstage. It’s done very smoothly and the audience doesn’t seem to notice that the spot doesn’t move. Except for the footlights, all the spots are where the ceiling drops in front of the stage.”

“Can the lights be reached easily?” Scotty asked.

David shook his head. “We had to rent a special ladder to get up there.”

“Then let’s sum up this part,” Rick said. “Somewhere close to the stage is some kind of control panel that can override the one backstage. In some fashion, discs or shutters were brought into play to create the shimmer. To make the switch, whoever was in control had to be able to see the stage clearly. That whoever has to be somewhere, and that means secret rooms or passages. Also, the places from which stage action could be controlled are pretty limited, either to high overhead or around the lights at the front of the ceiling. Anyone want to add anything?”

“You’ve summed it up well,” Derek agreed, and the others echoed him. “Believe me, as soon as we get through the next

three shows, which will bring us to Monday, we'll go over that house like ants at a picnic."

"And we'll find whoever is communicating with Jan," Karen added.

Jan wrinkled her nose at Rick. "I didn't expect you to find the answer in a day, even if my dad joked that he did. But you'll find it. Have you any idea how to take it from here?"

"Yes. Scotty and I have some work to do."

Scotty groaned. "On a full stomach?"

"You can do it sitting down. Listen, everyone, please."

The group was getting up, preparing to go on to other activities or perhaps a post-dinner nap.

Rick was serious. "We've got a real problem. I say we, because those of us at Spindrifft have taken a hand. First, we can't be sure the presences are friendly. I know Jan feels good about one, but there's that other one, the vicious thing. And I was thinking about it, and I remembered that, in nature, there are many predators who lure or charm their victims, even plants that smell and taste good to trap insects. So I'm saying that we take nothing for granted."

"Good thinking," Dr. Miller murmured.

"Also, the Camerons can't be sure from now on that some joker isn't going to override their controls, and I'm suggesting that they take extra precautions."

"You can be sure we will," Derek said positively.

"The most important thing," Rick finished, "is to somehow get to the bottom of this—without anyone getting hurt!"

CHAPTER VI

A Secret Talent

The Camerons prepared to leave with obvious reluctance. “We got ready this morning,” Karen sighed, “but there are a lot of last-minute details, including makeup. We really have to go.”

“Will you try the levitation act again tonight?” Scotty asked anxiously.

“No way!” Derek shook his head. “We can’t afford any bits which could be over-ridden. We’re substituting a finish where we have complete control.”

“That’s safest,” Jan agreed. “Anyway, Barby and I will bring you luck tonight. We feel lucky.”

“We’ll bring the girls to the landing after the show,” David promised. “Of course you boys are welcome, too.”

“I invited myself,” Jan said with more than a trace of defiance.

Rick knew the defiance was directed at him, because his face must have shown he didn’t like the idea of the girls going to the Mirella estate without Scotty and him.

“I don’t like it,” Scotty said bluntly.

Barby suggested, “How about this? You two go do whatever you’re planning, then join us. What are you going to do?”

“Jerry’s getting out the paper while Duke Barrows is taking the weekend off, so we know he’ll be at the *Record*. We’re going to see what the paper has about the estate in the files.”

“How long will it take?”

Rick shrugged. “Maybe an hour, maybe less. It depends on how much there is in the *Record* morgue.”

“The timing would be all right,” Scotty agreed. “But let’s be sure of one thing. You will not wander around the house,

and you will stay with Karen and the twins. Do you promise?”

Jan nodded, and Barby said, “We do. Of course we can’t be with them on the stage.”

“No.” Derek agreed. “But you can be down front where we can keep an eye on you. The boys are right. Until this is settled, none of us should be alone in the house.”

Within a short time the group was at Whiteside Landing. The Camerons and the girls headed north to the estate, while Rick and Scotty went into Whiteside to the *Morning Record* office. Jerry Webster, one of their closest friends, opened the door at their knock.

“Going to spend Thanksgiving night with a poor but honest working man, hey? What’s up?”

“We want some dope on the old Mirella place,” Scotty told him. “You know the Camerons are friends of mine from Marine Corps days. They’d like to know more about the place they leased, so we promised to look it up, if you’ll let us.”

The reporter polished his glasses thoughtfully. “So you decide to do it on Thanksgiving night when you’re full of turkey and trimmings and would like nothing better than a long nap. Better think up a better one than that, Scotty.”

“Better, better,” Rick said, grinning. “Seriously, some odd things have been happening. We want to see if there’s anything in the history of the place that might help explain them. Tell him, Scotty. I’ll start on the files.”

Scotty filled Jerry in, then joined Rick as the reporter went back to work on the next morning’s slim edition. It took almost as long as Rick had estimated, then the three gathered at a table to examine what Rick and Scotty had found.

Rick summed up. “The Mirella place was built by a man named Anthony Wayland forty-one years ago. He was a bachelor with only two known relatives, a sister and her son. He entertained a lot. Big, lavish parties. His guests were mostly New York people, not many locals. Then Wayland vanished from the scene, and we have no explanation in

these clips.”

“But there’s more,” Scotty said. “About four years ago—we don’t know how long after Wayland disappeared—the estate got tied up in litigation. It was claimed by Wayland’s nephew, Carl Cleary, the son of his only sister, who had died some time before. A second claim was filed by the nephew’s wife on the grounds that she was married to him when the original claim was made. Apparently they’ve been fighting in court ever since. Not much, is it? Also, there’s nothing about why it’s called the Mirella estate when a man named Wayland built it.”

“Funny there’s nothing in the files about Wayland dropping out,” Rick said.

Jerry shook his head. “Not necessarily. It may have happened somewhere else, whatever it was, and the news never got to us. We only get clips from a few papers, and if it didn’t appear in those, we wouldn’t have it.”

Rick held up a clipping. “Here’s the most recent item from a Newark paper. The People’s Bank, as trustee for the estate—it was named by the court—put the property up for commercial lease to pay taxes.”

“How can we get more dope?” Scotty asked.

“Call the bank,” Jerry suggested.

“Good idea,” Rick agreed. “Only I wish we could get the information without waiting until tomorrow. The manager of the trust department is quoted in the clip... here it is. John O. Barnett.”

Jerry motioned to the shelf. “Newark bank, Newark directory.”

Scotty jumped to it and began the search. Finally, he found the listing in a Newark suburb. “Got it. Ready?”

Rick picked up the phone and dialed as Scotty read off the number. Three rings and a woman answered. Rick asked for Mr. Barnett. When the trust manager got on the phone, Rick told him it was the Whiteside *Morning Record* calling. “I’m sorry to trouble you at home, sir, but you may be able to

help us with some information for the morning edition.”

“Glad to answer your questions. What do you want to know?”

“We have nothing in our files about Mr. Anthony Wayland, the builder of the Mirella estate that you’ve just leased. What can you tell us?”

Jotting down notes, Rick listened, asking an occasional question. His excitement grew. Jerry and Scotty, sensing that he had something important, moved in close. When the manager finished, Rick asked, “Sir, are you certain about his death?”

“Quite. When we took over the estate on the court’s order, Mr. Wayland was alive. When he died, the court sent us a copy of the death certificate.”

“That seems pretty definite. One more question, please. Can you tell us why the place is called the Mirella estate? ... Thank you very much, Mr. Barnett.”

He hung up and turned to his friends, grinning widely. “Listen to this and start making your own notes, Jerry. There’s a story, all right. First, he knew nothing about the name, so we drew blank on that one.”

Rick consulted his notes, not that he was apt to forget! “Anthony Wayland went insane about five years ago and was sent to a mental institution in upstate New York. His nephew signed the commitment papers, and Wayland’s own psychiatrist testified against him and said he was a menace to society. Wayland died in the sanitarium about six months ago, so the nephew has started all over again in probate court. This time he’ll probably win with no trouble.”

Rick laughed with delight. “Hold on to your hats. Wayland made his money as an entertainer. He was nationally famous—as Mysto, Master of Illusion. The Marvelous Mysto, greater even than Blackstone or Thurston, the greatest of them all. No wonder the stage was equipped!”

The boys watched the closing act from the rear of the Phantom Caravan room. Derek placed Karen in a large, completely transparent plastic box mounted on an open

platform so everything was visible. He threw a silken blanket over the box and immediately pulled it away. Karen was gone! Pausing only for applause, he tossed the blanket over the box once more, then pulled it away. Tom, the Mongol, rose from the box and bowed, to thunderous applause. Derek threw the silken blanket down on the floor, pulled the pistol from his pocket, and fired at it. The blanket rose and Karen stepped out of the folds.

Rick watched, mouth agape. There was no place Karen could have gone from the box and no place Tom could have come from. The whole thing was impossible. Except that it had happened. A really terrific illusion with only seconds between the steps.

As they walked down among the departing guests and joined the girls, Rick said, "I'm beginning to believe in real magic. How on earth could they do that trick?"

Scotty grinned. "Rapidly and carefully."

Rick turned immediately to Jan. "How did it go?"

"No vicious gremlins tonight, Rick. Only the nice feeling."

They reached the edge of the stage. Rick turned and looked up. The forward wall of the ceiling, where it dropped into the wide channel, was a mass of lights, and the wall itself was scored in a double triangle pattern.

"See anything interesting?" Barby asked.

"No, only that there could be a dozen doors or openings up there from which someone could look down if there were room between the ceiling and the next floor. Know something? The most likely place for a secret room from which the stage could be controlled is between that dropped ceiling and the floor above."

"Let's suggest that to the Camerons," Scotty proposed. "Then maybe we can all go up to the third floor and look around, just to see if there are any architectural anomalies."

"Good idea," Rick agreed.

Jan turned and met Rick's eyes squarely. "Come on, Rick. What did you find out tonight? He's holding out on us,

Barby, stalling with his speculations about hidden rooms.”

“Being psychic again?” Rick teased.

“Well, I’ve heard about how the cat looked when it swallowed the canary, and I’ll bet it didn’t look any more smug than you do!”

“Better improve your poker face,” Scotty jibed.

“It won’t help,” Barby retorted. “He might be able to keep a secret from you and me, but Jan can read him easier than see Spot run.”

“Too true,” Rick sighed. “Jan’s right. Let’s go backstage and we’ll tell you all at one time.”

The Camerons were in the staff lounge having a post-show cup of coffee, and the three helpers were just walking in with more coffee and a box of doughnuts. For a few moments the magicians and the girls chatted about how well the show had gone. Then Karen spoke up.

“Rick and Scotty were doing research,” she reminded the others, “and from their expressions, I think they found something.”

“We did,” Scotty said, smiling. “Tell them, buddy.”

“Okay.” Rick paused dramatically and dropped his bombshell. “The Mirella was built by Anthony Wayland, the Marvelous Mysto!”

For a moment there was shocked silence, then Archy, alias Hassan of Aleppo, said reverently, “Mysto the Master, the greatest of all! And we’re actually working in his house, on his stage!”

Derek whistled. “No wonder the stage was perfect.”

David added, “He’s a legend. Even the great ones, like Blackstone and Thurston, called him ‘the magician’s magician’”

“He pulled stunts no one ever duplicated,” Joe, the Hindu Swami, offered. “Like vanishing the elephant.”

“How did Mysto vanish an elephant?” Barby asked.

“There was a gazebo over a lake, at the end of a pier. You

could see the water under it, and you could see right through it with only supporting columns that held up the roof to block the view. Mysto had the elephant brought out, then he just closed a curtain around the inside of the gazebo for a few minutes. When he opened the curtain, the elephant was gone. It didn't go into the lake, and it sure couldn't fly, but it wasn't there any more. A squirrel would have been visible, much less an elephant."

"But how could he do it?" Barby wanted to know.

Joe shrugged. "No one knows."

"That's not the only mystery," Tom the part-time Mongol offered. "He once vanished the mayor of San Francisco. He invited the mayor to help demonstrate teleportation, and put the mayor in a cabinet—one like ours—then said some mumbo jumbo. When he opened the cabinet the mayor was gone. Well, the mayor had a police guard with him, and the officer got pretty excited. He ransacked the cabinet, and then actually pulled his gun on Mysto and was about to arrest him when the mayor came walking down the aisle, looking like he'd seen a ghost. He said he'd gone into the cabinet, then the door opened and an assistant helped him step out—right in the middle of the theater lobby. He had no idea how he got there."

"He was stooging for Mysto," Archy suggested.

Tom shook his head. "Not a chance. The local reporters put the mayor through the hoops, but he stuck to his story. He honestly didn't know what had happened."

"That's incredible," Barby breathed. "Can such things really happen?"

"Only with Mysto," Joe assured her.

"Were they really tricks," Jan asked, smiling, "or real magic?"

Joe grinned. "I've never seen real magic. Believe me, real magic would scare me to death. Mysto pulled tricks, but that's all they were—great tricks."

Rick asked the question that had been uppermost in his

mind during the reminiscences. “Could Mysto have pulled the switch of the dummy with Karen and caused the shimmer?”

Derek and David sat upright and looked at each other, then at their helpers. The helpers nodded. “Yes,” Derek said finally. “I don’t know exactly how, but he pulled tricks even more complicated. But you said Mysto is dead, didn’t you?”

“I’m going to check,” David moved to the lounge extension and dialed. “Hello, Cynthia? This is David Cameron. Is Irv at home?... yes, I’ll wait. Oh, how are you, Irv? David. Listen, do you recall an item about Mysto dying? ... Okay. I’ll hang on.”

He turned to the group in the lounge. “Irving Reisman. He keeps a file for *Stage Annual*. His office is at home, so if he has anything on Mysto he can put his hands on it quickly.”

Derek observed, “Mysto would be an old man now, if he were still alive. Funny how he dropped out of sight.”

David spoke again. “Still here, Irv. What did you find?” He listened, thanked his informant, and hung up. “That settles it. *Variety* carried an item about six months ago, and *Stage Annual* had it in the last edition. Anthony Wayland died in a New York sanitarium after being in retirement for several years. Does that check, Rick and Scotty?”

“It checks,” Scotty said, and Rick nodded.

“Did you find anything on why he was in the sanitarium?” Karen asked.

Rick hated to say it, but they had to know. “Mysto was put away because he was insane, as a threat to society.”

There was a shocked silence, then Joe spoke up. “I find that hard to believe. I saw Mysto at close range for about six weeks just before he retired. I was filling in for one of his people who had broken a hip when a line parted. Off stage, he was a quiet, humorous guy who really liked people. He just wasn’t the type to go bananas, believe me.”

“Unfortunately, his own psychiatrist testified against him,” Scotty told them. “And it was his nephew, his sole

surviving relative, who had him committed.” He coughed apologetically. “Hey, this may sound a little weird coming from me instead of one of the two dreamers.” He grinned at Jan and Rick. “But was anything ever said about Mysto returning from the dead? I mean, Houdini promised to come back, didn’t he? Did Mysto?”

All hands looked at each other. Finally, Joe—who apparently had known him best—said, “I never heard anything like that about him.”

Karen laughed, “Scotty, are you suggesting that Mysto’s ghost is haunting us?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Scotty assured her. “I’m just asking.”

“It isn’t a ghost,” Jan said positively. “Don’t ask me how I know, because I don’t know how I know. Does that sound confused? Anyway, it’s not a ghost.”

“I agree with Jan,” Karen said. “So what do we do now?”

Barby had a sensible suggestion. “Let’s all go home and get some sleep. It’s late.”

David rose. “Smartest suggestion we’ve had all evening. Our act may look easy from out front, but it’s wearing. I’ll bet my child bride is tired.”

“You win,” Karen said. “Let’s you and me show the kids out while the others clean up.”

Barby asked curiously, “Were you really a child bride, Karen?”

Karen smiled. “That’s just David’s joke, because he’s two whole years older than I am. He was an elderly type of twenty when we were married.”

“The only reason she married me is because she knew I’d tell her how the tricks were done and she knew Derek wouldn’t,” David joked as the group walked to the entrance hall.

After thanks and goodnights, the Spindrift four started home, Scotty driving. While Scotty and Barby exchanged speculations in the front seat about how some of the tricks

were done, Rick turned to Jan. "Tell me how it was tonight."

"The same as before. He's still in the house. I didn't feel that bad thing, but my friend was there."

"Your friend?"

"Yes, Rick. While we were watching the show, I had the clear impression of an old man who needs help of some kind, a very nice old man. There was such a feeling of... of wisdom, I guess you'd say. And there was warmth that I'm sure is directed at me."

Rick thought about it for a moment. "Jan, have you ever had such feelings from other people? The same kind of warmth?"

"Yes," Jan didn't hesitate. "I feel it from people at Spindrift. I felt it that first night when we landed. I knew you weren't just taking us into your home because the government asked you and you couldn't very well refuse. You were genuinely glad to have us, and within a day or two it was as though we were almost in our own home."

"But wasn't that because all of us in the Brant household were acting pleased about your arrival because we were pleased? We could tell at once that you were our kind of people."

"Of course that was a lot," Jan agreed. "You were all so wonderfully nice that we couldn't help feeling wanted." She paused for a long moment, then asked, "Barby and Scotty, are you listening?"

"Yes, Jan. Do you mind our tuning in?" Barby asked.

"No. I want you to hear this. Maybe it will help you to understand why I'm so interested... no, that's not the word... why I'm so deeply involved in the feelings I get from the estate."

She took a deep breath. "All my life I've been able to sense most other people's feelings. Not everyone's, and not always with the same intensity. There are people now and then that I can't read at all, and others so open to me that I know practically all they're feeling. It doesn't depend on

whether I like or know the people, either. I feel emotions from complete strangers.”

“You’ve never even hinted at this before,” Barby said in wonder. “I thought we’d talked about everything either of us ever knew. I think it’s a wonderful talent to have, Jan.”

“It isn’t that I wanted to keep a secret from my dearest friends, it’s just something that I don’t talk about. When I was little I talked about it and told people what they were feeling, or tried to be sympathetic, but when I grew older, I realized people would look at me funny-like, and some would be angry. Once I told a boy in sixth grade. He had a crush on me, and I liked him. I could feel him change almost instantly, and he said that I was cute, but a freak. When I cried to my mother, she explained that many people—maybe even most people—fear what they can’t understand, and it would be better if I kept it to myself, except with her and dad. So I have, ever since. I would have told the three of you, but it never came up.”

“It must be a useful talent to have,” Scotty observed.

Rick took her hand. “And painful sometimes,” he said gently. He knew from the quick pressure of Jan’s hand that she was grateful for that bit of insight.

“Yes, Scotty. Useful, and sometimes painful.”

“Can you control it at all?” Rick asked.

“Some. I’ve learned to push bad feelings or painful ones from strangers to the back of my mind, sort of, but I can’t shut them off completely. The talent or gift, whatever you call it—is useful because I usually know when people are sincere, and I can tell their reactions to me or what I’m saying. It’s why I could fit in so well into Spindrift.”

“You would have fit just as well even without the talent,” Barby stated.

“I think so, too, but it would have taken longer because I would have been shy and unsure. But it took just about zero time, for my folks, too.”

Jan laughed. “The second week we were there I was in my

folks' room, and mom said to dad, 'Isn't it wonderful? We feel as though we've known the Brants for years and years. How about you, dear?' I told them I now had a friend who was even closer to me than the sister I'd always wanted, and Scotty was already like a dear older brother."

Barby said mischievously, "You didn't mention Rick."

"Oh, they asked about Rick." Jan chuckled. "I told them we hadn't had a chance to play a game yet, but I thought I'd finally found someone I could beat at chess."

Rick groaned loudly. "That's terrible."

"Next time I checkmate you, just throw your king at me," Jan offered.

"I will, inside a tomato! Seriously Jan. When people are hurting, you can't help feeling it? That must be very hard."

"Especially when it's people I know. But airports are what I hate most. People are separating, some are hurrying home because of sickness or death in the family, businessmen are worried about failing, or losing, and lots are terribly afraid of flying but can't get there any other way. It all presses in on me so I want to run and scream. Any crowd is usually rough, but airports are the worst. Kids, I'm glad I told you, but let's talk about something else now."

"In a minute." Rick hesitated. "I know what you receive isn't a message in the usual sense, but can we call it that? What I'd like to know is whether you've ever felt messages at a distance before, as you did from the highway the first time."

"No, Rick. That's why it's so unusual. If I concentrate, I think I can even feel it just a little now, although it's hard to separate feelings sometimes. Another odd thing is that it gets stronger and clearer every time I go to the Mirella estate."

Jan squeezed Rick's hand, then leaned forward and touched Scotty and then Barby on the cheek. "I was pretty sure how you would react when I told you about my weird side, only I was scared, too, a little. But after I told you, what I felt was strong interest and loving affection just as usual. I wish you all had my odd talent so you'd know how I feel

about the three of you.”

“I think we do know. At least I do,” Barby told her.

“So do I,” Scotty swung the car toward Whiteside Landing.

“I know you’ll be fond of me so long as you keep beating me at chess.” Rick kept a tight grip on her hand. “Before we leave the subject, my dad told me to talk this over with Dr. Winston. Can we tell him about this talent of yours?”

“Of course. I don’t mind close friends knowing when it would be helpful. But let’s do like the government does and keep it need-to-know.”

Scotty laughed. “I’ve been thinking that it’s no wonder Jan knows you better than you know yourself, ol’ buddy.”

Barby agreed. “We’ve always known she was usually a jump ahead of you, but we didn’t know how until tonight, because this business of an old man in the Mirella estate came up. Who is he, Jan?”

Jan chuckled. “Rick knows.”

“Do I?” Rick was feeling a bit dazed at the implications of Jan’s hidden talent.

“Of course you do. What old man would be in that house?”

The name popped out unbidden. “Anthony Wayland, alias Mysto. But he’s dead.”

“Does the report of his death make sense? Or do the data fit Mysto better than any other possibilities?”

“Come on, Rick,” Scotty urged as he swung into a parking slot. “You know she’s right.”

“Okay, let’s spell it out. Jan is sure it’s an old man, and Mysto is old. We have the fantastic switch last night, which Mysto could have made. Mysto built the house. Now, if someone is in the house, it has to be in hidden rooms or passages, and who would know about them better than the man who built the place? Who could move around the house unseen, even steal the dummy, and override the control

panel?”

The others exclaimed, “Mysto!”

Rick laughed. “Four votes for Mysto. Okay, we have a new hypothesis: Mysto lives. But that leaves us with a handful of big questions. If it’s Mysto, why doesn’t he show himself? Whose death was reported? Jan says part of the feeling is one of need, but what does he need her for? If Mysto wants to remain hidden, why did he switch Karen and the dummy? What’s the bad thing Jan has felt?”

“And we have to remember this,” Scotty added. “Mysto was locked up for being dangerously insane.”

Jan stated positively, “The old man in that house is not insane. He’s someone I’d like to know, a kind, wise person.”

Rick had a thought. “Could the bad feeling be a crazy Mysto and the nice feeling a different old man?”

“No, Rick. The bad feeling isn’t in the house. It’s a puzzle because I can’t tell where it is, except nearby.”

“We’ll sleep on it,” Rick said as they walked to the boat. “Maybe tomorrow will bring more light.”

CHAPTER VII

Blood on the Floor

Rick did no midnight pondering about the questions, or about Jan's unusual talent, instead he fell at once into a deep sleep. He came out of it at the sound of his mother's voice calling from downstairs. He glanced groggily at his alarm clock. It was not yet seven. "What is it?" he called.

"It's Derek. He wants you or Scotty."

Rick was out of bed in an instant, shivering in the sudden chill. He hurried to close his window and saw that Scotty was already coming through the connecting door, pulling on a robe.

"Something must have happened during the night," Scotty guessed. "I'll go downstairs. You take the phone on the landing."

"I thought you should know," Derek reported grimly when they reached the phones. "We've called Captain Douglas of the State Police. The cleaning staff came in this morning and found blood on the kitchen floor!"

"No body?" Scotty asked quickly.

"Nothing but a small puddle and some streaks of blood. The police are on their way. Want to come up?"

"You bet," Rick exclaimed. "Be there shortly."

They were out of the house in fifteen minutes, running for the boat landing, when Jan came through the orchard and hurried to catch up. Rick stopped short at the sight of her. The girl's dark eyes were deeply shadowed and she looked terribly upset.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. "What's wrong, Jan?"

She was close to tears. "I had awful nightmares, but now I can't remember what they were. I couldn't stay in bed any longer, so I came to see if Barby is up. Where are you going?"

"To the mainland." Rick dodged the question.

“Go wake up Barby,” Scotty suggested. “Have breakfast with her and you’ll feel better.”

Her eyes locked with Rick’s. “You’re hiding something. Why would you go to Whiteside this early?”

If he didn’t tell her, imagination might make it worse. “Something happened last night. Derek phoned to say they found blood on the kitchen floor. The state troopers are on the way.”

He expected a demand to be taken along, and was prepared to be stubborn, but Jan only nodded. “I knew it was bad. He’s hurt, but he’s still alive. I’d know if he weren’t. I won’t ask to go, but will you call as soon as you find out anything? I’ll be with Barby.”

They promised, and ran.

The House of Illusion was swarming with police officers when they arrived. Under Captain Douglas’ direction the police searched the house room by room, from basement to attic. Technicians tapped walls and listened with electronic stethoscopes, and others dusted the kitchen for finger prints.

By noontime, the police were through. Captain Douglas summed up as the boys and the twins sat with him in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

“We’ve drawn a blank. No sign of blood except here in the kitchen. The watchman saw nothing, but claims to have heard an occasional thumping sound, regular like a heartbeat. We found nothing that could make such a noise. What the watchman didn’t know, and I guess no one else did, is there’s a cut in the fence through which people on the north side, almost fully screened by vines, can come and go.”

“How about secret rooms?” Rick asked.

“From what you and the Camerons have told us, there must be some, but there are no obvious oddities of construction, and listening for hollow spaces got us nowhere. Short of tearing holes in the walls, I don’t know what more we can do without the original house plans. I’m surprised you and Scotty haven’t dug them out, Rick.”

“We thought about it,” Rick admitted, “but there just

hasn't been time. The record office won't be open until Monday."

"I guess that's right," the captain agreed. "But suppose you give it a try? If you need any official backing, call me."

"We'll do it. Think the blood will tell us anything?"

"Only if it was a human being that was wounded, and his or her blood type. If there's any tissue, it may give us an idea of where the wound was. The fingerprints won't help. Any bright ideas, anyone?"

There were none.

"I can put a man on guard here, if you want," the captain offered. "Frankly, I'm sure it wouldn't do any good. His presence would prevent any happenings. What's the scientific principle, Rick?"

"The very process of observation or measurement may disturb the phenomenon being examined so that you get false results. Something like that."

"That's it. Now I'm not assuming necessarily that someone just wandered in last night."

"Maybe someone stayed behind after the crowd left," David suggested, "then found other thieves had stayed with the same idea."

"Or maybe your unknown intruder bumped into a thief, or maybe none of these ideas fit. I'm stumped until we get more information."

"Maybe we ought to design a man trap for the kitchen," Scotty proposed with a grin.

Rick changed the subject, taking advantage of the captain's presence to ask, "How do you go about finding if a man really is dead six months after the death certificate was signed?"

The officer's eyebrows went up. "Oh-ho! When Rick Brant asks a question like that, he has something in mind. What man, Rick?"

"Anthony Wayland. The one who built this house."

"Old Mysto, eh?" At the surprised looks, the captain

grinned. "Sure, I knew him. I used to patrol this beat. Is he dead or alive?"

"That's what we're not sure of. He died in a sanitarium six months ago, according to the bank that controls the estate," Rick explained. "There were also articles in *Variety* and *Stage Annual*. But we're wondering. A lot of the strange things happening here could be explained more easily if he isn't dead. How can we find out?"

The captain took off his uniform cap and ruffled his hair. "Hot in here. The only sure way is to get a court order for disinterment and have a pathologist verify the body. But you have only a guess, no evidence, so that won't work. What I can do is query the police in the town where he died, and ask them to locate the doctor who signed the death certificate. Want me to?"

"We'd appreciate it," Derek said. "This business is getting us down. Anything that will help Rick and Scotty solve our mystery will put us ahead."

"Okay. Write down the dope, Rick. Place, dates, the works. "I'll make a phone call to the State Police barracks nearest the sanitarium as soon as I get back. It shouldn't take long. If we're lucky, I'll phone you."

The chef and his assistants were already at work. Derek and David headed backstage to prepare for the night's show. Rick wrote down the information in the captain's notebook, then he and Scotty walked out to the entrance hall and were on the verge of leaving when Rick saw a heavy-set bald man at the doorway which led to the doors without keys.

"Stand by a minute, Scotty. I see a man I want to talk to." He had recognized Ah Boon, the Buddhist monk.

The monk was just sitting down at an entrance table that would be occupied by the cloak room girl in the evening. He was in ordinary daytime clothes, a glen plaid suit with white shirt and tie, and was just opening the attache case.

Rick walked over and said, grinning, "I didn't know monks wore glen plaid suits, Mr. Ah Boon."

"Only monks who can afford one, Mr. Brant." The

pseudo-monk had an infectious smile. He took out of the case a flat, rectangular black box on which were a series of buttons. A wire was neatly coiled on its top. It was obviously a control box. There seemed to be only one object that would need the monk's control—actually, four objects—the doors without keys.

“I'm an electronics technician, Mr. Ah Boon,” Rick offered. “May I be of service?”

“Thank you, but it isn't necessary. I suspect it's simply a loose connection that gave me a little difficulty last evening.”

Derek came by and paused at the foot of the stairway. “Hi, Dick. I see you've met my friend Rick Brant.”

“We met the other evening,” Rick told him.

“Well, let me introduce you properly. Richard Auburn, this is Richard Brant.”

Rick chuckled. “Ah Boon-Auburn. Close. Have you ever been to Bangkok?”

Over his shoulder, as he headed for the stairs, Derek said, “It's hard to name a place Dick hasn't been. You two have a lot in common.”

“Actually, I have. You?”

“Not yet. The closest I've been is Hong Kong. You make a convincing monk, though. I've seen Buddhist monks in China and Tibet.”

“Thank you. I hope you and your party enjoyed going through my doors.”

“We did, but you baffled me. Obviously, someone had us in view, someone who had been briefed about us. I suspect that was you.”

The “Monk” had removed the cover of his black box and was checking connections inside. “Yes, but all in fun. Karen had given me a rundown on your party and a few others. For people the Camerons don't know, I just use my own best guesses. Actually, I'm pretty good at it.”

“I'll bet you are,” Rick agreed. “But Karen couldn't have guessed Jan and I would be inside at the same time, so the

words must have been yours. May I ask a question?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You said Jan and I would make our dreams come true together. Karen couldn’t have suggested that. What made you say it?”

Ah Boon, alias Richard Auburn, gave him an understanding smile. “You heard me say I’m good at quick analysis. I saw how you were looking at that very pretty girl when she wasn’t looking at you, and I saw how she was looking at you when you weren’t looking at her. So I decided a bit of prophecy was in order.”

Rick swallowed. “Thank you, Mr. Auburn, very much. I hope you’re as good a prophet as you are an analyst. Would it be impertinent to ask how you spoke to us?”

“Not since you’re a friend of the Camerons, and I know you won’t give me away. My real specialty is ventriloquism, as you’ll see if you come to the show in two weeks. A ventriloquist can subvocalize, like this: ‘enter the doors without keys.’” Rick barely heard the last five words, even from three feet away.

“Actually, I said that one louder than normal so you could hear. With a throat microphone, inside the ivory Buddha, and my little black box keyed to receiver-speakers, I can talk to people in the tunnel even with others waiting. For most, I push a button and a tape goes on.”

“I’ll be sure to catch your ventriloquism act,” Rick assured him. “And if I don’t do better than I’m doing at the moment, I might even volunteer to sit on your knee as dummy.”

The pseudo-monk offered his hand. “Good luck, Mr. Brant. If I need help with my electronics I’ll give Spindrift a call.” He returned his attention to the control box.

Rick walked to where Scotty was waiting. “Just had a nice conversation with a Buddhist monk,” he reported. He gave Scotty the gist of it. “You know, Karen must have briefed the whole staff about the Spindrift group, complete with pictures. After *you* briefed *her*, pal!”

Scotty laughed. “Just part of the service. No extra charge.”

Rick had called home and talked with Barby and Jan, so they knew there was really no news. “Let’s get back to Spindrift,” he said. “I want to put some time in on my new machine.”

For the rest of the day Rick worked on his project while Scotty, Jan and Barby wandered in and out of his room, alternately helping and slowing him up. After dinner, Rick went back to work while the three settled down to Chinese checkers.

The phone rang shortly after nine and Scotty answered. He called to Rick to get on another extension. “It’s the captain.”

The captain had two pieces of information. “Human blood, boys, type O. No other information. I queried the New York State Police and they found the doctor who signed the death certificate. He’s the physician who is called to the sanitarium to treat any sick people. The residents are all psychiatrists and psychologists. Anyway, the doctor told the police he couldn’t understand why there was any question. He knew old Mr. Wayland and personally examined him after death. Sounds air-tight, Rick.”

The boys thanked the officer, then reported to the girls.

“That settles it,” Barby said sadly. “It was such a good idea, too.”

Jan disagreed. “I don’t think it settles it. With anyone else it would, but remember who this man was!”

Rick’s eyes met Scotty’s.

“No ordinary man,” Scotty agreed.

“No,” Rick finished. “This was Mysto, the Master of Illusion!”

CHAPTER VIII

The Infrared Indians

Barby was cleaning her room the following morning when Rick stuck his head in the door. “Hey, Barb, have you seen my old football helmet?”

She looked at her brother in surprise. “What for? Are you going to hunt Mysto by butting the walls?”

“It would be about as useful as anything we’ve done so far. Have you seen it?”

“Try the attic stairs. I think I saw it with some stuff Mother was planning to store in the attic.”

“Thanks, Sis. I’ll look.”

Barby followed him as he went to the stairs and opened the door to the attic. The helmet wasn’t on the stairs, but he found it just inside the attic itself. He carried it into his room, Barby close on his heels.

Scotty was at Rick’s workbench, removing an odd-looking searchlight from the top of a motion picture camera.

Barby watched for a moment, then said suddenly, “Now I get it. You two are going hunting tonight at the Mirella estate!”

“Don’t you think it’s about time?” Scotty asked. “When deductive methods fail, take direct action. That’s my motto.”

“Uh-huh. And you’re going to use the infrared unit off the camera. But what’s Rick doing with the helmet?”

“Don’t ask me, Golden Girl. Inquire of thy boy genius brother.”

“Any more of that Golden Girl stuff and I’ll put Crazy Glue on your chair seat. Come on, Rick. What’s the helmet for?”

“Protection, if Mysto is armed with a baseball bat,” Rick said, grinning.

“Are you asking for the glue treatment, too?”

“Seriously, Sis, I’m going to mount the radiometer on it. I’d planned it as a surprise for you, but you’ll have to take it without the surprise, because I need a mount right now that will leave both hands free.”

“Golly, big brother, that’s great. Then, when I wear it, I’ll have both hands free for the infrared camera! Thanks real much.”

Both the unit on which Scotty was working and Rick’s new project allowed night vision by infrared radiation, but the two worked on different principles. The camera unit was one Rick had adapted from a military surplus sniper scope, designed originally for soldiers to use at night as a sight on a rifle. A small search-light projected a beam of infrared light, the invisible light that falls below ordinary visible light in the electromagnetic spectrum. An object struck by the beam was illuminated in “black light” which could be seen through the rifle scope as a greenish visible light. The scope through which the soldier sighted contained an image tube as a converter, but with his dad’s help, Rick had found a special glass that served the same purpose, and mounted it as lenses in a pair of sun glasses.

The new infrared radiometer on which Rick worked was solely a receiving unit. Its operation depended on the fact that nearly everything emits infrared radiation to some extent. In simplest terms, infrared is heat radiation, emitted by any object with a degree of warmth.

Because different objects have different capacities to retain heat, the radiometer could distinguish between them. For example, flowers in water in a bowl would keep heat longer than an empty bowl. Wooden objects hold heat much longer than metal ones, and so on.

The radiometer itself was a small aluminum rectangular cake tin, its bottom covered with black polka dots, the infrared sensors. Inside the tin, the filling consisted of myriad hairlike wires, each connected to one of the black dots at one end, and with several of its fellow wires to a terminal at the other. Rick had been making soldered

connections between the terminals and a small, flat image tube.

He had bought a sheet of aluminum of the kind sold by hardware stores for do-it-yourselfers, a description that certainly fit Rick. From it he fashioned a rectangular collar about six inches wide. The radiometer sensor dish fitted into one end and the image tube into the other.

Another purchase was quarter-inch aluminum rod, from which he was to fashion a suspension system so the combined units could be hung on the football helmet with the image tube the proper distance from his face. The remaining purchase was a cylinder of clear plastic, just big enough in diameter to contain nine-volt batteries.

As Rick told Barby, his intention was to surprise her with the helmet-mounted radiometer. The gadget was his project, but Barby was planning to use it in a project of her own. A family of raccoons had moved into the grove on the back side of Spindrift, and Barby intended to keep a log of their activities, with photos for her biology class. Because the appealing little masked animals are largely nocturnal, observation required ability to watch in darkness. In Rick's radiometer, the warm-blooded animals would shine like animated moons. The helmet would enable Barby to use both hands to operate a camera loaded with infrared film and an IR flashgun.

Barby watched for a bit, then asked, "Will it bother you if Jan and I watch? She's still upset about that blood on the floor, and she'll feel better if we're all together."

"You can both help."

"Good. I'll finish cleaning my room, then go get Jan. We'll come over in a while."

Rick finished the connections, made a temporary battery hookup, and threw the toggle switch. The tube screen lit up. It was working. Now for the battery containers and the mount. But before he started cutting tubing, Rick paused to see how Scotty was doing. His pal was making a hookup, too, connecting a battery pack to the infrared searchlight.

“All okay?”

“It checks out. How’s the radiometer?”

“Seems all right. We’ll try it in the closet when I get the thing mounted and the batteries installed.”

“The only thing that worries me,” Scotty began, “is that the tube is pretty fragile. If we get into a roughup...”

“Hold it!” Rick had heard a voice that he recognized. “That’s Winston, just leaving the library. I want to catch him.” He hurried to the head of the stairs and called, “Dr. Winston? Can you spare Scotty and me a few minutes, or are you in a rush?”

Dr. Parnell Winston turned and came up the stairs. “I’m never in that much of a rush, Rick. What’s up?”

Winston, a big, black-haired man with keen blue eyes and furry eyebrows, had gone deeply into the study of the human brain in his cybernetics work. He was an international authority on interactive control systems, like those that controlled intricate operations by computer networks. He was deep into the new field of bionics, which combined biology and electronics.

“Take my chair, sir,” Rick offered. “It’s pretty comfortable.” He motioned to the old leather chair he had wired for maximum comfort and convenience. Button switches on the arm controlled the angle of back and footrest, gave the exact illumination wanted for reading or TV watching, and operated the TV set in the opposite wall. Rick was forever adding or revising controls.

Winston tried the chair, adjusted it to suit, and warned, “I could go to sleep in this.”

Scotty smiled. “You won’t want to sleep when you hear about Jan.”

The scientist sat upright. “What?”

Rick knew the Winstons were very fond of Jan, as they were of Barby and of Scotty and him, for that matter.

“It isn’t anything bad,” Rick hastened to assure the scientist. “But it’s interesting, and we need your help.”

With Scotty adding comments, he gave Winston a full report on Jan's strange call to the Mirella estate by what seemed to be an old man who needed her, the growing realization that the data pointed mostly to Anthony Wayland, the famous magician, and details of the mysterious switch during the performance. He added that the message, if it could be called that, grew stronger and clearer every time Jan went to the estate, and that Jan could feel it at a distance.

After describing the day's events following the blood on the floor incident, Rick finished, "Jan had terrible nightmares last night while things were happening at the estate. She wasn't at all surprised when we told her about the blood, even though she couldn't remember details of the nightmares."

Winston was clearly fascinated by the recital. As he started to speak, Rick said, "One more thing. Jan told us something about herself a couple of nights ago, and said she didn't mind her friends knowing on a need-to-know basis, and she agreed that you need to know." He reported in careful detail what Jan had told them about her unusual gift, or talent.

"It must be a kind of extra-sensory perception, don't you think?" Scotty asked.

"Yes, clearly. But not one of the usual kinds. It isn't telepathy, because it isn't truly a message that carries symbols or images. It isn't precognition..."

"Like Rick's hunches," Scotty suggested.

Winston chuckled. "Those famous hunches! Actually, I think most of them have a different cause. Rick is doing a subconscious integration of information of which he is not consciously aware. The result is a subconscious conclusion which reaches the conscious level as a hunch. But, I must admit, there may be times when actual precognition plays a part."

"On the day when Jan felt the urge to go into the estate, I was here alone," Rick told him. "I felt uneasy and couldn't

seem to get any work done. I walked over to the window and let my mind go as blank as it gets—it seems impossible for me to go really blank—and the first thought that came to mind was the girls. The phone rang a minute later with Barby calling for me to come in a hurry.”

“You certainly couldn’t have had any subconscious information about that,” Winston agreed. “But most people would reject it as coincidence. Maybe it was—and maybe it wasn’t.”

“You’re saying that ESP is very hard to prove,” Scotty commented.

“Yes, very. The reason is because it’s what the writer Charles Fort called a ‘wild talent,’ which not even the owner can control to any extent. So it’s not dependably reproducible in the laboratory, which is what science requires. The whole basis of proof of ESP is built on statistics. In working with cards, how many hits in so many runs, and so on. Mostly the statistics show results just barely better than chance average—that is, the average result of people guessing about the same things.”

“It certainly wouldn’t be easy to prove Jan’s kind,” Rick said thoughtfully. “It would be very difficult even to define anything statistical to measure.”

“We’re pretty ignorant about ESP,” Winston told them. “No one has come up with a useful hypothesis about the mechanism, and no one has tried to define the boundaries. What I mean is, we can’t say where ESP starts or stops or how it works, assuming there is such a thing.”

“It exists for Jan,” Rick said flatly.

“Yes, and it wouldn’t occur to me to doubt her intelligence or her interpretation of what she feels any more than it would occur to you, Rick. Do you know what empathy is?”

“Yes, sir. It’s the ability to put yourself in the other person’s moccasins, so to speak. That is, to feel the way they feel... hey! That’s exactly what happens to Jan!”

Winston nodded. “That’s it. The ability to share in

another person's feelings. So far as I know, this kind of ESP hasn't been documented to any extent, and I've only seen it named a few times. But we have an obvious example of it right here. Jan is an empath."

"Empath," Scotty repeated. "Someone who has extrasensory empathy, sharing feelings or emotions without direct contact. Is that it?"

"I think so. The transfer of messages isn't symbols—pictures or words—as it would be with telepathy. Instead it's a transfer of emotions. Boys, this is fascinating. I wonder if Jan would work with me in a few experiments... but of course she would."

"I'd wait until this business is settled," Rick said. "She's pretty upset."

"Of course. I didn't mean now."

Rick asked, "Do you think there's any danger to Jan in this?"

Winston thought it over. "Not from the empathy itself, unless the emotions she's sensing get so terribly intense that she can't handle it. The solution then is to run. Put her in a car and put distance between her and the source. If there's real physical danger, I assume you two will be prepared to handle it."

The scientist rose. "Thanks for consulting me, Rick and Scotty, and please keep me informed of any development, day or night. This may be more than a confusing mystery. It may lead us into a pretty confusing branch of science."

As they resumed work, Scotty murmured, "Empath. So that's what Jan is. A pretty handy talent, I'd say, even if it does get rough sometimes."

"You have it, too," Rick pointed out. "Between the three of you I can't keep anything to myself."

Scotty grinned. "That's different. Jan feels what you feel, but Barby and I just figure it out because we know how you react and think. That's acute observation, not empathy. And don't forget, Jan's a very sharp observer, too, and she knows

you as well as Barby and I do.”

“I guess that’s right. Hand me that hammer, will you?”

When Barby and Jan arrived, the boys reported their talk with Winston.

“Empath,” Jan repeated. “Well, at least we have a name for it. Please understand, I’ve been hiding it so long I’m not really comfortable talking about it. What can we do to help with the IR gadgets?”

Rick handed her the football helmet. “Screwdrivers and wrenches right here. If you’ll take the face mask off completely, I’ll start making the suspension.”

Scotty handed Barby some marked sections of rod. “Here’s a hacksaw. We’re making a chest hanger for the light. If you cut these for me, I’ll measure for the straps.”

When the work was finished, just before dinner time, Scotty could hang the IR searchlight in the middle of his chest, secured with a strap around his neck and one around his chest to keep it from swaying. The battery pack hung below the light. To complete the system, Scotty needed only the special glasses.

Rick’s device looked like something taken from an alien spaceman. The radiometer projected out nearly a foot in front of his face, suspended from the helmet by aluminum rods. The image tube was about six inches from his eyes. Across the top of the helmet a row of plastic battery holders ran like a weird futuristic Huron Indian scalp lock. The final touch was a skirt of fabric that would prevent the light of the tube from shining out so that it could be seen by others.

“Let’s try it,” Rick invited. The four crowded into his closet among an assortment of clothes, sports gear, electronic apparatus and parts, and a rack of audio tapes.

Rick put it on and snapped the toggle switch. When the greenish glow came he adjusted the power control and focus on the side of the collar. Three faces leaped into view, glowing green and slightly out of focus. It would do very well, for both him and Barby.

Jan was next. Rick fitted the helmet over her head, and she exclaimed. “Last time I saw something like this was in a horror movie. It’s great, Rick.”

Barby tried it. “Boy! I can hardly wait to borrow your still camera and go after those raccoons. Is that as sharp as the focus can be?”

“Afraid so,” Rick admitted. “I’ll try to improve it, but with this design, it’s about as good as I can get.”

“Tonight’s the night,” Scotty told them when he had tried the helmet. “The Infrared Indians ride right after the show!”

CHAPTER IX

Footsteps in the Night

Rick's back itched. He longed to scratch it, but the itch had lodged in that aggravating spot just out of reach. He yearned for a sharp-edged door frame or something similar on which to rub, but no impromptu scratching post he could reach was at hand.

The Mirella house was alive. He could sense its tiny shifts, the settling of an older house that produces little snaps and squeaks in the dark hours as the house cools to night time temperature. More important, he could hear the house's heart beat. The sound wasn't loud, and he wasn't sure whether it was an actual sound or just a vibration. He felt rather than heard it, a rhythmic thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP that had continued for about fifteen minutes.

Rick had tried to identify the throbbing thumping but had given up. It wasn't the furnace, because heating plants are on-and-off affairs, regulated by their thermostats. It wasn't a water pump, because even in houses with wells, the pump went on only when the water level in the storage tank was lowered, and there was no sound of running water.

The thumping wasn't especially disturbing. It didn't seem to carry any menace, nor did the volume or speed increase. He couldn't imagine what caused it. The sound—much like a heartbeat—had started about twenty minutes after the Camerons had closed the door and driven home.

The throbbing stopped. Rick suspected it would start again after the operators, or time clock, or built-in control finished doing whatever the pause allowed. He turned his head, swinging the helmet with its radiometer. He saw the upstairs entrance hall as a not-quite-sharply focused still-life of chairs, end tables, vases, unlit lamps, and flowers. The contrasts were actually pretty good. He could make out a lot of detail in a vase full of flowers, and in the carving on a chair back.

Operating according to a plan worked out by phone with Derek, Rick and Scotty had gone to the House of Illusion as though to see the show. In fact, they had seen the show, and afterwards had casually drifted up to the gentlemen's lounge, where they waited until the show crowd had gone.

By pre-arrangement, Tom the Mongol had taken their big zipper bag—actually Scotty's Marine parachute bag—and deposited it in a linen closet in the second floor hallway. One of the car hops had taken their car to a service station a few hundred yards down the highway and parked it, so a car left at the house would not attract attention. The watchman had been told that two friends of the Camerons would be in the house until very late.

After the last guest departed, the boys got out of their suit jackets and put on turtleneck sweaters. Scotty hooked up his infrared light and Rick put on the helmet. Scotty took up station in a dark corner at the bottom of the staircase, from which he could command the front door, the entrance hall, and the doorways into the various rooms. Rick was just outside the door of the men's lounge. He could see the entire second floor hallway and doorways to the rooms.

The radiometer was working quite well. The house thermostat had automatically turned down to its low night position, so the furnace wasn't operating at the moment. Rick could see the changes as various objects gave off heat accumulated during the day. It was as though he saw his surroundings through a slight greenish haze.

He waited as patiently as he could, knowing that Scotty was probably doing much better. The big ex-Marine was a compact bundle of energy, but when the time came to wait he could discipline himself into perfect quiet, and wait with the enduring patience of an Indian.

A flicker of light attracted Rick's attention and he tensed, his hand stealing to his belt and his only weapon, a length of heavy, solid wood cut from a broken axe handle. A tiny ball of light ran halfway across his field of vision and stopped. What was it? How could a light move by itself?

His hand moved slowly up to the focusing knob. He

reached it and adjusted the vision tube, and had to smother a chuckle. A mouse was preening his whiskers in the hallway. Rick had become adjusted to the relatively faint images of the objects around him and had forgotten that, in contrast, a warm living thing would shine like a lit bulb.

The mouse moved on, pursuing his own mousy business, and Rick relaxed as much as he could with his back itching almost unbearably. The thump-THUMP began again. Machinery of some sort, but what kind, and where, and for what? If Mysto was the presence in the house, did he have a machine for some strange purpose in his secret hideaway? Was he making something? Creating something wild and wonderful? Did he need Jan for something to do with the machine? The whole strange business of some strange person—even a master magician—summoning Jan, puzzled and disturbed Rick a lot. He tensed. Had he heard a sound somewhere down the hall toward the office? He held his breath, listening with every bit of concentration. The sound was not repeated, and even the thumping ceased.

A half hour passed. There were sounds, but he knew they were normal ones, of the kind he could hear at home in the dark night watches, an intermittent symphony of small crackings and poppings made by boards, flooring, and other structural members as they cooled. He was cooling, too, because of inactivity. His warm sweater was no longer enough.

From off to his right he heard a faint scrape and stood very still. Something told him this was neither mouse nor house noise. If it was a person, he must be coming up the stairs. That meant he had passed Scotty.

Rick slid his hand to the club in his belt and tensed, ready to move. He didn't intend to tackle whoever it was. That wasn't the plan. He wanted to find out where the unknown occupant went, then he and Scotty together would confront him in his hideaway.

There was the tiniest of whispers as a foot scuffed on the carpeting, then brightness flooded the image tube as a figure moved across his line of vision, heading for the office. Rick

moved, too, keeping on the balls of his feet. The figure opened the office door, stepped inside, and closed it again. Rick turned swiftly. Another bright figure was coming up the stairs, and the brilliant gleam of light on its chest told him it was Scotty. They met on the landing and moved toward the office, careful to make no sound.

Someone else was less careful! From within the office they heard the thump of running feet. They were at the door in quick strides and Rick turned the knob. The door wouldn't open!

From inside came a yell. "If I get my hands on him, I'll kill him!"

Feet pounded, then there was silence.

Scotty put his shoulder to the door and pushed as Rick turned the knob. The door opened so quickly Rick almost fell inside. He stepped in and surveyed the interior with a quick turn of his head. There was no one in the room!

For the next half hour the two surveyed every inch of the room, searching for the secret passageway. Because they hoped to keep their presence a secret, they worked in silence. At last they had to give up. By unspoken agreement, they retrieved their coats from the linen closet, made their way downstairs and out the main entrance, which locked behind them.

"A presence in the house, huh?" The two hiked rapidly down the long driveway. "It was more like a squad. How many people? I'd say at least three."

Scotty agreed. "Same here. I saw only one. Did you see the others?"

"No, but I heard someone running, and then the yell. That's two, because the yeller was standing still, but the thump of the footsteps was fading. Now, you don't yell something like 'I'll kill him' to yourself. That's why I figure three."

"Could be. Did you get a good look at the man who came up the stairs?"

“No. He was too bright in the tube and I didn’t take time to adjust because I was moving. How about you?”

“He walked right into my beam coming out a door just past the Buddhist Monk’s doorway. He wasn’t Jan’s old man, that’s for sure. He was young, about six feet three or four, weight too much for his height. I’d guess about two-fifty pounds. He looked mean.”

“Maybe he’s the hater Jan felt.”

“He sure looked like he could be. And maybe the one he was yelling about was Jan’s old man.”

“If there were three, two had to come into the office through a secret passage, right? Does this mean Jan’s old man has a friend who uses the passage with him? Or did the old man and the third man meet from opposite directions? And where did the big guy come from and how did he get into the house?”

Scotty thought about it. “I’ll tell you a likely possibility. The guy I saw and the third man were trying to trap the old man between them, but he was too fast for them. The strangers must have come through the back door.”

“Now that’s an interesting idea,” Rick said slowly. “Wouldn’t it mean the bad guys knew, somehow, when the old man would be in the passage so they could enter the house and trip him?”

“I guess it would. Anyway, we’ve no way of knowing. Hello, here’s the guard and his pooch.”

The dog was a handsome German Shepherd who walked toward them stiff-legged while the guard held the leash. “Howdy. You’re the boss’ friends?”

“That’s us,” Scotty said.

The guard as eyeing Rick’s strange-looking helmet with interest. Having a huge bump of curiosity himself, Rick was sympathetic. “It’s an infrared radiometer,” he explained. “Lets you see in the dark.”

“Honest?”

“Sure. Tell your dog we’re friends and you can try it.” Rick

helped him put it on. “Walk into the darkness in back of the gate house.”

The guard did so and returned in a moment with a whistle. “Hey, that’s great. Wish I had one of those. My eyes in the dark have to be Kosciusko’s nose unless there’s moonlight.” He patted the dog.

Rick stared. “You named your dog for the great Polish patriot?”

The guard thrust out his hand. “Shake. Do you know how many people have never heard of Kosciusko? Most of them. Millions. And all he did was to save our revolution by turning all those Yankee farmers into real soldiers! Washington never could have won without him. I’m named for him. Thaddeus. Last name’s Palakowski.”

“Glad to meet you. I’m Rick Brant and this is Don Scott. *Do you know there’s a statue of Kosciusko right in front of the White House, in Lafayette Park?*”

“You bet I do! I’ve been there with my lodge to put a wreath on that statue, and don’t forget Pulaski the other Polish hero. He helped, too.”

“Good for you,” Scotty approved. “Some of us know the Poles were a warrior race. Those two Revolutionary heroes deserve a lot more credit than we give them. Listen, have you been hearing a thump-thumping?”

“Sure. It’s going now. You can feel it in the gate house, but not outside. Come on in and you can see for yourself.”

The boys went into the gate house for the first time. It was well equipped, with a tiny kitchen alcove, comfortable chairs, and a couch. Standing still and listening, the thump-THUMP was there, unheard but felt, although much less than in the house.

“Any idea what it is?” Scotty asked.

“Not a notion. Guy who had the job before me quit. It doesn’t bother me, though, and Kosciusko doesn’t seem to mind.” The guard laughed. “Maybe it’s Polish elves making kielbasa.”

The boys laughed, too. “Stop it,” Rick said. “You’re making me hungry. I could use a foot of that great sausage right now in a submarine sandwich.”

“Time for us to go,” Scotty told the guard. “Thanks for showing us the inside of the gate house.”

“Sure. See you again.”

As they reached the gas station and retrieved their car, Rick sighed. “Nothing great tonight, but at least we have a lead.”

“Yep. Something starts in the office. A passage, probably. So at least we have a place to begin if we have to tear out walls.”

“Can’t do that in a leased house. We’ll probably have to wait until the record office opens Monday and hope we can find a set of house plans filed with the permit application.”

“Let’s hope for a break. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Maybe. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER X

Mirror on the Wall

On Sunday morning the day was unusually warm and bright for late November and the four young Spindrifters walked together along the seawall looking at the sea and occasionally investigating a bit of flotsam. They paused at Rick's plane, the Sky Wagon. Scotty recited their experience of the night before, but had no useful answers to the girls' questions seeking more detail.

Jan spoke up suddenly after a few moments of silence. "You need me on the job. Maybe the feelings that I get from Mysto can help to locate the hidden rooms."

"If it is Mysto," Scotty answered. "Maybe you could help find something. We certainly haven't done a sensational job."

"Tonight's the Camerons' last performance until next Friday," Rick remembered. "Wonder if it will make any difference, whether or not there's a show."

"Are you going back tonight?" Barby asked.

"Sure. We have to keep trying, and there's nothing else we can do except some paper research when the records office opens tomorrow. We'll try to find plans of the Mirella estate. There must have been some filed to get the construction permit."

"Then all you have to do to increase your chances of finding something is to take us with you," Barby offered.

Rick vetoed that idea in a hurry. "This is your mystery, and we won't leave you out. But one thing we will not do is take you with us at night. We don't know who these people are, and we'll take no chances with you two."

Somewhat to Rick's surprise, Jan agreed with him. "Rick and Scotty can take care of themselves," she told Barby, "but if they got into trouble and had to protect us, too, it wouldn't be so good. There's trouble in that house." She hesitated. "I felt that bad thing again last night."

“When?” Scotty asked quickly.

“About one. I was lying awake in bed, waiting for the sound of the boat so I’d know you were home safe, and the feeling just flooded over me. It was faint, but it was there.”

The boys looked at each other, and Rick put their thoughts into words. “That was just about the time of the fracas in the office. I’ll bet what Jan felt was the burst of anger from the big mug that passed us in the hallway.”

“No bet. I think so, too.”

They had reached Pirate’s Field on the south side of the island. Jan moved to Rick’s side and took his arm. “Why can’t we go right now? It doesn’t have to be at night.”

Rick thought about it for a moment. “We can’t unless the Camerons are there. We need them to get in. And if they’re there we can’t expect any strange prowlers. But if you’re going to put your ESP talent to work, maybe you can pinpoint something without seeing the mystery people. Scotty, would the Camerons be there on Sunday morning?”

“Let us honor the memory of Alexander Graham Bell,” Scotty proposed, “by using the telephone.”

Jan’s house was nearest, and a moment on the telephone told them that the twins were at work in the office. Karen was at home. The four arrived within a half hour and were greeted by David. They went upstairs to the office.

The boys had phoned the twins at home before breakfast and reported on the previous night’s activities. Now Derek greeted them with, “We’ve sounded every wall and kicked everything in sight with no trace of hollowness or any sign of a secret door or passage.”

“It’s there,” Rick assured him. “Did you try inside the closet?”

“Sure. There’s not even an unsealed joint where wall and floor meet.”

“Okay. Scotty and I will prowl around while Jan becomes the world’s most beautiful bird dog and tries to sniff out somebody.”

Jan drew herself up to her full five feet, six inches and pointed imperiously at the two of them. "All right, hound dogs. Down on hands and knees and start prowling the baseboards. That's where you're most likely to find something. If you do, we may allow you an extra dog biscuit."

"Phooey," Barby disagreed. "Table scraps only. New biscuits are too good for them."

"Anything," Scotty pleaded, "if only you'll feed us by hand."

"Down, boy." Barby motioned them down on the floor.

Jan was right, Rick thought. Best chance of seeing a fault in the joints where panel met panel or panel met base moulding was just above floor level. The walls were a series of panels painted a creamy white and set off by frames carved into a series of fleur-de-lis. The frames were a darker cream than the panels.

"The secret door has to be a panel," Rick said. "But which panel, and where's the latch?"

"If I find it, you'll be the first to know," Scotty assured him.

Rick went left and Scotty went right, both on hands and knees, taking time to study every panel, every connection, including closet and bathroom. They met by the fireplace, stood, and began to go around again, searching higher on the walls. Barby and Jan had taken seats on the couch, Jan sitting with her eyes closed, concentrating on trying to identify what she was feeling.

The girl opened her eyes. She whispered, "He's around, and I don't think he's far away."

Suddenly she stood up and moved to Rick's side. "He's close!" For a moment she stood very still, then took in a deep breath. She pointed to the mirror above the fireplace. "He was there! For just a few seconds."

"Are you sure?" Derek demanded.

"I've never been so sure of anything."

Rick was first to the mirror. He examined it closely, but it

looked ordinary enough, except for the ornate frame. Scotty brought a desk chair and climbed up for a closer look.

“Let’s take the mirror down,” Scotty suggested.

Rick searched for a sign of clips or screws, but found none on the first try. It was Barby who finally pointed out the mounts. They were ornamental clips that formed part of the frame, but where screws should have been there were little rounded projections.

“I’ll bet those are caps over the screws,” Scotty guessed.

Rick handed up his scout knife. “See if one comes off.”

Scotty slipped the short blade under the edge of one and pried gently. There was paint around it and it took a sharp twist, but a cap came off exposing a screwhead.

“I’ll get screwdrivers.” David hurried out and down the stairs.

Rick turned to Jan. “Feel anything?”

“He’s still in the house, but not as close. I can feel the bad thing again, but not as strong. Rick, he was right there! It was almost as though I could understand words. I couldn’t but the feeling was as intense as that.”

“What was the feeling like, Jan?”

“The warmth was there, and a sort of... I don’t know. A kind of longing, mixed with impatience and what seemed to be pain. That’s the best way I can put it.”

“We’ll dig him out,” he said with more assurance than he felt.

“Yes, but you’ll be careful doing it,” Barby said firmly. “That’s a perfectly beautiful mirror and you’re not to harm it.”

“The frame will have to be repainted,” Scotty told her. “When we pry the caps off, we’ll chip paint. It can’t be helped.”

“It’s not a problem,” Derek assured them. “Our painting contractors can fix it up in an hour.”

David returned with screw drivers, a pry bar, and a

hammer. Rick began on the lower screws while Scotty worked on the higher ones from the vantage of the chair. Getting the caps off was the only hard part because they had been painted over. The screws came out easily. When only two screws remained, Scotty gingerly pried the mirror away from the frame just enough for Rick to slip his hand in.

“It’s hollow in back,” he exclaimed triumphantly.

They removed the last screws and then called for help. With Derek and David assisting, they carefully lowered the mirror to the floor.

Behind the opening was a space about four feet long and three feet high. Scotty, on the chair, leaned in and reported, “There’s a corridor behind this wall!”

“Got a flashlight?” Rick asked.

David produced one from his desk drawer. “Are you going in there?”

“Both of us are,” Scotty said.

“Us, too,” Jan hastened to add. Then, as Rick shook his head, she subsided. “I guess we’ll have to wait.”

“We always have to wait until the excitement’s over,” Barby sniffed. “Hand me that pry bar,” Scotty asked Derek.

“I’ll go in first, then Rick can follow.”

Scotty used the mantel for a foot rest, then swung a leg over the bottom of the opening. Derek handed up the pry bar. Scotty went in the rest of the way and stood in the hidden passage.

Rick passed the flashlight to him, then followed. He looked around for a moment, then told the others in the office, “There’s a little platform on which someone can stand and look into the room. The floor level is the same as the office.”

David had been examining the mirror. “Look, kids! This mirror is one-way glass.”

A watcher behind the mirror would have an excellent view of the room. “No wonder Karen felt someone watching

her.” Jan exclaimed.

Inside the passage, Scotty ran the flashlight beam over the walls. “It’s finished just like a room,” Rick said in surprise. The passageway was about four feet wide, and of room height. The walls were plaster-finished and painted white. “No wonder tapping didn’t produce a hollow sound. It would sound like knocking on any normal room wall.”

When they stood with backs to the opening, they could see the end of the passage on their right. On the left, the passage made a sudden drop downward. Rick turned and looked up. The fireplace vent came out of the right rear of the fireplace at the edge of the mirror opening and vanished upward through the ceiling. It was a metal pipe about eight inches in diameter, with a fireproof flange at ceiling and fireplace wall.

“Before we do any exploring, let’s find the entrance into the office.” Scotty was already running his hands over the wall. The plaster apparently was seamed with cracks, but a closer look with the flashlight showed that the cracks were a design, a diamond within a square. The design was cut deeply. Any of the vertical or horizontal lines might mark the doorway.

They searched inch by inch until Scotty suddenly stopped and moved the light closer. “Here’s something. Sweat from hands must have made this spot darker.” He pushed, but nothing happened. “Doggone it,” he said, disappointed. “I was sure we had it.”

“Don’t give up. It’s the only mark on the wall. This has to mean something.” Rick kept pushing, his hand moving across the wall section.

Barby and Jan climbed up on chairs and put their heads through the opening, in time to hear the exchange of words. “There must be a latch,” Barby suggested. “The dirty spot must be the key to it.”

Jan agreed. “Why not put one hand on the smudge and reach around with the other. I’ll bet the latch will be somewhere in the semi-circle the hand can reach.”

Rick grinned at her. “No wonder she beats me at chess, kids.” He put his hand on the spot and slowly swung his other hand in an arc from shoulder height to the floor. If that didn’t work, he would swing the hand up as far as he could reach.

“Here it is,” Scotty said. “At least it looks like it. Reach down a bit more and push.” He held the flashlight steady.

Rick pushed on a spot that wobbled the slightest bit—and almost fell into the office as the hidden door swung wide.

Jan and Barby hastened to prop the door open with a chair, then the girls and the twins crowded into the doorway for a look. The door was a panel with “blind hinges,” invisible from either direction, set into the wall.

“The latch is a knot in the baseboard in here,” Scotty told them. “It’s right at the edge of the panel. Let’s see what it matches in the office, because there has to be a latch for getting in.”

He pushed on the loose knot while the girls and twins watched from the outside. The latch turned out to be the eye of a cherub at the base of an ornamental strip at the side of the fireplace, easily tapped with a toe.

“Close the panel with us inside and try it,” Scotty requested.

Barby did so and the panel swung open silently and smoothly. “It works fine. Are you going to explore now?”

“Want us with you?” Derek added.

“Might be a good idea for one of you to come,” Rick replied. “But one should stay here with the girls.”

“We’re coming, too,” Barby announced.

“You are not,” Rick stated emphatically. “The two of you are staying right here, with either David or Derek.”

Barby knew when it was useless to argue with her brother. She took one look at his face and subsided, but not without a cool, direct look that told him she resented it.

“I’ll come and Dave can stay with the girls,” Derek

said. "Lead on, Scotty."

They examined the dead end of the passage first. There was no sign of a hand mark to show where an opening might be, and no loose knots in floor or wall. Apparently it was simply a dead end, as it appeared, but Rick wasn't satisfied. There was no reason he could think of to build an extra ten feet of passage to lead nowhere.

Going the opposite way, the downturn in the passage was a flight of stairs. It narrowed as they descended, and as Rick estimated they had reached ground level, the passage turned, the change in direction permitted by the narrowing. They had to negotiate the turn in single file. The stairs ended in a dead end. This one, however, was easily solved. The smudge was there, and a loose knot.

Scotty handed Derek the flashlight and took a good grip on the pry bar. "I'm going through in a rush," he said softly. "Keep close behind me and be ready for anything."

Rick tensed to spring as Scotty touched the loose knot, slammed open the door and rushed forward. Rick and Derek were close on his heels.

They emerged into a recreation room, dimly lit from a window well at ground level. The room was panelled in Philippine mahogany and furnished with rattan chairs, tables and settees. Pictures framed in bamboo hung on the walls.

"I know where we are," Derek told them. "This room was left furnished. It's under the extreme right of the house as you face the front door from the stairs." He pointed to a flight of stairs. "Those go up to the entry hall."

At Rick's suggestion, Derek went back upstairs to tell the girls and David what had happened, then the boys began a search of the room for panels that might move, for loose knots or other latches. They tapped walls, and listened. A half hour later they went back upstairs, dejected, going by way of the visible legitimate stairs.

As they emerged into the main entrance hall, Scotty stopped short. "Hey! This is where that big guy came from

last night. He came up the stairs and I saw him come out this door. I didn't know there were stairs, so I didn't know what part of the house he had come from."

"Funny," Rick said thoughtfully. "He wouldn't have gone down the stairs from the office through the passage then come up these. There's got to be another entrance to that downstairs room."

"You speak true, ol' buddy. But we couldn't find it. Now what?"

"I guess now we wait until the record office opens in the morning and try to find the house plans. Only I think the Infrared Indians ought to ride again tonight. We can at least keep track of the late night traffic."

"I'm with you."

Back in the office, they reported to the girls and the twins. "So, we've found one passageway that leads to nothing interesting," Barby summed up for them. "But there must be others."

"True, Sis." Rick explained their plan to hunt for house plans in the morning.

"It was a good start," Jan sympathized. "Sorry we didn't find my friend. He's still here somewhere."

Barby added, "If you'll put the mirror back now, I think we'd better go home for lunch."

Rick and Scotty groaned in unison and got busy.

CHAPTER XI

The Talisman

Jan joined Barby, Scotty, and Rick after an early dinner just as the boys were putting fresh batteries into their infrared gadgets.

“Only one thing to do.” Rick made the final connection to his battery packs. “We’ll have to keep watch again tonight and maybe even more nights until we get a better handle on this business.”

“With us,” Barby added.

“You never give up, do you?” Scotty shook his head. “We know you want to, and maybe if we took automatic weapons with us and were prepared to shoot, you could. But this is a peaceful operation and Rick and I only carry clubs in case we have to defend ourselves. So you’re not going with us, period.”

“We could carry clubs, too,” Barby pointed out.

Rick laughed. “I can picture you two warrior maids if we should get into a roughup in the darkness. Without your own night vision gear, how would you know who to hit?”

“Well, it didn’t hurt to ask,” Jan said. “But if Barb and I aren’t going with you, we’re going to a movie.”

“We’ll have to borrow your car, because Jan’s folks have to use theirs, and Dad loaned his to Dr. Shannon. Maybe you could borrow Jerry’s motorcycle.” Barby stared hopefully at her brother.

“Okay,” Rick agreed. “We’ll call Jerry. Only you’ll have to drive one of us to the estate with the bag of gear.”

Jerry agreed, and Barby and Jan drove the boys to Jerry’s where Scotty got the motorbike. They followed him to the all night gas station near the estate where Scotty left the bike and got in the car. The girls dropped them at the estate and went on to the movie. After the movie they would go to the *Record* office and wait until the boys showed up or phoned.

By advance arrangement with Derek, Rick and Scotty went to the recreation room at the foot of the secret passage, using the regular stairs. They carried clubs and flashlights as well as the infrared equipment.

As they sat in the darkness waiting, Rick's thoughts went back for about the tenth time to Ah Boon and his prediction. He and Jan couldn't make dreams come true together unless they were together. But she wouldn't graduate until he had already been at the university for a year—unless he changed the schedule. Only there was no point in doing that unless Jan wanted them to be together. The evidence was all against that assumption, he told himself sadly.

The thought put him right back at the starting point. What had Ah Boon seen that led him to make the prediction? Rick didn't want to make the only logical conclusion, that the phony monk had guessed wrong.

After a seeming eternity, David looked in. He said softly, "You're on your own. Call first thing in the morning, and for Pete's sake if you run into anything yell first for the police and then for us. Okay?"

"Okay, we'll call in the morning," Scotty told him.

The boys had decided to stay together. As the Camerons left, they moved quietly up the stairs to the second floor and took up station by the men's lounge where Rick had waited the previous night.

About fifteen minutes had elapsed when the thump-THUMP began, more felt than heard. It continued for nearly twenty minutes, then stopped. There was silence except for the normal sounds of a cooling house, the metallic plink of a radiator, or the creak of a floorboard.

A half hour passed, and they were getting restless when a muffled sound from the first floor alerted them. Rick put a hand on the control knob, ready to cut down the intensity if someone passed. He felt Scotty's hand on his arm, and a squeeze of warning.

Rick tensed. A bright figure came into sight up the stairs to the hallway and Rick turned the control down. The

glowing figure resolved into an old man, moving slowly toward the office.

The boys didn't hesitate. They stepped stealthily toward the doorway, intending to keep him in sight, but moving carefully so he would not be aware of their presence. They had the advantage of night vision while he was dependent on the faint light that makes indistinct shadows in dark houses. Nevertheless Rick saw that he moved like a man who knew his way. He must be Jan's friend.

The old man opened the office door, which had been ajar, and they moved more rapidly, reaching the door just as it closed in their faces. Rick turned the knob and pushed. The blasted door stuck again!

As he turned to Scotty there was a sudden little scream from inside that brought them up short in horror.

Rick breathed, "Sis!"

Scotty yelled, "Barby!"

His powerful leg smashed into the stuck door and slammed it open. He catapulted into the room, Rick almost falling over him as he, too, threw himself into the office.

Rick felt the wind as the door into the hidden passage swung shut and saw Scotty cross his line of vision to the panel to open it again. Then he stopped at the sight before him.

In the pale greens of the radiometer he saw the figures of the girls. Barby was standing, one hand across her mouth. Jan was kneeling, her head bent forward in an attitude that was almost prayerful.

Jan held something that flared in the radiometer tube, something so bright that it had a halo like a bright ring around it.

Rick jumped for the light switch and flicked it, then pulled off his helmet, blinking in the sudden light. He husked, "Are you all right?"

"We're all right," Barby affirmed. "I was just startled for a moment. Was that Scotty who ran by after the first man who

came in?”

“Yes.” Rick’s eyes were on Jan. Now, with the lights on, the brilliant flare was gone, but she still held the object in her hands. Rick knew he would never forget the instant when Jan turned to him, her hands cupped as though holding something alive and precious, and the look on her face was one of pure delight.

Rick hurried to lift her to her feet as Scotty came through the secret panel, taking off his special glasses. “Gone,” he said angrily. “He vanished. I got into the passageway too late.” Scotty turned to Barby. “Well, Miss Dimwit, did you enjoy the show?”

Barby wasn’t in the least contrite. “I didn’t care much for the ending, but it was fun. We came in as soon as we could park the car at the service station and walk back. The gypsy let us in without any questions because she’s used to seeing us come in as friends of the Camerons. We came upstairs and hid in the closet. It was perfectly safe. After all, we knew you and Rick would be right outside the door.”

Rick wasn’t paying attention. His eyes were on the object Jan held so tenderly. It was a reddish stone, polished smooth, slightly smaller than an egg and about the same shape. In normal light it looked very ordinary. If he hadn’t seen it in infrared he would have thought little about it.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know. He dropped it. He came into the office, and I think he saw we were watching from the closet. He started toward us, then whirled suddenly and made a jump for the panel so fast it startled us, and Barby screamed. I heard him say, ‘Take this,’ and he dropped it at my feet and went into the passage. I heard something crash against a passage wall from the inside, then you and Scotty came smashing through.”

Her expression was still one of surprised pleasure. He asked, “Why does it affect you so?”

“It’s the way it feels. It changes. A few seconds ago I felt excitement, then fear, and then a bit of anger. Right now it

feels nice and warm and friendly. And it helps me feel what you feel, like Scotty's upset with us and you're relieved. Touch it, Rick."

She held it on her palm, and he put his own palm across the stone. Sensation enveloped him. He was literally enfolded in pure, loving warmth. He had never felt so intensely loved and wanted. It was an altogether remarkable sensation, different and far deeper and more pervading than Jan's description. He sensed undertones of delight, and of concern, and somehow, behind the strong feelings, there seemed to be a lively, happy intelligence in deep communication with him. Rick thought that, maybe, with both of them holding the stone, more of its effect was brought out. Anyway, it was a terrific effect.

Jan had given a sudden gasp as their hands touched, and now she was looking at him with dark eyes opened wide, and lips parted in an expression of mixed awe and wonder.

Rick hadn't wanted to take his hand away and lose the feeling, but he was uneasy, knowing they were within reach of unknowns, some of them possibly hostile, with no means of defending the girls and themselves except a pair of clubs.

"Let's get out of here," he said abruptly. "Right now." He put his helmet on, turned on power, then took hold of Jan's free hand. He motioned to Scotty to take hold of Barby. "Lights out and IR on. Whoever is in the house must know we're here after all the racket, but we have an advantage in the darkness. Come on." He flicked off the office lights.

On the way down the stairs he took it easy, so descending in the dark wouldn't be too hard on the girls. When they reached bottom, walking was easier and there was faint light through the window draperies.

As they neared the entrance doors, Jan suddenly gave a little cry, like a cry of pain. She swayed and would have fallen, but Rick had an arm around her in time. She gasped, "Rick, I dropped the stone."

The stone no longer glowed so brilliantly, but because it was warm from Jan's hand, it showed up easily in the

radiometer. Still holding to her, he bent his knees and scooped it up, dropping it into a pocket. Scotty and Barby had the doors open now, and he and Jan went into the night.

Barby stopped as the doors closed behind them. “Oh, golly! Jan and I forgot our coats.”

“Never mind. You can take our jackets.” He turned to Jan. “Can you stand all right?”

“Yes... it was just a momentary shock. I’m all right now.”

He slipped off his jacket and put it around her shoulders, as Scotty held his for Barby. The boys, remembering the chill of the night before, had worn both sweaters and jackets, and though the night was cold, they’d be in the car with the heater on in a short time.

“What happened, Jan?”

“That, awful, vicious thing. It blasted me with almost physical force, I guess because I was holding the stone. When I dropped the stone it lessened, and then quit. It was terrible, Rick. But it’s gone now. I still feel a little shaky inside, that’s all.”

The infrared was useful as they walked toward the highway, until they reached the lighted zone of the gate house. Thaddeus and Kosciusko met them, apparently just about to make their rounds.

“Hi.” The guard greeted them. “The boss said the two of you would stay late, but he didn’t mention the ladies.”

“He didn’t know about them,” Scotty told him. “We’ll tell him when we phone in the morning.”

“Okay. I’ll note in the log that four of you left. Goodnight.”

They walked to the gas station without speaking. Scotty made arrangements for Jerry’s motorcycle to be put in the garage overnight, then the four got into the car and relaxed with a sigh of relief.

Scotty drove, with Barby beside him. In the rear seat, Jan turned to Rick. “May I have the stone, please?”

He took it from his pocket and held it for a moment before handing it to her. The warmth was still there, but fainter, and there were overtones he couldn't identify. But clearly, there was now something like fear and worry.

When he held out the stone Jan took it and cupped it in both hands. So softly that Rick had to lean close to hear, she whispered, "He's in real danger. We've got to help him."

"How, Jan?"

"I don't know."

There was no further conversation until they reached Whiteside Landing, and then the roar of the speedboat made conversation impossible.

The four young people went into the Brant library. Barby ran upstairs to call their folks, while Rick called the Winstons, remembering the promise to keep him informed. Jan called her parents, knowing they had returned home because the speedboat they used had been gone from Whiteside Landing.

Mrs. Brant and Barby hurried to make hot chocolate and set out cookies and doughnuts while the group gathered.

Jan handed Barby the stone while they waited. "What a nice feeling!" Barby exclaimed. "It's warm and friendly."

Scotty took it from her. "Hey, she's right! It is a nice feeling."

Those words were a hopelessly poor description of what Rick had felt when he touched the stone back at the Mirella estate.

"Toss it over, Scotty. I want to try it again." He caught the stone and held it for a moment. "For the love of mike!" The intense, wonderful sensation was almost entirely reduced to what Barby and Scotty had described, warm, friendly, and nice. He gave it back to Jan. "I wonder if the stone has cooled or something."

Jan smiled at him, but didn't answer. Just then her parents and the Winstons arrived.

"All right, my children," Hartson Brant said when

everyone held a mug of chocolate. “It’s late, and this meeting—which shall be short—is called to order. Rick, what’s going on?”

“I yield the floor to my sister, dad. Come on, Barb. You and Jan were the stars of the performance. You can take turns.”

Barby’s chin went up. She moved to Jan’s side. “First, Jan and I are tired of over-protective males named Brant and Scott who never let us get in on any interesting action because of some real unlikely possibility that we might get hurt. True, Jan?”

Jan nodded. “Please don’t misunderstand. We’re really glad that they want to take care of us, and we appreciate it. But we think all four of us ought to decide rather than having the decisions made for us. That’s why we did what we did tonight, and I’m glad we did it.”

“Exactly what was it you did, darling?” Dr. Miller asked.

Barby picked up the tale. “The boys decided to take the infrared equipment back to the Mirella estate tonight. When we asked to go with them, they said no. You know we found one secret passageway this morning, because we’ve kept you up to date. The whole idea of watching by night was to try to see where the mysterious people in the place came from and went.”

“I take it you didn’t agree with their decision not to take you with them.” Hartson Brant frowned. “But you decided to go to a movie instead, as I recall.”

“It was my fault,” Jan said quickly. “I pushed Barby into it. We knew exactly what the boys were going to do because we heard them talking on the phone to David. They were going to wait in the basement recreation room until everyone was gone, and then go up to the second floor and wait by the men’s lounge where Rick waited last night. Anyway, I persuaded Barby...”

“She did not. I was just as eager as she was!”

Jan continued. “We persuaded each other, then, to forget the movie. Instead we parked the car at the gas station,

walked to the House of Illusion and went in. The receptionist just said hello, because she knows we're friends of the Camerons. We went upstairs to the ladies room and stayed there until all lights were out and then we went into the office and sat down in the closet and waited."

"We knew Rick and Scotty would be right outside the door," Barby reminded them. "Anyway, we were sure we weren't in any danger. The old man Jan senses is friendly, and the hate she feels isn't directed at us."

Rick had put the girls on the spot, and they had turned the tables on him by using the spot to make what, he was thinking, was a valid point.

"We opened the closet door so we wouldn't miss anything in the dark," Jan continued the tale, "and we waited a long time. We felt the house's heartbeat, too, just the way the Camerons and the boys described it."

Mrs. Miller was shaking her head at the story, and Mrs. Brant had moved to the edge of her chair. The men were staring fixedly at the girls.

"Then the door opened," Barby picked up the story. She paused dramatically. "Jan's old man came in. We couldn't see well, but there was a little starlight through the French doors to the porch, so we knew it was an old man. We stood up and he moved toward us, then gave a sort of funny jump away from us. The jump startled me, and I let out a scream. He rushed through the secret panel door to the passageway, and then Scotty and Rick came crashing in."

"But first," Jan said, "He spoke to me. He said, 'Take this,' and he dropped it in front of me."

She held out her hand with the stone on her palm.

"But what is it?" Mrs. Brant asked.

"It looks like an ordinary little stone," Mrs. Miller said in surprise.

"There's nothing ordinary about this stone, Mom." Jan handed her the stone.

Mrs. Miller's reaction was just like those of Barby and

Scotty. She passed it to Mrs. Brant, who had the same feelings of warmth and friendliness. The stone went around the circle and ended up in Hartson Brant's hands.

"Very curious," the scientist said, rubbing the stone. "It emits very definite sensation, not of physical warmth, but of the feeling of warmth with some other tones harder to read. I think a little apprehension and fear. There's a nice, friendly component to it." He looked up. "Anyone believe in magic? If we were in any degree superstitious, I think this is what we would call a weirdstone, or a talisman."

Dr. Winston commented, "This ties in with what we know of Jan's special talent, doesn't it?"

"It definitely does," Jan agreed. "Maybe you can help us find out how, Dr. Winston."

"I'm anxious to work with you on it, Jan."

Dr. Miller looked at Rick and Scotty. "And how did you react to smashing through the door and finding our two reckless daughters?"

"I was scared to death," Scotty admitted, "until I knew they weren't in any immediate danger."

"I'm afraid I didn't react the same way," was Rick's reply, "because of what I saw when I got inside. I had the IR radiometer helmet on, and I could see the girls fine, so I knew they were okay, but I also saw that Jan was kneeling on the carpet and holding a miniature sun in her hands. It was so bright it had a halo in my image tube. By then I knew we'd missed the old man—whom we'd seen enter the office—and just then Scotty came back and he was upset enough for both of us."

"And what do you think now that it's all over?" Dr. Miller pressed.

Rick said what he had been thinking. "That the girls and Scotty and I were both half right and half wrong. We were right in not wanting them to be in any danger, and they were wrong in thinking there wasn't any danger. We were just plain lucky. Last time, it wasn't the old man who came, it was a big, mean-looking guy who is probably the hater Jan felt. If

he'd been the one to show up tonight and found the girls in the office, there's no way to know what might have happened. At the worst, Scotty and I might have had a fight on our hands in the darkness."

"And don't forget," Scotty added, "we heard noises that told us the mean looking guy—who's a lot bigger and heavier than I am—was probably somewhere close by."

"Too true, pal! Anyway, we got out of it because the only one we ran into was Jan's old man. But I do want to make a point about how we were wrong. We've been pretty one-way about this, Scotty and I, making the rules and telling the girls what they could or could not do, and all the time it's been Jan's mystery more than ours. She's the principal, the one the old man wants to be in touch with."

The girls were listening, eyes wide. Rick grinned at them. "My point is, we should always give them at least an equal voice. If we think it's too dangerous for them, we dig in our heels, as we ought to. But, unless they agree on all points, we just don't do whatever we were considering. That's the only way to be fair and to keep them from running off on their own because they disagree."

Both girls ran to Rick and put their arms around him. "I'll never forget this day," Barby exulted. "It was the day my beloved brother was converted from overprotective male chauvinist!"

"All right." Dr. Miller shook his head. "In view of this extraordinary conversion, I'll withhold lecturing my daughter on foolhardiness until we get her home. Now let's talk about this stone and what we do next."

"When things cool down a bit, I hope Jan and I can do a bit of experimenting," Dr. Winston smiled at the girl.

"I'll be ready," Jan told him.

Hartson Brant commented, "From a quick examination of the stone, I'd say it's a quite ordinary silicon-aluminum compound with enough iron to give it the red oxide color. How about you, Walter?"

"There may be small amounts of other minerals, but I'll

be surprised if it isn't mainly as you say."

"Without a real examination, it's impossible to tell the physical structure," was Dr. Winston's contribution, "but I'll make a small wager there is crystalline structure inside quite different from the usual silicon-aluminum rock."

"And on that note, I suggest we adjourn." Hartson Brant rose. "Jan, when you find your mystery man, he may be able to tell us more about this stone. When do you think that will be?"

"We'll try again tomorrow. By day!"

"Before we break up, a question. Rick, you say the stone was so bright in the radiometer that it had a halo?"

"Yes, dad. The radiometer was set so people would be in focus, which means the stone was a lot warmer than Jan's hand."

Winston offered, "The question is, does the stone have an IR emanation of its own? Or was it warmed in some way?"

"By the time we got to the front door, the stone was no warmer than Jan's hand," Rick told him. "My guess is that, when I first saw it, it was hot from being in the old man's hand, which means he must have a high fever. Someone was wounded the other night, and it looks very much as though it were he."

"We've got to find him," Jan said urgently. "Tomorrow, Rick."

"Yes. Somehow."

As the Winstons and Millers walked to the door, Rick followed. He stopped Jan in the doorway. "Let me touch it again, Jan."

She held it out in her palm, and he covered it with his. Again, the sensation of loving warmth enfolded him, as intense as when he had first touched it at the estate, but there was a new feeling with it. Like glowing sparks in a mist were what seemed to be bubbles of laughter.

"You don't know what you're feeling, do you, Rick." Jan's lovely eyes were mischievous.

“Do you?”

“Uh huh. I’ll tell you sometime, maybe.” She laughed at him, turned and followed her parents into the darkness.

Hartson Brant had heard the exchange. He grinned at his son. “Eternally feminine,” he said. “Provocative and filled with mystery.”

Rick groaned. “It took me awhile to figure out that Karen was referring to Jan’s ESP talent when she called her one of the rare ones. Now I’ve got to puzzle out what she knows about the stone that I don’t.”

“Don’t puzzle all night,” Scotty warned. “We’ve work to do tomorrow. We’ve got to find Jan’s old man. Your guess about him being wounded and feverish has to be right!”

CHAPTER XII

Jan Finds a Friend

The phone rang a few minutes before breakfast the next morning, and Rick picked it up in the library while Scotty ran to the kitchen. Derek Cameron told them the watchman had reported that four people left the house when he had been told two would be there, and that two were girls. Though the magician was puzzled, he assumed it had been Jan and Barby.

The boys outlined what had happened, then Scotty told him, "We've got to find that old man today, Derek. From what we saw last night, he must be running a high fever. Will you be at the estate this morning?"

"Within an hour. All three of us. Today we go full speed on the new show that begins next Friday night." The current show schedule, extra long because of the holiday, had ended the night before.

"We'll be there," Rick replied.

As they hung up, Rick turned to see Jan in the doorway. "I can get him to come out," Jan promised. "With this." She held out the mysterious stone.

"Why are you so sure, Jan?"

She looked troubled. "Last night you only touched the stone while it was in my hand, except for a minute when everyone was handling it. Here, take it and close your eyes. Don't pay any attention to what you feel at first. Try to get the more distant feeling."

Rick looked at her, wondering. He held out his hand and she dropped the stone into it.

The same flood of sensation enveloped him, but fainter, there was a troubled feeling, too, an anxiety that had replaced the bubbles like laughter he had sensed last night. He closed his eyes and mentally probed behind the troubled warmth, and slowly it came to him, a faint sensation of

distant loneliness and of pain. Unconsciously he rubbed his arm above the hand that held the stone, tenderly kneading the big triceps muscle. That was where it hurt. He felt feverish, out of sorts.

For a moment longer he gripped the stone and wanted very much to reply somehow to an unspoken plea for help. He opened his eyes and met Jan's.

"We have to go, Rick. He needs our help. That's how I know he'll come out when I get there."

Rick nodded. What he had felt was Jan's old man behind the initial sensation of loving warmth. Jan knew something about the loving warmth, and he had a wonderful, hopeful suspicion. He'd get it out of her somehow, after they took care of the more immediate problem.

"We have time for breakfast before the Camerons get there. Have you eaten?" When she shook her head, he said, "Come on. Barby and Scotty must already be sitting down."

Within a short time of the Millers' permanent move to Spindrift, the deep and growing friendship between the families and among the four young people had resulted in an informal part-adoption of the four by both families. They went in and out of each other's houses—at least the family parts—with a minimum of formality. Rick and Scotty did chores around the Miller home as they did around their own, without being asked. The girls exchanged household tasks in a way that eased the burden on each. If one of the four happened by at meal time, a place was set with a pause only long enough to ask, "Have you eaten?"

When Jan walked into the dining room with Rick, Mrs. Brant asked automatically, "Bacon or sausages, dear?"

"Bacon please, mother Brant."

Hartson Brant and Mrs. Brant joined the young people at the table. The scientist smiled at Jan. "You've opened up a whole realm of possibilities with that stone. I've seldom seen Winston so excited."

"I'm glad he is. We're all curious as can be."

“Hmmm. It’s a poorly defined field, as you know. The boys and Barby told us about your unusual talent. We can well believe it’s both a blessing and a burden.”

“More blessing, I think. What kind of research do you think would be most interesting?”

“I hope we can make an attack on the basic problem of ESP that causes most scientists to reject it out of hand, as an impossibility. It’s the one Rick made a passing reference to at our first meeting Thanksgiving Day.”

“What’s the mechanism,” Rick agreed. “In this case, how are feelings transmitted to you, Jan.”

“Why is it a puzzle?” Barby asked.

The scientist answered. “Because every other kind of message we know about that doesn’t go through wires or some other physical medium is transmitted through the electromagnetic spectrum.”

“Like radio and TV, Dad?”

“Yes. Even like messages sent by light, which is also part of the spectrum, as I’m sure you remember from your science studies. But no one has ever shown that ESP, extra sensory messages, are carried in the spectrum, and we don’t know of another medium.”

“How much research has been done?” Rick asked.

“Surely, not enough. But there’s another factor. To send a message takes power, no matter what the medium or the message. No one has shown that the electrical energy available in normal brain processes could power an ESP message across the room.”

“But people have reported that they knew of terrible accidents or deaths in the family all the way across the country,” Jan offered.

“True, Jan. And there have been so many anecdotal incidents, as they’re called, that they can’t all be rejected as coincidence. But until some means of transmission can be shown and proved, you won’t find many scientists buying the idea of ESP.”

“I guess all my feelings are illusions,” Jan said with a smile.

Hartson Brant chuckled. “The one thing that’s not an illusion is our ignorance about the whole field. Perhaps your mysterious talisman owner can shed some light for us, Jan. And perhaps the stone itself can help Winston understand more about the process. Do you go for the owner today?”

Rick put his napkin away. “Right now, Dad. All four of us. We’re meeting the Camerons at the estate.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Yes. He’s hurt and running a fever. If we get him, the first thing we’ll do is take him to Dr. Frame. You might alert him that we’ll probably be coming.”

“I’ll do that. And good luck, kids. If you need help, call.”

The four got jackets and gloves and hurried to the boat landing. Within a short time they were turning into the Mirella estate. The three Camerons were in the office, working over a drawing board.

“So you two got in the act in spite of everything,” David greeted the girls.

“I think it’s wonderful.” Karen congratulated them. “It’s what you over-protective males should have expected. Girls like these just can’t be left out. The time is over when girls were delicate violets ready to faint at a mouse.”

Rick smiled ruefully. “I’m afraid you’re right, but I wish you weren’t.”

Karen returned the smile. “You don’t really mean that, Rick. I know you try very hard to protect them, you and Scotty, but I also know that you’re very proud of their independence and courage.”

Rick sighed. “I’m beginning to realize that I’m about as hard to read as a highway billboard.”

“Don’t feel lonely, Rick,” Derek laughed. “Karen gives us all the same problem.”

“May I see the stone, Jan?” Karen asked.

“Of course.” Jan handed it to her.

Karen held it tight and closed her eyes. “I can feel it. He’s in pain. What shall we do?”

“If you don’t mind leaving Rick and me alone here in the office, I’ll try to call him, using the stone. I’m not sure it will work, but it might.”

“Let’s go,” Derek said, rising. “We’ll wait outside until you call us.”

“Don’t close the door too tightly,” Rick warned as they all filed out. “It stuck twice; last night and the night before.”

Jan sat down on the couch and Rick perched on a chair where he could see both Jan and the panel. He watched as she cupped the stone in both hands and closed her eyes.

She whispered, “Come out, please? We’re here to help you.” A minute ticked by. Jan kept her eyes closed, and he knew she was concentrating, trying to send a message. Another minute, then Rick felt the short hairs on the back of his neck bristle. He knew they were being observed through the mirror above the fireplace.

Jan knew it, too. She said clearly, “It’s all right. We’re friends.”

Rick tensed as the panel swung open. A deep but gentle voice said, “I know you are.”

The old man was standing straight and tall, dressed in a pair of faded corduroys and a plaid woolen shirt. He wore ancient sneakers. His hair was white, but thick and curly. He was clean shaven, and his face would have shown the pallor of confinement and illness had it not been flushed with fever.

He looked at Rick, bowed slightly, turned and walked to Jan. He sat down on the couch beside her, and they smiled at each other like old friends.

“Hello, Mr. Wayland,” she said, happily.

“Hello, Jan,” he replied, and his smile broadened. “I’m glad to meet you at last, in your own very lovely person instead of just through talismanic communication.”

He turned to Rick. "I'm glad to meet you, too, young Mr. Brant."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Wayland," Rick answered. "I've tried hard enough to meet you. You are Mr. Wayland?"

"Yes. Of course I know your names and faces from overhearing and seeing you. I suspect the first question that pops into your minds is why I haven't come out before?"

"That's true, sir. Why haven't you?"

"Invite the rest in, and I'll tell you all. I'm anxious to meet the rest of my new friends—and I know that's what you are all are."

Rick opened the door. Barby, Scotty, and the Camerons were standing there, eyes wide. He stepped aside and they came in. Barby and Karen instantly ran to the couch. The old magician held out a hand to each, greeting them by name. He chuckled with pleasure.

"This is the first time I've been surrounded by such youth and beauty since my last performance."

Rising, he bowed to Scotty and the Camerons, and greeted them by name, even getting the twins right.

"The Marvelous Mysto," Derek said in a hushed voice. "We are honored, sir."

Wayland waved a hand, rather weakly. "Not a bit of it. You two and Karen are a credit to our ancient profession."

Karen smiled at him. "It was you who shifted me and the replica, wasn't it?"

"I'm the culprit, I fear. I was sure you had found that it was I who built the place, and I was trying to send a message, that it was indeed Mysto that Jan and Karen sensed."

"We did get the message, eventually," Rick told him.

"It was risky, in one sense. Not physically, but I wasn't entirely sure it wouldn't be too upsetting. I knew Derek and David were fast-thinking, cool young men, and Karen was their equal. I also knew the shock would be worse to her, but I hoped to alleviate it by putting her in her husband's arms."

He smiled at Karen. "I will try to earn your forgiveness. I know you had a few bad moments, but you recovered even faster than I had hoped, and the twins handled it with incredible speed and poise. I congratulate all of you."

"How on earth did you do it?" David asked.

Wayland shrugged, then winced as the movement hurt his arm. "If I get out the mess I'm in I'll show you. That is a promise. But right now I'm going to ask my granddaughter to take me out of here, with Barby, Rick, and Scotty as aides."

"Your granddaughter?" Rick repeated, stupefied.

"My spiritual granddaughter." Wayland smiled. "She and I are *en rapport*, we and the talisman."

Jan held it out to him. "I almost forgot. Here it is."

Wayland took her hand and closed it around the stone. "Keep it for me, my dear, until I need it again. But I haven't told you why I haven't come out before. I've wanted to, but I had a small problem. At first, the only one I could trust was my charming young friend, here, although later I came to trust all of you. But when you were here, within my reach, the others were here, too, and I couldn't risk exposing you to them."

"Who are the others?" Rick asked.

"My nephew and a few of his friends. They want very badly to get their hands on me. I would have risked it last night when I saw Jan and Barby step out of the closet, but just then the talisman told me the others were near. I dropped the talisman for her to use and ran for cover. It was either that or risk giving you away. I couldn't let them know you were friends, even though they undoubtedly saw you through the mirror at one time or another."

"But why do they want you?" Jan asked.

"Later, my dear. The story will keep. For now, I suggest we go. The others are not around at the moment, but there is no telling when they'll return."

As they all moved to the stairs and started down, Rick told the Camerons, "If you can make it, I wish you'd come

this afternoon.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Derek assured him.

“Then suppose we pick you up at the landing at three. We’ll have a light snack. If Dr. Frame can fix Mysto up, and I’ll bet he can, we can solve this mystery with a few minutes conversation. And about time, too!”

CHAPTER XIII

The Magician's Tale

The Brant family doctor injected Mysto's arm with a local anesthetic, cleaned out the wound, gave him a massive shot of antibiotic to combat the infection, and oral medication to reduce his fever. Putting a sling on the wounded arm, he told the old magician the wound needed time to drain before closing it, and to get some rest and good food, and come back tomorrow.

The Spindrift four took Mysto home, but before he was allowed to rest, Mrs. Brant insisted on a hearty breakfast, which he ate with obvious pleasure. He then submitted with equal pleasure to being led to bed in the spare room. Scotty loaned him pajamas and Rick found him a new toothbrush.

By the time the Camerons, Millers, Winstons, and Brants gathered in the library, Mysto had slept for nearly six hours. Rick estimated that the magician was about his own size, and greeted him with a complete change of clothing. The hours of sleep and medication had taken the fever flush from Mysto's face and he looked fine.

After introductions were made all around, Rick broiled strip steaks on a grill in the fireplace. Jan and Barby had set up TV and lap trays, and as Rick took the steaks from the fire, the girls placed them in buttered buns for ease in eating. Scotty served bowls of salad with Green Goddess dressing.

When everyone was fed, and at least half the guests had managed to sneak a bit to Dismal—including Mysto—the magician turned to Dr. Brant. "Shall I begin?"

"Please do. I'm sure you've anticipated our questions."

Mysto smiled. "I'm sure I have."

Barby served him coffee, and he sipped appreciatively. "Of course, you wonder how I can be alive when I'm so legally dead, my death certified by a reputable physician and confirmed by the police. You did check with the police? Yes, I

was sure you would. I must explain that the first part of what I'm about to tell you is pieced together from scattered bits of information, and from guesses based on my knowledge of the people concerned.

"To sum up, I am a victim of my nephew, Carl Cleary, the only son of my only sister. Carl is totally amoral, and I helped him out of one scrape after another, used much influence and paid many fines to keep him out of jail. I also kept him supplied with enough money for ordinary needs, but not enough for Carl. Although I disliked him intensely, I saved his hide, for my sister's sake. Like some mothers of wayward sons, she thought he was really a candidate for sainthood, the victim of nasty people."

The magician paused for a sip of coffee. "After my sister died, I kicked Carl and his wife out. He had married a woman even greedier than he, and moved her in with me."

Mysto stood up and began to pace slowly in front of the fire. "It is important that I admit at the onset that I was more than a bit eccentric. My house was nearly always full of guests, and I played pranks on them, harmless practical jokes, materializing ghosts in the middle of the night, pulling magic tricks at unexpected moments, and generally keeping the household in a state of excitement, which my guests enjoyed.

"It would be quite natural for you to think of me as childish and immature. I was all of that, and more. I had plenty of money to use as I wished, and I was alone, in spite of a house full of people. A psychiatrist later told me I reverted to my childhood to escape from myself, by building a house of fun with secret rooms and passages, recalling books I had read as a child which stimulated my fantasies."

"You never married?" Mrs. Brant asked.

"No, and that is my real sorrow. It takes a rather special kind of woman to share the life of an itinerant entertainer, and there was one, who was to me much as Karen is to David. We planned to be married during the next pause in our schedule. We had taken the show to entertain troops during one of our various wars, and the enemy chose the

height of the show to shell us. She and three of my troupe were killed, two were badly wounded, and I escaped with a minor cut.”

The magician shrugged. “After that the prospect of marriage was gone, and so was my interest in keeping on. I built the estate and named it Mirella in her memory, and filled the place with anyone who cared to come, just to keep the stillness away.”

He accepted a coffee refill. “My nephew developed a plan to squeeze money out of me. While playing high stakes poker, he met a psychiatrist whose greed exceeded his ethics, if he had any. I believe the psychiatrist invested money in Carl’s scheme. He arranged an introduction to me through someone, and we became quite close friends, I thought. Naturally, he learned a great deal about me.

“Finally, he suggested that I was suffering from intense guilt feelings from having taken my fiancée to her death, and said those feelings could be exorcised with analysis sessions, which he offered out of friendship. I agreed.”

“Your nephew didn’t come into the picture at all?” Hartson Brant asked.

“Not at all. I never suspected he was at the root of it, until he showed his hand. Well, we had some weeks of sessions, and then my psychiatrist stopped coming and wouldn’t answer calls or letters, and I was turned away when I went to his office. I kept a small apartment in the theatre district of New York, and one day while I was there I was served a subpoena to appear in court for a sanity hearing.”

The listeners gasped.

“Yes. My nephew had asked for my commitment. He let me know that, for a million in cash, he would let the insanity matter drop. I refused. After all, I knew I was sane.”

Mysto smiled wryly. “Carl had made his plea to a judge known for accepting large cash donations to be given by him to his favorite charity. You can imagine what charity.”

Derek asked, “Didn’t you get a lawyer at once?”

The magician shook his head ruefully. “No, Derek. I never needed a regular lawyer. My business legal needs were handled through my accountants. I was a true innocent, believing in the system of justice, and I knew a court would find me sane.”

“But the court had to give you a lawyer,” Dr. Brant commented.

“Yes, and did. A stupid man who may also have taken a donation to his favorite charity. My psychiatrist testified that I was mentally incompetent—insane, within the legal meaning of the term, and recited details he had learned of my pranks, ghostly manifestations, and so on, and on. A pair of his colleagues examined his notes and testimony, and concurred in his opinion. Carl also testified at exaggerated length. Between them, they made me out the worst madman in court history and a public menace.”

“Incredible!” Dr. Miller asked, “Didn’t you ever get good legal aid and a competent examination?”

“No, although I tried. But I was without funds or friends. The court had me immediately locked up in the Bellevue psychiatric ward, froze my assets, and named as trustee a Newark bank where I had a substantial account. This was at Carl’s suggestion. In solitary confinement, I had no communication except for attendants, and when I pleaded that I was quite sane, I was doing no more than the worst real case in the institution.

“Then the court remanded me to a private sanitarium in upstate New York, costs to be paid by the trustee bank. This was at Carl’s suggestion because the amount in that bank was a relatively minor part of the estate, and he was after control of the whole thing.”

“You must have lost hope,” Barby said sympathetically.

“Yes, for a while. When I tried to get in touch with old friends, I had no response. I found later, through the one person who came to my aid, that Carl had been in touch with all my friends and employees, and told them that his poor old uncle was hopelessly mad and would surely try to get in

touch. He told them it would be more humane to ignore me than to answer and raise false hopes.”

“I’m beginning to look forward to meeting Carl,” Scotty said grimly.

“I hope you never do, Scotty. At first I thought the staff at the sanitarium would realize I was sane, but they were only interested in examining me about the crazy exploits in the court record. Finally, I accepted the fact that I was stuck. They allowed me pencil and paper, and I began a project I’d once planned, a definitive history of magic, in outline, because I had only my memory.”

Mysto chuckled. “I had the talisman. At first I hoped the resident medicos would realize its value and accept it as evidence that I was emotionally stable, but either they were not attuned or didn’t believe their feelings—probably the latter. It happens more often than you might think. People just refuse to believe anything out of the ordinary, especially if it has mystic connotations.”

“I’m surprised they let you have a stone, even a small one,” Dr. Winston commented.

“Ah, but it was essential to my well-being,” Mysto said, laughing. “It held my soul, and I would die without it at hand. I threw tantrums, screamed until I had no voice left, beat my head against the wall, and finally collapsed. The moment they gave it to me I became a quiet, smiling, perfect patient. I repeated the performance until they gave up and I was allowed to keep it. After a while they put me in a ward of quiet, harmless people, where we each had a room and bath, and only the main ward doors were locked.”

“How much time had elapsed?” Dr. Brant asked.

“About three years. In all that time I had one occasional visitor, a former assistant who had been with me during the shelling that killed my fiancée. He was wounded badly, and ceased performing. Instead, he became a carnival barker, and later operations manager for a string of three carnivals that moved around the region. By one of those wonderful coincidences that happen perhaps once in a lifetime, he was

inspecting a carnival playing the city where I was sent when the local paper announced my arrival with a feature headed, 'Famous Magician a Patient at Sweetacres.' From then on, whenever he was in the area, he came and spent a couple of hours."

"Your nephew didn't know him, I guess," Rick observed.

"No. He had never been to the house. Well, I began to itch for freedom, and when my friend said he'd be back in a month or so, I asked him to bring me some special black hair dye."

"Did the sanitarium actually allow you hair dye?" Jan asked in surprise.

"Yes, but it took time and a new act. I said I'd decided to grow young again. I explained that, for my hair to grow black again, it would have to be encouraged, and shown how, so I needed hair dye. They laughed when out of my sight, of course, but I pleaded and wept and persisted and made a nuisance of myself. Finally, the psychologist in charge of my case told me the problem was that they could never explain an expenditure for hair dye to the trustees. I told him I could have a friend bring it, and he finally gave up. Why not? It was a harmless fancy."

The listeners were sitting forward, waiting for more details.

"Everything depended on timing. I knew there was a better chance of things going wrong than of going right, but what did I have to lose? The essence of my plan was this: across the hall was a patient who had suffered from some mental problem that kept him staring into space for hours on end. He had no visitors, and seldom spoke to anyone. He also suffered from a bad heart, and emphysema, and his principal sound was a continuous cough.

"He was about my size, with the same color eyes and white hair. We didn't look a lot alike, but we were of the same facial type. Through the Talisman, I was *en rapport* with him to the extent his troubled mind allowed, and I sensed far better than the outside physician who came to

treat us that he was nearing the end. Morbid as it seems, I just waited for the poor man to die.

“My friend came, bringing the hair dye. He had taken the precaution of buying a standard brand, emptying it out, and refilling the container with the special dye, which is a kind actors use. It dyes hair well, but washes right out with soap and water. I gave my friend a phrase I would write to him to say when I needed him for the final act.

“I could feel the man across the hall fading, and I’m sure he had a series of slight heart attacks over a period of a few weeks. I could sense brief intervals of pain, to which he paid no attention. When his energy level got so low I could barely read him, I wrote to my friend that, when the dye wore off in about ten days, I would see if my hair had started turning black as I had hoped.”

“Of course, you planned a substitution,” David offered. “But suppose the man had died during the day when attendants were about?”

“That was the chance of which I spoke, David. But he was considerate enough to die about three in the morning. Actually, the odds were on my side, if I understand the statistics. Most deaths in institutions supposedly occur in the early morning hours before dawn. I felt him go, because I was keeping the talisman tight in my hand; it had become a reflex by that time. I carried him to my own bed, rubbed dye in his hair, then washed it from my own. When the shift came on in the morning, they saw what they expected to see in the man’s room, an old white-haired man coughing his life away. And, in my bed, a black-haired man who had died in the night.”

“But how could that work?” Rick protested. “Surely the attending physician and the staff knew both you and the other man.”

“True, Rick. But there are things that people don’t realize. First, people who are institutionalized tend to become non-persons. They become ‘cases’ and are treated as objects, not as people. The staff knew me quite well, because the manifestations of my madness they had seen were amusing,

though harmless, but they had no interest in examining my ‘dead body’ closely. On the other hand, my dead friend had been almost a zombie with nothing memorable except his cough.”

“I can see that,” Scotty agreed. “But physicians who treat the sick do have to see people as people, don’t they?”

“Not in an institution, Scotty, when the physician is called in only occasionally. I saw the attending physician call on my departed friend several times, and not once did he stay for more than two minutes, and not once did he look the man fully in the face. Nor did he really look at me when he gave me a routine exam. He looked, but he did not see. When he examined the body that morning, he put his stethoscope down on the chest, gave a brief look at the eyes, signed the death certificate attesting heart failure and left. The door was open, and I watched.”

Derek spoke up. “Magicians learn quickly that people see what they expect to see. The doctor naturally expected to see an older man with black hair and hazel eyes, and that’s what he saw.”

“Exactly, Derek. Thank you.” The magician added, “Of course you realize that death strips personality from the face, often making it hard to recognize even persons we knew fairly well.”

“I can see how planning the substitution would have been easy for the Master of Illusion,” Karen said in admiration.

“Thank you, Karen. Of course, there was one more step. In four days, my departed friend had a visitor, an employee of my carnival buddy, who showed up with blonde hair and moustache, in neat suit and hat.

He had come, presumably, to talk over a financial matter. After a half-hour visit, the man left. When the attendants came around with afternoon refreshments, they found a bald man bound and gagged in the bathroom.”

“Didn’t that get him in trouble?” Scotty asked.

“Very briefly. He threatened to sue because a madman had attacked him, knocked him out, then stole his clothes.

The staff found it hard to accept that the patient was capable of it, but, on the other hand, a strange visitor might have triggered a sudden adrenaline flow. The moustache seemed suspicious, but he told them he liked his looks in one, but was unable to grow a decent one. They finally gave him clothes and turned him loose after carefully noting his false name and address. He joined my friend and me at a motel, where I had gone at once.”

Rick laughed. “So when the hunt started, it wasn’t even for you!”

“True, Rick. We drove to one of his carnivals, where I went to work in a game stall. But I must shorten this tale. After two months with the carnival, I put on a simple disguise and made my way to Whiteside and home. I brought with me a knapsack of food and a few other necessities, plus some clothes and toiletries, and moved in. The furnace was on, necessary to keep the pipes from freezing, so I had heat and hot water. All the comforts of home, not in the regular rooms, but in my favorite hideaway. I had often hidden there to get away from the people I invited.”

“When was this?” Derek asked.

“I’d guess a week before your people started redecorating the place and doing some minor construction, Derek. I soon realized, of course, that the house had been leased, but there was nothing I could do about that. When I overheard a voice I now recognize as Karen’s, in the Phantom Caravan room, say that the mural they were painting might be the best magic of the whole show—well, I went into shock at the realization that magicians were about to move in.”

“We didn’t launch our act until after you retired,” David commented. “I’m sure you’d never heard of the Camerons.”

“Not quite so. My friend filled me in on the gossip and news of the magic circuit and spoke very highly of twins who were great magicians in spite of twinning up on the audience now and then. But it was some time before I realized that the new tenants were you.”

“We have to twin up to do some of the things Mysto did

alone.” Derek smiled.

Mysto chuckled. “I’m near the end of this tale. Not only did I find preparation for new tenants, I also found that my nephew was there before me.”

“Living there?” Dr. Winston asked.

“Working, actually. With some friends. At the height of the Cold War when Civil Defense was being pushed, I built a shelter, a very large and elaborate one, under what is now the formal garden in the rear. Its center is under the hammer of Thor. You older ones may recall that such measures often brought laughter from people, so I concealed the entrance as I had concealed the ways to my rooms and passages. My nephew knew about the shelter, as did my sister. I equipped it with bunks, entertainments, and a year’s supply of rations and canned water.”

“How is it entered?” Scotty asked.

“Through the downstairs recreation room, or a secret garden entrance. When I ran out of the food I had brought with me, I started into the shelter to get some of the supplies cached there. I didn’t choose to live there, because I much preferred my hidey-hole. Anyway, I ran into Carl in the recreation room.”

Mysto laughed. “He thought I was a ghost. For a moment I thought he would drop dead from fright. But, alas, I had caught a snuffle, and I sneezed. Now, ghosts are said to do many things, but I’ve never heard of one sneezing. Neither had my nephew. He started for me, and I thought it best to run, because the panel was opening behind him and I could hear other voices. I fled up the secret stairs, which you have discovered, and popped into my haven, which neither you nor Carl has found.”

“The entrance must be at the other end of the corridor,” Rick guessed.

Mysto smiled. “I was grateful then for the work going on by the new tenants. Without it, I’m sure Carl would have physically torn the house apart to find me. Since then, they and I have played hide and seek by night. Once the House of

Illusion was in operation, there was plenty of food in the refrigerators, and I admit to scavenging a bit. Then, while cutting a bit of cheddar cheese one night, one of Carl's people sneaked up on me. In the struggle for the knife, I got cut before I could knock him out. I see your surprised looks, but I've been adept at oriental martial arts for years. I doubt that I could handle Carl, but his friends are of no consequence."

"We saw someone who must be Carl the first night we kept watch," Scotty told the magician. "If I'd known what you just told us, I'd have been tempted to use my club."

"Better that you didn't, Scotty. He'll get his, one of these days. But, to conclude. I was in a rather precarious position until last week. I was sitting quietly, rubbing the Talisman--! often do that, as Greeks, Turks and other Middle-Easterners rub the amber beads that the Greeks call *komvoyolis*, and others caress little 'worry stones'—and I was wishing someone would come and bail me out of the mess I was in."

"I can see the several facets of the mess," Hartson Brant agreed. "You couldn't make yourself known without disclosing that you were an escaped 'madman,' you couldn't turn yourself over to your nephew, and it would be extremely chancy to put yourself at the mercy of tenants you didn't know. Meanwhile, you had to eat, and ultimately find a way out of the dilemma."

"A concise summary, thank you. While musing and caressing the stone, I suddenly found myself *en rapport* with Jan, a quite strong connection. Of course, I didn't know who she was, but I could tell it was a young woman. Each time she came back to the house, the rapport grew stronger. I could sense that under her curiosity, and what I felt was real sweetness, there was strong character and courage. I had hope suddenly."

"Thank you for those nice words about my daughter," Mrs. Miller said, smiling.

"Well deserved, as we both know. Jan brought Rick, Barby and Scotty, and before long I convinced myself that they would be glad to help me. By then I knew who the Camerons were, and I was quite sure they would also extend

a hand to an ancient colleague. But I could not just walk out of the woodwork, so to speak, until I was sure it would not end in a confrontation with Carl and his friends. I'm *en rapport* with Carl, even without the Talisman. He is an extremely powerful personality, and a dangerous one. So it was easy to keep track of his whereabouts. Not until the twins and Karen, and my four young friends came this morning, when Carl and company were not on the premises, did the safe opportunity come."

"You dropped the talisman for Jan last night," Dr. Miller reminded him.

"Yes. I explained that to them this morning. Just as I recognized Jan and Barbara, the Talisman told me Carl was near. I dropped it for her, because our communication had been mostly initiated by me. I wanted to know her feelings from the transmitting end, so to speak. I knew something would have to happen soon, or the infection in my arm would spread and become deadly."

Winston spoke up immediately. "Do you mean the Talisman is a transmitter?"

"No, Dr. Winston. The person is the transmitter. The stone is... well, the closest I can come to an explanation is that it is a passive amplifier. It has no power supply, no creative properties. It only can amplify feelings that are there, and I don't know how it does that."

"Must people be *en rapport*, as you call it?"

"That's a handy way of saying simply that people are able to exchange emotions through the stone. It is not true of all people, and the ability varies."

Hartson Brant said slowly, "Then, for the stone to work, individuals have to be in tune with it. In resonance, we would say in the case of an electronic circuit, or a tuning fork and a musical instrument string."

"A good analogy, sir. The degree of resonance varies greatly with the individual. As a general rule, I've found that the higher the intelligence and the greater the creativity, the stronger the resonance—although those are not the sole

factors. I've known highly creative, near-genius people who are deaf to the stone. The intelligence and creativity have to be within a certain kind of mind, which is also something we can't define."

"How well are you in resonance with our children?" Mrs. Brant asked.

"Quite well, but different for each. I found myself in useful rapport with Rick this morning, even from here to the estate, and I've sensed Barby and Scotty, and even the twins, better than average, though to a lesser degree than Rick. I believe Karen and I are in excellent resonance." He smiled at Jan. "But this special young woman and I are in superb resonance. One degree more and we would have been close to real telepathy."

"I felt pain this morning," Rick confirmed. "It was your arm hurting, because I put my hand right where you were cut I knew it was you. It had to be."

"How is it possible to receive sensation at such a distance?" Dr. Winston demanded.

"I wish we knew. I can only tell you that, when resonance is better than average, it seems possible to actually transmit feelings deliberately, rather than depending on those which simply happen."

Winston had more to ask. "Would you be willing to work with me, Mr. Wayland? I'm sure you know that one of the major questions about extra sensory perception is the mode of transmission. If we could find out exactly what the stone amplifies, as well as how it does it, we would open up a whole new field of investigation."

"You can count on me, Dr. Winston."

Mrs. Brant asked, "Where do the stones come from?"

"I'll give you a guess. That's all it is. I think the stones are a form of stony meteorite. There are stony meteorites, you know, and their composition varies. Mine is not unique. Some have been recorded in history. Socrates is said to have owned one, and there is reference to one in the Norse Sagas. The Pueblo Indians once worshipped such a stone, and one

appears in the oral traditions of the Maori of New Zealand.”

“Where did yours come from?” was Barby’s question.

“From a sailor in San Francisco who came to me after the show. He said he bought it from a Malay who claimed to have stolen it from a figure in the Shan Hills of Burma. It was supposed to be magic, he said, but it wouldn’t work for him.”

“You’d better take it,” Jan said, rather sadly. She held it out.

“Not just yet.” Mysto smiled understandingly. “I know how it is, Jan. Here in this room are a dozen people who either like you very much, or who love you very dearly. While you hold the stone you are literally immersed in their love and affection. It must be a wonderful feeling.”

“It is,” Jan said simply.

Rick sensed very clearly how Jan felt. He diverted attention from her with a question. “Mr. Wayland, I’m sure there are lots more things to be said, but here’s one big one. You said your nephew and his friends were working. Working on what?”

“Ah, I did forget that, didn’t I?” Mysto reached for his wallet. “I managed to sneak into the shelter one night when they were out, presumably peddling their wares. I took a couple of samples. Have one.”

He held out a new, crisp, twenty dollar bill.

CHAPTER XIV

The Gathering of Forces

Rick knocked at the door of the captain's office at the Whiteside State Police Barracks, and at the call of "Enter," went in and greeted Captain Douglas.

"Got time for some visitors?"

The captain's eyebrows went up. "Social? Or police business? Not that it matters. I have time for both. Who are these visitors?"

Rick put his head out the door and called. "Come on in."

Jan, Barby, and Scotty walked in and greeted the captain, then stood aside. Mysto, his arm in a sling the doctor had just put back on, went in and gave his cordial little bow.

For an instant Captain Douglas stared, then he jumped to his feet. "My Sainted Aunt, Mr. Wayland! For a moment I thought the Spindrifft gang had brought me a ghost. Sir, you look just wonderful, although your hair has gone white. But what do you mean by being alive and well when the New York State Police assured me you were dead?"

Mysto held out his good hand to the officer. "First, let me congratulate you. It was Sergeant Douglas when last we met, I think. I'm glad to see you've risen so high. As to your comment about my death, wasn't it Mark Twain who once told a newspaper that its report of his death was greatly exaggerated?"

"I'd like to hear about it."

"Of course. But I've already bored my young friends with it, and I can't very well ask them to sit through another long recital."

"You certainly can!" Barby exclaimed. "I've never heard anything so fascinating. I'd love to hear it again."

"So would I," Jan agreed, and Rick and Scotty echoed her. "Very well, then, if the captain has the time."

“I do. In fact, I insist. Please sit down, all of you.”

Mysto retold his tale, but did not go into so much detail about the Talisman. He told the captain what it was, and how it had helped put him in touch with Jan and the rest of the Spindrift four. When he completed the story, he handed Captain Douglas a counterfeit bill.

The captain examined it carefully. “Very good. It wouldn’t fool a real expert, but I think it would get by most store-keepers and most new bank tellers.”

“We looked at it,” Rick told him. “How is it different from the real one?”

“Not in appearance,” Captain Douglas replied. “That’s quite good. The difference is in the feel. I’d guess this was printed by offset, whereas real money is printed from plates on a unique kind of paper which leaves a subtle, textured feeling, noticeable to anyone who has handled money for any length of time. To an experienced teller it wouldn’t feel right. Then, if he put a magnifying glass on it, I suspect he’d see some imperfections, not only in the print but in the paper. In good money, the little colored threads that most people don’t notice are right in the paper. These colors are printed.”

The captain pushed his intercom button and spoke to the clerk in the outer office. “Willy, get me Special Agent Bill Ewing at the Federal Building in Newark. He’s in the Secret Service, Treasury Department. If he’s not there, track him down.”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you mind a few questions, Mr. Wayland?”

“Not at all.” Mysto laughed. “If only you knew how pleasant civilized conversation is to one who has been deprived of it, you wouldn’t even ask.”

“Fine. I’m sure you’re aware that it is my duty to report this reappearance to the New York authorities and to the court?”

“I’m quite aware of it,” Mysto returned, unruffled. “And of course, you will do so.”

“You sound confident that it will not mean too much trouble for you.”

“I am confident. I had a long talk with Rick’s dad this morning, and we already have been in touch with his attorney. You see, captain, all I ever really needed was a sponsor, one with such standing that he could not be pushed around. Now I have it. Dr. Brant’s lawyer will petition the Court of Appeals to set aside the lower court’s verdict on my sanity, and remand me to his custody pending examination by competent psychiatrists without prejudice.”

Rick explained, “We would have waited a few days to give Mr. Wayland time to meet and consult with Dad’s lawyer and some reputable psychiatrists, but we thought the counterfeiting thing was pretty urgent.”

“We’re afraid that, if Carl Cleary finds out Mr. Wayland isn’t in the Mirella estate anymore, he might pack it all up and run,” Jan added.

“We couldn’t very well walk in with a phony twenty without telling you how we got it,” Scotty pointed out.

“True.” Captain Douglas rubbed his chin. “Of course, the counterfeiting thing will keep us pretty busy until we raid the shelter and have Cleary and company safely in the hands of the Secret Service. Then I’ll have a report to write. It could be several days before I get around to reporting you to the New York people, Mr. Wayland.”

“I’m going to get a bumper sticker for the car,” Barby said happily. “One that says, ‘Support Your State Police.’”

“Thank you, Barby. We’ll appreciate the plug. Jan, you’re very quiet. Do you still have the stone Mr. Wayland described?”

Jan took it from her pocket. “Here it is, captain.”

Captain Douglas examined it without touching. “It looks ordinary enough. Do you suppose it would work for me?”

“Pick it up and see,” Jan urged.

The officer did so. “Bless Bess! It does work. I guess I’m... what is it?”

“En rapport,” Jan said.

“In resonance,” Rick offered.

The captain gave them all a warm smile. “I’m glad you like me, because I like all of you. Thank you, Jan.” He handed it back. He addressed the magician rather hesitantly. “This will be rather expensive for the Brants until the court releases your estate, which may be a long, drawn out affair. If a loan would help...”

“Thank you, captain. Thank you very much. Fortunately, it won’t be necessary. The biggest joke of all is this: I always kept a large amount of money in the house, and it’s still there. Had my nephew only known it, he could have done very well for himself without breaking the law—if he could have found my cache. Also, I have substantial resources in other forms, which Carl knows nothing about, nor does the court.”

Captain Douglas laughed. “I wonder how many laws you broke by substituting that other patient for yourself and then escaping. But that’s a problem which belongs to the State of New York, and I’m glad to leave it to them.”

Mysto smiled. “Dr. Brant suggested that my best defense would be a powerful offense. I think we will institute suit against the court, the judge, the state, the sanitarium, and all parties to this affair on the grounds of false imprisonment and whatever else a clever attorney can think up. I’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

“What will you do when this business is cleared up? Or at least in the long waiting period for court action?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Mysto admitted. “I’ll have the estate back and the Camerons will be my tenants. I wonder if they’d like the landlord to play a small part in their act?”

The young people gasped. “They’d be knocked silly by the very idea,” Barby exclaimed. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, yes. I’m not too old to handle an illusion or two now and then. I have a hankering for an audience again. It’s a built-in failing of show people. What’s more, it’s time I took

on some superior performers to train in my own exclusive illusions. Do you think they'll accept?"

Jan said, astonished, "Of course! And not only because you're the Master Magician. They like you as a person. The Talisman told me so."

The intercom rang, and Captain Douglas tipped the switch. "Yes?"

"Mr. Ewing, Captain. I found him at the police station in Bayonne."

"Thanks." The officer picked up the phone. "Hello, Bill. Ed Douglas at Whiteside. How would you Federal types like to have us poor country boys hand you the counterfeiting operation you've been hunting, all wrapped up in ribbons?"

The phone erupted with excited sounds.

"Nope. No joke. You're in Bayonne, so you can be here in twenty minutes. Want to come over and get the dope first hand? Just a sec, Bill." He turned to Mysto. "Can you wait?" At the magician's nod, he spoke into the phone again. "Come on over."

The Captain hung up and asked, "Can you give us all the details offhand? Locations of doors, possible traps, escape routes, and so on?"

"Of course. There are two entrances to the shelter. One is through the downstairs recreation room and the other is a secret entrance under one of the statues in the garden. It was the outside entrance they used for their comings and goings. The watchman was easy to evade. If he'd turned his dog loose instead of keeping him on a lead, Carl and friends would have had a problem."

Rick spoke up. "How can we be sure the gang is inside?"

"The Talisman," Jan said instantly. She shuddered. "I can tell you if the nephew is there. I'm sure he's the one I felt. He was so hateful, so wrong-feeling and vicious. Just as Mr. Wayland described him."

Mysto shook his head. "Jan, you didn't tell me you had sensed Carl, although I should have known it."

“Yes, twice strongly and a couple of times less so. The night you gave me the Talisman, he let go with a blast that almost knocked me down. It was awful. Rick had to hold me up, and I dropped the Talisman.”

Mysto took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry you had to be exposed to that creature. As I said, he’s a powerful, angry personality who emits bursts of temper. What’s more, he’s as strongly in resonance with me and the Talisman as you are—which means you’re in resonance with him, too. No, Jan, you will not use the Talisman. In your life you will come across evil, because it exists, and some of it will be attuned to the stone, which I intend for you to have eventually. But no more of Carl for you, my dear. I’m your pointer, captain.”

“Very good, Mr. Wayland.”

Rick decided now was the time to make an important point. He addressed the captain. “Sir, it was the four of us who got Mr. Wayland out of the estate, and sort of solved the mystery. Now, I know some of the Federal law officers want no part of ordinary people hanging around while they perform. So, if you please, we hope you will be our protector—or maybe advocate—so we can be there at the finish.”

“For certain, Rick. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, Scotty and I can be wherever Mr. Wayland is, and the girls could have a view out over the garden, if Mr. Wayland would tell you which room would be safe, with no secret entrances. Then maybe you could station a rifleman with them in case of a break. I imagine you’d want a long gun looking down on the garden, wouldn’t you, sir?”

Captain Douglas chuckled. “You make your point nicely, Rick. I would station a rifleman, or maybe two, where the view is best, and if the girls happened to be visiting the Camerons, putting them with my men would be a natural thing to do for their protection. Of course, you and Scotty would be visiting, too, and when Bill Ewing finds out what your part was in this, I doubt he’ll object, anyway.”

“Thanks, captain. But don’t exaggerate our part. We’ve never accomplished so little. All Scotty and I managed to do

was hang around in the darkness. Our role was mostly just being there.”

“You undervalue your services,” Mysto reproved. “True, it was Jan who was the most in resonance with me and the stone, but would she have continued to come to the house without you and Scotty? The Millers wouldn’t have allowed it, and your folks wouldn’t have permitted Barby such freedom of movement were she not in your care. Also, my trust was in you, as well as in the girls. I would never have come out if they had been there alone.”

“Thanks for those kind words,” Scotty said. “But, as Rick said, mostly we were just there.”

“Nonsense. It was your persistence that finally helped me get free. I’ve never seen a better team. Without Barby, Jan would not have been there to take the Talisman and call me out. Without you two in easy reach the girls wouldn’t have dared to invade the house by night. You were all necessary, and my gratitude is to all of you.”

“He’s right,” Jan said firmly.

Barby said, “Of course, he’s right. When do we do this, captain? Will it be a long wait before you and the Federal people move?”

“I’m going to push for tomorrow morning, Barby. Just to give us enough time to cover all bases and get our troops ready. Meanwhile, I’ll sew up the place so tightly a mouse couldn’t get through.”

Jan linked her arm through Rick’s, and Barby’s eyes went from boy to boy. “We’ll go for it tomorrow, as a team, right?”

“As we should,” Scotty finished.

CHAPTER XV

The Heartbeat

On the morning following the visit to Captain Douglas' office, Rick, Scotty, the girls, and Derek sat in the kitchen of the House of Illusion, having soft drinks and cookies.

The chef and his staff were having a day off, because, in show business talk, "the house was dark." The next dinner show was three days away.

Elsewhere in the house were the Captain, Mysto, Jerry Webster, David, and Karen. Jerry's presence was due to a few of Captain Douglas' less pleasant memories of operations with Federal officers. Somehow, when local or state police made a major crime break jointly with Federal agencies, the role of the locals managed to get lost in the press and TV reports.

As the officer said privately to the boys, "I trust Bill Ewing completely. He's a good man. But if Jerry's there and the *Record* files his story with the Associated Press, I'll know the credits are reported accurately."

Rick was impatient as always. He knew that, just inside the estate fence, state troopers were getting into position to block all possible escape routes. Others would be arriving any minute. He was anxious to see them all assembled, ready to move in on Carl Cleary and company.

The others were talking about the mystery of the Mirella estate, and how only Mysto had all the answers. Rick observed, "Not quite all the answers. There's still at least one puzzle. We know Mysto and Carl's gang had been around the house, but you told us the dust was thick and undisturbed."

"I've thought about that," Derek admitted, "and we were wrong. What we thought of was footprints in the dust, or signs of it being disturbed, and there were none. What didn't occur to us until later, was that some of the rooms had no dust on the floor. As I look back, there was none in the recreation room or the kitchen. Of course the office and

entrance hall are carpeted.”

Mysto arrived in time to hear Derek’s comment. “Naturally. I was using the kitchen, and it had been cleaned up. Carl isn’t stupid. He would have cleaned the rooms he needed to use so any footprints wouldn’t lead to his hideout.”

Barby asked, “Are you sure we can’t be overheard?”

“Very sure,” Mysto replied. “I know all there is to know about this place. There’s no way Carl could know that we’re here unless he comes out through the recreation room, and he won’t do that by day.”

Captain Douglas came in with David and Karen. “First load coming up the driveway.” A truck arrived, turned, and backed to the loading platform at the rear of the house. The truck was emblazoned with the picture of a loaf of bread, and it carried the name of a famous bakery.

David opened the double doors and six troopers filed into the kitchen. At the captain’s signal, they arrayed themselves around the wall and waited for instructions.

A second truck arrived on the heels of the first. This time it held four men in civilian clothes. Rick and his friends knew one of them, Agent Bill Ewing. The others were also Secret Service agents, because, in addition to protecting the President of the United States, the Secret Service is charged with protecting the nation’s money against counterfeiting.

Ewing asked Mysto, “Are you sure your nephew is in the shelter?”

“Positive.”

Captain Douglas rose. “Shall we get to it? Barby, Jan, and Karen, you know where to go. Nagorski and Peters will go with you.” The two carried rifles.

Jan and Barby both had delighted smiles for the boys as they went with Karen and the troopers to the room Mysto had designated.

Two troopers, two Secret Service men, and Captain Douglas went downstairs to the recreation room, where Mysto had earlier shown the secret of the shelter door. The

five carried pistols, and the captain had a walkie-talkie. A loose nail in the baseboard was withdrawn and pushed into an innocent appearing nailhole.

Mysto, Ewing, and the other officers moved to the doors that opened into the formal gardens. Rick, Scotty, and Jerry let the leaders widen the gap and then followed, not talking or calling attention to themselves in any way. This was at the captain's instructions. He didn't want Ewing to have a chance to object to observers. Derek and David took up positions in the doorway, from which they had an excellent view.

The boys circled quietly around the massive statue of Thor with its non-operating fountain. Mysto had told them Thor's hammer was actually the shelter's vent, with the air intake well screened in the base. The fountain would flow when summer came.

Mysto went to a statue of Diana, Goddess of the Hunt, complete with bow and arrows and two hunting dogs. Silently he showed that a bronze clasp on the front of Diana's quiver moved, then pointed to a flagstone in front of the statue.

Ewing took his walkie-talkie out of the belt holster and held it to his lips. "We're in position, Ed."

Rick heard faintly, "Attention. We move in on a five-count. Counting now. One, two, three..."

Mysto had his hand on the metal clasp. "Four, five!" He turned it. The flagstone dropped, exposing a shaft with steel rungs leading downward.

Ewing was down the ladder in a flash, the other officers close behind. There was a sudden yell from below, muffled by earth and shaft, then a shot.

The boys hurried to Mysto. They were under orders not to follow the invading lawman, and Rick chafed with impatience; he wanted to know what was going on.

Suddenly Mysto groaned. He squeezed the Talisman tightly in his hand. "They haven't got him!"

“How do you know?” Rick asked quickly.

“I felt fright, then anger, and just then a strong feeling of relief. He got free somehow. I don’t know how.”

Scotty grabbed Rick’s arm in a grip that hurt. He pointed. Rick looked just in time to see a foot vanish behind a statue of the god Pan. He shot a glance at the window behind which the girls and troopers were watching and saw a rifle barrel project over the sill.

“Let’s go,” he gasped and motioned to the left. Scotty was off on the instant, and Rick sprinted to the right. He saw the trooper stand, rifle ready, and knew he had been seen.

The boys arrived simultaneously from opposite directions as they rounded Pan. Just as he dove headlong in a flying tackle for the legs, Rick saw the face of a big, beefy man contorted in rage. At the same moment, Scotty’s flying body hit the man above the waist. It was a well coordinated example of the old adage, “You hit’m high and I’ll hit’m low.”

The stranger went down with a crash like a redwood falling, striking Pan a direct blow. The satyr god teetered wildly and Rick scrambled for cover. Pan held a pan pipe, a reed syrinx cast in stone and held in place by a copper pin that had eroded. The god rocked as Carl Cleary tried to scramble to his feet, fell into the statue again, and left it rocking. He whirled and got to one knee, teeth showing in berserk rage, and was reaching for Scotty when about ten pounds of stone pan pipe made a perfect landing on the back of his head. His eyes glazed; he fell forward on his face.

The boys stood up as Mysto arrived, followed by troopers who had rushed in from the perimeter. The magician bent and rolled his nephew part way over. His nose and forehead were bleeding freely from the impact with the flagstone under the statue’s edge.

“Well, Carl,” Mysto said softly, “it looks as though the Dark Ferrash has struck you at last.”

Rick had done some catching up on Omar Khayyam, and he recognized the reference to the Angel of Death. “No, sir. He’s just knocked out.”

A trooper verified the statement and handcuffed Carl's hands behind his back.

Derek and David joined the boys, and in a moment the two troopers with rifles brought Jan, Karen, and Barby into the garden. As Jan came up, she met Rick's eyes. "He's the one I felt. The hateful one. I felt another awful blast from him when Mr. Ewing dropped into the shaft and when you hit him."

"I'm glad you weren't holding our Talisman," Mysto told her. "It's bad enough that you could feel him without it. With the stone in your hand you would have been sickened."

"What's happening below?" Scotty demanded.

A trooper answered. He held up his walkie-talkie. "Just got the word. The others are being herded upstairs in the house. There are only two more. One man let fly a shot that missed before one of the troopers grabbed him."

"Carl's a shrewd one," Mysto said, shaking his head. "He must have installed another exit just in case of something like this."

"He couldn't have gotten beyond the fence anyway," Barby pointed out. "There were troopers all around. But I'm glad Rick and Scotty got him. And Jan, Karen, and I had grandstand seats." She put her arm around her brother and squeezed.

"You had the best view of all," Rick agreed. He gave her an affectionate smile. Jan took his hand. "Do you suppose we can go below, now?"

"Let's just do it," Scotty said. "I'll lead."

The girls followed Scotty down, then Mysto followed Karen. Rick looked around for the twins, but they had gone into the house to greet the officers and their prisoners. He went down the steel rungs into a huge room made of reinforced concrete. It was well equipped with furniture, including four day beds.

Against one wall was gear that Rick recognized instantly as an offset camera, plate-making and other equipment, and

a printing press. Away from the wall were tables, some stacked with reams of paper. One held an industrial type paper cutter.

Rick's friends were clustered around a separate table. He walked over in time to hear a Secret Service agent say, "I'd guess these stack up to about a million. Maybe a bit more. And look here." The agent pointed to another stack. "These are not cut yet." The twenty dollar bills had been printed six to a sheet.

"Their lab was set up in the bathroom over there." The agent pointed. "They were just getting ready to cut these. The big guy made a dive behind that couch over there, but we didn't worry because he couldn't hide, we thought. Take a look."

Behind the couch was a drape that concealed a hole chiseled in the concrete, an exit big enough for even Carl Cleary. From the opening a short tunnel ran to the base of a ladder.

Captain Douglas arrived through the recreation room door. "Mr. Wayland, your nephew is conscious again. Want to talk to him?"

"No, Captain. He and I have nothing to say to each other. Rick, Scotty, and a stone syrinx said it for me."

"Very well. Bill and his men are loading the prisoners right now. Some of my men will escort them to Newark and jail."

"Where's Jerry?" Rick asked. He had just missed his friend.

"Here he comes." Scotty pointed to the recreation room door.

Jerry was grinning widely. "I just took some shots of the prisoners being put in the truck. Do you guys know I fired just as you hit Cleary? It should be a beautiful action shot. Now I want a couple of the press and the bills I see on that table and I'll be gone."

Rick walked over to the press with him. The metal table

on which it rested had been wired to a water pipe, probably both for stability and to ground it. No wonder the thumping had been audible. It had been transmitted through the piping in the house all the way to the gate house.

“There’s no printing plate on it,” Scotty noted.

The agent laughed. “You didn’t think we’d let you print some of your own, did you?”

“No,” Scotty retorted, “and I’ll bet we don’t get any samples of that finished pile, either.”

“We may get some in change, sometime,” David suggested.

The agent shook his head. “Not unless you travel to Timbuktu or someplace like that. The stuff is very good, but not good enough for very wide distribution here. They’ve been smuggling it to soft currency third world countries where people aren’t used to many American bills and how they look and feel. We’ve known about it for some time, and we think we have the outlets pretty well blocked. We’ve worked hard to trace the phony bills back to their origin, but these people had such an elaborate system of distribution that when we finally got back to a small firm in Bayonne, it turned out that they didn’t know the counterfeiters and never saw the people who left bundles of counterfeits in a new place every time. They’d get a phone call and a place. They paid the counterfeiters by bank transfer of money to a numbered account in Liechtenstein after taking their cut.”

“So this ties up the whole thing?” Jan asked.

“It does. And believe me, we’re grateful for the help. It’s been a long hunt.”

“I want to try the press,” Rick told them. “I don’t care about the plate. I want to hear the sound.” He found the switch and threw it.

The press cylinder rolled. Though he looked he couldn’t see the parts that made the noise, but the familiar rhythm was there, thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP.

Scotty laughed. “There beats the mysterious heart of the

House of Illusion.”

“We’ll be taking all of the equipment out, including the press,” the Secret Service agent told them.

“The house is about to have a heart attack,” Barby declared. Jan chuckled. “Let’s hope it never gets a transplant!”

CHAPTER XVI

The Return of Mysto

It was a gala occasion. Announcements on television and radio, and in newspapers heralded the return of the Magnificent Mysto at the House of Illusion. The house was filled to overflowing, with extra tables added in every unused space.

The Camerons had invited the Spindrifters to come as guests, but Hartson Brant protested that they planned to bring five others, and a baker's dozen was too big a strain to put on Cameron hospitality. Karen insisted, and settled the discussion with a hurt look and a question. "Aren't we friends?"

Now the Brants and Millers were at the center of the Phantom Caravan room once more, and with them were the Winstons, Jerry Webster, and Jerry's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Webster.

The Whiteside *Morning Record* was a member of the Associated Press, and Jerry's stories and pictures had gone out over AP wires and were picked up by newspapers, and radio and TV stations across the country, a great byline exclusive beat for Jerry. His reports had been the basis for reporter questions at the Ewing press conference in Newark on the afternoon of the raid.

Captain Ed Douglas was pleased. The state police had, for once, received the proper share of credit. Jerry had seen to that.

Rick was enjoying the performance, but he had had a couple of shocks during the day and his mind was not fully on the show.

At his side, Jan laughed as Derek reached into an oversize pocketbook borrowed from a lady he had invited to the stage, and plucked out a live rooster, which he held up, then handed to Tom, the part-time Mongol. It was the lady's expression that was funny; she stared into her pocketbook in

horrified disbelief.

It was hard for Rick to keep from looking at Jan instead of the show. She was stunning in a silvery white dinner dress, her lustrous dark hair set in a style new to her—and to Rick. Her only jewelry was a pair of earrings and an unusual gold pendant at the bottom of a short gold chain.

The pendant, like a slim rectangle rounded at top and bottom, was a cartouche, an Egyptian symbol of identity. Within the slightly raised outer rim were hieroglyphs identical to those found in ancient Egyptian writings. These spelled out, in phonetic Egyptian, ‘Janice Virginia Miller.’ The earrings were much smaller cartouches which said simply, ‘Janice.’ The set was a present from Rick, handmade for Jan when he and Scotty were in Egypt .

The Camerons on stage went through a variety of illusions, from those based on apparatus to pure manipulation. All were new to the Spindrift group because the program changed each week. Rick thought it was a better show than the one on opening night.

Then Derek stepped to the front of the stage. “Guests of the House of Illusion, we have reached the moment you and we have been anticipating. We are honored that the greatest of magicians has come out of retirement to share with us each week an illusion he has created and which only he can perform. Please welcome the Magnificent Mysto!”

Mysto emerged from the wings in white tie and tails looking every inch the master of illusion. He bowed as the audience greeted him with applause, then bowed again as the applause faded.

“Thank you. Believe me, the sound of applause is, to a performer, as rain is to a desert flower. I will try to earn your applause with a small and gentle illusion.”

The magician turned toward the wing. “Hassan, if you please?”

Hassan, alias Archy, came from the wing with Tom, carrying what seemed to be white plastic sheets three feet wide and four feet long.

Mysto turned to the audience again. “Before my retirement, I specialized in large illusions such as some of those Derek has shown you tonight. But now, in my later years, I enjoy more intimate fun, leaving the spectacular illusions to the young and strong. Believe me, my friends, what you have seen tonight has required both strength and courage.”

Archy and Tom had unfolded the plastic sheets, which turned out to be a folding table about eight feet long, of shiny white plastic on a framework of white aluminum legs. They placed it center stage, only a few feet back from the footlights.

“We deal in illusion,” Mysto told the crowd. “But magic *does* exist There is a true magic in our children, and I believe it is strongest between the ages of four and eleven when the world itself seems magic to the fortunate ones, and even the less fortunate can spin webs of dreams and fantasies. I want to call on such a spinner of magic to help me tonight, if there is one among you.”

The house lights came up, and the magician looked out over the audience, searching.

Finally he pointed. “There, at the sixth table to the rear of the right center. Do I see a young lady of about six years? Please, pretty miss, will you help me?”

There was a moment of discussion at the table, then a little blonde moved through the tables to the stairs at right front of the stage and went up to the magician.

Mysto greeted her. “Thank you for coming. Please tell the audience your name, how old you are, and where you live?”

She spoke with surprising clarity. “My name is April Tyler, and I’m seven years old, and I live in Seaford.”

“Thank you, April. What is your daddy’s name? I see him watching us. And what does he do?”

Again, clearly. “His name is Captain Thomas Tyler and he’s the best fishing captain in the whole United States !”

The audience broke into applause.

Before the applause died, Rick saw that Scotty was having his share of the same problem that kept Rick's eyes busy. Scotty was having a hard time trying to keep from staring at Barby.

On stage, Archy and Tom brought out a rack on which about twenty fabrics in assorted colors were hanging, each by a corner. Tom went back into the wings and brought out a tall chair, like a bar stool with a back. He placed it behind the white table.

When only Mysto and April were left on the stage, the magician spoke. "What you see are silk scarves—not synthetics, but the natural kind, made by Chinese silkworms. I'm sure you all know that the silkworm spins his cocoon with yards and yards of silk which is unwound and spun into thread to make silks like those we have tonight.

"The question on which we base our illusion is this: does the silk, in the form of a scarf, carry any memory of once being a silkworm? If it does, perhaps a little magic can bring it back to an illusion of life as a silkworm once again."

Mysto took April's hand and led her to the rack. "April, little helper, I ask you to choose one of these pretty silks, so we can see if it remembers being a silkworm."

"Can I pick any one I want?"

"Any one at all. Do you have a favorite color?"

"I have two favorites. Blue and gold."

"Well, I see several shades of blue, but no gold. We do have a yellow, though."

April looked through the scarfs and finally pulled one toward her. "This one is the blue I like, and it has yellow flowers."

"Very pretty. Shall it be that one?"

April nodded, and Mysto unclipped it from the rack. "Please unfold it and hold it out so everyone can see it."

She did so. It was about a yard square.

"Now, April, it's time for you to take the high seat so you

can see everything that's going on, and be my special assistant.”

The magician lifted her to the high seat, then faced the audience.

“My friends, I must tell you for the sake of accuracy, that a silkworm in the raw, as found in nature, is not a pretty creature. So, if we can make a silkworm from this scarf, it will not look like its ancestors.” He held the scarf up again and showed both sides. It was simply a square of silken fabric.

Mysto laid the silk out on the table and began to fold. First he folded it double, then began folding back and forth as though pleating it. When he was finished it was about eighteen inches long and six or seven inches wide.

“First trial. Will the silk cooperate?” He picked up the middle at both ends and lifted the silk into peaks. When he let go, they collapsed back onto the table, as anyone would expect thin silk to do. He tried again, lifting the middle of the pile and again it collapsed.

Mysto shook his head sadly. “I’ve lost my touch. Our only hope is to be sure the silk has enough little girl magic. April, will you please run the scarf through your hand three times, like this?”

He took one corner of the silk and let it hang, then put his hand around it and made a fist. He pulled the scarf through his fist while holding it tightly.

April caught on quickly. She pulled the scarf through her tight little fist three times, then handed it back.

“Thank you. I’m sure it has enough little girl magic now to behave. Let us see.”

The magician shook the scarf out, showed it front and back, then laid it out on the table and folded it once more. But this time, when he ran his fingers down the length of the underside, the folded scarf stayed up, like a small tunnel of silk, its edges just touching the table. The audience applauded.

Working quickly, Mysto twisted one end around into a ball, twisted a bit more and tied two scarf ends, and the silkworm had a head with two little ears. A few twists and ties at the other end and the silkworm had a tail projecting out behind. The result looked astonishingly like a long, pretty blue caterpillar with head, tail, and yellow patches. Even more astonishing, it kept its shape.

“Is that a satisfactory silkworm, do you think, April?”

The little girl was sitting with eyes wide and mouth in a perfect O. She nodded vigorously. “It’s beautiful!”

“Thank you. Now let us see if it can perform for us. We want only a well-behaved silkworm.” Mysto had completed the figure at one end of the table. Now he walked to the other end and snapped his fingers. “Come, silkworm.”

The silkworm undulated the length of the table and stopped in front of him. The audience laughed and applauded, and April clapped her hands with pleasure.

“Now turn around, silkworm.” It did so, making a U-turn and straightening out again. “Go to the other end and turn once more, silkworm.” The silken creature obeyed perfectly. There was now long applause.

Mysto asked, “Do you think you could make it jump through a hoop, April?” She shook her blonde head. “I don’t think so.”

“Let’s see if I can. Hassan, do we have a hoop?”

Hassan brought one, a yellow ring about a foot in diameter.

Mysto held it in the air about three inches above the table. He pointed a finger at the silkworm. “Come! Jump!”

The silkworm wriggled, but didn’t move. Mysto repeated the command with a stern voice. The silkworm actually shook its head. The audience laughed and applauded.

Mysto heaved a great sigh “It’s as I feared. It takes little girl magic. April, will you tell this creature to jump?”

April giggled and leaned forward. “Please jump, silkworm!”

The silkworm sped forward, launched itself through the air and through the *hoop*, then skidded sideways to a stop at the edge of the table. The audience applauded again.

“Shall we have it jump once more, April?” Mysto asked,

“Yes.” As Mysto held the hoop in position she called, “Please jump again, silkworm, but be more careful.”

Again the silkworm sped forward and went through the hoop, but slowed and stopped without skidding. It turned, as though awaiting further instructions from its little mistress.

Like the rest of the audience, Rick was enthralled. The silk creature acted like a living thing, motion rippling along the sides when it wasn’t moving, and undulating smoothly when it moved.

“What else would you like it to do?” Mysto asked.

“Can it go backwards?”

“Ask it to, and see.”

April leaned forward. “Please go backwards, silkworm.”

The silkworm had to switch ends so that its tail was to the table length, but it did so, then went backwards to the other end, its little tail end wiggling.

Mysto said, “I think it behaves so well for you because you say please, April. Now what would you like it to do?”

She thought for a moment. “Could it go around and around the edge of the table?”

“I think it would depend on what you told it to do. If you told it to go in a circle, it would. Try it.”

She did so. The silkworm chased its tail around twice.

“The table is a rectangle,” Mysto said. “Do you know the kind of circle that will fit in a rectangle?”

She shook her head. Mysto turned to the audience. “Who can help us?”

Several shouted, “Ellipse!”

“That’s it,” Mysto agreed. “Ellipse. Say it, April.”

It came out *ellipth*, but that was close enough. She said slowly, "Silkworm, please go around the table in a ellipth."

The silkworm undulated happily around, then went around again with no further instruction.

Jan leaned close to Rick. "Honestly, I can believe he really brought it to life."

It seemed so. What was most amazing was that the magician had moved around freely, even turning his back once or twice on the moving silkworm. He made no motions with his hands as though controlling it, and looked more at April than the silkworm.

At Mysto's instructions, April told the silkworm to go to the center of the table and face the audience.

Mysto asked, "Do you know what performers do when they finish and the audience applauds?"

April did. "They bow."

"Yes. If you think it's time for our silkworm to take a bow, tell it to do so."

"Silkworm, please take a bow."

The amazing little creature raised up its front end and bent its rounded head forward as the audience applauded for long minutes. Then it settled down to the table once again.

Mysto lifted April down. "You have been a very fine helper indeed, April Tyler. You may help yourself to a silken scarf for each one of your girl friends, and one for your mother. Hassan will help you, in a moment."

To the audience, he said, "The illusion of life. Even life for a silk scarf, made possible by little girl magic. And for April's own scarf to keep, here is one..." He reached for the creation on the table "... that once obeyed her as a silkworm."

He picked up the silkworm by its tail, pulled it through his fingers and it was only a scarf once more. He displayed it front and back, then handed it to April.

"Now let us take our bows, April." The magician bowed, and the little blonde did a very creditable curtsy. The

audience applauded then rose to its feet and gave them a standing ovation.

The applause continued as Mysto left the stage and Hassan took April to the rack and helped her choose scarf after scarf. Mysto took two more bows, then left and the audience quieted.

Derek came forth. "It is the custom for shows like ours to end with a spectacular illusion, like materializing a tiger, or blowing up the magician. But what could be more arresting, charming, and spectacular than the illusion you have just seen? Such magic is possible only at the hands of the Marvelous Mysto. We would not try to follow such an act. And so, my guests, goodnight. We hope you will visit our house again."

Derek, Karen and their assistants took bows; then Mysto appeared to thunderous applause and the curtains closed.

Jerry Webster was first on his feet. "Please excuse me? I've got to get to April for an interview."

Rick laughed. "Go, boy!"

Then the audience was on its feet, nearly everyone talking at once. What they had just seen was clearly impossible. A silk scarf cannot be folded and twisted into a shape and then hold it and do tricks. Silk is springy, and such a scarf, crushed into a ball, explodes like a sponge when released. Must have been plastic.

Even if the scarf could hold its shape, it couldn't make complex moves without more strings than a marionette, and even if it had strings, which it did not, it couldn't jump through a hoop. Strings would have been visible.

Besides, to control the silkworm the magician would need to use his hands and pay close attention. Mysto had paid more attention to April than to his creation.

He must have used a different scarf than the one April picked. Only she had run it through her hands three times, and he held it out, showing both sides once. At the end, he had simply picked it up, run it through his hands again, and opened it out, then handed it to her. It had to be the same

scarf.

Rick was listening to all this as the Spindrift group moved with the audience. They would turn off shortly, and go to one of the small dining rooms where a reception for friends would be held.

He told his family and friends, “The obvious conclusion is that the whole thing was an illusion. The silkworm didn’t even exist!” Mysto’s return clearly was a smashing success.

CHAPTER XVII

Rite of Passage

About an hour after the reception following Mysto's return, Rick stood on the front porch of the Brant home and looked out at the sea glimmering in the light of a three-quarter moon. It was a fine night, the temperature in the forties, and even Diz, not normally a night dog, seemed to enjoy it. Diz was keeping Rick company while he waited for Jan.

Rick had thought about the astonishing silkworm on the way home, and he had a notion of how it might have been done. He suspected the pure white plastic table on which all could be seen so clearly was not as innocent as it appeared. There were very likely controlling circuits and series of small electro-magnets cast into it.

He had also noticed the care with which Tom and Archy had not only placed the table, but pushed the rear legs down hard, perhaps to be sure the table was stable, but also, probably, to ensure good contact for power supply and control circuit, or both.

Mysto had given the silkworm shape by running his hand underneath the fabric, from one end to the other. Rick would bet that what seemed to be a quick movement had also placed a magnet-responsive snap-out frame that gave the silk its shape, with a snap-back for quick palming when Mysto ran the silk through his fingers at the end. Rick would also bet that the silkworm's little ball of a head had not been empty.

No matter. It had been a convincing and completely charming illusion, even if April's commands might have been obeyed from the wings with the help of a joystick control.

Diz was getting a bit impatient, and chilly. He scratched at the door, and Rick let him in, then glanced at his watch. It was getting late, and he was also a bit impatient, and more than a little bit tense and uncertain.

In the library, he knew, Scotty was also in a state of confusion and uncertainty. As the Millers left for home, Barby and Jan started upstairs to Barby's room, then, as Scotty started to follow, heading for his own room, Barby stopped him.

As Rick looked on, his sister took Scotty firmly by the suit lapels, looked squarely into his eyes, and said in a tone that left no room for argument, "You wait here for me, in the library. Rick will be waiting for Jan on the front porch. And while you are waiting, I want you to think about two great big negatives. First, you are not my brother. Second, I am not your sister." With that she turned and hurried upstairs.

For Rick, the confusions of the day started much earlier with the morning mail and a letter for Mysto which Rick took to the Mirella estate. He founds trucks in the driveway and men unloading lumber, wall board, and other equipment.

Mysto was not a person to delay when a decision was made. The Camerons had agreed to move in, and already the third floor was being converted to fine, large apartments for Karen and David, and for Derek. Another apartment and guest rooms were to be created on the second floor for Mysto. The downstairs recreation room and other spaces were to be made into offices. Lounges and restrooms for the public were to be added to the left of the stairway.

The complete rebuilding of the second floor to create an apartment for Mysto, plus several guest rooms, would result in destruction of the hidden passageways and the magician's hideaway. Mysto promised a tour before the secret places were torn out. The hidden chamber and passages in the North wing, though, would remain. Their original purpose was not secrecy, but to provide a convenient and safe place from which lights and equipment high above the stage could be changed.

Mysto already had taken the Camerons to the main room which, as Rick had guessed, was above the Phantom Caravan room ceiling.

The old master of magic was a happy man. The Brant attorneys had assured him his affairs would be straightened

out very soon, and already they were negotiating a deal with the New York State's Attorney under which all charges against Mysto would be dropped and some compensation paid if he would refrain from suits against New York institutions. He could, if he chose, continue to sue the accusing psychiatrist. As for Carl Cleary and company, Bill Ewing was certain they would be guests of the Federal Prison Service for a long, long time.

Seeing the master's good humor, Rick sought the answer to a bothersome question. He hoped very much that his suspicions were correct. "Sir, what happens when two people touch the Talisman?"

"If you and I were to touch the stone together now, feelings from any other source would be blocked out simply because of the strength of the signal. You would feel strongly my emotions of the moment. If my attention were directed to you, it would be mostly what I felt about you. In the same way, I would feel strongly your feelings about me."

Rick swallowed hard. "Thank you, Mr. Wayland."

"My pleasure, Rick." The magician's eyes twinkled. "Give my love to Jan."

The second jolt of the day came when Rick was tying his tie, almost ready to go to the Mysto opening. He saw motion from the corner of his eye and turned to see in his doorway a strikingly beautiful, poised young woman. For a half-heartbeat he stood with mouth open, almost thinking it was a stranger. Then he moved to the doorway to greet his sister.

She was dressed in a lovely deep blue dinner gown that matched her eyes and looked sleek and elegant on her slim, feminine figure. Her hair was in a sophisticated but very appealing arrangement totally unlike her usual casual hairdo. For makeup, she needed only a bit of blue eye shadow and a soft tone of lipstick. Her only jewelry was earrings and a cartouche like those he had given Jan, except that hers was a gift from Scotty, and carried her name.

Rick shook his head in disbelief. "Barby, darling, you are simply gorgeous! But what became of my little sister?"

“She grew up.” Barbby smiled her pleasure at his reaction. “Big brother, I want you to do two things for me, please. First, go downstairs ahead of me. Scotty’s in the library, waiting. Be sure he’s where he can see me when I come down the stairs.”

“Oh?” He looked at her in surprise. “Going to make a real dramatic entrance? You know he’ll get a knockout jolt when he sees you!”

“That’s the idea.”

Rick laughed. “That’s catching the same rabbit twice, Barb. Or don’t you know? I mean, Scotty carries a picture of you all the time. I asked him once, joking, why he didn’t have any pictures of other girls. He asked, ‘Are there other girls? I’ve never noticed any.’”

“He’s never given me the slightest hint,” Barbby said, eyes wide.

“He thinks you consider him a brother.”

“Believe me, I’ll let him know I already have a great brother. Now, the other thing. Walk home with Jan tonight. I’ll keep her here until her folks go, then the two of you can be together.”

“Why tonight, especially?”

“Because today we grew up.”

His next shock was Jan herself. She, too, had metamorphosed into a poised, elegant young woman with different hair style, makeup, and a high fashion white gown that was perfect on her slender figure. For a long moment he could only stare. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She asked, “Rick, what is it?”

He admitted, “You took my breath away.”

“Good. I wanted to.”

It was time for Jan to be coming down from Barbby’s room. Rick had the feeling that he was waiting for an explosion, or for the moon to drop out of the sky, or a volcanic eruption. It was clear that the girls—no, they were young women now—had a plan they were executing to

perfection, leaving Scotty and him in a considerable spin. He had the feeling that he was an observer, and maybe a participant, in an important rite of passage.

Jan came through the door and greeted him with a warm smile. "Where are we walking?"

"With those heels, it has to be the seawall path, along the runway to the Sky Wagon, turn right on the orchard path, and so to the Miller establishment."

"You named it, my handsome detective. Give a lady a hand."

He took her gloved hand and they walked down to the seawall path. He wanted to ask quickly, "Why? And what's going on?" But Jan spoke first.

"Ever since we went to the opening of the House of Illusion you've had something on your mind, Rick. Not the hunt for Mysto, or anything connected with that. Something different, and I had a feeling that it somehow involved me."

"It did." Rick doubted he would ever get fully used to Jan's deep perception. "I'll give you a quick summary, then we can leave it for exploration later. Okay?"

At her nod, "I graduate next June. Normally, I'd go on to the university in the Fall, but I thought I'd change that and spend a year taking day courses at colleges close by, choosing some engineering, math and language. Then go to the university a year later."

"Waiting for me to catch up?"

"Yes. We can talk about it tomorrow. Right now, I've got a different problem. I'm as mixed up as a pasta salad, or maybe a Chinese fire drill. You and Barby have thrown Scotty and me into dizzy tailspins, as you well know. Why, Jan?"

"We decided it was time that, now and then, you two stopped treating us like two of the boys. Not that we don't enjoy being treated as buddies. We love it. But not all the time, and it's not enough now that we've grown up. Rick, I'll be seventeen in a month. Barby will be seventeen in three months. My grandmother was married at that age, and my

mother only a year older. I won't bore you with all the heroines or famous women who changed the world at our age. The point is, we're women now. Young women, true, but not girls any longer."

"I've been jolted into agreement, Jan, but why tonight?"

"Because we just finished another adventure, and everything is working out beautifully. Also, we understand each other even better now. We've been a solid foursome ever since we Millers moved to Spindrift, and we don't want that to change, but we want to be solid twosomes, too. Going to Mysto's return tonight gave us a chance to shock you into realizing that we've grown up."

"You succeeded."

"Good. Rick, what made you think about taking a year of day courses instead of going on to school in the Fall?"

He laughed. "A phony but smart Buddhist monk. He prophesied that we would make our dreams come true together, and in my brilliant and incisive way I suddenly realized, for that, we needed to be together and we wouldn't be unless I changed the schedule, if being together is what you want."

"That's my Rick," Jan said approvingly.

"Now let's talk about this twosome. Is it true my emotions have always been an open book to you?"

"You'll never be able to hide your feelings from me. Do you mind?"

"I've thought about it. No, I don't mind, so long as you accept that some not-so-nice feelings, like irritation and anger, are transient."

"I accepted that long ago. Remember, I've been feeling other people's emotions all my life. I probably have a better working knowledge of the way emotions shift with events and the weather than most psychologists. Underlying emotions, though, do not change so fast or often."

"All right. What this means is that you've always known exactly how I feel about you."

“I’ve known.” Jan smiled. “I’ve loved it.” Under the smile he sensed that she was both serious and tense.

He went on, “But I’ve known only that you liked me very much as a friend, just as I’ve liked you as a friend and not only as a bright and very appealing, very lovely girl.”

“To me, that’s the best part, that we’re truly very good and trusting friends. My mother told me, and it makes sense, that people have the most successful and fun marriages when they’re best friends as well as lovers, and eighteen months until I graduate isn’t too long an engagement.”

Rick stopped short. “Do I hear what you’re saying?”

“Yes, Rick. Not long after I came, Barby and I got together with our two mothers, and they told us what could happen when kids start romancing too young, including probably breaking up for good. So Barby and I made a pact. No romance until we were seventeen. It wasn’t easy.”

“And that’s why you kept me at arm’s length.”

“Yes, even though I didn’t want to. Do you know what we felt when we touched the Talisman together?”

“I suspected, and Mysto confirmed it today.”

“Then each of us knows how the other feels, with no doubt or question, so we can be completely open with each other. I’ll tell you a secret I’ve never told anyone, not even Barby, if you tell me your reaction instantly.”

“I promise.” His plane was only a few yards away. Tonight he could fly without it.

Jan lifted her face to his. “You remember in the car when I first told you about my strange talent? I told my folks that, in Barby, I had a friend who would be closer than a sister, and I was right, wasn’t I? In Scotty, I had a big brother, and I was right about that, too...”

“And in me, also right, someone you could beat at chess.”

“What really happened is that mother asked, ‘What about Rick?’ and I didn’t even hesitate. I said, ‘He’s the one I’m going to marry,’ and that’s what I’ve been dreaming about ever since.”

“Jan, beloved...” Rick took a deep breath, “... what’s best of all is to find out that we two dreamers have been dreaming the same wonderful dream!”

It was impossible to say who moved first. Jan was in his arms in something less than a microsecond.

THE END

THE MAGIC TALISMAN
A RICK BRANT SCIENCE ADVENTURE,
No. 24, the final book in the series

AFTERWORD

This Rick Brant story was written as the 1960's came to a close. At that time the publisher, Grosset and Dunlap, lost interest in the series, indeed, in any series except those of the Stratemeyer Syndicate. They did not publish *The Magic Talisman*, but allowed the series to break off with Volume 23, *Danger Below*, in 1968, after sales of close to two million copies.

A decade and a half later, series book readers and collectors who are now grown to maturity revived interest in several series and authors, sparked by Fred Woodworth's *Mystery and Adventure Series Review*, and Gil O'Gara's *Yellowback Library*. It was in the *Review* that the existence of the unpublished manuscript for *The Magic Talisman* was first disclosed, and the result was continuing nudges from Rick Brant readers with whom I corresponded and some I met, to get busy and publish.

It took several years to become convinced that publishing the story would be a good and final finish to the Rick Brant Science Adventure tales after so long a time, and conviction came only after strong and continuing pushes from fan letters, and personal pushes from those established series mavens, Ernie Kelly, Bill Gresens, Fred Woodworth, and, finally Rick Norwood, who became the publisher at his Manuscript Press.

My thanks go to them and to my wife, Libby, who added her own encouragement. Credit for turning a sometimes unreadable manuscript into a clean word-processed tale suitable for publication belongs to Carolanne Watson. And thanks, too, to those, who in their day, enjoyed some of Rick's adventures as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Hal Goodwin aka John Blaine, Bethesda, Maryland

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