

***THE CASE
OF THE
CALICO CRAB***

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

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The Case of the
CALICO CRAB

by

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

“When he got to the end of the fence, he slipped around it and disappeared into the bushes.”

It was the sound of low voices very near her window. What could that mean?

On the window-sill lay two calico-crab shells side by side!

“That was the worst minute of all—when we saw Dad down in that hole.”

Betsy clapped her hand to her mouth and her eyes were big with surprise and terror.

Spike almost whooped with joy to behold one of the footprints pointing through the opening.

“We must get him out of here as quickly as possible!”

“When he got there the feller was standing on the bank, rarin’ mad.”

CHAPTER I

The Empty House

IT did not seem an afternoon for adventure. Not, at any rate, within the peaceful confines of Cedar Point. And yet it was to mark the beginning of the most exciting and mysterious events in the life of Stacy Newhall. It had been, up to this point, a very serene and uneventful life, as far as her own personal affairs were concerned. But a cold and brilliant late afternoon in January of 1942 was to change all that, though she didn't realize it at the moment.

Peeling off one thick, knitted glove, she extracted a key from her handbag and unlocked the padlock which secured the heavy iron gate. Opening the latter and closing it behind her, she relocked the padlock and slipped the key back into her bag. The padlock had felt like a lump of ice and she thankfully slipped her glove on again. Having passed the gate which was the only entrance to the long, five-mile estate on this ocean strip of land, she stood for a moment, trying to decide by which route she would make her way back home. There was the long, straight gravel road running down through the middle of this narrow strip of land between ocean and bay. Or, she might scramble across the dunes and trudge along the sand at the edge of the surf. The third course was a narrow path through the cedars and beach heather to the bay shore, which she could follow south till she came to her own house a mile or more farther on.

"I'll take the bay side, I guess," she decided. "It'll be warmer and more sheltered in among the pines and cedars, and the sunset will be lovely across the bay. Besides, I might meet Dad. He was going to be out looking for golden-eye ducks this afternoon, somewhere up this way. There's an important-looking letter for him in the mail I got, and he might like to have it as soon as possible."

So thinking, she turned toward a narrow, sandy path that wound through the cedars and beach heather to the southwest and the shores of the bay. There had been heavy northeast rain that morning—and for several days past—till a shift in the wind to the northwest had cleared the skies earlier in the afternoon. The usually shifting sand was still damp and firm beneath her feet. The normally gray-colored heather retained the bronze hue that rain always lent it and glowed redly in the afternoon sun. Its contrast to the deep blue sky above was breathtaking, as was the bright green of the pines and the burnished sheen of occasional holly bushes, with their brilliant red clumps of berries. The air smelt of pine and cedar and salt. Stacy drew in great breaths of it and was glad she was alive and in this particular spot.

“Though it’s a queer contrast to last winter at this time!” she thought, as she trudged along. “Then I was still at boarding-school, getting ready to graduate in June. And there were parties and plays, and studying for tests and examinations, and all the social goings-on I’d been used to. Dad and Mother were still quietly at home, busy with college work. And Jim had just announced that he had enlisted in the aviation service. And now where is he? We don’t even know—!” But she must try not to dwell on that, so she brushed the thought from her mind as she emerged from a thick cedar growth into a clearing near the shore of the bay.

In the middle of this clearing stood an old, rambling, gray-shingled house, two stories high and topped in the middle of its roof by a four-sided, glass-windowed cupola. No smoke rose from its big brick chimney, no curtains draped its gaping windows. The house was obviously empty. Stacy knew that it was the old, original house that had stood on the property when Mr. Drew, her father’s friend, had bought this long strip of ocean land; and it was, up to that time, the only house on the five-mile stretch to the inlet. Mr. Drew had used it for a while as a hunting-lodge during the duck-shooting seasons, but had found it too uncomfortable and inconvenient. He had later built the pleasant, cosy house a mile or so farther south, and on somewhat higher ground. It was this latter house in which she and her family were now living. The old house, empty and abandoned, stood intact, and rather forlorn, looking out over the bay.

Stacy was about to skirt the side of it and get down to the shore, when she suddenly changed her mind and decided to go into the old house first and run up to the tower, from whence she could obtain a good view up and down the shore. Perhaps she could locate her father easier from that high point. The wind was rather piercing on the exposed bay shore, and if she should not see him, she had determined to keep within the shelter of the woods on the rest of her walk home. The house was supposed to be locked, but she knew that she could get into it through the cellar door and so make her way upstairs. The padlock on the cellar door had long ago rusted and been broken, and she often got in this way to get the view out over the bay from the cupola. Loosening the rusted padlock, she pulled up the door and hurried down the steps into the semi-darkness of the cellar.

It seemed very dark after the brilliant glare of the sun outside. But Stacy could have found her way in it blindfolded; so she had soon scrambled up the cellar stairs to the main part of the house whose empty interior was lit by the setting sun through its west windows. It smelled musty, and the damp enclosed chill was almost more penetrating than the brisk wind outside. Hurrying up the main staircase to the second floor, she climbed the steep, ladder-like steps to the cupola and stood in the small

enclosed space, lighted by its four windows looking toward the four points of the compass.

The brilliant glare of the sun on the water of the bay to the west stabbed her eyes with actual pain. She hastily turned from that direction and looked down the long, curving stretch of shore toward the south. The pointed cedars crowded close to the shore along almost its entire length, interspersed by reedy marsh patches at infrequent intervals. A narrow crust of ice was already beginning to form along the strip of sandy beach. Seagulls darted, swooped, and screamed raucously at each other, and far out toward the middle of the bay, Stacy could see a swimming flock of Canada wild geese—twenty or more. But there was no sign of her father.

“Probably he’s crouching down behind a bunch of reeds somewhere,” she thought, “with his binoculars glued to his eyes, waiting for his particular kind of duck to come swimming along. He certainly has a lot of patience—to sit still out there on a day like this, just to get a glimpse of some particular wild bird and see just what color the feathers are along its back or on the edge of its wings! I’d never try to write a book about shore birds in winter if I had to go to all that trouble! Guess I might as well give it up and go home through the woods. He may be way down the other side of our house, for all I know.”

She took one more glance through the south window before she turned to leave the little tower, resting her hand on the sill, as she leaned far to her right to get as full a view down the shore as possible. But the vista was empty of any human being. It was as she turned away to leave the cupola, that she was conscious of her hand on the window-ledge touching something that seemed unfamiliar. And on looking down at it, she saw a curious object resting on the sill.

“Now, that’s strange!” she muttered aloud, taking it up and examining it more closely. It was the upper shell of a small crab, of a species she had sometimes found along the ocean beach. Not more than three inches long and less than two in width, it was a delicate white shell, thickly dotted with bright pink spots. Her father had told her that it was commonly called the “calico-crab” and the meat of it was much in demand among sports fishermen, as it was a potent lure to the striped bass. The fisherman often paid as much as ten or twelve dollars a dozen for them in the bait-shops, because the variety was not very plentiful. But there was a curious angle to her finding this empty shell just where it was.

“I was up here three days ago,” she continued to mutter, “and I’m simply certain that thing wasn’t on the window-sill here then—or anywhere else in the house! Some one has been in here since and left that shell here. But who could it be? The house is locked up—and I don’t think any one knows about that broken cellar door lock—

except myself. I've never told any one that I get in here sometimes. And, anyhow, no one would be likely to carry such a thing as an old crab shell and leave it, except perhaps a child. And there aren't any children that would be likely or able to get in here. It's a puzzle!"

Stacy shivered, as a wholly unaccountable chill ran down her spine. The old, empty house had suddenly assumed a slightly sinister aspect for some reason that she could not define. It seemed foolish to base it on just the presence—unaccountable though it was—of this empty shell of a calico-crab. It was more that the crab shell indicated the past presence of some one else in the house—perhaps the person was in here even at this minute!

This was an alarming thought. Stacy stood perfectly still, listening—every sense keenly on the alert. The setting sun had almost reached the horizon, going down in a red blaze of glory through the low mist on the other shore. The little tower had darkened perceptibly. The wind was rising with the coming of darkness. Somewhere outside, a loose shutter banged at intervals. There were other creaks and groans in the woodwork of the house which, under ordinary circumstances, she would scarcely have noticed. Now they assumed a menacing meaning.

"I mustn't stay here another minute!" she decided, and scuttled down the ladder. Frantically wishing there were some door through which she could pass, instead of having to go through the dark cellar, she flew down the stairway, through the darkening hall to the kitchen, hesitating only a moment at the top of the cellar steps. Some one—something—might be in that black cellar, waiting to clutch at her as she felt her way toward the outer steps! In sheer panic, she had almost decided to break one of the kitchen windows and climb through, when the foolishness of her fears suddenly brought her to her senses.

"Of *course* there's no one in here now!" she told herself. "If there had been, I'd have seen footprints around outside. But no, this must have happened before the northeast storm. If there were any footprints, they've been washed away by now. Oh, I'm just being a complete idiot!"

And with this pronouncement, she boldly marched down the cellar steps, felt her way along the wall till a turn in it brought her to the daylight still filtering down those outside steps, and leaped up them to the welcome outdoors. Never had it seemed *more* welcome than at that moment! Before leaving, she slammed down the cellar door and inserted the broken padlock through the hasp.

"If some one is getting in here who has no business to," she decided, "I'm going to put a stop to it myself. Next time I drive to town, I'm going to get a new padlock and then nobody can get in but me. I'm sure Mr. Drew would be glad to have me do

it. Some one might get in there and—and burn the house down—or something!”

Before she left, she looked about carefully for footprints, but could find none but her own. Then she hurried around toward the side of the house facing the bay. A stiff, cold wind tore at her flying dark hair and penetrated even the thick warm ski-suit she was wearing. But the sky was wine-colored above the darkening waters of the bay, and a few small, fleecy pink-and-gold clouds marked the place of the sun’s disappearance. Stacy raced along the shore in the direction of her home, her fears rapidly disappearing with the distance she was putting between herself and the empty house.

“But just the same,” she told herself as she neared her own strip of beach, “there’s something awfully strange about that calico-crab being where it was—and I’m going to find out more about it!”

CHAPTER II

Enter Spike Truman and the Dingy Truck

IT was a curious combination of circumstances that had brought about the wintering of at least part of Stacy Newhall's family in the remote locality of Cedar Point. Up to this time, she had never spent the winter anywhere save in the college town in which they normally lived and later at her boarding-school. Her father was professor of ornithology at the college. Her mother was also an instructor in the institution, in the department of literature. Her older brother, Jim, had recently graduated from another college and immediately thereafter joined up with the aviation service. Beside these, there was one other member of the house, the eight-year-old English boy, Michael Crane, who had been evacuated from London a year before, and had miraculously reached them after some hairbreadth escapes from submarines in crossing the Atlantic. His parents had been lifelong friends of Mrs. Newhall, and she had offered to give Michael a place in her own home, "for the duration."

The Newhall family had spent the preceding summer at Cedar Point, as they had so frequently done in recent years. Mr. Drew, who had been a friend of Professor Newhall since their college years together in young manhood, had allowed them to use it, for a very moderate rent. He would have preferred them to pay no rent at all, since he was such a close friend, but the Professor would not hear of this. Though Spencer Drew was a multimillionaire, and owner of one of the greatest chemical works in America, it made the Newhall family feel more independent to know they were paying something for the privilege of using this delightful spot as a summer home.

Cedar Point was an odd location, being the last five-mile tip of a narrow strip of land on a remote portion of the coast. It was seven miles south of the nearest coast town, the portion in between boasting only two or three fishponds and some baymen's shacks, and one little general store kept by a woman named Mrs. Dunne. When Mr. Drew had purchased the lower five miles for his own use, he had had a hurricane fence built across the narrow upper end, from ocean to bay, with a locked gate for entrance. No one possessed keys to this gate except himself, the Newhalls and the members of the Coast Guard Station down near its southern end. There was no other access to the property except by boat, on the bay side, or by slipping around the ends of the fence at low tide. As it was so far from town few, if any, ever tried it.

The Newhalls had returned from here to their college town, the previous autumn, when the vacation days were over, expecting to take up their college work as usual. Stacy was prepared to enter the Freshman year in college and her plans were all made, when suddenly there came a strange reversal of these plans. Her father abruptly announced one day, that instead of beginning on his teaching year, he would take his sabbatical year of freedom from college work, go back to Cedar Point and complete a book, which he had long planned to write and illustrate, on shore-bird life in winter. Only Stacy seemed to be completely dumfounded in this upset to her plans.

“Why does he have to do it just *this* year?” she demanded of her mother. “I thought he was going to wait till next year, when you could take yours, and both have it together.” Mrs. Newhall seemed very calm about the whole thing.

“There are several reasons for it,” she told her daughter. “One is that he hasn’t been too well this past year or so—overworked and overtired. Even the summer did not rest him enough. He’ll give out completely, if he doesn’t have a long rest of several months more. Then, too, he wants to get that book done before more trouble breaks loose in this country. He feels certain we’re very near war. And if that happens, things may take such a turn that he won’t be able to finish it perhaps for many years. Then there’s Michael. He’s so frail and delicate still. I don’t think he was ever a strong child, and he’s been through an awful experience. He doesn’t seem to prosper in this inland air, but he made quite a bit of progress at the shore this summer. We think it might set him on his feet completely, to spend the rest of the year there.”

“Well, what about you—and me?” demanded Stacy. “Are Dad and Michael going down there all by themselves, and you and I going to stay here—or what?” Mrs. Newhall had hesitated just a moment over her answer.

“I’ve got to stay here, of course, and go on with my college work. But those two can’t be left alone at Cedar Point to shift for themselves—and that’s where I’m afraid you’ll have to make your sacrifice, my dear. I’m hoping that you’ll be willing to go with them and see to the running of things. We can get Mrs. Olafsen from the fishpounds to come in every day, as she does in summer. All you’ll have to do is supervise things. I’ll get down every weekend that I can. I know it means giving up your college year, but this is an emergency and we count on you to do your part. It may be more of an emergency than you think, so don’t feel we are asking this of you lightly, will you?”

Stacy’s lips had quivered, and her brown eyes had filled with tears of disappointment. It meant the complete abandonment of all her hopes and plans, and

the suddenness of it all rather knocked her off her feet. For a moment she could not answer, and, in the interval, her mother added:

“It isn’t going to be very easy for me either, dear, to carry on alone here, and I know just how you feel.” Those few words had had the effect of bracing the young girl to a braver shouldering of her task. Giving her mother a spasmodic hug, she had exclaimed:

“It’s all right, Mums—you can count on me! I *was* a bit knocked cold, just for a minute, but I think I’m going to like it, anyhow. I’ve always wanted to be at Cedar Point in the off seasons and see what they’re like down by the ocean. Now the chance has come. Maybe I can take some of my college books along and do some studying by myself, down there. If I can tag along that way, I might even be able to make up two years’ work in one, next year—who knows!”

So it had come to pass. Michael, Stacy, and her father had packed their belongings and returned in the family car to Cedar Point in October. Mrs. Newhall had declared that she would not need the car and could come down by train and be met at the nearest town, at such times as she could get away. They would absolutely have to have it in that isolated spot.

The beautiful autumn months had drifted by, one gorgeous day after another. Stacy felt she had never realized the real charm of the fall and early winter season at the shore before—that it far exceeded anything the midsummer months had to offer. Her mother came down at frequent intervals, and often brought with her Stacy’s closest friend, Roberta Colt, who would have been her roommate if she had entered college that year. She wrote to Roberta (or Bobs, as she was better known) every few days, and this, with the studying she did, the “birding” tramps she took with her father, and her supervision and entertainment of the delicate little English boy, Michael, fully occupied her days.

It had all been very peaceful, idyllic, remote from anything that savored of trouble till America went into the war, early in December. And even after that, the outward surface of their lives remained practically the same, but Stacy was conscious of a strange uneasiness beneath the apparent calm. To begin with, they had word that her beloved brother Jim had, some weeks before, resigned from the army aviation service, joined the American Volunteers, and was even now in the Far East, preparing to patrol the Burma Road. He had proved himself a remarkably skilful pilot, and had been gladly accepted in the Volunteer Corps. He had had to sail at once, without even time to bid his family good-by. They were all proud of Jim, but never did they dare to confide to one another the secret fears they felt for his safety.

Stacy was conscious, also, that the coming of war had upset her father. He had

never acknowledged it, but he seemed to have lost the calm of the earlier days and to be beset with a curious restlessness and uneasiness. Stacy thought it must be because of concern for his book. He complained frequently that the planes and blimps which so often now were passing overhead on their mysterious missions of war, disturbed the bird life of the coast, and were causing many of the wild ducks and geese to seek more inland regions. This was surely enough to cause him worry, but she sometimes wondered whether that were all. She felt there must certainly be something else, though she could not have explained why she thought so.

Thus matters stood on that late January afternoon, when she had decided to walk up to Mrs. Dunne's store and see whether any mail had been left there for them. Mrs. Dunne's own mail was brought down from the nearest town every day by her son, and she had offered to have the Newhall's brought with it, so that they might be saved the trouble of going so far for it. Stacy had been kept indoors so long by the heavy storm that was now past, that she was glad of the outdoor exercise. It was on her way back that she had had the curious experience in the empty old house.

As she ran around her own house toward the east side, to enter it by the door facing in that direction, she was somewhat surprised to see a dingy, tan-colored closed truck standing in the driveway. It was no local vehicle. She knew every one of those. And how it had got in through the locked gate was a mystery. Probably its owner was inside the house, since there seemed to be no one in the driver's seat. She opened the door and went in directly to the living-room. No one was there except Michael, a pale, frail little light-haired boy, cuddled up in a big chair, reading by the open fire.

"Hello, dear!" said Stacy. "Are you all alone? Whose truck is that out there, do you know?" Michael looked up sleepily from his book.

"I didn't know there was a truck," he replied. "I didn't hear any come in. Yes, I'm all alone. Even Mrs. Olafsen went home a while ago. She'll be back before suppertime, she said. I knew you'd be in pretty soon—or Uncle Ben—so it was all right." He had been told to call Mr. and Mrs. Newhall "Uncle Ben" and "Aunt Eustacia," though they were no actual kin, and it seemed to cheer him in his homesickness to do so. Stacy looked nonplussed at his announcement and declared:

"Well, there's something very queer about how that truck got in through the gate and why it should be parked in front of this house. *Somebody* must be around who belongs to it and I'm going to find out who it is!" She wasted no more words but darted out of the house.

When she reached the truck, in the driveway, she walked all around it, trying to

figure out where it had come from. It bore the state license tags, but the series of letters indicated that it belonged in some region far distant from its present locality. Curious to know what it contained, she went round to the rear and tried to open the closed doors. They proved to be securely locked, and she could not budge them. She had not yet taken her hand from the handles of the door, when a voice behind her almost startled her out of her shoes:

“Better let those alone! You’re not supposed to snoop!” She whirled about indignantly—to behold a thin, tall, red-haired young man with dancing bright blue eyes and sandy eyelashes, and thick-lensed complicated looking glasses, grinning at her. He had evidently just come around a bend in the driveway.

“Why—*Spike Truman!*!” gasped Stacy, recognizing her brother’s best friend and college roommate. “How on earth did you ever get in here?” Spike (who went by that name for no known reason except that his real one was Reginald) grinned at her impishly and made a mock-ceremonious bow.

“Good afternoon, Miss Eustacia Newhall!” he chuckled. “I’m certainly happy to see you—looking so fresh and blooming!”

“*Don’t* call me ‘Eustacia’!” she commanded petulantly. “You know how I hate it!” Stacy never had liked her full name—and Spike was a notorious tease.

“Okay—Stacy!” he countered. “How’s tricks? I guess you must be surprised to see me in these parts, but there’s a reason. By the way, I wouldn’t half mind going indoors and warming up a bit, if it’s all the same to you. I got kind of frozen, waiting around for somebody to come home. Where you-all been?” Stacy suddenly remembered her hospitable duties.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Do come along in, Spike. I just got back from a walk, and Dad’s out somewhere. Michael’s home, but he must have been asleep when you knocked. Even Mrs. Olafsen isn’t here just now.” They turned to walk up the path toward the house, when Stacy suddenly demanded:

“What’s the matter with the nice little car you used to have, Spike? Why are you driving that disreputable old truck—and what’s in it, anyhow?” Spike gave her a curious look, as he answered:

“My car’s still all right—back in its li’l old garage. And don’t throw any mud at this nice truck—it serves a very useful purpose. It’s got five very good tires—and that’s important right now!” His answer was evasive, and she sensed that he didn’t want the question pressed any farther. But as they entered the house, she couldn’t resist asking, “However did you get through the gate—without any key?”

“That’s a secret, too!” he tantalized her. “Maybe you’ll find out, sooner or later!”

“He’s just as impossible as ever!” she thought. “Always treats me as if I were a

child, and hadn't any sense. If he weren't Jim's best friend, I—I wouldn't even speak to him!"

Michael sprang up with a glad little cry as he recognized Spike, whom he worshiped with the hero-worship of the small boy for the very much older youth. And while the two were chattering together, Stacy disappeared into the kitchen to make some hot chocolate and cinnamon toast. While she was still at this task, her father also arrived, and she heard them all talking and laughing together.

"Every one seems to get along nicely with Spike but me!" she thought resentfully, as she carried in the tray. "And I'd like him, too, if he didn't tease me so much. The others don't seem to mind it, but he treats me as if I were still only about twelve years old." Which reflection was really much nearer the truth than she imagined. Stacy was short and slight in build—rather elfin in appearance and scarcely looked her seventeen years. To Spike, she had never seemed more than the twelve-year-old child she was when he first met her, and he had never ceased to treat her as such.

There were chortles of joy from all hands when she appeared with the refreshments. Spike sprang up to fetch a small table for the tray and Professor Newhall threw some fresh logs on the open fire.

"Now I begin to feel like a human being again!" announced Spike, as he sailed into the cinnamon toast. Michael was so busy devouring him with adoring eyes that he could scarcely pay attention to his own refreshments. And then Spike demanded news of Jim, whom he had not heard from since the latter had sailed for the Far East. While her father was giving as much as he knew, Stacy was wondering:

"Why hasn't Spike enlisted, I wonder? With all his pals going into the army or navy or aviation, I should think he'd be ashamed to be fooling around, doing nothing in particular. He must be just waiting for his number to come up in the draft." As if in answer to her private thoughts, Spike said:

"Jim's the lucky guy; I sure envy him! Tried my darnedest to get into something, same time he did. But they wouldn't have me. Not with glasses like these—and blind as a bat if I take 'em off a minute! But I'll get into something yet—if it lasts long enough!" The simple explanation made Stacy feel rather ashamed of her previous thoughts. Spike went on to ask the Professor how he was coming on with his book and the conversation continued along these lines. Presently Spike got up to leave, and Stacy asked him if he were going back to his home across the state.

"Nope, I'm going to be around these parts for a while. Got a job to do right in this region, so I'll be around here for a spell. Got a room up in town, but I'll be seeing you all every once in a while. Thanks for the eats, Stacy. They sure did hit the spot. So long, Mike! Some day I'll come down and give you a ride on the truck."

When he went, Professor Newhall went out with him, and the two stood talking together a long while, standing by the truck. His departure left Stacy more puzzled than ever. When her father returned to the house, she tackled him straightway with:

“However did Spike get in here, Dad, through the locked gate, and what’s he doing down in these parts, anyway?” Her father hesitated just a fraction of a moment before answering.

“The way he got in was quite simple,” he said at last. “He just waited at the gate till the Coast Guard truck came through, as it always does about four. Then he showed them a letter from me, to prove he was a genuine visitor and not an intruder, and they let him through.”

“But how’s he going to get out?” queried Stacy.

“I gave him a key to use,” replied her father. “His work may take him in and out of here at intervals for a while, so he’s requested permission to have a key. I know Mr. Drew wouldn’t object—and certainly we won’t!”

“But what *is* his work, Dad?” persisted Stacy. “And why does he go around in that funny, disreputable old truck? It all sounds very mysterious. He wouldn’t tell me anything about it.” The Professor looked slightly annoyed, as he answered shortly:

“If he wouldn’t tell you, it’s pretty plain he doesn’t want to talk about it. So, if I were you, I’d avoid asking any more questions. He’s probably doing some very useful work. Let’s let it go at that.”

But Stacy was far from satisfied. She mulled over the puzzle silently, all through the evening meal, while Michael chattered about Spike and his own happiness in the prospect of seeing him occasionally. She was equally silent later, as she played slapjack and other simple games with Michael before his bedtime. The problem had quite driven the earlier one of the calico-crab from her mind.

After Michael had been safely tucked in bed, she wandered around the house aimlessly for a while, and finally decided that instead of settling down to read or listen to the radio, she would put on something warm and go out to roam around on the dunes a bit before going to bed. The wind had dropped, and there was a bright moon, making the landscape as clear-cut as day. Her father, who was tired after his long afternoon out in the wind, was dozing over the fire when she quietly slipped out and rambled over toward the high dunes by the sea.

On a dune she stood a moment, silhouetted sharply against the star-sprinkled sky. The air was icy cold but very still. The full moon, still in the east, spread a broad path of glory over the ocean, where only a lazy, silver-tipped surf beat softly on the sand. For miles the lonely beach stretched north and south of her. It seemed impossible to think of war and bombing-planes and cruel submarines in such a

peaceful spot as this!

She was growing cold, standing there so still, so she ran down toward the surf, the sand crunching and spraying out under her flying footsteps. At the edge of the lazy waves, she turned and walked along a little way, keeping a lookout for frost-fish which were often cast up, numbed with the cold, on the beach, at this time of year. "It would be nice to get two or three for breakfast to-morrow," she thought idly. There were no fish, however, but her eye was suddenly caught by an ordinary wet crab shell picked out by the moonlight, and her mind went back to that other curious calico-crab shell of the afternoon. And again she began to puzzle over the odd fact of its being where it was. A high droning overhead somewhere, pulled her gaze skyward, till she made out the distant winking red and green lights of a plane, working its way to the south. And somehow, the spell of peace was broken, as she realized it must be a patrolling bomber on the watch for some lurking submarine out there in the silver-crested sea. The war was everywhere—even in this heavenly spot! Shivering a little, she turned her back on the sea and raced across the wide beach toward the dunes and home.

It was when she was crossing the road that ran down through the middle of Cedar Point, that she happened to glance down its length toward the south—and stopped suddenly, dead in her tracks.

"That's mighty queer!" she whispered to herself. "He never left the place—after all!"

Perfectly distinct in the moonlight, not more than a hundred yards from where she was, stood the dingy truck, pulled well off the road into the bushes. It was faced south and its rear doors stood wide open. The inside, however, was deeply in shadow, so that she could not see what it contained. But right beside the opening stood Spike, his back toward her, motionless and intent in posture. And from where she stood he seemed to be holding something against both ears.

For a moment Stacy was too startled to move. Then her first impulse was to hurry toward him and find out what it was all about. But, remembering her father's warning, she realized that it wouldn't be very fair to take him unawares in that fashion. Perhaps, later, he might be willing to be more communicative about his mysterious doings. Anyhow, she told herself, she wasn't going to let him think she was interested in his affairs—not when he treated her the way he did!

And with this decision, she turned and vanished noiselessly into her own driveway and out of sight of him.

"Well, it's certainly been a queer day!" she told herself before she fell asleep that night. "I wonder what's going to happen next?" And at this moment a new thought

occurred to her. So striking was it that she sat straight up in bed, hugging her knees with her arms.

“I wonder,” she murmured, “I just *wonder* whether Spike could have had anything to do with that calico-crab shell?”

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Dunne's Store

AT an early hour next morning Stacy was rapidly pedaling her bicycle up the road, past the gate, and in the direction of Mrs. Dunne's little general store, where almost anything could be obtained from a can of tinned milk to a pair of rubber hip-boots. She had decided right after breakfast that it would be nice to have one of Mrs. Olafsen's rich rice-puddings for lunch.

"Okay!—but den you hafta go for more milk—right away!" Mrs. Olafsen had commented. Stacy had therefore decided to take her wheel, though she would have much preferred to walk. It was a cold, bright morning with considerable wind, which greatly hampered her progress northward. She rather liked going to Mrs. Dunne's store, which she always thought the most curious establishment of its kind that she had ever seen. It was close to the fishpound, and was more than just a store, for it contained tables where meals were served, and a big old billiard-table at the rear, where poundmen and Coast Guards and an occasional fisherman, could eat and amuse themselves. These were practically the only types of people who patronized the place, as it was far from the populace of the more northern seaside resorts.

As Stacy propped her bicycle against the rickety little wooden porch and opened the door to enter, she was aware of more than the usual racket within the store, for this early hour of the day. The noise appeared to come from the rear, where a group of poundmen and one or two Coast Guards were clustered around the billiard-table, watching two other people who were deep in a game. Mrs. Dunne, a tall, thin woman with white hair and a worried expression, was watching them from the door of the hot little kitchen opening from the back of the store, and her niece, a young girl of Stacy's age, was waiting on a child from the fishpound, at the counter.

"Hi, Betsy, what's up?" demanded Stacy, as the girl handed the child ten sticky gumdrops in a paper bag and shooed him out. Betsy Connell lifted her own worried face to greet the new-comer.

"Oh, nothing much, Stacy," she admitted, "only a couple of fellows in here having a game. They must be pretty good at it—they've got the rest so excited they won't eat the meals they ordered and it's all getting cold. Aunt Liz'll shoo 'em all out pretty quick if they don't quit making such a racket! What'll you have, Stacy?"

"Just a couple of quarts of milk," said Stacy. And while the girl went to get them from the refrigerator, she looked again over to the corner where the billiard game was progressing. As one of the players moved around, chalking his cue, she

suddenly recognized, with a start of surprise, the flaming red head and thick glasses of Spike! Somehow she had thought he must have gone back to town, and had never expected to see him at Mrs. Dunne's. Why he should be playing billiards at that hour of the morning, instead of tending to more serious affairs was rather puzzling. She tried to see what the other person looked like but could only see the top of a head of straight light hair. When Betsy returned with the milk, she paid for it and hurried out, as she feared Spike might suddenly catch sight of her and hail her. Betsy went to the door with her, and as she opened it, she whispered:

"I've got something to tell you, Stacy. But I don't want to do it here. If I come down to the gate around eleven, could you meet me there?"

"Sure thing, Bets!" agreed Stacy. "I'll walk up. I'm just spoiling for a nice long walk to-day. Maybe we could take a tramp through the woods."

"I can't stay long to-day," countered Betsy. "Aunt Liz is baking pies and I have to tend the store. But I can get away for a little while about then. See you later!"

As Stacy wheeled back home with the milk, she wondered what Betsy could have to tell her which was so important that a meeting had to be arranged. She had grown quite fond of this young girl whose life was spent in the odd environment of Mrs. Dunne's store, and during this rather isolated winter had seen quite a bit of her. Betsy Connell was her own age, and was a remarkably intelligent young person. She had come, a year or so before, to live with her aunt, when the sudden death of her father and mother had left her without any other means of support; Mrs. Dunne had come to her rescue and given her a home. She had been part way through high school when this tragedy had changed her life, and had hoped to finish it and obtain a business situation. But Mrs. Dunne's abode was far from the nearest high school, and beside that, Betsy had realized she could not throw herself on the kindness of her aunt, without helping that overworked lady in every possible way. So she had let her other ambitions fade out, while she did her utmost to be helpful in the store.

Her friendship with Stacy, that fall and winter, had been the one cheering note in her not very entertaining existence. Stacy had loaned her fascinating books, they had tramped the woods and the shore together, and sometimes she had even visited for an hour or so at Stacy's delightful home and met the others of her family. It had opened a brand new vista to her, and she secretly adored this new-found friend. On *her* part, Stacy was equally grateful for the companionship and thoroughly enjoyed the infrequent hours they spent together.

As she scudded toward home, she found herself wondering how Spike had come to be in the store, apparently idling away his time. And she looked around to see if she could discover the whereabouts of his dingy old truck. It was nowhere to

be seen, along the whole distance of the long, straight, flat road, and she was certain it had been nowhere in the vicinity of the store. Where, then, could he have left it? The whole set-up was becoming more of a puzzle by the hour! And to add to it, Betsy seemed to have something mysterious to impart to her, that could not be disclosed in the publicity of the store. She couldn't imagine what it was, but she felt she could hardly wait for their rendezvous at eleven.

However, there were nearly two hours to pass. She put most of them in by reading to and amusing Michael. He had had a bothersome cold for two days, and they had felt it best for him to remain indoors. He was an appealing little boy, frail and delicate in health, and still far from recovered, nervously, from the shock of his experiences in England during the bombing period of the previous year and his harrowing evacuation trip to America. He never spoke of these things and tried to be responsive and cheerful, but Stacy suspected they were never far from his mind.

So she read to him and played games with him that morning, before the open fire, but her own thoughts were still occupied with the curious circumstances that had happened during the last twenty-four hours. Presently it was quarter to eleven and she told Michael she must go out for a while and advised him to take a nap on the sunporch, where she tucked him up warmly in a lounging chair, with a picture-book for company. And as there was no time to walk that distance, she jumped on her bicycle and sped northward, arriving at the gate promptly at eleven. Betsy had not yet arrived, but at that moment Stacy could see her stepping down from the porch steps of the store and running toward her. Stacy unlocked the gate and Betsy came through it, considerably out of breath.

"Let's walk into the woods a bit," panted Betsy. "I don't want to be seen here talking with you!"

"Whyever not? What's happened?" demanded Stacy, to whom this singular request seemed something more than unusual.

"You'll understand when I tell you," replied the other girl. "Just let me get my breath." They turned into the little path through the woods toward the bay, the same one Stacy had taken the afternoon before, and walked in silence till Betsy had recovered her wind. When they were screened behind the sheltering cedars, Betsy stopped short.

"I can't go too far," she declared. "I've got to get back pretty soon. But something happened yesterday afternoon that I thought you ought to know about. There's a new young fellow that's come to the fishpound lately—at least, he wanted to get work in the pound, but you know they aren't doing anything during the winter. They don't start up till spring. So he said he'd wait around till then, and he took one

of the rooms Aunt Liz has over the store. They call him ‘Gunnar.’ I don’t know whether that’s his last name or what, anyway he seems to be a Swede or a Norwegian or a Dane, like the rest of them. He’s quite smart and full of fun, and they all seem to like him. That was he, playing billiards this morning with that red-headed fellow. I don’t know who *he* is—”

“Oh, you mean Spike Truman,” interrupted Stacy. “I saw him there. He’s my brother’s best friend. He came down to see us yesterday. He was driving a funny old closed truck—”

“Yes, I saw him in that,” interrupted Betsy. “But what’s become of the truck? I haven’t seen it since.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea!” admitted Stacy. “But tell me, Bets, what is this queer thing you know? Is it about Spike?”

“No, it’s about that other fellow—Gunnar,” said Betsy. “Yesterday afternoon, just about sunset, Aunt Liz sent me over to the bay to get some clams from old Ben’s place. You know, the one right down there.” She pointed in the direction of the shore to a ramshackle shack and dock, belonging to an old fisherman, Ben Thomson, who kept a constant supply of fish, oysters, and clams obtained from the bay. It was a few hundred feet north of the fence defining the Drew property.

“Well, while he was getting the clams, I was standing outside and I happened to see some one sneaking along by that wire fence. It was just light enough for me to tell that it was that Gunnar fellow. When he got to the end of the fence that runs into the bay, he slipped around it and disappeared into the bushes on the other side. I don’t know where he went after that, and I couldn’t wait to see when he came out. But I didn’t like the looks of it, somehow. He knew well enough he was trespassing on private property, because there’s that sign on the fence saying to keep out. So I thought probably you folks ought to know about it, and that’s why I’m telling you here, where no one could overhear us. I didn’t like the looks of it at all.”

“And neither do I!” cried Stacy. “We’ve never had any prowlers around here before. Thanks so much for telling me, Betsy. I wonder what we ought to do about it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Betsy, frankly. “This is war time, you know, and I’m certain there’s a lot goes on around here that isn’t any too good for the country. You’d be surprised if you could hear the things whispered around that *I* hear, in the store! I don’t like it, and neither does Aunt Liz. I don’t know whether this Gunnar is mixed up in anything or not, but I hope he keeps away from you folks.”

A sudden memory struck Stacy, like a flash of lightning—the old house, yesterday afternoon, the eerie feeling in it, and the strange, inexplicable presence of

that calico-crab shell on the tower window-sill. Breathlessly she related the experience to Betsy.

“Do you—do you suppose that has any connection with—this Gunnar?” she ended.

“It might—or it mightn’t,” admitted Betsy cautiously. “He might’ve got into the house, same as you did. Perhaps he went up in the tower to get a good lookout. But why leave a crab shell there? Or maybe he never went near the place at all.”

A sudden plan occurred to Stacy and she put it to her friend.

“Bets, where is this Gunnar—right now?”

“He was in the store when I came away, playing pool and drinking gingerpop. I’m pretty sure he’ll stay there till lunch time. He usually does. Why?”

“Because I’m going to the old house right now!” declared Stacy. “It isn’t far from here—and I’m going to see if anything else has happened!”

“Then I’m coming with you!” asserted Betsy. “If queer things are happening, it isn’t safe for you to go there alone. Let’s hurry—I really ought to be back at the store now.”

One behind the other, they tore along the little, narrow, winding path through the cedars, and emerged at the back of the old, empty house on the bay shore. To all outward appearance, it looked precisely as it always had. Certainly there seemed no sign of any one about, though they took the precaution of walking all around it on the outside, before entering. Then Stacy unhooked the broken lock from the cellar door and they cautiously tiptoed down into the dim cellar.

Once upstairs, in the room that faced the bay, all seemed very prosaic in the bright light of morning. The eerie feeling of yesterday afternoon was quite lacking. Without giving themselves time for any misgivings, they scampered upstairs and peered about in the three or four empty bedrooms to make sure there was no intruder present. Then, a little more slowly, Stacy led the way up the ladder to the cupola, Betsy following close at her heels.

The cupola was also empty. Together they stared out through the four windows for a second—at the bay on one hand, partly frozen over, and dotted with gulls sitting on the edge of the ice in large groups, the wide ocean on the opposite side, quiet and blue and twinkling in the morning sunlight, and the glimpses of trees and heather and rolling dunes through the windows to the north and south. But the scenery did not interest them at this moment. Stacy walked over to the south window, where yesterday had lain the calico-crab shell on the sill.

“Betsy,” she gasped, “this is where it was—and *it isn’t here now!*” They both looked wordlessly at the empty sill. Suddenly Stacy whirled about and sent a

searching glance at the other three window-sills. In an instant she had plunged over to the one on the *east* side—and pointed dramatically:

“Look!” she cried. “It’s over here now—and I didn’t put it there either!” They both stared at it in blank amazement. It was Betsy who presently muttered:

“There’s something mighty queer going on here—and I bet that that Gunnar is mixed up in it!”

“What shall we *do*?” breathed Stacy.

“First of all, get out of here—right away!” advised Betsy grimly. And they raced down the ladder and out of the house. They never stopped till they had traversed the little path through the woods and were out near the road. Then, while they were catching their breath, Betsy announced:

“I’m late now. I can’t stay another minute. But we’ve got to talk things over—and right soon. Can we get together this afternoon some time?” Stacy thought it over a moment.

“Tell you what,” she decided. “I really ought to go with Mrs. Olafsen this afternoon. She was going to drive Michael and me to town in her car, so that I could do the marketing for the things we need. But I’ll say I don’t feel like going, and I’ll give her the list of things. She shops better than I do, anyhow. And Michael can go with her. He likes it and will enjoy the trip. Dad’ll be out hunting up his birds, and that’ll leave us alone for quite a while. When can you get there?”

“About three,” said Betsy. “I can only be away about an hour and a half. Then things begin to get busy in the store.”

“I’ll walk up and meet you at the gate,” added Stacy. “That’ll give us more time to talk.”

They parted on this arrangement, after Stacy had let her friend through the gate. But as she pedaled back toward her own home, she muttered to herself:

“What does it all *mean*? What’s going on here? And why—why, *why* was that calico-crab changed and put on another window-sill?”

CHAPTER IV

Consultation

BUT, what are we going to do about it all?" So demanded Stacy, as the two girls, later that day, sat in cosy chairs before a roaring open fire. They were alone in the house, and again Stacy had made hot chocolate and cinnamon toast. Betsy, sipping and munching, had secretly decided that it was the most glorious food she had ever tasted. How wonderful it must be, she thought, to live in a house like this, and to have no wearisome cares or disagreeable duties, instead of spending one's time in a dingy store! Some girls were certainly lucky, she privately decided. But Stacy had hauled her wandering thoughts back to the matter in hand, with her sudden query.

"There's only one thing I can think of to do," said Betsy, awkwardly putting down her cup and saucer on the tray. She felt she could not talk, or even think, seriously, and eat and drink at the same time. "That's to keep a sharp watch and find out, if we can, what's going on. There's some funny business going on along the shore here—Fifth Column work, I s'pose they call it. I've heard plenty of whispering about it in the store. I don't know what it is—and I don't know who's doing it. Nobody's sure, I guess, but everybody's suspicious. And I sort of don't like the way that Gunnar fellow acts. Not that he's done anything that looked queer—until that thing yesterday—but he doesn't seem as straight and simple and—and honest as the other poundmen do. I keep wondering why he should come here in the middle of winter, when the pounds are all closed, and hang around doing nothing till spring? He could get a job doing something else till then, I should think. And he seems to have plenty of money to spend, too. Though where it all comes from, I can't think—unless he's saved it up—or somebody's handing it to him."

"There's one thing I've been wanting to ask you," interrupted Stacy. "How did Spike and that Gunnar come to get together in the store this morning—and start playing that game of billiards? It strikes me as sort of odd that Spike would be spending his time that way. He's supposed to be doing some sort of work down here—I don't know what."

"Well, this is how it was," said Betsy. "I was waiting on store when this Spike came in. Gunnar was having his breakfast at one of the tables; Spike sat down at the same table, because some poundmen, and Coast Guards off duty, were having theirs at the others. Spike ordered a cup of coffee and some fried ham, and then the two of them got to talking. I couldn't hear all that was said, but finally they got talking

about the billiard-table, and each of them said he played a good game—sort of boasting about it. And finally Gunnar challenged Spike to beat him at a game, right after they'd finished breakfast. They got at it right away, almost, and the others got interested and left their breakfasts to watch and started making bets on who'd win."

"Who did, by the way?" demanded Stacy.

"Oh, Spike won—and I think Gunnar felt kind of peeved about it. He doesn't like any one getting the best of him. But Spike was very nice, and said he'd be in again and give Gunnar the chance to have his turn. And then he bought some chewing-gum and cigarettes and went out."

"Where did he go when he left the store?" cried Stacy. "Did you notice? Did he come down here?"

"I don't know—I didn't watch him," acknowledged Betsy. "I was busy clearing the tables. But I *did* notice one thing—Gunnar followed him to the door and stood there looking after him quite a while after he left the store. And he wasn't looking south, toward this place but north, up toward town. So I guess that's the way Spike must have gone."

"I do wonder what Spike is doing down here—with that queer old truck of his?" mused Stacy aloud. "There's something very odd about that truck! He wouldn't let me see the inside of it, and he seemed to be doing some very curious things with it last night in the moonlight. It must be all right, because Spike's a very fine fellow, really. My brother is terribly fond of him. He wouldn't be doing any—anything illegal, I mean."

"Maybe he's working for the government—a G-man—or something like that!" exclaimed Betsy, with sudden inspiration.

"I never thought of that—maybe he is!" cried Stacy, and added:

"And maybe Gunnar is a foreign spy or Fifth Columnist! Wouldn't *that* be something!"

"I've thought *that* might be possible, ever since he first came here," agreed Betsy quietly. The two sat silent a moment, a little overcome by the possibilities this guess opened up to them. Inside the cosy room, the fire chuckled and sputtered. Outside, the wind raced across the bay, the gulls screamed and squabbled on the edge of the ice, and the tree branches swayed and creaked by the window-panes. Stacy absently refilled Betsy's cup and her own and crunched another piece of cinnamon toast. Suddenly Betsy sat up straight and began in a low voice:

"Do you know, Stacy, this may be a very serious thing that's happening—and we've stumbled right over it. What do you think we ought to do—tell some one about it?"

“The only one I could think of to tell,” said Stacy, with a worried frown, “is my father. And I don’t like to bother him with it. He isn’t very well and seems worried about something himself. Probably it’s his health. And, when you come right down to it, what is it we could tell? I don’t think those odd little things we’ve noticed would mean much to the—the authorities, whoever they are. We’ve been warned by the government to hold our tongues about what we see and hear, so I believe we shouldn’t say anything—just yet, to any one but ourselves. Let’s you and I just make up our minds to keep a watch, as far as we can, on whatever is going on, and only tell it to each other. Shall we? You have a grand chance to see quite a bit in the store there, and I’ll keep my eye on the old house. If nobody knows we’re doing it, we may have a good chance of discovering something more. And, who knows!—it may be awfully important!”

A thrill of excitement uplifted them both, at the thought that they might be able to do something of vital importance for their country at war. Betsy made no audible comment, but laid her hand on Stacy’s, in a wordless promise of coöperation and secrecy. And, just at this moment, they were startled by the sound of tapping on the window behind them. Both of the girls leaped to their feet—to behold the grinning countenance of Spike outside the window-panes. Stacy hurried to the door to let him in.

“How you startled us, Spike!” she exclaimed, and added, “Betsy, this is Spike Truman. I guess you saw him in the store this morning.” Spike gave the girl a curious glance as he acknowledged the introduction, and added:

“Didn’t mean to scare you two, but you sure did look like a couple of conspirators, the way you had your heads together! What’s the big secret?” The two girls glanced at each other guiltily, and a red flush crept up in Betsy’s pale cheeks. But Stacy instantly recovered her poise. Ignoring his impertinent question, she replied:

“You’re just in time, Spike. There’s still some hot chocolate left, and I’ll make some fresh toast. You must be cold and hungry.”

“I didn’t come in for that—honest!” explained Spike. “But I’d sure like to have a nibble. This air makes you as hungry as an elephant!”

“I suppose you came in to see Dad,” remarked Stacy, slipping some bread into the toaster. “He’s out somewhere, down on the shore.”

“Yes, I saw him,” commented Spike. “He was crouched down behind the bushes, sketching a loon that was swimming near the shore. The loon flew off with a hoot when I hove in sight, and I’m afraid your father wasn’t any too pleased with me! Tell you what I came for,” he added, as Stacy handed him his hot chocolate. “I

was wondering whether you folks had a couple of old spare blankets you could loan me for a spell. I asked your father and he said he was sure there must be some, and told me to come and speak to you about it.”

“Why, of course we have!” agreed Stacy. “I’ll get them for you before you leave. But what’s the matter? Don’t they give you enough bed-covers where you’re boarding?” Spike grinned a little sheepishly as he answered:

“Well, to tell the truth, I don’t see much of that room of mine in town. It’s quite a way off and I’m trying to save my tires and gas. I have a little cot in the truck and I’m sleeping in it right down here on the place. I did bring some blankets, but I didn’t guess right on how cold it would be, so I’ve come a-borrowing!” His answer quite startled both of the girls. This seemed another odd angle to their riddle.

“But, Spike,” exclaimed Stacy, “why do you do such an inconvenient thing as that? Why not come and stay with us? We have a spare guest room, and you could just as well use it as not. Jim would be awfully pleased to think of you being here, and it wouldn’t inconvenience us a bit.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” said Spike, “but I think I’d better stick to my plan. I feel more independent that way, can move around more freely. I’ll drop in for a meal sometimes, or a bite of something like this, if you’ll let me, but I’ve got to stick pretty close to my job.” Suddenly Stacy made a bold plunge.

“Just what *are* you doing here, Spike?” she asked, and hoped frantically that he would not again turn her down with some silly rejoinder. And this time, Spike seemed more communicative.

“Well, you know—or maybe you don’t!—that I took a civil engineering course, along with my scientific one, in college, and this is the first job I’ve landed since I graduated. Mr. Drew happened to want this piece of land thoroughly surveyed, and what they call a ‘contour map’ made of it. Your father was good enough to suggest me for the job—so here I am—and mighty glad to get it!” After which explanation he became absorbed in consuming his toast and chocolate.

But, though she did not say so, his explanation seemed a bit unconvincing to Stacy. She knew very little about “surveying” or making “contour maps” (whatever they were!) and she could not help but feel that it could not possibly require such constant devotion to it as sleeping in a truck on the place at night. One couldn’t do anything like surveying at night, anyhow! It required broad daylight. She did not believe that Spike was telling an untruth. He might very well be doing some surveying, just as he said. But that was not *all* he was engaged in, she was convinced.

Meantime, during all this conversation, Betsy had been showing signs of

uneasiness, and at this moment rose, saying she must be getting back to the store. Spike also rose to help her on with her coat, and stood politely while she said good-bye and left the room. Then he fell upon the remaining toast and hot chocolate with unabated zeal. But Stacy accompanied her friend to the door and loaned her the key to the gate, saying that she had another she could use herself. Before Betsy left, Stacy whispered to her:

“This is getting thicker by the minute! I saw Spike out with his truck last night—and he wasn’t doing any *surveying*! He had something held up to his ears, and he acted as if he were *listening*!”

CHAPTER V

In the Dead of Night

SOMETHING woke Stacy from a deep sleep—she could not think what—but she found herself sitting straight up in bed staring into the dark. It was bright moonlight outside the windows, and the landscape was as visible as in daylight. But her windows faced away from the direct moonlight, and the room itself was quite dark.

She continued to sit up in bed, listening for any sound and wondering just what had awakened her. The house was a low, long, rambling one, with all the rooms on the ground floor, and only an attic above. So Stacy's bedroom windows, as were all of them, were at such a distance from the ground that she could easily have climbed out of one of them and been instantly outdoors. One of the windows was open and, from lack of any breeze blowing through it, and the softness of the air, she realized that the temperature had considerably moderated.

Stacy presently remembered that she had been dreaming she was in the midst of an earthquake when she was so suddenly aroused. And now she realized that it must have been the shaking of the bed that had caused the dream. Why the bed should have shaken, she could not quite understand. She wondered whether any one else had felt it and decided that she had better get up and look in on little Michael. If he had felt something similar, he might wake up and be frightened. She groped for her bedroom slippers and bathrobe, and had just got them on when something else caught her attention.

It was the sound of low voices very near her window. What could that mean? More curious than alarmed, she crept noiselessly to her open window and stood listening, without putting her head outside. A window of her father's bedroom was only a few feet away and she quickly realized that he was in his room, talking through his open window to some one who stood directly outside it. Who that might be she did not at first know, but standing close to the opening, she could just gather scattered fragments of the conversation—an isolated phrase here and there, or only a single word.

The first one she heard was her father's deep, subdued voice saying, "No, Spike—" and "—both of them asleep—" It was Spike then. Might have guessed it! But what was he doing here, whispering to her father in the dead of night? Had something happened? She was just about to poke her own head out of the window and demand to know what it was all about, when she heard her father say, quite

distinctly, “We must keep this to ourselves. Don’t want to frighten—” The rest Stacy could not catch, but she could guess his meaning. He didn’t wish either Michael or herself to know. There was only one more phrase that she caught, spoken by Spike, before he slipped away. But it was enough to explain the whole situation. For what she heard was: “—tanker, probably—torpedoed—several miles off shore—”

Stacy crept back into bed and lay shivering at this appalling revelation. It had come then! The thing she had been secretly fearing and had hoped would escape their vicinity. She had read in the papers and heard over the radio that enemy submarines had been at work on distant reaches of the coast, but she had somehow hoped that the deadly things would never get round to this serene and peaceful spot. Nothing of the sort had happened since they had been here, and this fact had strengthened that hope. But now it had come! It was the force of the explosion that had caused her bed to shake. Somewhere out on the ocean a ship was in frightful distress—and they were all powerless to do a thing about it. She longed to go and talk it over with her father and try to find what comfort she could from his reassuring presence. But she knew she had better not try that. It would only worry him the more to realize she was awake and had heard his conversation with Spike. And he must not be further worried.

Michael’s room was next to her own, on the other side, and both the doors were open. She got out of bed again and tiptoed noiselessly to his door to discover if he were stirring. But his regular breathing told her he was sound asleep and had probably realized nothing, so she thankfully went back to bed. She lay long, sleepless, trying to figure out what this new menace boded, and what bearing, if any, it might have on the odd occurrences of the past two days. Perhaps Betsy might have some ideas about it. She determined to see her friend at the earliest moment next day. And on this resolution, she finally fell asleep.

As she brushed her dark, curly hair, sitting in front of her dressing-table next morning, she stared discontentedly at her reflection. That reflection showed a pretty, piquant, almost childlike face, framed in dark fluffy hair, with bright, sparkling brown eyes, and a slender elfin body, which belied the muscular strength she actually possessed.

“Oh, why did I have to be so *little!*” she mourned to herself. “Why couldn’t I have been big and athletic-looking like Barbara or—or even Betsy? *She* isn’t exactly athletic-looking, but she’s tall and—and sort of capable-looking—and I’m not! Nobody expects me to be able to do anything worthwhile!” She threw the brush down impatiently, and got up to go and see how Michael was faring. She did not yet know that the day might demand much of her—in spite of her size!

To begin with, she found Michael still in bed, tossing restlessly, his forehead hot with fever. After some arguing, he acknowledged a headache, sore throat, and tightness of his chest. Much concerned, Stacy realized that he had probably caught a fresh cold on his expedition to town the day before with Mrs. Olafsen. She blamed herself sternly for having allowed him to go. She had thought it would do him no harm, if he stayed in the heated car, but she had been wrong, and perhaps neglectful of him, in not going along on the expedition, or staying at home with him. However, steps must immediately be taken.

Making Michael promise to stay in bed, she hurried to her father's room to talk the situation over with him, but he was not there, nor anywhere in the house. Realizing that he had probably risen before daylight, prepared himself a light breakfast, and gone out on the shore to watch the ducks and geese who were usually swimming near it at that hour, she knew she must tackle the problem alone. Thanking her stars that they had a telephone in the house, she called up her mother. Mrs. Newhall instantly decided to give up her work at college for the day, borrow a neighbor's car and drive down to get Michael and take him back with her, where he could have their own doctor's attention and a nurse, if he were to be seriously ill. At any rate, he must not remain in that remote spot for the present. In the meantime, she gave Stacy directions for his care, said she would be down by noon, have a hasty lunch, and take Michael back with her immediately.

It was a hectic morning for Stacy, in which the dreadful event of the night before was temporarily forgotten. No one mentioned it, and only one incident about eleven o'clock recalled it to Stacy's mind. Betsy, at that hour, called her up from the store. Her voice sounded cautious and rather muffled. Stacy guessed that she was speaking very low, in order not to be overheard. What she said was:

"I want to see you as soon as possible. Can you get up here this morning?"

Stacy explained the situation about Michael, and that it would be impossible for her to leave before early afternoon. But she added that since Michael would no longer be there, after that, she would have her time pretty much to herself from then on.

"I want to have a long talk with you," murmured Betsy from the other end of the telephone. "I think I can get off quite a while myself this afternoon. Harvey hurt his hand this morning—cut it—and he can't be outdoors doing much work because it's all bandaged up. But he can tend to the store. I'll get him to do it and that'll leave me free. It's a nice mild day. We might take a long walk. I'll stop down for you."

"Grand!" cried Stacy and then added, softly:

"Is it very important, Betsy?"

“Very!” said Betsy. “Good-by. I’ll be seeing you about two!”

When Mrs. Newhall arrived, Stacy had Michael warmly dressed and lying on the sunporch couch. He was still feverish and headachey but seemed no worse than he had been in the earlier morning. It was agreed by all, however, that the best place for him for a while would be with Mrs. Newhall, and in close vicinity of a good doctor. He didn’t want to leave and pleaded hard to remain where he loved it so much—and where he could see his beloved Spike. But on the promise that he should return just as soon as he was better, he was finally driven away, after a hurried lunch. Stacy longed to tell her mother about the appalling episode during the night, but refrained, not wishing to worry her with anything else. She felt pretty sure her father had said nothing about it, either.

It was half-past one when they left. Stacy felt too restless to remain quietly in the house, waiting for Betsy’s arrival, so she decided to start out up the road, and probably meet her halfway.

The day was as mild as early spring—a season of comparative warmth that often comes to that part of the coast during early January. The air was spicy with the scent of pines and cedars. Some Maryland warblers flitted among the shrubbery, and juncos and fox-sparrows were busy pecking at the cedar and holly berries. Halfway to the gate, Stacy spied Betsy coming toward her and waved a greeting.

“Let’s walk down along the ocean, Bets,” she said, as soon as they had met. “It’ll be grand there to-day, no wind. We could walk down the road about half a mile to that path going over the dunes. It’ll be easier than tramping through the soft sand here.” Betsy being perfectly agreeable, they proceeded as they had planned. “I’m sorry Harvey cut his hand,” Stacy continued. “How did he do it?” Harvey was Mrs. Dunne’s only son and her general helper in all the outdoor work.

“Cutting wood with the buzz-saw this morning. He came near cutting his hand off!” said Betsy scornfully. “Little more and he would have. He’s so careless sometimes. Doctor had to take five stitches. Lucky for him it was his left hand. He won’t be able to do much outside work for a bit, but he can tend store. Too bad Michael is sick.”

“He’ll be all right soon,” replied Stacy. “He’s better off with Mother, right now. Too bad about both these things, but at least it may give us a chance to get together more. By the way, what were you going to tell me?”

“Did you hear or feel anything last night?” demanded Betsy briefly. It seemed as if she could scarcely talk about it above a whisper. Stacy acknowledged that she had, and related the circumstances.

“I felt it, too,” said Betsy. “It woke me up. Seemed like the window of my room

would blow in. You know, it faces out toward the ocean, and I could see flashes of light and what looked like a blaze of fire for a while. Then it all went out. I guess the vessel sank. I wonder what happened to those poor men?"

"I don't know!" shuddered Stacy. "Probably the Coast Guards or some other boats picked them up, if they got clear of the ship in time, don't you think so? Maybe there'll be something about it on the radio, later."

"I don't think so," commented Betsy. "They say they're not going to report these things if they can help it. Might give information to the enemy. But, anyhow, that wasn't what I specially wanted to tell you about."

"Oh, has something new happened—something about our own affair?" queried Stacy, all agog with interest and suspense.

"Well, it's two things, really," reported Betsy as they swung along in the warm sunshine. "One of them is this—I heard the Coast Guards muttering about it in the store this morning. They didn't know I could overhear them, I guess. They said that last night, just before that ship was sunk, one of them was patrolling the beach and saw a flashlight showing out between the dunes. It winked on and off, like a kind of signal, and a few minutes afterward there came that explosion. He said the Coast Guard who saw it—I mean the light—ran like anything to the place where he thought it had been, but he couldn't find a sign of any one. Whoever it was had slipped away, or else had some hiding-place. He said it wasn't any good to hunt around any more. He had to go on with his patrol."

"That's awful!" cried Stacy indignantly. "That just shows there's *some one* around here who's working with the enemy! Betsy, *could* it be that Gunnar fellow? Where was he last night at that time, I wonder?"

"I haven't any idea," admitted Betsy. "His room is upstairs over the store, and Aunt Liz and I sleep in that one downstairs next to the kitchen. He could come in and out in the night and we'd never know it. He seemed just the same as usual this morning, laughing and joking with everybody. He doesn't seem to like your friend Spike, though, ever since that billiard game. Maybe he was peeved because he didn't win it. Anyhow, he and Spike don't even speak now—just nod to each other when they pass. But I want to tell you about that other thing—and it concerns Gunnar."

"After Harvey had cut his hand this morning and a Coast Guard had run him up to the doctor's in town in the truck, it gave Aunt Liz and me a lot of extra things to do that Harvey usually does. So finally Aunt Liz said she'd tend the store, and she told me to go up and make the bed in Gunnar's room and straighten things up a bit. He'd driven up with Harvey to the doctor's. Aunt Liz usually does those things

herself. So I went up and made his bed; I picked up some clothes he'd left all around the floor, and hung them in the closet. And when I took hold of a coat he'd had on yesterday, something fell out of the pocket. What do you suppose it was?" Stacy stopped short in the road and exclaimed:

"Oh, for goodness sake, don't keep me guessing. I'm boiling to know—so don't let's make a game of it!"

"All right—I won't!" agreed Betsy grimly. "Here's what it was—a *calico-crab shell*—exactly like the one in the old house, same size and everything!" She paused on that, with dramatic effect. Stacy was stunned—and rather exultant.

"That clinches it!" she cried. "Do we need any more proof? Gunnar is the one who put that crab shell there. Perhaps that's the very same one—and he's taken it out again."

"Of course, you can't be certain of that," argued Betsy, throwing a bit of cold water on her friend's enthusiasm. "He might have picked it up on the shore, and just put it in his pocket—well, as a curiosity. You don't find many of them, you know. But I think there's a big chance it was the way you think. We just don't know. Only it certainly looks queer!" Suddenly Stacy stopped short.

"Where is Gunnar now?" she demanded. "In the store?"

"He was when I left," said Betsy. "He said he was going to sit around and help Harvey, in case he had to lift anything that was heavy, or that might bother his left hand. Harvey thought it was pretty nice of him, and he likes talking to Gunnar."

"That settles it, then!" decided Stacy. "We'll go right over to the old house—it's only a little way back from here—and see what the situation is now with that calico-crab!"

They retraced their steps, almost running in their haste, to the little path that led to the empty old house on the bay shore. When they reached it, they found the house deserted as usual. A drowsy afternoon hush seemed to lie over it. There was so little wind that the blue bay lay like a sheet of glass, its surface broken only by a white gull swimming in toward the shore, leaving a V-shaped wake behind. But the girls were too absorbed in their own affairs to admire the scenery. Plunging down the cellar steps and up through the house to the cupola, they came to a halt, breathless and gasping, to stare about searchingly at the four window-sills.

"Look at that!" they both cried in chorus, pointing to the south window-sill. On it lay *two* calico-crab shells, side by side!

"Well, what do you make of that?" whispered Betsy, as they stared fascinated at the phenomenon. But before Stacy could answer, Betsy hissed: "*Listen!*—"

There was the sound of distinct footsteps, echoing through the empty spaces of

the house below!

CHAPTER VI

Footsteps Below

FOR an instant they stood—paralyzed with terror. They were trapped—and they knew it. The sound of footsteps was coming toward the main stairway to the second floor. Even if they could get down out of the cupola, there was no escape. What they feared, it was difficult to say, except that they did not want to be discovered by *any one*, in this deserted house of so much mystery. Coming to her senses after this brief interval of panic, Stacy felt it was imperative that they should at least escape out of the cupola.

“Let’s get right down out of here!” she whispered to Betsy and scurried down the ladder, with the other girl so close after her that she was almost stepping on Stacy’s hands. They were in the hall of the second story before the intruder had reached the top of the stairs. As that person’s head emerged into view, both girls caught their breath in a gasp, and Stacy cried out:

“*Spike!* Whatever are you doing in here?” Spike’s countenance broke into a wide grin.

“I might ask the same question of you two,” he chuckled, “and, as a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I came in here to do!” His reply flustered them no little.

“Why—how did you know we were in here?” parried Stacy, sparring for time to find some logical excuse. Not for worlds was she going to divulge the real reason they had come.

“I happened to be in the woods, right near-by,” explained Spike, still grinning at their evident discomfiture, “and I saw the pair of you tearing along the path as if the devil was after you, and diving into the cellar of this place. I thought something must certainly be the matter, so I came in after you to find out what the rumpus was all about. Anything wrong?”

“Why—er—certainly not!” declared Stacy. “We—we just wanted to look out of the cupola windows. You can see all along the bay shore from up there. Father must be somewhere along here—have you seen him?” She didn’t like to evade the truth in this way, being a very truthful person, but she did not wish Spike to guess the real reason for their quest. Spike grinned a trifle sceptically at her explanation and remarked:

“Even at that, you seemed in a terrible hurry. Do you want to find him so specially? I happen to know he’s gone two or three miles south of your house this afternoon. You’ll have a long trek to find him.” Stacy felt she could cheerfully have

wrung his neck for his inquisitive grin. And she had a frantic desire to turn the tables on him, somehow, in any way, to divert his attention from their own affairs. Without giving him a chance for any further questioning, she demanded:

“By the way, Spike, where is your truck now? I haven’t seen it anywhere about on the road, lately.” It was then Spike’s turn to be a bit discomfited. He hesitated a moment, then retorted:

“You do look about a bit, don’t you! To tell the truth, I didn’t like leaving that truck right out in the road, even though the Coast Guards are the only ones going up and down. As I sleep in it, I thought it would be better to have a less public spot. So I drove it in through this path and parked it in the woods close to this house. I probably won’t keep it in the same place all the time, but for the present this is pretty snug. But, look here, I’d take it kindly if you two wouldn’t say anything about where it is, if you don’t mind. Especially around the store. I have some rather valuable equipment of my own in it, and while I don’t think any one would be guilty of breaking into it, I wouldn’t care about their snooping around.”

“Of course, we won’t mention it, Spike,” agreed Stacy. And Betsy nodded violently to signify her own agreement. She still felt a little shy with Spike and found it hard to talk to him.

“Well, we’d better be getting along, if we’re to find Dad,” added Stacy brightly. “Come on, Bets, and so long, Spike! Drop in at the house later and have something to eat!” And without giving him time for any further unwelcome questions, the two girls scurried off down the cellar steps and out of the house.

Spike watched them go, but did not follow them out. Instead, he turned and scrambled lightly up the ladder to the cupola. Standing in the middle of it, he stared thoughtfully at the four window-sills, especially at the one where rested the two crab shells. Pursing his mouth, as for a silent whistle, he suddenly exclaimed aloud:

“Now—I just *wonder*—!”

It was a rather curious circumstance that brought about a change in Spike’s and Stacy’s attitude toward each other, later that afternoon. Stacy had returned to the house alone, about five, as Betsy had declared she could not come in, but must get right back to the store. Entering the house, Stacy found Spike there, talking earnestly with her father. They both stopped abruptly as she appeared.

“Oh, hello, Spike!” she called. “Wait a minute and I’ll see what I can find to eat in the refrigerator.” She came back a little later with an iced fruit drink and some little cakes baked by Mrs. Olafsen earlier in the day.

“Thought we’d have this for a change,” she remarked. “It’s too warm to-day for hot chocolate.” As she put down the tray on the little table by the hearth, she noticed that her father looked tired, pale, and almost ill. He rose as she came in, and muttered:

“I guess you’ll have to excuse me. I feel too tired to eat anything just now. I think I’ll go and lie down till supper time. I’ve tramped too long to-day, I imagine.” And he left the two staring after him in some concern as he went out of the room.

“Is anything the matter with Dad?” demanded Stacy, as she poured the fruit punch into tall glasses. “He looks a bit tired and—and awfully worried, somehow. What’s up—do you know?” Spike, unlike his usual jaunty self, looked pretty solemn.

“Well, I might as well tell you,” he remarked seriously. “I figure you either know it already or will find it out very soon. Did you know that there was a tanker torpedoed somewhere off this place last night?”

“Of course I knew it!” almost snorted Stacy. “The explosion shook my bed and woke me up. And, what’s more, I heard you talking to Dad through his window, and—and some of what was said. I—I was only listening because I couldn’t figure what was going on. But I knew it would worry Dad to realize that I knew what had happened, so I didn’t let on to him to-day that I knew anything about it.”

“Good kid!” commented Spike. “That was sporting of you—to keep it to yourself.” Stacy grew red at this unexpected praise and then demanded:

“Is that what is worrying Dad—the sinking, I mean?”

“That’s part of it,” Spike went on to explain. “Of course, he feels the horror of the whole thing, just as we all do. But one particular side of it struck him right in the line he feels pretty keenly, this afternoon. He had gone over to the ocean side for a look-see there in the bird line. And quite a way down, he found about fifty loons up on the beach, staggering around simply coated with heavy, black oil. They couldn’t fly and could hardly walk, and are all due to starve and die right there, in a very short time. You know how your father loves his wild birds! It made him feel so ill he could hardly get home.”

“But how did they get that way?” cried Stacy, almost sick herself with the grim news.

“Oh, oil from the sunken tanker, of course,” explained Spike. “It’s floating all over the surface of the sea in great patches. Those loons probably came down to rest after a flight and got right into it. Glues their feathers together worse than so much molasses, and they can’t possibly get it off. They manage to swim to shore and get up on the beach—but that’s the end of them.” Stacy shuddered. She could well

understand how greatly this had affected her sensitive father.

“But can’t anything be done for them?” she demanded. “If—if there were some way of getting the oil off them—”

“It’s pretty hopeless” said Spike, “because there are so many of them, and the oil is so thick. Your father did find one that didn’t seem in such a bad way as the others. He only had a little oil on his breast. He caught that one and trudged all the way home with it under his arm. When I came in, I found him washing it off in a pail of warm, sudsy water, in the kitchen. When it was fairly free of oil, we took it out to the bay and let it loose. You ought to have heard that feller squawk when he found he could swim around all right! There he is now—well out—still swimming about and hooting his thanks. He’ll fly off after a while!”

He pointed to the west window and they both went over to stare through it at the smooth, crimson water of the bay in the after-sunset glow. There they could see, in a black silhouette, the rescued loon paddling about, raising his head at intervals to utter his wild, eerie hoot. This time they felt it must surely be one of sheer gratitude for his rescue! Then they went back to sit by the fire. For a time, neither of them spoke. Spike was fully occupied in disposing of his fruit-juice drink and the toothsome cakes. Stacy felt no appetite for them, after the recent revelation, and sat thinking soberly. Presently she seemed to have made up her mind to speak out, as she had not dreamed she ever could, to the Spike who had always teased and had never, till now, taken her seriously. The little incident of the oil-soaked birds, and his concern over them, had suddenly appeared to alter the situation.

“Spike,” she began gravely, “this probably won’t be the last or only time that’ll happen, will it?” He shook his head with equal solemnity.

“Fraid not!” he agreed. “Probably only the beginning. More and more ships are going to be sunk and more men and wild birds are going to die. Got to catch those who are responsible for it!” Stacy caught her breath, like a diver about to plunge, and launched into a new angle of the subject.

“I want to tell you something, Spike. I just feel I’ve got to tell some one—and it mustn’t be Dad. It’d worry him too much. It’s something Betsy heard two Coast Guards muttering about in the store this morning.” She went on to detail to him the affair of the flashlight in the dunes. And she ended with: “What does that mean, do you think? Is some one around here trying to signal those subs?”

Spike didn’t answer for a moment. He didn’t even go on eating, while she was giving him the account. Instead, he sat bolt upright, a half-finished cake in one hand, a half-empty glass balanced in the other. His blue, twinkling eyes had grown suddenly hard, his expression grim, while he concentrated on what she was saying.

Presently he spoke, but, to her surprise, it was on quite a different line from the subject they had been discussing. Looking her squarely in the eye, he demanded:

“Will you tell me something, Stacy? What did you and Betsy *really* go into that old house for, this afternoon?” The question was so abrupt that it gave her no time to consider any mode of evasion. Instead, she blurted out:

“I—I don’t know whether you’ll understand, Spike, but we went there to find out about—about the calico-crab shells. Whether—er—there’d been any—change in them. You wouldn’t understand, unless I explained about them, so I guess I’d better.” And while he listened grimly, she poured out the history of the shells, and how she and Betsy had suspected many things and formed a committee of two, to investigate the matter, if they could. When she had finished, she expected Spike, from the lofty eminence of his five-year seniority, to break into some teasing comment, and braced herself for it. But he only inquired:

“What did you intend to do with this information, in case you found the situation was really getting serious?”

“We didn’t know, Spike, just what we would do,” admitted Stacy thoughtfully. “So far, we didn’t have anything positive we could pin on any one. It’s all too mysterious and—and vague. But we’d made up our minds that if we did strike anything we could prove, we’d—we’d let the authorities know—somehow. We’d have to find out who to tell. But I’d determined it mustn’t be Dad. I didn’t want to upset him with it.”

Her halting explanation seemed to amuse him, for some obscure reason that she could not fathom. And she was suddenly sorry that she had told him anything at all. He was silent, too, for several moments afterward, and his silence added to her uneasiness. While he was thinking, he had been finishing the drink and the cake. Then he put his glass down and remarked:

“And so you decided to tell all this to me?”

“Well, I didn’t *decide* it,” exclaimed Stacy, a little impatiently. “It just came out—somehow. I felt so sorry about the birds—and Dad—and the whole thing’s so horrible, I just felt I *had* to tell some one!” Was he going to be difficult and silly and teasing again, she wondered resentfully? His answer astonished her.

“Well, you came to the right person,” he grinned. “In fact, you couldn’t have done better! And right here, Stace, I want to tell you that I think you’re a swell kid! Got more brains than I’ve given most of your sex credit for—and you know how to use ’em! And Betsy’s another. Now, I’m going to let you into a secret—or part of it, anyway. As much as I’m allowed to tell. Do you and Betsy want to go partners with me—in something pretty important?” Stacy’s eyes glistened with pleasure in his

unexpected praise of her and his wholly astonishing offer.

“Of course we do, Spike!” she agreed with alacrity. “But what can we do—and what are you doing? I don’t understand at all.”

“You’ll have to take me on faith, in a good deal of this,” went on Spike. “It’s desperately important—and very secret—and I can’t tell you all of it, or even very much. But I can let you in on a little, and you and Betsy can be a lot of help, if you’re willing to. I took on a bigger proposition than I thought, when I agreed to handle this job, and I find I’m in need of some help, on the side. But I’ve been at my wits’ end to find some one I could trust. And you two have stepped right in to fill the bill! Here’s the set-up.” He leaned forward impressively, his thick eyeglass lenses gleaming in the firelight, while Stacy held her breath in eager suspense.

“I told you I was doing a surveying job for Mr. Drew, down here and, as far as it goes, that’s quite true. But it’s only a blind for something a lot more important. Had to have some kind of work to cover up the real business I’m down here for. That concerns Mr. Drew, too, but I can’t tell you how—not just at present. But, while I can’t give you any details, I can say this much—that there’s a very definite plot being hatched down here, involving spywork and enemy sabotage on a pretty large scale. And what I’m here for is to get a definite line on it and on the ones mixed up in it, and nip it in the bud, if possible, before anything comes off. Part of the work I do is done from the truck, and another part is listening to the gossip and whispering that goes on up at the store—watching every one, just so I can get a hint here and there. The trouble is, they don’t talk in front of me much, or to me, just yet. I’m new here and they’re always a little leary of new-comers, you know. I don’t mean exactly that I suspect any of *them*, as being concerned in it, but I hoped to gather from their talk more about some who don’t hang around there so much.”

“But what about the truck?” breathed Stacy, so thrilled with this revelation that she could hardly think coherently. “You said you did some of your work in that. I’ve wondered so why you wouldn’t allow any one to see the inside of it.”

“That’s the most important angle of my work,” Spike enlightened her. “In my scientific course, I did some very specialized work in radio. I don’t mean the kind you listen to, but the really scientific ones, short-wave stuff and transmitting and building radios, and all that. I have an uncle who’s pretty high up in the biggest electrical company in the country, and he’s let me do some extra work there every summer, for several years. I’ve a sort of inventive slant myself in a small way, and I’ve been interested in concocting a new device for detecting the location of short-wave transmitters. You wouldn’t understand the technical part of it so it’s no use going into that. But Mr. Drew got interested in my work and he saw to it that I was

able to get the proper outfit for the experiments, and then he sent me down here to try it out. That's what I have in the truck."

He stopped there, as if his explanation had gone far enough. But Stacy, though properly thrilled by his confidences, was still pretty vague about what it all meant. Puckering her brows in bewilderment, she ventured:

"It—it sounds thrilling, Spike, but—but what has that got to do with this other business—the spies and sabotage and, and all that sort of thing?" Spike was silent a moment, probably trying to decide how much more he might reveal. Then he continued:

"Well, naturally you wouldn't understand unless I tell you this, and it's something you're not to tell to a soul—except Betsy, as she's going to be in this with us. We've good reason to know that there's some one, down in this vicinity, who has a secret transmitting radio-set, and is sending out communications to the enemy—and receiving them. It's been heard, every once in a while, but can't be located. The person must move it around from place to place, and very rapidly, at that. I've heard it half a dozen times since I've been down here, and located the spot it was in at the moment, beyond a doubt. But when I get to that spot, there's nothing—and nobody there! It's always down on this property, too, and how he gets in here is a teaser—locked up the way it is!"

"Oh, have you thought about that fellow, Gunnar?" demanded Stacy eagerly. "You know what I told you, that Betsy saw him wade into the bay and get around the fence—that night!" Spike looked serious.

"Yes, Gunnar's a problem. I haven't been able to make him out yet. There are several pretty curious things about him. He doesn't seem to want to cultivate my acquaintance, for one thing. Seems kind of suspicious. I'm keeping a pretty close watch on him, though." But this reply did not satisfy Stacy.

"But don't you think he has something to do with those calico-crab shells?" she demanded. "And what about *them*?" Just as Spike was about to reply, the clock struck six. Instead of answering her question, he rose hastily and remarked:

"Gosh, Stace! I didn't know it was so late. This'll throw me a bit off my schedule. I've got to rush to Dunne's store, cram down a bit of supper and be back at the truck pronto, to begin the evening 'listening in.' Generally begin to pick up something about this time, and I don't dare miss anything. Suppose you toddle up to the old house to-morrow morning—and we'll go over this thing more carefully. Bring Betsy with you if she can come. I want to tell you girls what you can do to help me, if you want to. So long, and thanks for the eats! Look out for your father, too. He's feeling pretty rocky!"

Two seconds later, Spike had grabbed his cap and mackinaw and hustled out, leaving Stacy, dazed but happy, and thrilled to her finger-tips, standing in the doorway and staring after him.

CHAPTER VII

Who's Who

BUT—I don't understand what you got me here for?"

It was Betsy who was talking, and she was standing with Stacy and Spike near the cellar door of the old house. She had just come hurrying to the spot, in answer to a mysterious and muffled telephone call from Stacy, the night before.

"I don't think I can get away so soon—just after this afternoon," she had replied, to Stacy's hushed but urgent message that she meet her at the empty house, as early as possible next morning.

"Oh, you've *got* to!" Stacy had urged. "Something very special has come up. I can't tell you over the phone, but you simply *must* try to get away. . . . No, I can't come to the store instead. It wouldn't be any use. . . . Well, try your best to come! You'll be surprised at what's happened!" And so Betsy was there, having dodged an irritated Aunt Liz and a sulky Harvey, and resigned to taking the consequences when she got back.

"Now, listen, Bets!" cried Stacy. "I know you're surprised about all this, but things have changed a lot since I saw you yesterday afternoon. I'll try to explain it as quick as I can. Spike, here, has been telling me quite a lot about what he's doing down here, and it's right in our line, and he wants us to give him some help." And she went on to explain, in a rather hurried and garbled fashion, the conversation that she and Spike had had the previous afternoon. Betsy began to understand it, after a fashion, but there were still many gaps she was at a loss to fill in.

"Now do you understand?" demanded Stacy, when she had finished her breathless summary. Betsy nodded in a slightly bewildered manner.

"I—I see how it is," she hesitated, "but—but I don't understand what you and I can do about it, Stacy."

"Well, just let *me* explain that!" interrupted Spike. "I don't think Stacy understands that either. But here's how it is. You see, I'm new down here and naturally I don't get the set-up very well—I mean I don't know much about all these people around the place. Now, Stacy does, quite a bit, and you know even more about them, Betsy, because you see them in the store so much and have lived around near them longer."

"But who do you mean?" demanded Betsy. "Aunt Liz and Harvey and myself?"

"Every one!" explained Spike, with a wide gesture of his arm. "I'd like to get an idea of the standing of every one around here, from your point of view. That doesn't

mean, in the least, that I suspect every one of being engaged in any plots, or anything like that. It's simply that I want to get a picture of the group in my mind—as much as you know about them. I suggest we all sit down here on these back steps—it's nice and sunny and warm enough—and make out a list right now, if you can spare the time, Betsy. I've got a note-book and pencil handy, and we'll get right to it."

So they huddled together on the sheltered and sun-warmed back steps, while Spike got out his note-book and pencil, and began a systematic "Who's Who" of the neighborhood.

"You can leave out yourself and your aunt and cousin, Betsy," he began. "We know all about you folks, and that would just be a waste of time." Betsy looked gratified at this, but insisted:

"There are one or two things I'd like to say about Aunt Liz and Harvey that you mayn't know. Aunt Liz is just true blue—a straight American from 'way back, and she wouldn't stand for any underhand work or Fifth Column business from any one that comes in the store. If she hears any talk she doesn't like, she just throws that person right out, no matter what the consequences might be. But, same time, she's awfully kind and good to these people, when they're in trouble—or anything like that. They all trust her a lot and tell her all their troubles, so she knows a good deal about them, more even than I do."

"Well, that's very important," commented Spike, scribbling away in his note-book. "We may have to call on her some time, for information. I've always been sure she was tops. Now, what about Harvey, before we go on to the others?"

Betsy seemed to hesitate a little.

"It's kind of hard to explain about Harvey," she said slowly. "He's all right—really—but he's sort of simple and childish in some ways. He's twenty-four, but Aunt Liz says he has never really grown up—in his mind, I mean. I don't want you to think he's not—well—all there, as they say. He's quite bright, in a lot of ways, but he has a sort of trusting disposition, just like a little child. He believes most anything any one tells him, without reasoning out whether it might be so or not. Aunt Liz says he's easily influenced. And the thing that worries both of us, just now, is that he's gotten to be such pals with this Gunnar. Neither Aunt Liz nor I like Gunnar very much. We don't trust him, somehow, though I've never known him to do anything queer, except going around the fence into the Drew place, that time. It's just a feeling we have about him. And we don't like Harvey being around with him so much. That's all."

"I see!" murmured Spike, still scribbling. "And it's a mighty interesting point you've brought up. And that brings us to this Gunnar. How long has he been at your

place, by the way?”

“Well, he came around the middle of December—I think it was,” went on Betsy. “He says he came down from New York. Wanted to get a job in the fishpound, but there wasn’t anything doing at this time, so he took a room with us and said he’d wait till the pound season opened—didn’t want to go back again. Said he’d worked all last year up around the Maine Coast and saved up his money. Said he didn’t like it much up there and wanted to work down this way where it’s warmer. That’s really all we know about him.”

“Is he an alien, do you think, or been naturalized—or what?” demanded Spike.

“He told Harvey he was born in this country—somewhere out in Nebraska,” said Betsy. “He does speak good English, not with much accent, I mean. So maybe that’s true.”

“Do you ever hear him speaking to the poundmen in their own language?” went on Spike.

“No, he only talks in English—oh! wait!—I do remember now that one day a German salesman came in to sell Aunt Liz a line of candy that she always buys from him, and he sat down afterward and had some lunch, at the same table with Gunnar. And after a while Gunnar got talking to him, in a low voice—and he was speaking in German. I didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Spike, scribbling furiously. “That’s a point that’s pretty important. We won’t jump to any conclusions, but I’ll make a note of it. Now, what does he do with himself, as far as you know? Sticks around the store most of the time, I gather.”

“Yes, when the weather’s cold, he stays pretty much in the store, talking, playing pool, and that kind of thing. But he does go out quite a bit, when it isn’t stormy or too cold. He goes over to the pound and wanders around there, or he goes over to the bay and talks to old Ben Thomson. I don’t know where else he walks. But once a week, he drives up to town with Harvey and I don’t know what he does there. Harvey says he always stops at the station and spends quite a while in the telephone booth calling somebody up, but he never tells Harvey who it is.”

“That might be important, too,” commented Spike. “And now as time’s flying, we’d better get on to the others. What about the poundmen?”

“Well, there aren’t so many here right now, because it’s the off-season. More will come in when the season opens. Those that are here are mostly the married ones, with families. They live in those little shacks you see right around the pound houses. I think they’re all right. They’ve been here a good many years. They’re Norwegians or Danes, and they all hate the Nazis like anything! I’ve heard them

talking about it—what the Nazis have done to their countries back in Europe and their relatives there. I'm certain none of them would—er—be in any plots."

"I'm sure of that, too!" interrupted Stacy eagerly, "on account of knowing our Mrs. Olafsen so well. She is the wife of one of the boat captains. And she tells me a lot about them all and how they feel about this war. She says there isn't one of them that wouldn't give everything he owns to get a chance to lay his hands on Hitler! She says if there were one Nazi sympathizer among them, the rest of them would just run him clear off the place and never let him come back."

"I guess that accounts for them, all right," commented Spike, "without going into all their individual histories. That leaves only the Coast Guards. And as they're all very much in Uncle Sam's service, they've already been pretty well inquired into, and are to be trusted. Now, let's see—is there any one else?"

"You mustn't forget old Ben Thomson," said Betsy. "He's that old clammer and fisherman who has the shack on the bay just outside this place."

"Right you are!" exclaimed Spike. "Give us the lowdown on old Ben, Betsy, please!"

"He's a strange old man," said Betsy. "I've never been able to make him out. He's lived in that old houseboat on the bay shore as long as any one can remember, around here. Makes his living digging clams and oysters along the bay, in the winter, and catching fish and selling them in the summer. They say he's an old native, and knows the bay and all its coves and channels better than any one else. He's a queer character, though. Sort of grouchy, he is, never talks much. Aunt Liz says he used to hear very well, but two or three years ago he had a bad illness one winter, something that affected his head, and now he's stone deaf."

"Don't see how he does much business—being so deaf!" commented Spike.

"Oh, he gets along all right," added Betsy. "He watches people's lips, and you help him out by pointing to things you want and holding up your fingers to say how many—that kind of thing. It doesn't seem to bother him much, only it's made him crosser than ever, Aunt Liz says." Spike wrote all this down without comment. Then he asked:

"He has a rowboat, I've noticed. Seen that pulled up on the shore. What does he keep in that shed alongside his shack, do you know?"

"He has a motor-boat in that," commented Betsy. "It's fairly good-sized and it's quite powerful. He uses it in summer to go way down the bay fishing. Sometimes he takes fishing parties out in it. He even goes out through the inlet, way down below and into the ocean, if it isn't too rough. The name of the boat is the *Osprey*."

"He doesn't sound too promising as a suspect!" commented Spike. "Being

stone-deaf, he couldn't possibly be running that radio I've heard, and the one who's working that is the one we're after. However, we'll keep an eye on old Ben, along with any one else who turns up as a likely subject." He closed the note-book and stuffed it in his pocket.

"I guess I'd better go now," suggested Betsy anxiously. "That is, if you don't need me any longer."

"There's just one thing," suggested Spike before she left. "If you'll keep an eye on people in the store, and an open ear for any gossip or peculiar doings, I'll be awfully obliged. That'll be *your* part in this affair, Betsy, and thanks a lot for what you've done. We'll get together again later."

Stacy remained to talk with Spike, after Betsy had hurried away. She was full of unanswered questions, and this seemed a good opportunity to clear up some of them. She began:

"Well, what did you get out of that list, Spike?"

"Not as much as I'd hoped," he replied, thoughtfully chewing the end of his pencil. "Thought I'd unearth a lot of shady characters, but they all seem pretty harmless—except maybe one or two."

"One of them is Gunnar, isn't he?" she demanded.

"His record doesn't look quite as good as it might," Spike admitted, "but there's nothing really solid you could pin on him."

"How about that crab shell that Betsy found in his pocket?" cried Stacy hotly. "That's enough to pin something on him, right away!"

"Might be," drawled Spike. "But after all, any one might pick up a shell, just out of curiosity, and stuff it in his pocket without thinking about it a second time." Stacy had to admit this was so.

"But what about those shells, anyway?" she further demanded. "You haven't told me yet what you thought about their being up in that cupola, when they never were there before, and being put on different window-sills at different times. Who put them there—and what for?"

"Well, if you want to know," conceded Spike, "I believe they are a means of communication between two people—or maybe more. A regular code, and a mighty clever one at that! No one could possibly guess what the different placing or number of them might mean except those who have the key to it. And it's undoubtedly being used for messages. We can only keep an eye on them and watch the changes in them—and hope to be able to decode them some time, if we can discover the key."

"But who's using it?" insisted Stacy, partly enlightened, but still dissatisfied with this explanation. "Somebody must come in here and change them. Can't you find

out? You have the truck right near here, and if you watched out, you could easily spot who goes in or out of this house.”

“Trouble is, whoever does it, undoubtedly comes at night—or else I’d have spotted them before this. And at night I have to be here, there and all over, beside working with my apparatus in the truck, which is well hidden from here. So I don’t get much chance. I’m going to give this house the once-over several times during the night, from now on, however. Maybe I’ll catch ’em at it.” Spike went no farther than this on that particular subject. And Stacy felt certain he was not telling her all he thought about it. Then she switched to something else.

“Have you thought about that flashlight signal the Coast Guard saw on the dunes the other night?” she inquired.

“I’ve thought about it a lot. It’s the most dangerous thing of all,” said Spike seriously. “The guy that was doing that was undoubtedly signaling some one or something out on the ocean—probably the submarine. And you’d better believe it was for no good!” They both sat silent for several moments, thinking this over. Suddenly Spike spoke out, quietly, grimly:

“I might as well tell you, Stace, since you are in this with me—I can’t tell you all about it, nor how we know—but there’s a horrible plot been hatched, and it’s going to be brought off *soon*! That’s one of the desperate things about it, we have so little time in which to run this down. Any time, any night, the thing may be brought off, unless we can nail the ones who are concerned in it. But the whole thing has been so carefully worked out and so cleverly masked that, so far, it’s impossible to nail any one as being concerned in it. I’ve been able to discover that there’s a radio-transmitter at work, but I haven’t yet been able to locate it—it’s being moved around too quickly. Nobody here seems to be acting too suspiciously—and there you are!”

Stacy was deeply impressed by his urgency. She had never seen Spike as serious as this before. One question that had been puzzling her she now gave voice to:

“But why is it, Spike, if this thing is so terribly important, that there aren’t more people down here trying to work on it? Why is it all left up to you?”

“That’s just the point,” Spike enlightened her. “If there were a lot of strange people around, it would be very noticeable, because this is such a small community. Whoever is concerned in this is watching like a cat to see if he’s being spotted by any one. If he thought he was, it would put him on his guard, and the thing would be carried out somewhere else. Do you get it?”

“Yes, I see,” acknowledged Stacy. “I was just wondering, too, whether it might

be some one from outside, from town, or even farther away—some one you don't know anything about, who could drive down at night, perhaps, and get in here."

"I don't think there's a chance," said Spike. "You see this place is peculiarly situated. It's separated from town by those wide marshes, and only the causeway running over them. A car at night would stand out like a lighthouse, coming across to this place. I'd be sure to see it, and I've kept a good lookout, ever since I got here, on just that chance. Not one has come in. I don't rule out the chance that some one might get across the bay in a boat, in mild weather like this, but so far, I haven't seen any boat out at night either, or heard one." Suddenly Stacy demanded, with a grin:

"Far as I can make out, you're around prowling all of every night. Do you ever get a chance to do any sleeping?"

"I do that in the daytime," he acknowledged. "Nothing much goes on in broad daylight, so I manage to tuck in a few hours here and there. The night is my busy season."

"I'm afraid Betsy and I didn't give you very much help this morning," said Stacy, switching to another subject.

"You gave me a lot," contradicted Spike. "More than you suspect. Now I know, at least, those whom I needn't concentrate on. That's a big help!"

Stacy got up to leave, remarking, as she did so:

"Well, I must be getting back home. Here's hoping something will happen soon—something encouraging, I mean!"

CHAPTER VIII

The First Blow Falls

THE hour when something was to happen was near at hand—much nearer than any of them suspected. And it came in a fashion as equally unexpected.

Late that same afternoon, Spike drifted into the Newhall home for his usual chat, and Stacy promptly went to the kitchen to prepare the usual afternoon refreshment. She was alone, as her father had not yet come in from his afternoon prowling in search of wild fowl to sketch and watch. Spike wandered out to the kitchen while she was fixing the tray, and joked with her a bit on her domestic habits.

“You’re certainly a swell provider of eats!” he teased, cracking ice for her while she squeezed lemons and oranges for a cool drink. “Your mother must have caught you and taught you early in life!”

“I love to do it,” she retorted, “and besides, I like to nibble something myself at this time of day. But, tell me, Spike, has anything new turned up since this morning?”

“Nothing of much interest,” he said, taking up the tray and carrying it into the living-room. “Thought I’d stroll up and cultivate an acquaintance with old Ben Thomson, but he was evidently not at home. Rowboat was gone and I figured he was out digging clams somewhere while this mild weather lasts. One thing seemed a bit odd, though. While he was away, I thought I’d take a little look-see around his place. The houseboat was all tightly locked up and so was the shed where he keeps his motor-boat. That shed hasn’t any windows in it, but I did find a crack in the wood of one of the walls and peeked in. And this gave me a bit of a jolt: *there isn’t any motor-boat in there!*” Stacy looked somewhat astonished.

“That’s certainly queer!” she exclaimed. “I know that’s where he always keeps it in the winter. Wait a minute, though!—Dad hired him to take us out in it one nice day last fall. He wanted to study the terns over on some marshes way down the bay, and couldn’t get to them any other way. He and Mother and Michael and I all went along, and we took a lunch with us and had a wonderful day. But I remember then that old Ben said the motor wasn’t working too well, and he guessed he’d soon take the *Osprey* up to the boatyard near town, and have her thoroughly overhauled. And I remember his saying maybe he’d leave her there all winter to get a good painting job on her in the spring. I guess that’s the explanation.”

“Probably is,” agreed Spike, and they fell to consuming the food and drink Stacy had prepared. The sun set in a rather hazy sky while they were eating and chatting, and a mist could be seen rising over the bay. Presently it grew quite dark and Stacy

turned on the shaded lights in the living-room.

“I wish Dad would come in,” she remarked anxiously. “I don’t like his staying out so late. He always gets in by twilight, at the latest. What do you suppose can be keeping him, Spike?”

“Maybe he wandered quite a way off,” suggested Spike, “stayed till the light failed, making sketches, and is trekking it home in the dark. Did he happen to say which side he was going to be on to-day, before he left—ocean or bay?”

“No, he didn’t,” admitted Stacy. “He seldom does, because he just goes where he can find the birds—wherever they happen to be. It’s getting awfully foggy, too. I *wish* he’d get back!” Spike could see that she was very much worried.

“Suppose I stay on till he gets back,” he offered, glancing at the clock on the mantel. “It’s nearly six, and Mrs. Olafsen hasn’t come in yet, and I don’t like to leave you here alone—worrying.”

“It’d be awfully good of you,” admitted Stacy, “but I don’t want to interfere with your work. I know you get busy about this time of day. Tell you what!—I’ll fix you some nice big sandwiches, with some cold roast beef we have, and a thermos bottle of hot coffee, and some fruit, and you could take it back and eat it right there in the truck, and you wouldn’t have to waste time getting your supper at the store.”

“Swell!” agreed Spike. “That’d fix me up like a king! I can eat while I’m doing my ‘listening in.’” They hurried out to the kitchen and busied themselves over this new task. They had just finished packing it away in a lunchbox when Mrs. Olafsen arrived. Immediately they demanded if she had seen anything of Professor Newhall on her trip down the road in her car.

“Na!” she exclaimed. “Ain’t he home yet? Can’t see de hand before de face in dis fog yet! I dunno how I get back myself.” Spike and Stacy stared at each other in consternation. It was now half-past six. If all were well, they felt certain that the Professor would surely have been back by this time, fog or no fog. Something must certainly be done!

“Look here, Stace!” said Spike. “I think it’s about time we got stirring. Here’s what I suggest. We’d better go out on a hunt for him. I don’t think he’s lost—he knows this place too well to get lost, even in a fog. He may be feeling ill—or have had an accident—or something like that. We’d better not waste time searching around, hit-or-miss, either. What spot is the one he goes to most often, do you know? The one where he usually gets the best results.”

“Oh, it’s a little point stretching out in the bay about a mile and a half south of here,” she replied instantly. “He can usually find wild fowl around there when there aren’t any anywhere else. I think he usually visits it at least once every day. It has tall

marsh reeds growing on it, right out to the end, and there's a place where he usually sits, screened by the reeds, and can watch and sketch the birds without their seeing him."

"Is there any way we could get to it by driving down the road?" asked Spike. "That'd be quicker than walking along the bay shore."

"Yes, there's a little path to it leading from the road. Dad gets to it that way sometimes, when the tide is too high to walk comfortably along the bay shore. I know where it is, because I've often gone there with him, but it would be awfully hard to find in this fog, I'm afraid."

"We've got to try, anyhow," insisted Spike. "Mrs. Olafsen, you must stay here, and if Professor Newhall comes back while we're gone, just keep him here. Don't let him go out trailing after us. And may we borrow your car for a while?"

"Sure—sure!" she agreed, anxious to be of help. "I stay ride here. You go find him—quick! De key iss in de car."

Before they left, Stacy rushed into one of the bedrooms and grabbed a couple of blankets. "He—he might need them!" she explained to Spike. He only nodded and murmured, "Good idea!"

Spike drove carefully and silently south along the main road, first having warned Stacy to keep a sharp lookout to discover the whereabouts of the path. "It'll be hard to find in this murk," he added. "I'm watching the speedometer, though, and when we've gone approximately a mile or so, I'll slow her down, so you can see better." It was a curious drive through fog so woolly and dense that even the bright headlights did not penetrate ahead more than a very few feet. Both of them were tense with suspense and foreboding. Only once during the trip did Stacy ask a direct question of her companion:

"Spike, did—did Dad know anything about what you're really down here for?" He did not answer at once. At last he said:

"Yes, Stace, he knows all about it. I wasn't going to tell you that, but I might as well, I guess. He knows about it—and it's worrying him quite a bit. He's been combining his own work with keeping a watch along the shore to see that nothing out of the way happens in the daytime. Then I take over at night."

"I see!" was all Stacy replied, and after that there was silence, till they arrived at a point which Spike said registered over a mile and a quarter from the house. He warned Stacy to keep a sharp eye on the side of the road, and geared the car down to a slow pace. Shrouded in the mist, all bushes and trees looked very much alike to Stacy. The fog even lay close to the ground, obscuring any vestige of a path, had they passed one. Practically no noticeable landmarks were visible to guide them to

the spot. Stacy kept the window on her side open, and strained her eyes to recognize something familiar. And so they crept slowly along.

“Spike, I—I don’t see a thing that looks like it,” she muttered, after a while. “I think we must have gone too far.” Her voice sounded choked with the fear she would not utter.

“I’m sure we have,” he agreed. “The speedometer registers over two miles from the house. Now, I’m going to turn around right here, go back a mile, and then turn and go over it again. Only this time, you’re going to get out and walk along, using my flashlight and turning it in toward the bushes. I’ll follow right along with you in the car. I think you’ll be more likely to spot it that way.” Stacy gave a great sigh of relaxed tension, and Spike turned the car and proceeded back to the distance he figured was a little over a mile from the house. After he had turned the car again, Stacy got out, flashed on the electric torch, and kept her eyes glued to the side of the road illuminated by its glare, watching every bush and shrub and patch of sand along the way. Spike followed directly behind her, in the car. The clammy fog shut them in and there was no sound save the crunch of car wheels on the gravel and the dull thud of the surf beyond the dunes. Suddenly Stacy halted with a little cry and held up her hand for Spike to stop the car.

“I think this is it!” she exclaimed, as he got out. “There are a man’s footprints here in the sand, going toward the bay. I think they must be Dad’s. Looks like the pattern of his sneaker soles. They’re quite fresh. He must have been over at the ocean first, then came back this way to get to the point.”

“Good work!” cried Spike. “How far is it to the bay from here?”

“Oh, not a quarter of a mile, I think,” said Stacy. “This path goes in through a patch of woods and then comes out right at the point.”

“I’ll leave the lights of the car on,” decided Spike, “to guide us on the way back. You go ahead with the flashlight. Let’s go!”

In single file, the electric torch guiding their footsteps, they made their slow way along the sandy little path, threading between high shrubbery dripping with moisture, till suddenly they were in a heavy growth of cedars. Here the fog was less dense and they could hurry their pace almost to a run. It was Spike who suddenly called out:

“Listen, Stace, do you hear anything?” They stood stock still, surrounded only by the silence and an occasional drip of moisture from the tree branches. Then Stacy’s heart gave a great lurch, for, borne through the murk of the fog, there came the faint but distinct sound of a cry:

“Help!”

CHAPTER IX

Ben Thomson Makes Some Purchases

IT was Betsy's turn to wait on the store that same evening, while Harvey was having his supper and Mrs. Dunne was washing dishes in the kitchen. The evening rush was over and save for Gunnar, playing solitaire on one of the tables, alone, there was no one else in the store. Betsy had not seen or heard from Stacy all day, since the morning's interview and she had been wondering what—if anything—had happened since then. It had turned very foggy since dark and few had come into the store after six o'clock. Probably no one else would that night, she considered, and occupied herself with straightening out some of the merchandise on the shelves. Presently, however, the door opened, and old Ben Thomson appeared. It was quite unusual to see him there at that late hour, and she wondered what he could need so much to bring him out on such a night.

Ben Thomson was a tall, stoop-shouldered man, with unkempt gray hair, small suspicious-looking eyes, a scraggly mustache, a weather-beaten face and a bitter, dissatisfied expression. His mouth contained few teeth and there was always a corn-cob pipe suspended from it. He seldom removed the pipe but talked mumblingly through it. He rarely spoke if he could avoid it. Most people thought that something had happened in his life to sour his disposition, but no one knew just what it was. Betsy disliked him very much and always hated to wait on him in the store, but there was no help for it this time. Every one else was busy.

"Good evening. What'll you have?" she asked, as he approached the counter. Though he was deaf, he could read her lips and, dispensing with any greeting, he produced a crumpled paper from his pocket and read off the list of his purchases, while she rushed about getting them together. It was a surprisingly large order for Ben, who seldom bought much at a time save articles like a can of tinned milk or half a pound of coffee or a sack of tobacco.

"You must be getting in all your supplies for the rest of the winter!" she shouted at him, as she struggled out with a whole case of canned soups, another of baked beans, a dozen tins of coffee, and other commodities in bulk. Never had she known him to make such extensive purchases before. He merely nodded without comment. After she had added up the bill, he paid it in dirty, crumpled dollars. Before he could carry the heavy load out to his rickety little flivver, Gunnar strolled up and offered to help him get it placed. Together they got it loaded in his car at last, and he vanished into the fog.

“The old boy must have come into money!” Gunnar remarked to Betsy, as he passed her at the counter on his way back. “Never have I seen him buy so much at one time before!”

“Neither have I,” agreed Betsy. “Perhaps he’s afraid they’re going to get scarce, on account of the war, and is hoarding them.” Gunnar grinned appreciatively and went back to his solitaire. And at that moment, the door opened again and Spike came in, his eyeglasses fogged with moisture. At the counter he stopped, took them off to polish them, asked for a bottle of gingerpop, and stood drinking it. Betsy asked how Stacy was, and he answered vaguely, between gurgling gulps. Uneasily, Betsy realized that something was not quite right. He had not been in to supper, and his manner was not its usual, care-free, breezy self. She could also see that Gunnar was watching him rather closely, while pretending to be absorbed in his game. Presently Spike put the bottle down and fumbled for some change to pay for it. As he did so, he muttered, under his breath:

“Don’t ask any questions, Betsy, but go out to the kitchen right after I leave. Harvey’ll come out to take your place. And *don’t* look startled!” He finished the last drop of his ginger-ale, and with a nonchalant “Bye!” sauntered out into the night. Startled enough, but trying not to show it, Betsy herself sauntered toward the kitchen. She could not imagine what this cryptic command involved, but she feared something in the way of bad news. She found Harvey just having his supper, which he ate in the kitchen to save steps, and her aunt standing by the sink wrestling with a pile of dishes, a worried expression very evident on her usually placid face.

Harvey passed her and went out to the store.

“What’s the matter, Aunt Liz?” Betsy demanded in a hushed voice.

“Run into the bedroom,” commanded Mrs. Dunne in equally low tones, “and get your night things together. You’re going to spend the night with Stacy. That red-headed young man came in and asked if I’d allow it. There’s some trouble there. I’ve no time to explain about it. He’s waiting outside the kitchen door to take you down. It’s all right. Hurry up, now! He’ll tell you all about it.” She went back to her dishes, and Betsy hurried into their bedroom to make a small bundle of the things she would need, her worst fears verified. She was only a moment or two, and when she came out, Mrs. Dunne whispered:

“Call me up when you get there and let me know how things are.” And with that, she pushed Betsy out of the kitchen door into the thick fog.

Betsy could see no evidence of Spike in the woolly murk, but a low voice at her elbow suddenly announced his presence.

“I’ve got a car a bit farther down the road,” he said. “It’s Mrs. Olafsen’s. She let

me use it to bring you down. Just hang on to me and we'll find it after a minute."

Still no explanation of this strange expedition! They found the road and skittered through the mist till they came suddenly on the car, and still no word had been spoken. When Spike had put her in it, and jumped into the driver's seat and started the car, he turned to her with his own peculiar grin.

"Don't worry!" he laughed. "You're not being kidnaped! I'll explain it all now. Professor Newhall had an accident late this afternoon. He was out bird-stalking, as usual, and hadn't got back long after dark, and then this fog came up. I happened to be at the house and knew Stacy was worried, so we took this car and went to hunt him up. Stacy will give you all the details later. We found him on the point where he usually watches the birds, but he had fallen into an unexpected hole that proved to be full of water and soft mud, and, trying to get out, he sunk so deeply that he all but went over his head. Nothing saved him but hanging onto a tough bush that happened to be growing along side. I don't know what might have happened if we hadn't hunted him up and got to him when we did."

"How *awful!*" exclaimed Betsy softly.

"Yes, it would have been pretty awful," Spike agreed. "He was pretty well all in when we got there and we had the deuce of a time hauling him out. But we finally did, got him to the car and back home and in bed. He isn't seriously injured in any way—no bones broken or ribs cracked. But the point is that he's had a bad shock and will have to stay in bed for a bit. Now, you know it's absolutely vital for me to be on my job to-night. We wanted Mrs. Olafsen to stay, but she has a sick youngster at home that she felt she must be with, so Stacy thought of asking your aunt if you couldn't come and stay with her to-night, so she wouldn't be all alone trying to take care of him. She'll be delighted to know that you're coming."

"Oh, I'm so glad, too, that I can help her out!" sighed Betsy. "I'm so happy that you thought of me." She wanted to ask a dozen more questions about the affair, but she could see that Spike was intent on his driving, and could spare no thought to answering them. The car's headlights failed to pierce more than a foot or two beyond its front, and the greatest care had to be employed, lest it get off the hard surface of the road and into the soft sand. But just before their arrival at the house, without turning his head toward her, he issued this ominous warning:

"Whatever you do, Betsy, don't either you or Stacy venture out of this house to-night, for any reason whatever. There's very direct danger abroad, and neither of you would be safe. I've warned Stacy, too. Something new has come up that I haven't time to explain, but you'll just have to take it that what I say is so. I won't be very far away from this place at any time to-night, so don't worry about being

unprotected. But *don't* go outdoors yourselves!”

With this solemn warning, he jumped out of the car, helped her out and both ran up to the house, where they were greeted by Stacy, who had evidently been watching for them. Mrs. Olafsen hurried out at the same time, to take her car and get back to her home and sick little boy.

“I be back early in de morning,” she called to them reassuringly. “Don’t worry! I tink de Professor he be all ride.” And she vanished into the fog.

“I must get along, too,” added Spike. “Is there anything else you need right now, Stace? If not, I’ll be back off and on during the night. I’ll tap at your window, so it won’t disturb your father, and see if things are going all right. So long!” And he, too, was gone into the murk of the night. Stacy drew Betsy indoors and almost hugged her.

“You were grand to come, Bets, and it was awfully good of your aunt to let you. Dad’s resting more comfortably now and I think he’s asleep. I’m going to put you in Michael’s room because it’s right next to mine. It’s so comforting to have you here. Come along and I’ll show you the room and then we’ll go and sit in the living-room till bedtime. We can talk there without disturbing Dad.”

She took Betsy along the hall to Michael’s comfortable little room to dispose of her things, and all the while not a word had been said about what really happened. When they returned to the living-room, however, Betsy could restrain her curiosity no longer.

“Please tell me, Stacy, what this is all about!” she begged. “Spike told me a little on the way down, but the driving was so bad that he had to tend to that and couldn’t say much. How did your father come to have this accident?”

Stacy threw a couple of fresh logs on the open fire, settled Betsy in one of the big, comfortable chairs by it and took the other. Then she began, and told all about their adventure, while Betsy listened, eyes wide with interest and suspense.

“It was awful, Bets, when we heard that faint cry for help!” she said, when she had come to that point. “We knew right away that it was Dad, and that he was in some dreadful trouble. We just raced along that path till we got out of the woods, both of us shouting, ‘Hold on! We’re coming!’ The path runs out through that point nearly to the end, through the reeds and bushes, and almost before we knew it, we nearly fell on top of Dad, in the fog. That was the worst minute of all, when we saw him down in that hole, up to his shoulders in water and mud, and just hanging on with both hands to a tough bayberry bush that grew near the edge. I think he almost fainted when he saw us, and we had the most dreadful time pulling him out—the mud and water seemed to suck him down like quicksand. I’m afraid we almost pulled his

poor arms out of their sockets. But at last we had him clear of it, and after he'd rested a bit, he managed to walk, with us holding him up on both sides, as far as the car, and we got him home. Then Spike and Mrs. Olafsen helped, and we got him in bed, and Spike went all over him to see if any bones were broken. Spike took a first-aid course last year, so he knows a bit about it."

"Did you send for your mother?" asked Betsy.

"No, that's exactly what we didn't want to do. She has her hands full with Michael already—he has a slight attack of the flu, you know—and Spike said he was sure Dad hadn't anything serious the matter with him—only shock and exposure and a pair of sore arms from so much pulling on them. He thought a couple of days in bed would be all he'd need, and we don't want to worry Mother about it. Dad didn't want us to let her know either, so we're going to see how this works."

"How lucky it was that you thought of looking for him in that spot!" sighed Betsy. "But, I don't understand one thing about all this. Your father knows that place so well, how did he come to stumble into the hole? If he knew it was there, I should think he could have avoided it, even in the fog." Stacy leaned over and whispered impressively:

"That's just the point, Bets, there was no fog when he got there, and *there'd never been any hole before, either!*" Betsy received this startling information in stunned silence.

"What—just what—did happen, then?" she stammered at last. Stacy drew her chair closer and went on to explain in a low voice:

"Dad said he'd spent most of the afternoon over on the ocean side, but decided to give the point a look-over before he came home. It was twilight, and the most likely time to see some ducks around. The fog hadn't come up yet, though it was pretty misty across the bay. He walked through the woods and out onto the point. Just as he came out of the woods, he saw a cubhead duck swimming quite a way out, and put up his binoculars to watch him, as he was walking slowly along the path. He knows that path so well that he didn't need to look down to see where he was stepping. And, all of a sudden, he says, he stepped on something that didn't seem very solid, and before he could catch his balance, he'd plunged right into this large hole that had never been there before. There wasn't any solid bottom to it and he felt himself sinking in deeper and deeper, the more he struggled to climb out. But he managed to grab hold of the bayberry bush, pulled the bush over, and held onto it for dear life. It's all that saved him from going clear under!"

Betsy shuddered at this description and Stacy went on:

"Then the mist came up and changed into fog and it got quite dark. He didn't

dare to struggle to get out, for that only sent him in deeper, and he didn't like to waste his voice shouting for help, as he was sure no one was near enough to hear him. He figured that when he didn't get home at the usual time, we might get worried and come out to find him, so he saved his voice for calling 'Help!' till that time. But it must have been awful, deep in that mudhole, and his arms getting more tired every minute. He said the time seemed like years. At last he decided to begin shouting at intervals, but he says it seemed an eternity, even after that, before we got there. He was just on the point of letting go, because he was so exhausted. Then he heard us shouting that we were coming—and I've told you what happened after that." Suddenly Betsy demanded:

"Stacy, how did that hole come to be there—if it never was before?" Stacy's eyes snapped, as she sat up very straight and said:

"That's just it—it never *was* there before! Somebody dug it probably last night—somebody who knows Dad usually comes there and—and just wanted to 'fix' him, somehow. It might even have killed him!"

"But, I don't see why he couldn't have seen it in time," still argued Betsy. "Whoever it was, must have realized he might come there any time during the day, and might be looking where he was stepping. Then he never would have got into it."

"That's another point to show how deliberate it was," Stacy informed her. "Dad says that hole was carefully covered over with light branches and strewn with seaweed and dry grass, to hide it. It was so skilfully done that he says he would probably have walked over it without thinking, even in broad daylight and if he had been looking where he was stepping. It's horrible, isn't it!"

"But—who could have done it, Stacy—and why?" still queried Betsy, bewildered over this apparently pointless piece of devilishness.

"Spike thinks—and so does Dad," Stacy informed her, "that it's some one who knows Dad usually spends a good deal of time there, and that this person evidently wanted to get him out of the way. Dad must have been interfering with something that's going on—this awful plot, of course—by being in that vicinity so much." The fire sputtered softly as they both sat mulling over the implications of this new development. Presently they heard Stacy's father calling, and she went to his room to change the hot compresses he was keeping on his aching shoulders. When she came back, Betsy asked the question that had been uppermost in both their minds:

"Stacy—who could have done this thing? I—I simply can't think it's any one around here that we know! Not even that Gunnar." Stacy gave her another meaning look.

"Spike has another idea about that, too," she informed her friend. "He doesn't

think it was Gunnar—or any one else we know. He thinks it's some complete stranger who's hiding somewhere on this place. Maybe a Nazi—maybe a Nazi sympathizer. But it's some one who's come in here—somehow—quite recently. And this thing that's just happened makes him sure that plot is going to come off very, very soon. He's suspected something like this, but now he's sure. And beside that, he's sure the intruder is the one who is working the radio transmitter. Probably talking to subs—out at sea.”

“But here's what puzzles me about that,” said Betsy. “If Spike can hear this radio talking, why doesn't he know what they're *saying*? I should think he'd get plenty of ideas from that.”

“I thought of that, too, and asked Spike,” declared Stacy. “But he says this transmitter uses some kind of code that's perfectly meaningless to him. There are never any answers, of course, because the answers could only come from the submarines, and if they set their transmitters going, the Navy or airplanes would pick them up and be able to spot their location and finish them off. I do wonder whether Spike will have any luck to-night!”

She asked this question idly, not even expecting an answer, and stared thoughtfully at the burning logs, and the sparks sailing up the chimney. But Betsy raised her head, almost unconsciously to glance at one of the windows directly across the room from her, and suddenly startled Stacy with a little, half-stifled, frightened scream.

“What's the matter?” demanded Stacy, jumping from her chair. Betsy had clapped her hand to her mouth and her eyes were big with surprise and terror.

“Oh!” she shuddered. “I just happened to look up and—and there was a *face*—there—right outside the window!” Stacy uttered a little giggle of relief and countered:

“Goodness, how you frightened me! It's probably Spike. He said he'd come back every once in a while.” But Betsy refused to be reassured.

“It wasn't Spike!” she insisted. “The window's all blurry with fog and moisture, and—and it was only there a second. The minute after I saw it—it was gone. But it wasn't Spike—or any one I've ever seen. It had terrible eyes—mean little pig's eyes! I couldn't see anything else much. But it wasn't Spike!”

The two girls stood staring at the empty window in stark terror.

CHAPTER X

Strange Vigil

NEITHER Stacy nor Betsy realized how long they stood there, staring at the empty window with frightened eyes. It was one of the windows that faced the bay, and they could not tear their gaze from it. They were shocked out of their gripping fear only by a sound that startled them afresh.

“What’s *that?*” demanded Betsy in a tense whisper. “I thought I heard something!” It came again—a tap-tapping on a window on the opposite side of the room. They whirled about—to behold another face pressed against the streaming pane. But this time it was the flattened nose and red head of Spike, trying to see into the room. With a great gasp of relief, both of the girls rushed to the door to admit him.

“*Well—what’s up?*” he demanded, as they literally hauled him in and closed and locked the door. “You both look as if you’d seen a ghost!”

“It wasn’t a ghost—it was a *face!*” cried Stacy. “Right over at that window there!” Spike gave one look at her wide and frightened eyes and was satisfied that this was something very new and very real.

“Tell me about it!” he commanded quietly, and stood warming his hands by the fire, as the two girls recounted to him the alarming experience of a few minutes before. When they had finished, he still stood thoughtful and quite silent, polishing his glasses and thinking it over, while they waited breathlessly for his verdict. Then, all he said at first was:

“I think you’d better not let your father know about this, Stacy, not right away, anyhow.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t for the world!” declared Stacy. “Not after what he’s just been through. He’s asleep now, with the light out. I looked in at him a little while ago. I guess that sedative you said to give him will keep him that way for a while.”

“That’s good. Now, the first thing we must do is lock every door and window in this house—and keep them locked the rest of the night.” Spike walked about examining and locking the four windows in the living-room, and then they all trooped quietly through the rest of the house, carefully fastening all the others. Stacy tiptoed into her father’s room to secure one of the windows which she had left open a little way. He was sleeping so soundly that he did not hear her, and for this she was thankful. When they had returned to the living-room, she demanded:

“Spike, you won’t go away again and leave us here alone to-night, will you? If

Dad were all right, I wouldn't ask it. But what could Betsy and I do, in—in case of an emergency? I hate to ask it, for I know what you're doing is awfully important. But how can we stay here alone?"

"Don't worry! You won't be alone," declared Spike quite unexpectedly. "I thought that all out after I left you a while ago. Not only for that reason but for several others, I decided that it was time I moved the truck from where it was to a spot closer down this way. So, in spite of the fog, I managed to get it out to the road, and it's now safely lodged in your garage. I spoke to your father about putting it there before I left. It's a two-car garage, so it won't interfere with your car, and it's going to be locked up there from now on."

"Oh, thank goodness, Spike!" cried Stacy. "You won't be way off now. But can you work it just as well from where it is now?"

"It works perfectly anywhere," Spike reassured her. "Only at first I thought it better to keep it in that location farther up the line. Then I didn't want to move it out, even at night, where it might be seen. To-night was the ideal time, in this heavy fog. So two purposes are served, you see. I'll be right close in case of need, and no one knows where the truck is."

The relief of the two girls at this welcome news was beyond any expression. They sank into their chairs by the fire, and Spike drew up another, while they went further into the strange circumstances of the face at the window.

"Who was it, Spike, do you think?" Stacy asked, glancing apprehensively over her shoulder at the window where it had been. "And why did it come staring in here?"

"It was undoubtedly the person on this place who is causing all the trouble," said Spike very seriously. "It's the first time he's allowed himself to be seen, and I'm pretty certain that was unintentional. My idea is that he came prowling around in the fog because he thought he'd be well concealed by it. He may have lost his bearings and peeped in here to see what house it was—or where he was. Or he may have known where he was, known that this house was where your father came from, and was trying to see whether he was around, or what might have happened to him. The prowler may not know whether your father got out of that hole he dug for him or not. And pretty surely—he'd *like* to know!"

"Don't you think we ought to pull all the shades down, then?" asked Stacy, shuddering at this possibility. "He—he might try to look in again!"

"Suit yourself about that," grinned Spike. "But I rather think he won't try it again. He saw Betsy glance up and catch a glimpse of him, and I figure that what he wants least of all is to be *seen*. He's probably a long way off by now."

They sat silent for a little while after that, staring into the fire and mulling over this strange, new turn of events. Spike looked very tired and, unconsciously, very worried. He knew he must go out to the truck in a few moments, but was glad to have this brief respite in the quiet house and by the warm fire. Presently Stacy leaned forward and demanded:

“If you could only tell us a little more about this, Spike! It’s so hard to understand why anything so important as you say this is, can go on—without, well—any one trying to put a stop to it. Like the Coast Guards, for instance. That’s one of their duties, isn’t it? Why aren’t they helping you? Why is this terrible person allowed to roam around here without any one putting a stop to it—or—or trying to capture him? Why do you have to work this out all alone?” Spike looked up wearily—he had been half-asleep in a little, stolen nap, when she spoke.

“You mustn’t take too much for granted, Stace,” he remonstrated mildly. “I’m not working alone. The Coast Guards have been warned to be on the lookout for any stranger in this neck of the woods, and they are. But so far, his hideout is so good they haven’t spotted him yet, and, of course, he’s never abroad in daylight. It *would* be a night like this—when you can’t see a foot ahead of you, that he’d take to roaming around. I must have almost run into him when I brought the truck down and put it in the garage. I don’t suppose it was more than five minutes between the time Betsy saw him and my tapping on the window. But it would be worse than useless to hunt for him in a fog like this, so the best thing is to sit tight—and wait. Pretty soon I’ll go out to the truck again and see if he’s working his transmitter. Up to the time I got here, he hadn’t been. Probably because he was running around in the fog, for reasons best known to himself! I oughtn’t to be loafing around here now, but I got so darned chilled with being out in this fog—and no time to eat those nice sandwiches you gave me—that I had to get warmed up a bit. I’m going out now to eat ’em and take a whack at the mechanism in my truck!”

He rose and stretched himself, and looked around for his cap.

“Don’t worry!” he added, turning toward the hall. “I’ll be right outside the house. If anything turns up that scares you, just raise a window and holler like sin!”

“Oh, Spike!” cried Stacy. “Don’t eat them out there in that forlorn garage. Can’t you come in, in a little while, and eat them here? I’ll make some hot coffee and we’ll all have a bite. It’ll be so much cosier. The coffee will help keep us awake, too. I’m not going to bed this night, are you, Betsy? I couldn’t sleep a wink.”

Betsy signified that she couldn’t either, and Spike agreed that the hot coffee and sandwiches indoors by the fire, after a bit, would just about hit the spot. He eased himself quietly out into the fog-filled darkness, while Stacy went to look in on her

father. Later, she and Betsy stirred quietly about the kitchen filling a tray with a late supper snack. They did not talk, because Professor Newhall's door was not far away and they did not want to disturb his heavy sleep. About twenty minutes later, Spike came in again.

"It's rather odd!" he said, settling down by the cosy fire and the attractively filled tea-tray. "I went out and opened up my receiving-set, but there wasn't a peep out of our elusive enemy! It's the first night, so far, that something hasn't been going on. Then I decided I'd do a bit of scouting around the house, just to see that everything was O.K., and I groped about through the fog, but didn't see or hear anything—not till I got round to the side facing the bay. Then I *did* hear something mighty peculiar!"

"Oh, what *was* it?" demanded both the girls in chorus.

"It was the sound of oars dipping in and out of the water, and the creak of rowlocks," Spike informed them. "Not very far away from the shore, either. Seemed as if some one was rowing a boat and creeping along close to the shore so as to keep their bearings in the fog. I just stood stock still, listening to the direction, till at last I couldn't hear it any more. The boat was evidently going south. I don't know who it was or what it means, but I'm dead sure it's something connected with this affair. Who has a rowboat around here, outside of old Ben Thomson?"

"No one," declared Betsy, "unless one has been brought in here just recently, one that we don't know about."

"Odd!" mused Spike. "I hardly think old Ben would be rowing around at this time of night—and in such a fog."

"That makes me think," continued Betsy. "Here's something I meant to tell you. All these other things made me forget it. Old Ben came in the store this evening, just before you got there, and bought an awful lot of stuff, things in quantities, like cans of beans and soups and tins and tins of coffee and evaporated milk. He's never done such a thing before, never had enough money to buy more than a little at a time—so he always said. It seemed sort of queer! I thought he must be hoarding them away for the winter, because he thought there might be a shortage of them. I just thought I'd tell you because I promised to report anything unusual that I saw in the store."

Spike paused, with a sandwich halfway to his mouth, and looked thoroughly startled.

"Gosh!—I'm glad you told me that!" he said, with a worried frown. "That's the most important lead we've had yet. Gives me the cue to a whole lot of things—"

He put the half-eaten sandwich down on his plate, placed the plate on the floor, leaned his elbows on his knees and sank his head in his hands. In that position he remained so long, thinking deeply, that finally Stacy ventured:

“What’s worrying you now, Spike?” To her intense surprise, he answered, without raising his head:

“*You are!*—you and your father!”

“Why, what do you mean?” she countered indignantly. “What have Dad or I just done to cause you all this grief?” He sat up straight, then, and looked her right in the eyes.

“I want you to go right home—both of you!” he announced briefly. “I want you to start to-morrow—at the earliest minute—and get away from this place!”

“Well, for goodness sake, why?” she sputtered, still indignant at his astonishing demand. “What have we done—or what haven’t we done—that’s upset you?”

“It isn’t that,” he tried to explain patiently. “It’s that I’ve realized to-night what a darned dangerous place this is for you both to be. There’s a desperate person loose around here. He has a desperate plan to carry out—and he’ll stop at nothing to get it going. He’s already nearly cost your father his life. If you happened to be in his way, he’d take yours—without batting an eyelash. It would be far better for you both to get out of here till the thing’s over. It’s slated to come off very soon. I’m certain of that. Then you can come back and spend the rest of the winter in peace. Betsy’ll be back at the store—and safe there. What happens won’t touch her. It’s you and your father I’m worried about. You’re right in the middle of it. Will you go—to-morrow?”

For a moment, a wave of indecision swept Stacy. So alarming was the picture Spike painted, and so alluring the safety and comfort of her home and mother, back in their college town, that she longed inexpressibly to agree to Spike’s command, and flee the place with her father at the earliest moment next day. Her father’s life had already been threatened. Hers was in danger. Did it serve any purpose that a good portion of her family should be wiped out? Jim was already risking his life in helping, far away, to protect the Burma Road. He might never come back—

Jim! At the thought of him, her mind suddenly veered to a remark she had often heard him make. He always made it with a grin: “I hate a fellow who turns tail on a disagreeable job, and finds some nice comfortable excuse for not doing it!” She suddenly wondered what Jim would think about *her* case. All this went through her mind like a flash, while Spike was waiting for her reply. But she only answered his question by asking another:

“Spike, have I been of any use to you—in all this? I know Dad has—but what about me? Please answer me honestly.”

“Of course you have!” he had to acknowledge. “In fact, you’ve given me some valuable help that I mightn’t have got in any other way. Maybe you might still, I don’t know. But that isn’t the question. It’s your safety I’m thinking about. I think it best

for both you and your father to get out of here—for the present!” He was almost rough about it. All the stubbornness that was latent in Stacy’s apparently gentle character bristled to the surface in reaction. She turned on him fiercely:

“Well, Spike, it’s nice of you to think of my safety—and I appreciate it. But, I’m telling you right now—that I won’t go—and neither will Dad, if I know him as well as I think I do! After all, this is war—*total war*! Jim’s not thinking about his personal safety just at present and neither are you—or Dad. And if you think I’m going to turn tail and run home to Mother just because things are a little dangerous here, when I might be of some use in it all, you’ve got another guess coming!” Her eyes blazed and her hands clenched, as she issued this ultimatum. Spike gazed at her, no little astonished and awed at the reaction he had aroused.

“Gosh, Stace!” he muttered. “No need to get all het up about it! If that’s the way you feel, I’m—I’m darned glad of it. I ought to have expected it of Jim’s sister, but I honestly felt I ought to let you know just what you’re facing—and show you an out if you wanted it. I sure think it’s swell of you to feel as you do!”

“No, it isn’t at all,” she admitted. “I’ll have to admit that at first, I was all for running away and getting home to safety. But then I realized that would leave you to wrastle with the thing alone, and beside that, I’m terribly anxious to stay and see how it turns out. Why—why, it would be like closing a book and throwing it away before you’ve finished with a terribly exciting mystery, if I couldn’t be here to see how this comes out!” During all this conversation, Betsy had sat silent, absorbing it. Now she spoke:

“I’m glad, too, Stacy, that you don’t want to leave. I—I sort of felt sure you wouldn’t. I want to help see it out with you. I—couldn’t have helped much either—if you hadn’t been here.”

Spike looked at them both and secretly thanked his stars that he could still keep two such faithful and resourceful helpers. He didn’t know quite how to express it, so he didn’t try. Instead he returned to his half-eaten sandwich and Stacy refilled his cup with some hot coffee. Then she suddenly bethought herself of a question she had several times been planning to ask him.

“Spike, we haven’t been in the old house lately, Betsy and I, and I’ve been wondering if there’s been any change in the way those crabs were arranged? Have you been in to look?”

“You’re jolly tooting, I have!” he answered. “I’ve been going in twice a day. There wasn’t any change since you last saw them, till this morning. And my eyes popped when I saw it! There was one shell on the south window—and three on the east. None on the others. Don’t ask me what it meant for I haven’t an idea—though

I've a pretty good notion now who one of the parties is. So have you, probably—our visitor to-night!"

"But who's the other?" cried Stacy.

"If I knew that. I'd have the answer to the whole thing," he admitted ruefully. "I've never been able to catch 'em at it. I think they must both watch to see that I'm well away from the region before they go in there to fix 'em up. Maybe it's when I go to the store to eat. I have to eat sometimes!" he ended ruefully.

"If Gunnar weren't always around the store when you're there, I'd say it was he," offered Betsy thoughtfully. "But maybe he does it some other time."

"Maybe," said Spike and glanced at the big old clock on the mantel, which said five minutes past midnight. Then he went to the door, opened it and gazed out long and searchingly at the weather. The blanketing fog still pressed close, and there was absolutely no wind. The atmosphere was moist and soggy. Closing the door, he turned back into the room.

"I'm going to suggest something," he said, standing before the fire. "I hate to do it, but I'm afraid it's absolutely necessary. I haven't had any real sleep in forty-eight hours and I'm almost unconscious on my feet! If I don't get some, I'll be practically useless to-morrow—and I think to-morrow's going to be a big day for yours truly. Now, you girls say you both feel pretty wide awake, and I think the show's over for to-night, as far as anything new happening. I was wondering, Stacy, if I could just go and lie down on the sunporch couch and get maybe a couple of hours of shut-eye? If you two girls are going to sit up anyhow, perhaps you wouldn't mind keeping a sort of lookout for me. I don't mean that you should go outdoors, but just keep tabs in here of any unusual sound or that sort of thing, and wake me instantly, if anything happens."

"Why, of course, we'll do that!" said Stacy. "I'll get a steamer rug to cover you, and you have a good sleep. Bets and I will stay right here and watch like a couple of cats at a mouse-hole!"

"Don't let me sleep a minute longer than two o'clock!" Spike warned them, as he took his blanket and went out to the porch. "That'll set me up for another forty-eight hours, and I have a feeling I won't be getting much more sleep in before that!"

It was a weird vigil that the two girls kept that night. After Stacy had tiptoed in once more to see that her father was still sleeping, they turned out the lights in the living-room and sat by the fire, whose leaping flames threw strange shadows on the walls. Gentle snores from the direction of the porch signified that Spike was deeply asleep. The two girls sat close together and talked in whispers, feeling as if they were alone in a world of evil doings and evil presences. They speculated deeply on what

this terrible plot might be, where it was to take place and why Spike would not tell them more about it, since they knew so much already. The old clock on the mantel ticked the minutes away, and the silence outside was profound. It was not quite half-past one when Stacy announced suddenly:

“It’s awfully stuffy in here! I’m just going to open the window a moment to get a breath of fresh air. I’m certain it won’t matter, now, because Spike is right here. I don’t feel so awfully afraid any more.”

She went to one of the windows on the bay side, unlocked it and raised it softly, and stood by it a moment or two, breathing deeply the moist, fresh air that entered. Outside the fog still wrapped the world in mystery, and there was not a sound in the muffled darkness. But suddenly Betsy, who was watching her, saw Stacy stiffen to an alert attention, her eyes widening with new alarm. Then, without a word to Betsy, she rushed out to the porch, shook the sleeping Spike by the shoulder, and hissed softly:

“Wake up, Spike!”

“What is it, time to get up?” he sleepily demanded, rousing to a sitting position.

“No,” she continued breathlessly, “but something is happening! I opened the window just a little, to get some fresh air and—and there’s a queer sound out there—just as if some one was sloshing along through the shallow water, close to the shore!”

CHAPTER XI

The Following Day

SPIKE wasted not a minute, but freed himself from the steamer rug, sprang to his feet, grabbed his cap and mackinaw and bolted for the door.

“What are you going to do?” demanded Stacy, fearful that they be left alone again in this new crisis.

“I’m going to try and follow that fellow, wading through the water,” he muttered. “I’ve got to find out where he’s going, if possible. Don’t turn on any lights. I don’t want him to think any one’s awake here. I won’t be gone long, and I’ll be right along the bay shore. If anything happens that you can’t cope with, open a window and blow this.” He reached into a pocket and thrust a police-whistle in her hand. “I’ll hear it and come right back. ’Bye!—and don’t worry!” He was gone, without another word, and Stacy closed and locked the door behind him, with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Again they were to be alone, while unknown and menacing things went on around them! She came back to crouch down beside the fire with Betsy.

“What a night!” she exclaimed in a whisper. Betsy said nothing, but clasped her hand in a sympathetic and understanding pressure. They did not talk, but sat waiting in a state of suspense that was almost unbearable. The moments were ticked off solemnly by the old clock on the mantel and the fire died down to embers, but they did not move to replenish it. What seemed like hours, proved to be only three-quarters of an hour, when a tap on one of the windows proclaimed the glad event of Spike’s return.

He was damp with mist, when they let him in, and his high leather boots were wet and sandy, and for a moment or two he seemed rather uncommunicative, as he threw fresh wood on the fire and stood drying off in front of the blaze.

“Did you—did you see him—or find him?” quavered Stacy, at last, unable to bear the suspense any longer.

“He was too far ahead of me,” Spike finally enlightened them. “When I got out there, I could still hear him sloshing through the shallows, going south. I had to follow in the same way. There’s a high tide to-night—a very high one—and right along here for a way it’s up to the trees and bushes. You just can’t make any headway unless you walk in the water and that’s just what he was doing. But, after a while, I didn’t hear him any more because he’d probably come to a stretch where you could go inland around the trees and things on the shore. I got to that place, too, but didn’t

care to try pursuing him overland. Pretty useless getting lost in the woods and trying to fumble around. I hung about there for a spell, listening for any other sounds, but heard nothing further. Then I turned and came back. And that's that!"

"Then—it wasn't any use?" queried Stacy.

"Only this much," he admitted. "I've figured it out that his hidey-hole must be somewhere down below where I stopped. How much farther, I don't know, but it's given me a bit of a clue. He was on his way up farther to-night, when he lost his bearings and peeked in here, I figure. He must have gone on farther north after that. Then he went back, and by that time, the tide was so high he had to wade to get around here. None of this accounts for the sound of a rowboat that I heard. I don't know where that fits into the picture. But one thing I'm sure of—the show's over for to-night! I've had my sleep and feel as fresh as a daisy. I want you two girls to go to bed, get a good sleep, and forget all this till to-morrow. I'll sit here in the living-room and keep watch, and look in on your father once in a while. But you two must get some sleep, or you'll be good for nothing, and we've a lot to do to-morrow—or rather, *to-day!*"

They protested that they did not feel sleepy and would rather sit up and keep watch with him, but he would not allow it and finally succeeded in shooing them off to their rest. They went, still protesting, but hardly had their heads touched their pillows than they were both sound asleep from sheer exhaustion. They did not know that after a time, Spike shut the doors of the living-room and had a long muffled telephone conversation with some one—a conversation that seemed to do much toward relieving his strain and perplexity.

No sooner had Stacy risen next morning than she found fresh complications awaiting her. Mrs. Olafsen had not arrived at the usual time to get breakfast, and Stacy and Betsy struggled with the proposition alone, Spike giving them what assistance he could. Professor Newhall awoke feeling better, but still stiff and sore from his previous day's adventure, and they persuaded him to stay in bed for a while longer, which he finally consented to do.

Then came a telephone call from Mrs. Olafsen, to announce that her little boy was very ill with the flu and that she could not possibly leave him that day. Stacy told her not to worry, that they could get along for a time without her, and then sat looking at Spike and Betsy with questioning eyes.

"What are we going to do?" she demanded. "I had thought that we'd be all right to-day, with Mrs. Olafsen here, as Betsy probably wants to get back to the store.

And you, Spike, I suppose, will have to be out a good deal of the time. I suppose I can stay alone with Dad, but he isn't feeling very active yet, and I don't know what he'd be able to do in case of—an emergency."

"Well, I know what to do," suggested Betsy, "that is, in case you care to have me. I'll call up Aunt Liz and explain about Mrs. Olafsen not being able to come, and your father not out of bed yet, and ask if I can stay here with you for the rest of today and to-night. I'm sure she'll be glad to let me. Things aren't very busy at the store now."

"Oh, that would be grand!" cried Stacy in real relief, and Spike signified that nothing could be better. So Betsy put through the call and the matter was speedily arranged. And after that, she came back to the dining-table and the three lingered over their coffee and toast in a pleasant feeling of temporary relaxation. Last night's alarms and suspense seemed for the moment quite dim and far away. But not for long. For after a while, Spike leaned across the table and reverted to their problem in a very serious voice and manner.

"Look here, fellow-conspirators!" he began. "It just happens that things are turning out pretty snappy this morning, from my point of view—though you may think it a calamity that Mrs. Olafsen can't be here."

"I don't think that!" contradicted Stacy. "Not since Betsy can be here!"

"And I don't either—for I *want* to be here!" chimed in Betsy.

"Well, then, everybody's pleased!" grinned Spike. "But this is how it affects me, and this situation, particularly. To begin with, it's essential now that I disappear from this community, completely—lock, stock and barrel—or rather, truck."

The two girls stared at him in consternation and bewilderment.

"Oh, Spike!—you're *not* going to leave here, are you?" wailed Stacy. "You must be crazy!"

"Hold everything!" he snickered. "Who said I was going to leave? I said I was going to *disappear*—quite a different matter!" They did not find this any more enlightening, much to his amusement, so he went on to explain:

"Well, I see you don't catch on, so here's the set-up. This thing has got to the stage where it would be best for all and sundry in these parts (except for you folks) to think that I've done a fade-out, in other words, packed up and gone home. That's one reason I moved the truck down here last night, in the fog, and have it safely stowed out of sight. I have a feeling that our invisible enemy has somehow gotten wise to me and my activities—perhaps that I'm on to his trail. Last evening after I left here to go back to the truck, I found a number of strange footprints around the truck. They were entirely different from mine, so I couldn't mistake them. Also there

were scratches around the lock on the doors, as if some one had been monkeying with it, trying to get it open. That's one reason I moved it down here.

"Then, I had another reason, just as important, beside the feeling that you ought to have me near you, since things were getting pretty hot. And that other reason is this: I can work better now if every one thinks I've left the place. If the truck is gone and I don't show up for meals at the store, they'll take it for granted I've cleared out. Then the johnnies that are involved in this plot will think they're unmolested and can move around more freely. And, Stacy, if you and your father will be kind enough to let me hole up in this house for a short spell, everything'll be just ducky!"

"Why, of course we will!" cried Stacy, delighted at this turn of affairs. "We've wanted you to all along, and didn't see why it was necessary for you to live in that uncomfortable way. Why did you?"

"Well, I had to get the lay of the land, when I first came," he said, "and I could do that much better by mixing in with the crowd at the store. Now I've got it, I needn't be there any more, and, as I said, I prefer to have them think I've lit out and gone to parts unknown. I don't mean I'm going to stay in this house all the time, by any means, for I've got to be out scouting around a good bit. But I'm going to keep out of sight even when I do that, as far as is humanly possible. Lucky it keeps on being foggy! That's going to be a big help to me."

The fog was indeed still hanging over the landscape that morning though not as thickly as the night before. There was still no wind, but there was a possibility that the sun might struggle through later in the day.

"The weather is playing a big part in this affair," he continued. "The thing couldn't come off—I mean the plot—if it were cold and windy and the bay frozen."

"Why not?" demanded Stacy impulsively, but he only replied:

"Sorry, but I can't tell you that!" And, noticing the disappointed expression in the faces of both girls, he added: "You may think I'm very unreasonable about that, but I'm under a solemn promise to disclose none of the details of this affair, so far as we know them. I'm certain it would be no harm to tell you, but I'd be breaking my promise."

"I quite understand that, Spike," agreed Stacy, "and I won't bother you with any more questions you mayn't want to answer. Just tell me, if anything I ask is 'out of bounds.' I want to confess, though, that one thing has been worrying me very much. Don't answer this, if you'd rather not, but I can't help wondering whether this awful plot is going to take place right around here, and whether it will be dangerous for us if it does?"

"I can answer that, all right," grinned Spike, "and I hope it'll relieve your mind.

The big thing, if it should come off, isn't going to 'take place here,' as you put it, but it's going to *start* from here. And if that start can be broken up—it won't take place. But the one who starts it has to be nabbed, and nabbed good and proper, or he might find some other remote spot and continue from there, if he got away. Now, that's absolutely all I can tell you, and I've got to go out and get busy while this nice concealing fog lasts. Don't worry about me if I don't get back very soon. I'll be all right, but keep your eyes open for anything that goes on in these parts. I'm going out to see if I can get a line on this chappie's hide-out."

After that, he went in to visit a few minutes with Professor Newhall, then got his cap and jacket and prepared to depart.

"Don't go outside for any reason," he warned the girls before he left. "Have you enough in the house for eats to-day?"

"Plenty!" said Stacy. "We always keep a good supply on hand for emergencies, and Mrs. Olafsen just went to market yesterday morning. Be back by half-past twelve, if you can. That's when we have lunch. If you can't, we'll keep something hot for you."

He was gone then, and so cautiously did he slip into the fog that they could not even see what direction he took.

CHAPTER XII

Complications

AFTER Spike had gone, the two girls began on a busy morning. All the chores that Mrs. Olafsen turned off so swiftly and inconspicuously, they had to struggle with and they found it no light task. They made beds, dusted and put the living-room to rights, cleaned out the fireplace and laid a new fire, preparatory to lighting it later in the day. Stacy thanked her stars that the house was heated by an oil-burner furnace which required no attention, and that there was an enormous tank of oil still on hand.

While Betsy peeled potatoes for lunch, Stacy helped her father, who insisted on dressing and coming into the living-room, in spite of his still sore and aching bones. He declared that exercise would limber him up and in any case that he was not going to lie there any longer doing nothing. He proposed to sit by the fire with a small table before him and begin sorting out his notes and sketches, preparatory to a new start on his book. When he was settled, Stacy went out to join Betsy in the kitchen and discuss with her what else they could have for lunch beside potatoes. It was while they were talking it over, that Betsy, happening to glance out of the kitchen window, exclaimed:

“Well, for goodness sake—if there isn’t Harvey driving in with the car! How in the world did he get in—and what does he want?”

They could not guess, and, in another moment, Harvey himself arrived at the kitchen door, laden down with bundles and packages in a big market-basket. Harvey was a tall, lanky young fellow, with touseled brown hair and large, childlike gray eyes, and a smiling, friendly expression. He always seemed more like a pleasant boy of twelve than a grown man, somehow. His left hand was still bandaged, after his accident, but he was no longer wearing it in a sling.

“Hi, folks!” was his cheerful greeting, as they admitted him at the kitchen door. “Guess you’re surprised to see me!”

“How did you get through the gate?” demanded Betsy sternly. “You haven’t any key to it.” He grinned at her bewilderment.

“Went over and borrowed Mrs. Olafsen’s,” he admitted. “Mom told me to. She had a little surprise for you folks and wanted me to bring it down.” He held out his basket to Stacy and she took it wonderingly, setting it on the kitchen table to examine. It contained a freshly baked mince pie, a large can of still hot vegetable soup, some sliced cold lamb and a plate of hot raised biscuits. Beside that, there

were some clothes for Betsy and a package of mail.

“Why, this is awfully sweet of Mrs. Dunne!” cried Stacy, genuinely pleased at the thoughtful gifts of food.

“Mom thought you kids wouldn’t want to do much cooking,” explained Harvey, “so she hustled around this morning and got these things ready. She said to tell Bets she can stay as long as Mrs. Olafsen isn’t here, to help you out, and for her not to worry about the store. Everything’s going all right. My hand’s better, so I can do pretty much as always.” Both girls expressed their pleasure at this news and their appreciation of Mrs. Dunne’s thought for them, and then waited for Harvey to take his departure.

There was an instant thought that had come into both their minds. It would not do for Harvey to linger about, for at any time Spike might return unsuspectingly and give his presence away. Since he wanted to create the impression that he had left the vicinity for good, the whole plan would be spoiled if Harvey were to realize that he was still on the premises. Harvey would innocently spread that report, and nothing any one could say would be likely to stop him. Therefore it was essential that he be eased out of the house without delay. But, unfortunately, Harvey showed every symptom of being inclined to linger! He asked for a drink of water, and while sipping it slowly, draped himself against the kitchen sink and opened conversation:

“Say, that red-headed feller must have beat it out of these parts. He ain’t been in the store for meals since yesterday breakfast, and nobody’s seen hide nor hair of him. You know where he’s gone, Stacy? He was a friend of yours, wasn’t he?” Stacy saw here her opportunity to clinch the impression of Spike’s departure. She hoped she could do it without having to tell any outright falsehood, and prayed wildly that Spike wouldn’t burst in, in the middle of it.

“Yes, he’s a friend of ours,” she temporized. “He was doing some surveying work, I think. He said he couldn’t get on with it very well without some one to help him and that he might have to go home and come back some time later with somebody. Maybe he *has* done that.” This explanation was entirely true, as Spike had told her only the morning before that, as far as his surveying work was concerned, he could make no progress on the contour map, and would have to bring down an assistant later on—“when the main show was over”—as he expressed it. She hoped wildly that this explanation would satisfy Harvey and that he would speedily take his departure. But Harvey was still enjoying himself, and the glass of water was only half-empty!

“Funny thing happened in the store this morning!” he rambled on. “Member how old Ben Thomson came in last night and bought all that mess of stuff? Pretty

nigh cleaned Mom out, he did. And blest if he wasn't in this morning again for another supply! This time he wanted a whole line of things Mom doesn't keep—or hasn't a big supply of. Ten dozen eggs—can you beat that? What's he want with ten dozen fresh eggs? He can't keep 'em fresh long enough to eat 'em up. And grapefruit by the dozen—and oranges—all that sort of thing. He was right mad when Mom told him she didn't have 'em, and then Mom got mad herself and told him to take his jalopy and go up to town and get 'em there. That's what she had to do when she needed things. He declared he had a busted tire that he couldn't fix, and no spare, and she said that was jest too bad, but she couldn't do anything about it—and then he stomped out. He and Mom sure did hit the roof that time!"

Harvey grinned amiably over this recital, and the two girls were very much interested, in spite of their wild desire to get rid of him. They both thought Spike would be deeply interested in this new development when he got back, since what Betsy had revealed about old Ben's doings of the night before had caused him so much excitement. Though what it could possibly have to do with their problem, they still could not imagine.

Harvey had finished his glass of water by this time, and they both thought he would be on the way out. But he promptly filled the glass again at the faucet and continued his recital of the morning's events. This time it was on another tack.

"Funny thing happened on the way down," he informed them. "I just got to the gate and was unlocking it, when along come Gunnar and asked would I let him get in the car and drive down with me. Said he'd like to see what the place looked like down this way. Said he didn't see why people should keep it locked up, anyhow. I said strangers wasn't supposed to be around in here. But he said he wasn't a stranger if he was with me, and there wasn't no way he could do any harm here anyhow, jest riding in the car. So I let him come. When we got to where the road leads in here, he got out and said he'd jest walk around a bit till I got back to the car. I told him he'd better be sure to be there when I come out or I'd go on and leave him. I ain't got no time to wait!"

This information was far from being comforting news to his two listeners. In fact, it had given them considerable of a shock. *Gunnar*—one of their chief suspects—rambling about at will so close to their vicinity! It was too much for Betsy's nerves, and she turned on her cousin with sharp asperity.

"You had no business to bring him down, Harvey, and you know it!" she cried heatedly. "And, what's more, you've dilly-dallied around here long enough. You hustle right out and find Gunnar and get back to the store! You hear me?"

Poor Harvey looked suddenly as hurt and crestfallen as a slapped child. Stacy

actually felt sorry for him, in spite of his shortcomings. He did not offer any objection, however, merely muttering, "All right, all right! Don't go up in the air!" And, seizing the market-basket, now emptied of its contents, he made for the door and was gone. When he had vanished, the two girls stared at each other in considerable consternation. Stacy was the first to recover her poise.

"Don't let's bother with anything more here," she suggested. "You've finished the potatoes, and, thanks to your aunt, we have enough for lunch without doing any more cooking or fussing. Harvey certainly has given us an earful! Let's go to my room, where we won't bother Dad, and talk it over."

And so, with Betsy sitting primly in the gay cretonne chair by the window, and Stacy sitting crosslegged on the bed, and the door shut against interruption, they proceeded to thresh the matter out.

"There's one good thing," began Stacy. "He got away before Spike got back. I was terrified for fear Spike would walk right in on us, and his whole plan would be spoiled!"

"Yes, that was all right," agreed Betsy, "but what about that Gunnar roaming around loose, down this way? He might meet up with Spike any minute—and that'd be even worse!"

"I really don't think we need to worry about that end of it," Stacy countered. "Because Spike will be on the watch every minute, outside of the house. He'd see Gunnar and just keep out of sight. But if he'd walked in here unsuspectingly on Harvey—it would have been just too bad! What's worrying me more is what Gunnar wanted to get down here for. I'd be willing to bet he's in cahoots with that prowler, whoever he is, and wanted to get in touch with him without taking the time to walk down. Spike ought to know about that. Then, there's this business about old Ben. There's something awfully peculiar about the way he's acting—and that's another thing Spike ought to hear, right away. But we can't get *at* him, we'll just have to wait till he gets back." Suddenly she sprang off the bed and strode about the room, her hands clenched.

"Oh, it makes me just frantic," she exploded, "to have to be cooped up here in the house, with all this going on, and just be supposed to sit quiet and—and watch it! I want to be out, and helping with this thing in some more active way—"

"Well, what's the matter with *my* going out and—and at least trying to find Spike?" suggested Betsy in her calmer manner.

"You can't do it!" exclaimed Stacy. "Neither Dad nor I would allow it. And, beside that, we solemnly promised Spike we'd stay put here and not go outdoors for anything. I can see that it's too dangerous—with that terrible creature around.

But that doesn't make it any easier to just sit around and wait. And one of the worst parts is that we know so little of what it's all about!—I just keep wracking my brains all the time trying to piece things together so that they make some sense. It's like the parts of a picture-puzzle, when you try to fit them together. You have some pieces that perhaps make a bit of sky and cloud, or a face, or the side of a house—but the main pieces are missing, so it doesn't make any sense at all.”

Betsy liked that simile, comparing their mystery to a picture-puzzle. Stacy had many such elaborate puzzles in the house, to while away idle hours, and Betsy had occasionally helped to work them out.

“It is like the pieces of a picture-puzzle,” she agreed. “It would be interesting to decide what pieces we already have—and how they fit together—and how many are missing.”

“And what kind of a picture it would be likely to make,” supplemented Stacy eagerly. She rushed over to her little maple desk in the corner, rummaged out a pencil and a sheet of writing-paper, and sat down before it at the desk.

“Let's begin right now!” she went on. “How many pieces have we got, so far, anyway? I'll make a list of them, in the order that they came to light—if we can remember. Number one is the crab shells on the window-ledges in the old house. Number two is Gunnar and his getting into this place by going around the fence. Number three is Spike and his mysterious truck. Number four is finding the crab shell in Gunnar's coat-pocket, which links him with those in the house—maybe! Number five is old Ben and his queer purchases at the store. Number six is Dad getting nearly killed falling into that hole. Number seven is the prowler who came around here last night. Number eight is the unknown person in the rowboat last night. Number nine is the footsteps sloshing through the water later. Number ten is the footprints around Spike's truck last night, before he brought it down here, and number eleven, what Harvey told us this morning about old Ben's affair in the store, and Gunnar sneaking down here with him in the truck. I can't think of any more, can you?”

“You've forgotten the flashlight signal in the dunes the other night,” supplemented Betsy. “I think that's very important.”

“It certainly is! I'll put it down as number twelve, though it really happened earlier,” said Stacy, scribbling busily at her list. “Now, there are the pieces we have. Usually these big picture-puzzles we work out have the name of the completed picture on the box, like, ‘Starting for the Hunt’ or ‘The Old Rose Garden’—that sort of thing. You know what I mean. I should say the name of our puzzle would be ‘The Terrible Plot,’ wouldn't you? We know that much about it from what Spike has told

us. But how the pieces fit into it is something else again!”

“Some of them do,” cried Betsy with increasing enthusiasm. “You have to fit them together according to some of the things Spike has told us. For instance, we know this desperate character is hiding down here, preparing to carry out some terrible plot. The one who stared in the window last night *is* that character. He must be the one, also, that dug the hole your father fell into. He’s also the one, probably, who made the footprints around Spike’s truck and who was trying to pry the lock open. And he surely must be the one who was sloshing through the water last night. I don’t know whether he was the one in the rowboat or not—could be, but somehow I think the rowboat was old Ben’s. He may not have been using it, of course, but no one but he could find his way around in such a fog as last night’s. I’m pretty sure it was old Ben!”

“You’d make a good detective, Bets!” laughed Stacy. “You certainly can reason things out!” Betsy blushed furiously at this compliment and Stacy went on:

“That’s what puzzles me most—what old Ben could possibly have to do with all this. He’s so deaf he can’t hear anything and I should think he’d be an awfully difficult person to deal with if you were trying to bring off something very secret. Besides, he may be queer and not a very agreeable person, but I’m certain he wouldn’t be mixed up with some dangerous plot or desperate person who doesn’t care what he does. Ben’s always seemed to me quite law-abiding, really.”

“You never can tell!” commented Betsy sagely. “Some people would do most anything—if you pay them enough. I can’t fit in this business of his buying all that food. I thought first it was for himself, but after what Harvey said this morning—about all that grape-fruit and fresh eggs—it doesn’t sound like it.”

“Maybe he’s buying it for that desperate prowler!” cried Stacy. “He’s hiding out down here somewhere and may plan to stay a long time and wants to lay in some supplies. Perhaps he got hold of Ben, somehow, and paid him to get them.”

“I never thought of that,” admitted Betsy. “I think that must be what it is. But, Stacy, where can this prowler hide down here? There isn’t any house or shack where he could stay, is there? And he can’t simply be around outdoors, or dig into some hole, in this January weather. It’s so cold most of the time he’d freeze to death.”

“There certainly isn’t anything he could stay in,” declared Stacy positively. “I know, because we’ve been over nearly all this place so many times. Mr. Drew told us once that when he first bought the place there was a little shack part way down toward the inlet. It was very dilapidated and unsightly, and he had it taken down. It was on the bay shore and Mr. Drew said he had quite an argument with old Ben

about its being removed. Old Ben claimed it was his and he used it as a storage place for some of his fishing and crabbing stuff. Mr. Drew said old Ben hadn't any claim to it, since he'd bought the place, but he paid him forty dollars for it, which was more than it was worth. Ben took the money, but Mr. Drew said he never forgave him for taking down that shack. There's nothing else except the old house. I'm sure the prowler isn't staying in that or Spike would have known it. And he certainly isn't boarding at the Coast Guard Station—so there you are!"

"Well, we'll just have to count that as a missing piece," deplored Betsy. "And that brings us to Gunnar—he's the most puzzling person in this whole mess, because we really haven't a thing against him except his getting in here around the fence that time, and my finding the crab shell in his coat-pocket. And yet, he seems to be mixed up in it, somehow."

"And then, his coming down here with Harvey to-day," added Stacy. "That may have been just curiosity to see the place, and a chance to get a ride down. But—"

"That reminds me!" suddenly interrupted Betsy. "I'd like to find out whether Harvey's got back to the store yet and whether he found Gunnar and took him back. Do you mind if I use the telephone?"

"Go right ahead," said Stacy. "I'm just as anxious to know as you are." They hurried out into the hall and entered the living-room, where Professor Newhall was happily busy and absorbed in his notes, sitting before the fire. He never even looked up as they entered, and Stacy doubted whether he realized they were there. He had the gift of concentration in his work that could shut out every other consideration. The telephone was in a small alcove off the main room. Betsy lifted the receiver, got her number and, apparently, her aunt answered. Stacy could hear only one side of the conversation.

"Hello!" said Betsy. "Is this Aunt Liz? . . . I want to know if Harvey got back yet. . . . Oh, he did? Just now? . . . Well, he left here a long time ago. . . . Was Gunnar with him? . . . Well, for goodness sake! . . . I know it. . . . Well, I don't know what we can do about it! . . . Well, good-by . . . and thanks for all the things you sent." She hung up at that, and stared wildly at Stacy.

"What do you think?" she gasped. "Aunt Liz says Harvey just got back two minutes ago. She's as mad as anything because he took Gunnar down, to begin with, and then, after he left here, he couldn't find Gunnar anywhere, spent all that time looking for him and finally came back alone! Aunt Liz is fit to be tied! But, Stacy, that means Gunnar is still prowling around this place!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Unseen Enemy

WHEN Spike left the house that morning, he had a very definite plan in mind of just how he was going to conduct his search for the lair of the midnight prowler. He did not intend to go at once in the southerly direction he had indicated to the two girls, but instead, keeping carefully within the screen of trees and undergrowth, turned toward the north.

The fog still hung thick over the landscape, helping to cover his progress. The air was moist and heavy and there was still no wind to help drive away the mist. He did not take either to the road or the bay shore, but kept within the wooded section between the road and bay. His progress was slow, for he was watching every clump and bush to see that it screened no hidden enemy, though in this region he hardly expected to meet one. Occasionally he veered toward the east, to get a glimpse of the road, and again would break over toward the west and a view of the bay shore. Both of these vistas being fairly well hidden by the fog, he saw little to give him any information.

At last he came to the spot where he had parked his truck before removing it to the Newhall garage, and, after satisfying himself that no one was in the vicinity, began a systematic search of the ground where it had stood. He studied the strange footprints carefully, traced them in the damp sand to where they had first emerged from the bay shore, and came back to see if he could find any evidence that they had moved in any other direction. Being satisfied with this survey, he straightened up, dusted the sand from his knees and was about to turn away to fresh fields, when his eye caught the sight of something lying behind a bush near where the door of the truck had been. He reached over and plucked it out, discovering it to be a sheet of paper, folded several times, and, from the grubby look of its exterior, indicating that it had long been kept in some one's pocket. Curiously he unfolded it and glanced at its contents. One look sufficed to reveal what it was, and his lips pursed in a soundless whistle as he stood studying it carefully. Then, with a triumphant grin, he unbuttoned his mackinaw and, folding the paper in its original creases, placed it in an inner pocket.

"This sure is *something!*" he whispered to himself, as he turned away and began to retrace his steps in a southerly direction. He kept pretty much to the same course he had followed in coming north, till he reached the vicinity of the Newhall house. He was almost inclined to stop in and exhibit his amazing find to the girls, but decided

against it, as the delay might cause him to lose valuable time. The fog was showing signs of lifting a little and he wanted to take advantage of it, as long as it lasted. He would probably have encountered Harvey, had he not resisted this impulse, but that fact he naturally did not know.

Creeping carefully through the trees and bushes that separated the house from the road, he was finally past it, and dived into the more sheltering growth to the south of it. Aside from one or two stretches of open land, sparsely overgrown with bay and huckleberry bushes, it was practically all a wooded growth down to the point where the Professor had had his unfortunate experience the evening before. Spike crawled through the open spaces on hands and knees, to avoid being in sight, till he gained the wooded area and finally came to the path leading out to the point. He wanted very much to inspect the mysterious hole into which the Professor had fallen, and scout around the region still farther to the south to see if he could discover any trace of a secret hiding-place.

Following the path to where it emerged from the woods, he crawled the remaining distance through the long marsh reeds out toward the end of the point. When he reached the spot where the hole had been, he found to his surprise, that it had all been filled in again—and very recently, at that! Dead grass and small branches had been scattered over the spot, but there were telltale footprints about—footprints that corresponded exactly with those he had noticed around the truck. It was obvious that the digger of the hole had wanted to cover all traces of it, for reasons best known to himself.

Spike crouched down by the covered hole and thought about this for several minutes. The filling in of that hole indicated a number of things to his mind and he wanted to fit them into the picture, as he saw it. One thing was evident. Something had gone very wrong with the plans of the enemy the night before—probably several things. If the intruder had planned the death and disappearance of Professor Newhall last night, it could only mean that the desperate plot was about to enter its final phase. Otherwise, the intruder would not have risked the uproar and search of the entire place that would have ensued, had the Professor failed to return to his home. He must have been planning to make a departure last night, and so be safely out of the way. What, then, had prevented it?

Spike concluded finally that it must have been the fog. Yet, on the other hand, he considered, the fog would have been a fine concealment, had the intruder intended to escape by land. Was he, perhaps, trying to get away when Betsy saw him peering in the window? Perhaps he did escape at that time. Spike felt a dreadful sense of frustration when he contemplated this possibility. His own whole effort, then, had

been completely in vain, and the terrible thing he was trying to avert would surely take place.

But, on the other hand, there were the footsteps sloshing through the water, the night before, long after the face had been seen at the window. He had followed them south and decided that this could only mean the return of the intruder to his lair. In that case, he was still there but was doubtless planning an early departure, no later than to-night itself. Spike knew he must hurry. He had, probably, less than twelve hours before him!

With this haste in mind, he began another survey of the footprints about the spot. They were confused and blurred, and only here and there could he find a definite and perfect one. His idea now was to see where they led when they left the place, for that ought to point to the direction of the hideout. Sand is a very revealing clue to footprints, especially when it is damp and fairly firm, and the conditions for this were ideal. If the person had departed from this spot by wading through the water, of course, there would be no trail. But, crawling about through the reeds on each side of the point, he could find no prints leading down to the water's edge.

Convinced, then, that the intruder had gone back by way of the path, he himself followed it, crouching low in the reeds, till he came to the place where the woods began. His own footprints on the narrow path practically obliterated all others, but he walked slowly along, scrutinizing each side of the path to discover whether any prints led off from it through the dense jungle of undergrowth, of which the prickly catbriar formed a large part in this particular region. That catbriar formed as effective a barrier as a barbed-wire entanglement, as he well knew, having often tried to force his way through it!

He was halfway back to the road and had seen no sign of that for which he was searching, when suddenly he came upon a narrow opening in the matted undergrowth, toward the south. It was so narrow and unobtrusive, that the waving strands of catbriar which hung across it, would have to be thrust aside if one were to enter it. But, on the sand beneath them, leading off from the main path, Spike almost whooped with joy to behold one of the footprints, pointing through the opening toward the south.

Here was the clue he had so long sought—the secret path that led to the still more secret lair of the enemy! No better concealment could be imagined than that barrier of entangling catbriar! So dense was it that even in winter, and with the shiny leaves gone, it provided a perfect screen and safeguard.

“Now,” thought Spike, “comes the dirty work!” He unconsciously pulled his belt a notch tighter, settled his glasses firmly, felt in his hip pocket for the trusty little

automatic which he had been warned never to travel without. It was there, all safe, and within easy reach in case of necessity. Then, thrusting aside the catbriar strands, he plunged as noiselessly as possible, into the tiny, but distinct trail that led windingly through what seemed an endless maze of briar undergrowth, higher than his head.

The woods were very silent. The distant, subdued murmur of the surf on the beach was the only sound. Presently he realized that the heavy fog of the earlier morning had disappeared and that there were patches of blue sky overhead. This did not cause him any joy, as it made his own concealment considerably more difficult. The tiny trail led on and on, till finally he was aware that the surrounding briars were not quite so thick and were lower in growth. He would have to be more careful now, he considered, not to be seen, for it was evident he was approaching what he hoped was the ultimate goal!

He crouched lower, and stopped for several moments to listen for any telltale sounds beyond. He must be nearer to the bay now, he thought, for he was sure he heard the muffled dip of oars off to his right. Could it be that the one he pursued was escaping by rowboat, after all, just as he was almost within grasp? Spurred on, a little recklessly, by the worry of this thought, Spike pushed along on the path. He had determined to halt the intruder at the point of his automatic, if necessary—anything to prevent his escape.

A turn in the path brought him unexpectedly to the brink of a little creek that flowed out into the bay. It was narrow, but evidently of some depth, and he halted abruptly at this unforeseen barrier. Looking toward the right, he could glimpse the bay a couple of hundred feet away, toward the west. Toward the other direction, not more than twenty feet from where he stood, the stream seemed to disappear under a tangled mass of catbriar stretching solidly across it, from bank to bank. There was something extremely odd about this, and he regarded it in puzzled bewilderment. Why should a flowing stream be so choked with briars? Why should they grow so high—be so thickly piled above it? True, the trees and undergrowth pressed thickly on each side, and the water of the creek flowed out from underneath, but, to his critical eye, there seemed something unnatural about the set-up. Could it be—

It was at this moment that he suddenly felt a stinging, crashing blow on the back of his head. Stars and fireworks danced before his eyes, and then all turned black. His glasses flew off with the force of the impact, and landed several feet away, where they hung inconspicuously on the twig of a beach-plum bush. Spike stumbled forward one step, fell flat on his face, and all consciousness left him!

CHAPTER XIV

Pawn's Move

AFTER all, I don't know what we can do about it," remarked Stacy, when they had somewhat recovered from the shock of realizing that Gunnar was still down on the property prowling around. "If we could warn Spike, we'd do it. But since he forbade us going out of the house, I guess we'll just have to let him take care of himself."

"I'd give a lot to know just what Gunnar is up to!" commented Betsy, and they indulged in a few more moments of low-voiced, worried speculation on the question. Meanwhile, Professor Newhall, after glancing at the clock, called in to them:

"About what time are we to have lunch, Stacy? It's after half-past eleven. I'm getting a little tired sitting up here. Guess I'm stiffer and more achey than I thought. If lunch isn't to be very soon, I think I'll go and lie down for a bit before it."

"I told Spike we'd have it about twelve-thirty," Stacy answered coming into the living-room. "I also said that if he weren't back by that time, we'd keep something warm for him. You'll have nearly an hour if you want to lie down. Betsy and I are going to the kitchen right now to get ready for it."

"The fog's lifting," remarked the Professor, as he limped off to his room. "The sun seems to be coming out, too. Perhaps it will be a clear day after all!"

As he disappeared down the hallway toward his room, the two girls walked over to the window toward the bay and peered out at the changing weather, wondering what effect it would have on Spike's plans. He had counted on the fog as an asset to his operations and it seemed too bad that it should be lifting at this particular crisis. Suddenly Stacy drew her friend a little back from the window, so that she would be out of sight, and pointed at something coming around a bend in the shore from the north.

"Look!" she breathed. "There's old Ben coming along in his rowboat! Now, what do you suppose *he's* up to?" Ben was indeed rowing steadily down along the shore, in a southerly direction. He pulled with the short, telling strokes of the true "bayman," and his boat slipped through the smooth water, cutting a long V-shaped swath with its prow. His boat seemed loaded in the stern seat with several utensils looking like large rakes and a four-pronged forklike affair. "What's all that stuff he has on the back of the boat?" Stacy went on.

"He's probably going down to dig clams or oysters," Betsy informed her. "He gets them down on the flats near the inlet. This is a good day for clamming, it's so

smooth and calm. I know he often goes down there when the weather is right for it. Probably he isn't doing any harm—not the kind *we* think!”

They watched him out of sight, and then turned to go into the kitchen to prepare lunch. Stacy set the table in the dining-room, while Betsy fussed about the stove, heating the soup and biscuits and mashing the potatoes. At length all was ready and the clock pointed to half-past twelve. As there was still no sign of Spike, Stacy suggested that they leave the food in the warming oven and wait just a bit longer for his possible return. Her father, too, was deep in a quiet nap and she hated to arouse him yet a while. So they went out to the sunporch to sit and chat, hoping that Spike would put in an appearance in the meantime.

The porch also faced the bay, and they had only been there a few moments when Betsy, who was facing toward the south, exclaimed:

“Look! There comes old Ben back again. That's kind of queer—he hasn't been gone long enough even to get down to the flats. He's usually away most of the day when he goes clamming.” Old Ben was rowing back from the south and it needed but one glance at him to realize that something had gone amiss with him. He was pulling with rapid, angry-seeming strokes, jerking the boat along with every appearance of a man who is thoroughly mad or disturbed about something. Stacy ran to get her father's binoculars, and both girls brought him into close range with the powerful field glasses—so close that they could actually see the expression on his face.

“He's in a terrible lather!” remarked Betsy. “I wonder what could have upset him?”

“And look at the back of the boat!” added Stacy. “All those rakes and forked things are gone. Remember how they were piled up there? Has he lost them, or thrown them overboard, or left them somewhere? And why is he so sizzling mad?”

Betsy could answer none of these queries, so they continued to stare at the boat, as it shot through the unruffled water, leaving a trail of foam in its wake, till it was out of sight around the bend to the north of them. At that moment the Professor came strolling out, his nap finished, to inquire rather plaintively when they were going to serve lunch.

“We might as well have it right away,” Stacy decided, “and keep Spike's warm for him till he comes in. He said not to expect him at any special time. Come on, Bets—we'll put the things on the table!” She said nothing to her father about the curious actions of old Ben Thomson, and the three sat down to a pleasant luncheon, putting aside their worries temporarily. Spike would be in later for his, and they could compare notes on the morning's events.

But it proved to be rather a silent meal. They were all too tense with expectation to indulge in casual conversation and, finally, toward the end Professor Newhall said to them kindly:

“I know that you girls are very nervous and keyed up. We all are. And I won’t try to hide from you that this is a very crucial day in the affair we’re all, to some extent, involved in. However, our part has to be a passive one—at least for the present—and the calmer we keep, the more effectively we can do our share when the time comes, if it should have to come.

“After lunch, I’m going to take another rest and nap, and then go on with the work on my notes. I advise you both to forget all these doings, if you can—read, listen to the radio, play games—anything to divert your minds. Try it, anyway!”

“Dad,” demanded Stacy, “please tell us one thing—do you think Spike is in danger? That’s what’s worrying us most.”

“I won’t deny that he may be,” the Professor acknowledged. “But you must remember this. Spike is serving his country in a total war, in the way for which he’s best fitted, the same as Jim is in *his* way, and there’s always danger under such circumstances. But, remember this, too. Spike is able and resourceful, and, if there’s danger, he’ll be apt to see it before it is on him, so don’t worry too much about that. Now I’m going to lie down again.”

When they had cleared away the table and washed the dishes, the two girls went into the living-room to discuss how they would spend the intervening time till Spike’s return.

“I ought to write a letter to Mother,” said Stacy. “I always do, twice a week, and let her know how things are going here. But somehow, I just can’t do it—not with all this going on. I don’t dare tell her about it, she’d be worried sick. And I can’t think of anything else to write. I believe I’ll call her up to-night, instead, if everything’s all right. I’m anxious to know how Michael is, too, but I’m awfully glad he isn’t around here—with all these goings-on! What shall we do to pass the time, Bets? Put one of those big picture-puzzles together?”

“I’d like that,” agreed Betsy. “Let’s do it out on the sunporch, where we can watch what goes on on the bay.”

They took one of the Newhall’s most elaborate puzzles out to the porch and were soon deep in the problem of piecing it together, trying all the while not to think about Spike. At one time, Betsy looked up and remarked, apropos of nothing that was happening at the moment:

“I like your father, Stacy, and the way he thinks about things. Somehow, what he said at lunch made me think of something I was studying in English literature, in high

school, just before I had to leave. It was that sonnet of Milton's on his blindness. Do you remember the last line? 'They also serve who only stand and wait.'" She ended rather shyly, a little doubtful whether Stacy would understand. She was not given to poetical sentiment, and hoped she hadn't been what she privately called "mushy." But Stacy understood perfectly and answered with eagerness:

"I understand just what you mean, Bets. That's one of my favorite poems, and Dad's, too. I suppose we're 'serving' by simply sitting here and waiting—and being ready for anything that may happen—but it's a pretty trying way of 'serving,' isn't it?" They went on with the puzzle, but, privately Stacy was very much intrigued at this new and thoughtful side of Betsy's character that the girl had suddenly revealed to her. "Who would have thought it!" she marveled. "I must tell Dad about this, sometime. He thinks young girls, nowadays, never think about anything but sports or dancing or dates. He'll be interested to find there's one that has other ideas, anyway!"

A while later, the picture completed, she glanced at her wrist-watch to discover that it was past three o'clock—and still no sign of Spike. The Professor had come out again to the living-room and was deep in his notes once more. How much longer were they to wait, she wondered, without doing something about his strange absence? She did not like to question her father any further about the matter, knowing well that it was also prominent in his own mind, and that he would move when he considered the time was ripe.

"I don't feel like doing another puzzle, do you, Betsy?" she remarked. "Somehow I can't seem to keep my mind on them just now. And I don't want to read or listen to the radio or—or anything much. Tell you what, have you ever played chess?"

"No, I never have," admitted Betsy. "I don't know the least thing about it, but I'd like to learn."

"Well, that's grand!" cried Stacy. "I'll get out the board and pieces and I'll teach you the moves. That takes quite a little time, and you have to keep your mind on it, strictly. You can't think of anything else."

She brought out the chess-table and box of pieces to the porch. And the next half-hour was spent in showing Betsy how the pieces were set up, and the names and different moves of the different pieces. Betsy proved unusually quick at grasping the complicated problem, and when she had that much firmly fixed in her memory, she set up the board herself and they began a game, Stacy advising her on her moves and explaining the different situations as the game progressed. So absorbed did they become in the problem that they scarcely noticed the sun, advancing toward

its downward path in the west, across the bay, and the bluish mist rising on the opposite shore.

“I like the move of the little pawns!” exclaimed Betsy at one point. “They can only move forward, and one square at a time, except right at first, and they don’t seem to be able to do much. Yet, if they get in the right position, they can capture a queen or checkmate a king!” She moved one of her own forward and Stacy had to warn her:

“Look out—if you do that, you’ll be exposing your queen.” Betsy took the move back and tried to think up another. And so the game went on, till they suddenly realized that the sun was touching the horizon and dusk was coming on. It was with real shock that they came out of their absorption in the game to find it had grown so late and that Spike had not returned.

But the Professor had also realized the situation, which, unknown to them, he had been watching for quite some time past. Pushing his notes aside, he rose and came out on the porch where they sat.

“I don’t want to alarm you two unduly,” he said, “but it’s growing very late—it will be dark in a short time—and Spike hasn’t returned. Before he left, we had an understanding that if he weren’t back before dark, it might be an idea to hunt him up. I think the time has come when we’d better get busy about it.”

“Oh, yes!” cried Stacy. “Do let’s start out right away, Dad. I know the direction he said he was going to take. He said he’d go south and scout around the point where you were yesterday, and work on down from there. That’s where we’d better begin, hadn’t we?” Her father nodded.

“If it weren’t for the circumstances, I certainly wouldn’t take you two with me,” he went on. “This kind of a mess is not one for young girls to be mixed up in. But, unfortunately, you’d have to stay here alone, and might be in more danger than if you came with me. And, too, perhaps you can be of some assistance. Better go to your rooms now and get on some warm clothes—the kind that can stand crawling through the bushes. The wind has risen and I think it’s going to be a cold, clear night. We’ll go in the car. It’ll be quicker, and there’s no telling but what we may need it. You’d better do the driving, Stacy. I’m still a bit lame and sore for that. Put in some warm blankets and a thermos bottle of that coffee you were keeping hot for Spike. Now, run along and get ready!”

Sorely worried about what had happened, yet relieved that they could at last go into action, the two girls hurried away to fulfil Professor Newhall’s suggestions. He waited till they were out of sight and hearing and went to the telephone and put through two separate calls. Then he went to his own room to prepare for the

excursion.

When all was ready, they locked the door and bundled themselves into the car. Stacy noted that before they left the house, her father turned on a number of lights in the living-room, although they were going to be away. Without asking, she knew that this was to give the impression that they were at home, should the intruder come prowling about again. When they were safely in the car, the Professor in the rear seat, and Betsy in front with Stacy, they drove away down the road without any lights on, finding the way only through the dimming afterglow of sunset. And, as they neared the spot where the path turned in toward the point, which had been so difficult to find the night before, but was in plain sight now, Stacy slowed down and whispered to her companion:

“The little pawns are going to have their move now!”

CHAPTER XV

The Desperate Chance

STACY and Betsy were long to remember the nightmare events of the next few hours! But now they stood by the side of the car in the growing darkness, while Professor Newhall gave them the last directions.

“Remember, you’re to keep close to me every moment,” he warned them. “Don’t stray off, even a little way. It’s absolutely essential for your safety that you stay by me, and all of us keep close together. Since Spike intended to examine conditions on the point first, our best bet is to make for that spot and look around ourselves. What we find there, if anything, will determine our next move. Have your flashlights ready, but don’t turn them on till I say so. We don’t want the enemy to see lights bobbing around. Are you all ready?”

They indicated that they were, and with the Professor in the lead and the two girls trailing close behind, they crept along the little path toward the woods which intervened between them and the bay. Stacy had put on her warm ski-suit and had lent one of her mother’s to Betsy, so they were both well equipped to crawl through underbrush and catbriar, if necessary. The stars had come out while they were on their way down, but there was still a light of afterglow in the west, and, until they entered the woods, they could find the path without aid of their flashlights. Walking in the soft sand of the path, and avoiding stepping on branches or twigs that might crackle, their footsteps made no sound. Stacy’s heart was pounding so loudly with excitement that she thought the others must surely hear it. But, as their own were acting in very much the same way, they were not conscious of much but that.

At the spot where the path led into the woods, the Professor paused and whispered:

“We’ll have to have a bit of light, here. I’ll turn on my light and keep it pointed toward the ground. That’ll show the path, but won’t be very visible to any one lurking around. Keep right behind me—and make as little sound as possible.” He was about to move on, when Stacy detained him a moment and whispered:

“Dad, have you—have you anything with you in case—we needed some protection?” He answered grimly:

“I have my service revolver that I used in the last war. I wouldn’t have come without something—but I hope there’ll be no need for it. And, don’t worry, I still have a good aim!” Without further conversation, they entered the darkly wooded stretch.

It was a nightmare pilgrimage, creeping along in the dark, only the spot of the flashlight on the path to guide their feet, expecting any moment they knew not what terror to leap out at them. Stacy felt that she knew then, as she had never before, what the expression, “your heart in your mouth,” really meant. Her own felt as if it were actually choking her. Suddenly, when they were about halfway through the wooded stretch, Professor Newhall stopped short and whispered to them:

“I think I hear something! We’d better be out of sight. Get down here behind these bushes, and don’t make a sound, but *watch!* Hurry, now! We won’t be seen, these bushes are very thick, and it’s dark.”

Without further question, they all crept in behind a thick growth of inkberry bushes, which, being evergreen, retain their thick, glossy leaves through the winter and make a perfect screen. And in the surrounding silence, they all heard the distant but distinct sound of some one struggling through the undergrowth, brushing and tearing the catbriar apart, in what seemed to be a reckless disregard of sound or caution. As they listened it grew louder and nearer, crashing toward them from a southerly direction on the opposite side of the path. The mass of catbriar on that side of the path seemed almost impenetrable, yet some one was plainly making a way through it, and was now so near that he seemed no more than thirty or forty feet away.

The three behind the bushes scarcely drew a breath. Shortly, some one was bound to emerge on that path—and almost directly in front of them. Who would it be—Spike, or the enemy? Only the ensuing moments could reveal that! The Professor, who was in between them, put a comforting hand on the arm of each of the two girls. They found some reassurance in his touch. It was only a moment afterward that a dark figure broke out of the maze of catbriar, directly opposite them.

Instantly they knew that it was not Spike! Peering through a small opening in the bushes, they could see that the figure was shorter than Spike and much stouter. There would have been no mistaking Spike’s tall, rangy stature. They held their breath. What was this stranger going to do next? If he came straight ahead and crossed the path, he would literally step on them! If he turned toward the road, he would eventually discover the car and realize that some one was in the vicinity. Only if he turned toward the bay would they be temporarily safe.

They had not long to wait. He turned toward the bay! Stamping along, almost running, he was presently out of sight around a turn in the path, and they drew the first breath they had taken since he emerged into view. Directly he was out of sight, the Professor squirmed out from the hiding-place, whispering to them:

“We must see which way he goes! He’s making for the bay shore for some reason. You two stay right where you are, while I trail him. It isn’t far—and I won’t be long. It’s still light enough on the shore to see what he does. You’ll be perfectly safe right here. Don’t move away an inch!”

He said all this very hurriedly and in a moment was lost to their sight. The two girls crouched low behind the bushes, not even daring to speak, and the interval there alone in the darkness seemed the longest they had ever lived through. Overhead they could see the twinkling stars, and a cold, rising wind chilled them as they sat, motionless and tense, waiting for the Professor’s return. What if the evil stranger should turn and see him? They listened for the horrid sound of a shot ringing through the darkness, but no such sound materialized. Only silence was all about them.

After what seemed like an eternity, they heard the sound of footsteps returning on the path from the bay. They were hurried footsteps and took no particular pains to conceal themselves. Terror gripped the two girls afresh, for they thought this surely must be the evil stranger, and here they were—almost directly in his path!

The footsteps came nearer, with the sound of twigs and branches carelessly brushed aside, till they had come abreast of the hiding-place of the girls. Then Stacy heaved a great sigh of relief. It was the tall form of her father, and not the shorter, chunky figure that had emerged from the catbriar! Instead of coming around their screen of bushes to them, he called softly:

“It’s all right, girls! Come out at once. He’s traveling up the bay shore and has already gone quite a distance. He won’t be back for a while!” And when the two had scrambled out to join him, he went on:

“Now, we haven’t a minute to lose—this is the chance of our lives to find his hideout, and perhaps get some idea what has happened to Spike. Follow me, and you needn’t be so careful to make no noise, this time. He’s well out of hearing!”

He turned on his torch and plunged into the tangled catbriar, the girls close at his heels. It was a rough journey, and it was well for them that they were clad in ski-suits and tight caps, for the prickly vines tore at their faces and caught in their clothes in what seemed like a deliberately vicious effort to detain them. On and on they trudged, the tiny path winding and erratic, but somehow, they felt, drawing them closer to their goal.

A triangular piece was torn from Stacy’s sleeve, and Betsy had a long scratch across her nose before they came to a gradual thinning out of the prickly mass. Suddenly they were in the open and close to what seemed the bank of a stream or creek. The Professor flashed his torch about, curiously, and remarked:

“I’ve seen the opening of this creek from the bay, but never penetrated far into it. Never happened to be any birds in here that interested me, and the water’s rather deep toward the bay end of it. Also the banks are heavily overgrown with bushes, except for this clearing. Now, let’s see what we have?”

He flashed the torch toward the west, which revealed the entrance to the bay, and a pale lemon afterglow fading in the western sky. Then he turned it toward the east. Here rose only a dark mass of catbriar, bridging the narrow stream, whose waters rippled out under it. The close-up effect was very peculiar, and somehow not quite natural. The mass of catbriar looked more as if it had been cut and thrown there, than that it had grown over the stream naturally.

“Something odd about this!” he muttered, as he cast his light about in different directions. As he did so, the light caught something in a bush that glinted oddly. Suddenly Stacy sprang forward with a little half-sobbing cry, snatched it from the bush and held it up.

“Do you see what it is?” she gasped. “Spike’s glasses! They can’t be anybody else’s, they’re so queerly shaped. Oh, something dreadful must have happened to Spike—or they wouldn’t be here!”

Her father took them, examined them critically and put them in his pocket.

“Yes, they’re undoubtedly Spike’s,” he said grimly. “But don’t be too worried. He may have lost them or dropped them, for he’s evidently been around here today.”

“But he can’t see a thing without them!” cried Stacy. “He told us he was as blind as a bat if he didn’t wear them constantly. Oh, something awful has happened to him, I *know* it!” Her father tried to calm her distress with another suggestion:

“He may have lost or dropped them in his hurry and is now wandering around trying to find his way home without them. We’ll hunt him up shortly.” He didn’t very much believe this himself, but the two girls were so terror-stricken at the thought of Spike’s possible fate, right here in the lair of the enemy, that he felt he must offer something to distract them from that prospect.

“Now, I want to look about here thoroughly, before we leave this spot,” went on the Professor. “That person undoubtedly came from this location and his hideout must be somewhere about. We haven’t much time, for he might take it into his head to come back, any minute. I’m going to look over this heap of catbriar. Something about it doesn’t look right to me.”

He walked a few feet up the stream, the girls tagging after him, and threw the powerful light of his torch around the mass that was piled across the stream. Seen at close range, it had a dead and withered look, as if it had been cut some time before

and piled where it was. Plainly it was no natural growth, as the cut ends sticking out, and brown, dry leaves still clinging to it, testified. The entire mass was some twenty feet in length and reached well above their heads. They had walked about ten feet along its length, where it touched the bank of the creek, when Betsy, who was slightly in the lead, pointed to a portion of it just beyond her.

“Look!” she whispered. “There’s an opening there, just beyond where it sticks out a bit on the bank.”

They all hurried forward and Betsy was proved correct. There *was* an opening in the mass, high enough to get through by stooping a bit. The Professor turned his light into that opening, and the trio gasped at what was revealed to them!

“Why—there’s a *boat* in there!” exclaimed Stacy. “All under that catbriar. You can crawl aboard it through this hole. Dad—is *this* the hideout?”

“Undoubtedly!” muttered her father, spraying his flashlight about. “And I guess our next move is to get aboard—at least mine is—you’d best stay on the bank till I see what’s what.” He stooped and slipped through the low opening, and was able immediately to set foot on the boat, which was close to the side of the bank. It was a long boat, of the flat-bottomed type, with a powerful motor in the center, and a little, enclosed cabin in the stern. It had been kept from contact with the mass of concealing catbriar by means of a big stretch of canvas, strongly braced with poles at the sides and center, forming a sort of tent over the boat. The whole arrangement was an extremely clever combination of protection and camouflage.

They noted that the open part of the boat was crowded with cartons and boxes, quickly recognized by Betsy as the same she had sold to old Ben Thomson the night before. There was also a pile of clam-rakes and the pronged spade that both of them had seen in his rowboat that very morning. They could not imagine the reason for the presence of these utensils here, but it definitely involved old Ben with the concerns of the enemy.

What happened next, happened very quickly. Professor Newhall, after one swift glance about, turned to the door of the little cabin and tried to open it. He speedily discovered that it was locked.

“We’ve got to open this,” he announced to the girls, “even if I have to break it down!” Looking about him for some implement to use, his eye lit on the pronged fork, which was solid and heavy. He lost not a moment in extracting it from the heap and, using it as a ram, he drove it against the door with all his might, in spite of his aching muscles. To tell the truth, he had completely forgotten these in the excitement and urgency of the moment!

It took several well-aimed blows to shatter the wood of the door around the

lock, but suddenly it gave, and the door flew inward. He then threw the fork aside, took up his torch which he had laid on the floor of the boat, and stepped forward to peer into the tiny cabin. One glance sufficed him and he stepped inside. The two girls waited where they were in breathless suspense, not daring even to think what he might have discovered there. It was two or three endless moments before he poked his head out of the door and said to them:

“Come in here!”

They jumped across the side of the boat, Stacy first and Betsy after her, and crowded around the cabin door. There was scarcely room for all three of them inside the tiny space. What they saw brought a choking into their throats and little cry of terror to their lips.

The body of Spike lay on the floor. His feet were bound together with a rope, at the ankles. His hands were tied behind his back. A piece of wide adhesive tape was plastered across his mouth and went clear around to the back of his head, and a dark bandanna handkerchief was tied over his eyes. For an instant they thought he was dead, and Stacy cried:

“Oh, *Spike!*” on a little, sobbing breath. A violent kick of his bound feet was the response, and they knew then that he was very much alive!

“We must unloose him and get him out of here as quickly as possible,” said Stacy’s father. “I’ll untie his feet and hands, and you girls try to get that adhesive plaster off his mouth. Raise his head, take off that bandage from his eyes, loosen the adhesive tape at the back, and strip it off quickly. It may hurt him a bit, but it’s the easiest and quickest way to get it off.”

With hearts as light as toy balloons, in comparison with what they had been up to now, they all went to work. Spike never even winced as Stacy peeled the adhesive tape from his face and mouth, and when Betsy had removed the bandage over his eyes, he blinked at them unseeingly, but his face crinkled in his familiar grin, and he croaked thickly:

“Swell of you folks—but—how did you find me?”

“Never mind that now,” advised the Professor. “The thing is to get you out of here—as quickly as possible!” He had finished untying the ropes and inquired: “Do you think you can walk?”

“Something’s the matter with the back of his head!” cried Stacy. “That adhesive tape’s all bloody!”

“He hit me a good bang from behind,” Spike tried to explain. “I went out like a light!”

“Don’t try to talk, Spike—and get out of the cabin, girls! It’s too crowded in

here. I want to see if Spike can stand up and walk.” The girls retreated through the doorway to the outside part of the boat, while the Professor helped raise Spike to a sitting position and then to his feet. The young fellow was very wobbly in the knees and weak from shock, the blow he had suffered on the back of his head, and the cramped confinement he had been standing for hours. He swayed uncertainly and muttered:

“Gosh! I wish I hadn’t lost my glasses! Can’t see a thing!”

“Here they are!” said the Professor cheerfully, pulling them from his pocket and adjusting them on Spike’s nose. “Stacy spied them hanging on a bush right near here.”

“Bless her bright eyes!” chortled Spike, the whole expression of his face changing, as he joyfully peered about and managed to straighten himself up with more confidence.

“All right—now let’s get out of here before that rascal gets back,” warned Professor Newhall. And he tried to urge Spike toward the doorway. But the young fellow resisted.

“Not before I’ve found what I’ve been itching to lay my hands on all this while!” he declared. “It must be here—and I won’t leave the place without it!”

“What is it?” demanded the Professor rather testily. He had only one object in mind—to get away from the spot with all possible speed.

“You ought to know!” countered Spike, darkly.

“Oh, yes! I’d forgotten it in all this excitement,” admitted Stacy’s father. “I suppose it must be in the cabin here, somewhere.” They both glanced about the tiny space eagerly. It was so small that practically all it contained was in plain sight. Across one side was a narrow bunk, raised a foot or so from the floor. In another corner was a wooden cupboard, which, being opened, revealed two or three plates and cups and saucers, a coffee-pot, a frying pan, a few knives, forks, and spoons, and a simple little oil cooking-stove. There were also a folding camp-chair and table leaning against the wall. In another corner there rested an odd, boxlike affair about a foot and a half square, with a long rod standing beside it. That seemed to be all the cabin contained, except for a large suitcase shoved partway under the bunk.

Spike pointed to the boxlike case in the corner and asked the Professor please to reach for it and open it. He did so and revealed within an intricate set of tubes and mechanism.

“Set it up on the floor, will you?” Spike further required. It was done, while Spike braced himself by holding on to the frame of the cabin door. When the instrument was opened directly in front of him, he raised his foot and put it calmly but

firmly into the middle of the mechanism and bore down hard, crushing the fragile thing into a mass of glass-splinters and wreckage.

“He’s used that for the last time!” Spike mumbled triumphantly. “It was his transmitter set!” But even that destruction did not seem to satisfy him, and he asked the Professor please to pull out the big suitcase from under the bed and get it open. “Handle it carefully,” he warned. “You know what may be in it!”

Gingerly the big leather suitcase was edged out from under the bunk and placed in the middle of the floor. Fortunately it was not locked, so precious time did not have to be wasted prying it open. When the lid was thrown back, it revealed a mass of neatly folded clothing, with a small automatic lying directly on top.

“That’s mine!” cried Spike. “He must have searched me and hidden it there.” The Professor put the gun in his pocket and proceeded carefully to lift out the clothing and place it on the floor. It seemed to consist mainly of underwear and a uniform and cap, on which, however, there were no emblems to indicate the rank of the owner. These had evidently been removed for fear of identification. There was nothing else, and the contents did not entirely fill the capacity of the bag. Spike’s face registered intense disappointment.

“It isn’t there,” he explained, “but it’s got to be somewhere on this boat! We *must* get it before we leave!” But the Professor was clearly very uneasy. He had the safety of the two girls to think of, as well as their own, and realized that things might become pretty unpleasant all around, should the enemy return to find them there.

“I really don’t think—” he objected, when suddenly there was an interruption from outside. They heard a little, muffled cry of alarm from the two girls who were watching outside the door, and a scuffling noise, as of some one crawling through the catbriar-opening to board the boat. Instantly alert, the Professor reached in one pocket and handed Spike’s automatic to him. And reaching into another, he drew out his own service revolver, and the two of them stood on guard. In another moment a face appeared in the doorway.

It was the towheaded, grinning countenance of Gunnar!

CHAPTER XVI

The Missing Pieces

IN that terrifying instant, the two girls gave up everything as lost! *Gunnar*—their second “suspect,” here on the scene! His partner was probably close behind. They were caught in a hopeless trap. What was going to happen next? *Gunnar* spoke to the two men inside the little cabin.

“Hold everything, folks!” he chuckled. “No need for the shooting sticks!” They both lowered their weapons instantly.

“Hello, John!” croaked Spike thickly, through his swollen lips. “How’d you find us? We must have missed each other this morning.”

“*John*?” thought Stacy in wild wonder. “What’s the meaning of this?” The Professor only commented:

“I’m glad you got here when you did. We’re in pretty much of a fix, and that rascal may be back any time. He’s gone up the shore. This is his hideout. He had Spike trussed up and helpless when we found him. We’ll explain it all later. Now we’d like to get Spike back to the house. He’s pretty weak and all in. But he will insist on hunting for that article before we leave. He hasn’t found it yet.”

Gunnar—or “John” as it seemed—glanced about curiously at the interior of the boat and remarked, in excellent English and without a trace of foreign accent:

“So this is his ‘lay’! No wonder we’ve never been able to find it. Best concealed and best protected hide-out I’ve ever seen! But don’t worry, Spike, about what you’re looking for. To begin with, I rather think he wouldn’t be comfortable keeping it here with him on the boat. He’s probably dug a hole and hidden it somewhere near-by till the last minute. We’ll have to look for it by daylight. The thing to do first is get you out of here, pronto! Do you think you can walk—enough to get through those briars? I’ll go along to help, and tackle the old boy if he comes back and meets us. Then, when you get through that, I’ll come back and stand guard over the place and nab him if he appears. But I somehow think he isn’t going to appear!” He did not explain why.

“Sure, I think I can wobble along,” agreed Spike. “But I’d certainly like to find that thing before I leave!”

“It isn’t safe!” warned Professor Newhall. “And, remember, we have the girls to think of. Better do as Mr.—er—*Gunnar* says!” Reluctantly Spike agreed.

“Better put that motor out of commission before we leave,” he suggested. “He might come back by rowboat and try to get going.”

“Not much chance,” said the new-comer, “with all this camouflage to remove first, and I rather think he isn’t going to get back. But we won’t take any chances.”

All this time, the two girls had remained in the background, taking no part in the colloquy, utterly dumbfounded at the turn affairs had taken. Gunnar turned around and faced them, where they stood braced against the housing of the motor and remarked:

“Hello, Betsy and—er—Miss Newhall! Too bad you had to be mixed up in all this, but I guess you’ve been a good bit of help. Now, if you don’t mind moving aside, I’ll do a little fancy tampering with that motor!” The girls moved away from the square wooden housing that covered the motor, and he lifted the top, fiddled expertly with some of its gadgets and was seen to put one or two vital parts in his pocket.

“That’ll fix it!” he grinned. “And now, Spike, if you feel like it, we’d better get going.” By some obscure means, to the complete amazement of the two girls, the former supposed “enemy” had suddenly taken charge of the whole proceeding! Spike gave one last look about the cabin and announced, “I guess I can toddle along, if I must, but keep that guy from getting hold of—you know what, John! That’s my main worry now.”

“Forget it!” said the one-time Gunnar. “That guy’s never going to get back to this boat again. And before I’m through with him, he’ll wish he’d never been born!” And, with that assurance, Spike appeared to be content. He was helped over the side of the boat and onto the bank by the new-comer and Professor Newhall. It was only then, after the two girls had scrambled up to join them, that Spike seemed to realize they were also present.

“Hello, pals!” he greeted them whimsically. “Ain’t this a swell party were throwing?”

“Never mind, Spike,” quavered Stacy. “If you can get back to the car all right, we’ve got a nice thermos of hot coffee waiting for you there.”

“Oh, man!” he chortled feebly. “The very thought of it makes me stronger already. I haven’t had a thing in me since breakfast!”

The trip through the catbriar path was another nightmare that the two girls didn’t like to look back on afterward. Gunnar went ahead, his left arm partly around and bracing Spike, who still felt very dizzy at intervals from the blow on his head and was wobbly in the knees. Betsy came next, because she was tall and could reach out and fend off the briar strands from Spike’s face. Stacy followed after her, and the Professor brought up the rear, with his revolver ready in case of pursuit from that quarter. The journey seemed never-ending, and at any moment they expected to

hear the sound of the enemy, crashing toward them on his return journey.

But at last it was over and they emerged onto the open path through the woods.

“I’ll leave you here,” said Gunnar (the girls still could not credit him with any other name!) “because I think you can get him that easy distance back to the car without my help. I’ll stand right here for a short spell, till you’re well on the way, in case our ‘friend’ should suddenly appear from the bay direction. Then I’ll get right back to the boat. Several things I want to see about there.”

“By, John!” muttered Spike. “Here’s luck—and see you later! Keep ’em running!” Then the three led him away toward the car.

No one spoke till they reached it and had installed Spike in the rear seat. The Professor got in beside him and Betsy sat in front with Stacy, who was to drive. They noticed that another car was parked close behind their own. Betsy said it was Harvey’s and that Gunnar had evidently borrowed it. The Professor opened the thermos bottle and gave Spike a big drink of hot coffee, and then they drove back to the house. Relief from the terrific strain under which they had all been laboring kept them silent. The girls were bursting with astonished questions, but they felt that this was no time to ask them. And so, at last, they reached the safety and comfort, the heavenly safety and comfort, as Stacy privately called it, of the Newhall house.

“There’s just one question I’ve got to ask you, Spike,” said Stacy when, with her father’s help, he had been put to bed, his head bathed and bandaged, and he had been fed with hot soup and coffee. “Please tell us *who* this Gunnar really is!” Spike grinned feebly and answered:

“His name is really John Gunnarson. He’s an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—and a crackerjack! One of the best they’ve got. You can all sleep sweetly to-night. He’ll finish the job!”

CHAPTER XVII

The Picture Complete

IF somebody doesn't come in soon and explain things," exclaimed Stacy impatiently, "I'm going to give one wild yell and go out of my mind!"

Betsy, washing the lunch dishes, while Stacy wiped them, smiled understandingly and remarked that she felt the same way. It was one o'clock of the following day, and a number of things had happened since the nerve-racking events of the night before. They had all gone to bed shortly after ten that night, and slept soundly and dreamlessly. The reason for this complete relaxation was that Gunnar had called up about ten, with this reassuring message:

"We've got them both, and they're safely in custody, where they can do no more harm! Tell Spike to get a good rest—and I'll be seeing him in the morning."

That was all, but at the time it was sufficient. They did not even have the curiosity to question the how's and when's, but tumbled into bed in sheer exhaustion and were instantly dead to the world.

But the next morning all was confusion again. John Gunnarson called up before breakfast, asked how Spike was feeling, and, being assured that he was almost normal, except for a slight occasional dizziness, asked if it would be possible for Spike and Professor Newhall to meet him with the car, as there was some important business that must be transacted. The Professor, being quite recovered from his own mishaps, said he would be glad to go and do the driving, and nothing could have held Spike, no matter how he felt!

They ate a hasty breakfast and left immediately afterward, and the two girls had been alone ever since. They did not fear being alone now, as both Spike and the Professor had assured them that all danger was over, and, in any case, the Coast Guards were having an extra patrol on both the bay and ocean beaches in that vicinity, for the day, and would see to it that the house was carefully watched.

Harvey had driven down in the middle of the morning, with more hot food, prepared for them by the thoughtful Mrs. Dunne. He was full of curiosity about what had been going on—what were these queer doings in which Gunnar was concerned—but he got little satisfaction from them. Betsy drove him out of the kitchen, directly he had deposited his bundles, and told him she was going to call up Aunt Liz in ten minutes to see if he had got back. If he hadn't, he'd hear from his mother! That was enough to send him out on the run.

It seemed very strange to them to be alone, after so much guarding and

watching, and they would have enjoyed it, had they not been so consumed with curiosity to know what was happening, and what was the explanation of it all. They tried to busy themselves with household duties, and, when lunch time came and still no one had arrived, they prepared and ate the meal by themselves. Afterward they wandered out to the sunporch, but they could not settle down to picture-puzzles or even chess to pass the time.

“Who do you suppose was the ‘them’ that Gunnar—I mean John Gunnarson—spoke of over the ‘phone last night?” said Stacy. “One of them, of course, must be that creature who was hiding in the boat. But there must be some one else, or he wouldn’t have said ‘them.’”

“I guess the only one it can be is old Ben Thomson,” replied Betsy. “That was *his* boat—I’d know it anywhere! And those were his tools, rakes, and things, that we’d seen him with in the rowboat yesterday morning. And there was all that stuff, too, that he’d bought at the store. You can’t get around it—he must be the other one. And how a good American could come to be mixed up in—in all this, I just can’t understand!”

“But he told us last fall he was going to leave his boat up at the boatyard for the winter, for painting and repairs,” objected Stacy.

“Well, he didn’t!” said Betsy grimly. “That must have been only a bluff, to explain why it wasn’t in his own boat-shed. He hid it down in the creek for that horrid creature to use!”

At this point in their speculations, the door opened and Spike and the Professor entered, with a happy, “Hello, folks!” It was evident that they were in a very pleased state of mind, and they came out immediately to the sunporch and settled down on the swing couch, prepared, so the girls madly hoped, to solve the riddle at last. And they were not mistaken. The two men were in a rarely expansive mood.

“Gosh, kids, but it’s good to have that thing off our hands at last!” sighed Spike, passing a hand gingerly over the taped lump on the back of his head. The Professor grinned amiably and fished out his pipe—a sign that he was in a relaxed and communicative frame of mind.

“Well, if you don’t mind,” remarked Stacy, “Betsy and I would be awfully pleased with a little information about what’s been going on. We’ve tried to be very patient and not ask any questions, till things simmered down a bit. But we’re just about bursting to know!” The two men glanced at one another, and Professor Newhall replied:

“I don’t blame you two for being anxious to know the whys and wherefores of it all, and you’ve certainly done your bit in helping us out. But you understand, of

course, that this is war, and everything can't be told as it might be under other circumstances. However, Mr. Gunnarson thinks it will be all right to explain the main points of it to you, since you already know so much, only you must be under solemn promise not to reveal anything of this to outsiders."

Both girls nodded gravely and murmured, "I promise!" And Stacy added, "I wish you'd explain first about this John Gunnarson. We're all mixed up about him—we thought he was one of our worst suspects!"

"I know you did!" grinned Spike, "and I thought it best to let you go on thinking so, for a number of reasons. Principally because, if you'd known who and what he really was, it might have been quite difficult for you to act naturally about him, and just some little slip might have given the whole show away. Also, I'll have to confess, it rather tickled me to watch you numbering him in with the possible suspects!"

"I never thought you acted sufficiently interested in him," remarked Stacy ruefully. "I can see why, now. But, do go on and tell us all about it—from the beginning. How did you get wind of this plot, anyway?"

"Well, I'm rarin' to tell you about how our Nazi was caught last night, but I guess it'll make more sense if I start at the beginning," explained Spike. "Have to go back several months ago, before we got into the war. You know, of course, that Mr. Drew has that enormous chemical and munitions plant about twenty-five or thirty miles south of here. And you've probably realized that even before the war was declared, they were in danger of some form of sabotage. Mr. Drew, naturally, has spies working for him everywhere—even in Europe. Early last fall he got wind of a very clever plot that was to be put through, some time in the late fall or early winter.

"Some wily Nazi agent was to be sent over here, and part of the plot was that he was to go into hiding right down on this strip of land, which they knew was part of Mr. Drew's private property. Other agents here were to obtain the use of a boat for him. And, in this boat, at the proper time, he could make a dash down the bay to very near the locality of the plant, get the dirty work accomplished, and afterward dash out to sea, through one of the nearest inlets, and there be picked up by a U-boat which would be waiting for him. But the most devilish part of the trick was this. He would have with him, to carry out the destruction of the plant, the most deadly and devastating demolition bomb that has yet been devised. It was some new invention of the Nazis, and, while being small enough to carry by hand, could, when it was exploded, set off the most appalling and progressive form of destruction. Mr. Drew also learned that the bomb would not be set off by the Nazi agent himself, but by one of his own trusted employees, who had turned traitor to his employer and his country, tempted by the offer of a large sum of money. The Nazi agent naturally

could not get into the plant himself, but it was arranged that he was to meet this employee in a remote spot near the water, transfer the bomb to him, and he would take it in and place it where it would do the most good, after setting its time mechanism so as to give himself ample opportunity to get away.

“This is a long and involved explanation,” Spike went on, “but I hope it’s clear to you. Naturally, Mr. Drew was plenty worried and immediately began taking steps to frustrate this thing, if possible. One of the first things he did was to ask your father if he would be willing to spend the winter down here, taking his sabbatical year and working on his bird book, which he knew your father was anxious to write.”

“So that’s the explanation of that!” interrupted Stacy. “I’ve always wondered why you made that special decision, Dad!”

“Yes, you know it now,” acknowledged Professor Newhall. “Mr. Drew realized that one asset of this place, to the enemy, was the fact that it was so deserted in the fall and winter months. No one on the bay side, and only the Coast Guard Station on the ocean side. A uniquely solitary location. He thought that if we were found to be living here and moving around quite freely, it might discourage the plan. Or, at least, I could keep a sharp eye out to discover any trace of an interloper on the property. Evidently our presence here did *not* discourage the carrying out of the plot, though the intruder did his best to get rid of me, just before he was ready to take his leave!” He smiled a wry little smile.

“Is that all Mr. Drew did?” inquired Stacy of Spike.

“I’ll say it wasn’t!” went on Spike. “At the other end, he installed special investigators, disguised as workmen, in every department of the plant, to try to discover the lowdown skunk who was going to plant the bomb. They weren’t successful for a long while. Then the war suddenly broke out, and Mr. Drew realized that the time for strenuous measures had come. Enemy submarines were beginning to operate off the coast and he knew there was no time to spare. So he had the F.B.I. send down one of their best operatives to take up a post at Mrs. Dunne’s store, where he could pose as a fishpoundman and keep a sharp eye on affairs inside the gate, without being under suspicion. John Gunnarson is tops in his line and did a perfect job. I don’t think any one but *you*, Betsy, suspected him of being anything but what he said—and even that was the wrong thing!”

Spike grinned at her, and she answered ruefully:

“Well, it was only because I caught him watching things and people pretty closely, when he thought no one was looking at him. And even then, I didn’t really suspect him of anything till the day I saw him sneaking around the end of the fence.”

“That was a slip on his part,” admitted Spike, “but there was an urgent reason

for it. I had just come in with the truck, and he wanted to get in touch with me and give me the general layout before I turned up at the store. Also, he'd picked out a good hidden spot for the truck. I guess he didn't realize you had gone over to old Ben's and had caught a glimpse of him at his nefarious work!"

"But where do you come in, Spike?" demanded Stacy. "How did you come to be assigned to the part you played?"

"I have your father to thank for that," said Spike, with a grateful glance at Professor Newhall. "He knew me well, of course, through my friendship with Jim, and knew the type of things I was working at. It was realized that this Nazi agent would have to use some sort of short-wave radio-transmitter, to keep in touch with the others associated with him in the plot. It was thought that if this transmitter could be located, we could put the finger on him, pretty accurately. There are various kinds of these locaters, but I happened to have doped out a special one of my own that your father thought was pretty good. So he recommended me to Mr. Drew—and I got the job—disguised as a surveyor, of course, to deceive all and sundry. As it turned out, I was able to locate the transmitter perfectly, every time, but never to find it when I got to the spot. And now, of course, we know the reason. He never used it from the boat, but would take it to some other locality. By the time I reached that spot, he'd have dived back into his hidey-hole again, which we never discovered till last night. Pretty slick work!"

"Another thing we realized was that the ground would have to be prepared for this Nazi agent some time before he got here. A boat would have to be obtained and a hiding-place found for it, and some one would have to prepare it for him and see to his wants while he was in hiding there. This would naturally have to be some one who lived close by, was well acquainted with the region, and who would not be suspected of having anything to do with the affair."

"Old Ben!" interrupted Stacy. "But how could he have been induced to do such a dreadful thing? He always seemed a decent sort of person, in spite of his queer, cranky ways."

"He was the perfect instrument," said Spike. "I'll tell you why, presently. We got a lot out of him this morning at the examination of that pair, for that's what we were doing. Don't ask us where, for we can't tell you. I felt pretty sorry for old Ben. He's not the traitor you think, but has been very cleverly taken in. He even told us who had put the proposition to him. It was your German candy-salesman, Betsy, the one you told me about the other day, who turns out to be a Nazi agent in reality. John Gunnarson has had his eye on him for quite a while back. He's now under lock and key. But John wasn't absolutely certain about it till last night."

Spike paused for a moment in his recital and looked around at his audience. The Professor was leaning back, puffing contentedly at his pipe, smiling a little at the way things had turned out, and probably considering that from now on, he could continue with his own work in some sort of peace. The two girls were leaning forward, eagerly drinking in this late explanation of all their perplexities, bursting with questions, no doubt, but waiting for Spike to finish his story. The westering sun streamed in through the glass of the porch, and the blue bay was ruffled with a cold winter wind. And Spike was thoroughly enjoying his rôle of narrator!

“Well, there you have the set-up,” he went on. “Now I’ll tell you how the thing was worked. This candy-salesman, who came down to the store frequently, had had a long opportunity to study old Ben. And, as I said, found him the perfect instrument for the job. To begin with, he was stone-deaf, which was a real asset. He lived by himself and to himself, couldn’t use a radio, never read the papers, and knew little and cared little about what was going on in the world around him. He loved only his life on the bay, and if he could make a living out of it, that was all that concerned him. Of outside affairs or people he knew nothing and cared nothing.”

“That’s old Ben to a T!” cried Betsy. “Do you know, I don’t believe he even knows there’s a war on!”

“He knows it now, all right!” agreed Spike. “And also how he was mixed up in it, and he found it a pretty startling piece of news. But to go on—it was early last fall when this salesman put a proposition up to him. He had to do it in writing, of course, because of Ben’s deafness. Fortunately Ben kept the letter, although he had been told to destroy it. The salesman said he was acting for a friend of his, a wealthy man who had grown discontented with his life, had a lot of trouble at home, and so on, and wanted to drop out of his world entirely, disappear from the country and go down to the West Indies or somewhere in that region and start life over again as some one entirely different. You know the kind of thing you sometimes read about in the papers.

“In order to do this successfully, he didn’t want to travel in any of the ordinary ways. He wanted to slip away from his home town and get down here, where he hoped to have a suitable boat in which he could hide out for a few days, and, when the weather was favorable, get started some dark night and make his way down through the inland waterways to Florida, and then on wherever he chose to go. It would all have to be very secret. Ben had a boat that was ideal for the purpose and could be made ready ahead of time and hidden somewhere down on this property, well out of sight. The salesman offered to buy the boat for a good fat sum and to pay Ben well for his further services.

“It was a thin sort of story, but Ben is a simple-minded creature and he fell for it. Also the generous sum of money was another attraction. He could buy another and better boat, and it was no crime to help a man disappear if he wanted to, as long as he wasn’t a criminal. People had queer ideas, but it was no affair of his, as long as he was well paid for the job! He agreed to the bargain and was immediately paid a good fat sum in cash for the boat. This made him feel all the better about it and he was ready to go on with the rest of the job.

“The salesman had the whole thing planned out. Ben took him out for a row one day, and they decided on the location for the boat, well up in that creek. It was an ideal spot. The creek was deep at the mouth, and the banks so overgrown that the hiding-place was not likely to be investigated by any one on foot along the shore. And there was such an impenetrable maze of catbriar on all the other sides that it could not easily be found from the land side. Ben was also given directions about how to protect the boat by canvas, cut catbriar to conceal it, and have the motor at all times tuned up to be ready to leave at short notice.

“During the late fall, Ben got all these things done, chiefly at night when his activities wouldn’t be noticeable. There were a number of other details that I needn’t go into, but at last all was completed, and he waited for word that his client was to appear. The last time he saw the salesman, before this happened, he was given a code and directions as to how he was to communicate with the client after he got here. He was warned never to be seen with him, day or night, unless otherwise directed by the client himself. This code, as you’ve probably guessed, was the calico-crab shell device, and a pretty clever one it was.

“And that makes me think—yesterday morning, before I went down to the point, I went up first to the spot where I’d kept the truck, to have a look-see. And, down behind a bush, I found a piece of folded paper which contained the whole code all written out. I can’t describe it to you now, but so many crab shells on one window-sill meant one thing—moved around, another. It related to matters like supplies of oil for his little cook-stove, when he expected to leave, and things he wanted Ben to do. Evidently this had been dropped there the night before, by accident, and dropped by the Nazi himself. I saw what I’m certain were his footprints around where the truck had been. I think he pulled out his pocket-knife to tamper with the lock of the truck doors, and this thing fell out unnoticed. I put it in my pocket, but it’s gone now. He evidently went through them later in the day and found it. So there you have the explanation of the calico crabs!”

“And we thought it was Gunnar that was using them!” chuckled Stacy. “I wonder how he came to have one in his pocket?”

“I asked him that, after you told me about them,” admitted Spike, “and he said he’d just found one on the beach, one day and picked it up and put it in his pocket—and never thought about it again. Well, Ben admits he thought this was a pretty silly arrangement—couldn’t see any sense in so much fuss and bother about it all, but he agreed to it. It was several weeks after the arrangements were all completed, before Ben’s customer appeared. He had been warned that the person would arrive very late at night at his houseboat and would have to be rowed down to the hideout. And this is what happened, just about a week ago.

“Where the Nazi agent came from and how he got there, Ben did not know, except that he arrived in the dead of night, a very black and rainy night, with only a large suitcase and a smaller case—that was the transmitter—as baggage, identified himself and was rowed down through the rain to the hidden boat. We’ve tried to find out where he came from—this Nazi—but he won’t tell. In fact, he refuses to say anything. A very ugly customer! We think he may have landed from a submarine, lurking off shore, using one of those rubber boats. It’s more likely than that he came from up the line, in this country.

“At any rate, Ben says he never actually saw him again till night before last. He got his messages through their code system. The fellow seemed to know his way about perfectly, and had evidently cut that inconspicuous path for himself through the catbriar, for Ben says *he* didn’t. Ben would get the things he required, row them down and leave them there on the shore outside the boat, at night. The Nazi never showed his face. But I bet he was getting plenty worried, for things weren’t going exactly as he had planned.

“To begin with, the place was much more inhabited than he’d been led to suppose. You people were in this house (I don’t think the salesman was aware of that!), and shortly I began prowling around. And you can bet none of this was lost on our Nazi friend. The Professor annoyed him, particularly, because he camped out so often on that point not far from his hideout. It was typical Nazi stupidity, cruelty, and lack of foresight, that led to his effort to get rid of you, Professor, just before he was planning to make his own departure. Ben was thoroughly horrified when he heard about it, wasn’t he!”

“It wasn’t the rascal’s only blunder,” smiled the Professor. “He made plenty before he was through!”

“I’ll say he did!” agreed Spike. “And now, to cut this short and come down to the last day or two. He was naturally anxious to get on his way as soon as possible, and that all depended on the weather. Everything depended on the weather in this nice, ghastly little plot, and that had all been planned out beforehand. He had to have

a mild spell, to get away in that type of boat. Rough, stormy, or freezing weather wouldn't do, so they were counting on one of those January thaws that usually come at this time of year in these parts. The right moment seemed to have come, day before yesterday, when it turned so mild and almost summery—do you remember? Ben had received orders to buy that list of things you saw him purchase at the store, Betsy. Ben said he thought it was supplies for his trip down the coast. The salesman had given him the list long before, but he wasn't to get them till the time was indicated. Without doubt, these things were really supplies for the submarine he was going to board. Ben was to take them down that night, also his rakes and forks and help get the catbriar unloaded off the boat. It's a pretty hefty job, wrestling with that catbriar, and the Nazi couldn't cope with it alone. Then the departure was to take place.

“But, something happened that put all their plans out of whack, something they hadn't counted on at all. That was the *fog*! Nothing could be done while that lasted, and the thing would have to be postponed another twenty-four hours. Ben knew it, being a native, and realized that it was due to last all night and perhaps all next day, unless the wind changed. The Nazi evidently didn't and probably thought it would be a matter of only a couple of hours or a little more. And that's where everything went haywire!

“Ben decided he wouldn't bother to take the things down to the hideout soon after dark, as he'd been told to do, when they wouldn't be needed till to-morrow, anyway. Might as well save himself the trip. The Nazi waited a long while for them, and when they didn't come, got plenty mad and started up the bay shore to Ben's houseboat to find out why. He wasn't afraid of being seen, as the fog would hide him. But fog is awfully deceptive when you're calculating distances, and that's where he got mixed up. Saw the light in this house, thought it was Ben's, and Betsy caught him staring in the window!

“That was bad enough, but there was worse coming. When he got to Ben's at last, Ben wasn't there! The reason for this was that a little earlier that night, Ben had had a stroke of conscience. He'd got to thinking the matter over and decided that he wasn't strictly fulfilling his contract by not taking the stuff down to the boat at the exact time he'd been told to, and that he'd better get about it. So, he loaded the stuff in his rowboat, and, in spite of the fog, felt his way down. Of course, both of them passed one another, unawares, part way to each place and missed out when they got there.

“Ben had expected to find his chap rarin' around on the shore, when he got down to the hideout, waiting for the stuff to come. But he wasn't, and Ben dumped

the goods on the bank, near the boat and paddled back again. That accounts for the sound of oars that I heard the other night—remember? It was Ben, going down to the hideout. When he got back, he found he'd had a visitor during his absence—and a tearing mad one at that!

“There was a note on his table from the visitor he'd missed, giving him the dickens for not appearing as he was told and telling him to bring the goods and the implements down without fail next morning. That he intended leaving the next night, fog or no fog, and wanted things prepared well ahead of time. He also ordered Ben to get a lot of fresh grape-fruit and eggs, beside the other stuff, and not to appear without them. Ben was pretty mad at the tone of that letter. Also, he was quite upset about the matter of the grape-fruit and eggs. He was pretty sure he couldn't get them at Dunne's store, and he'd completely ruined a tire getting back to his own place that night, so he couldn't drive up to town for the stuff, next day, as he didn't have a spare.

“He made a try at the store next morning, as you know, but didn't get anywhere with that, so he started out for the place with only the implements to get the catbriar off the boat. Says when he got there, the feller was standing on the bank, rarin' mad. Wouldn't even let him land. Told him to throw the rakes and things out on the bank and he'd do the job himself. Told him, in other words to get out and stay out. Said he'd get paid for his services and the stuff he'd bought, later, if he kept his mouth shut. It must have been rather funny—most of it had to be in signs and gestures! Ben went off, madder than a March hare, and completely bewildered about the whole thing. Didn't seem any need for the guy to go off the handle like that—so he said!

“But there was something Ben didn't know—and that's where I step into the picture! After I'd snooped around where the truck had been, yesterday morning, I went on down to the point to see if I could find some trace of our Nazi around that hole. I found that the hole had been filled in again and all traces of it covered up. Done by old Jerry, of course, for there were plenty of his footprints around. Either he was covering up evidence of the dirty work, or thought he was covering up the Professor, in case he was still down there!

“At any rate, the effort proved his undoing, for I followed his footprints back along the path—and they led me to the opening through that catbriar patch and, eventually, right to the hideout. I didn't recognize it for that, immediately, but it struck me there was something a bit phoney about that mass of catbriar across the stream. There wasn't a soul around the place, but I did hear the sound of oars out on the bay, just before something beaned me on the back of my head and I went out like a light. The Nazi must have been hiding out in the bushes, probably waiting for Ben,

when I suddenly lit on the scene and he knew he had to get rid of me—and as quietly as possible.

“Unfortunately for him, there was Ben just about to round the corner and come in sight, and there I was, a most unwelcome proposition on his hands! He couldn’t have Ben thinking he’d killed anybody, that would spoil the picture entirely. So he crept up and smacked me down from behind and left me lying there in the bushes and tall grass. Ben couldn’t see me from the boat, and he wasn’t allowed to land. The Nazi was so mad and so jittery about the whole thing, that all he wanted to do was get Ben out of the way. Ben was equally mad, and just threw the tools up on the bank and departed.”

“We could see he was mad,” interrupted Stacy, “for he came rowing back, jerking the boat along and looked mad enough to eat nails. We saw him passing by, but we never dreamed what had just happened to *you!*” She shuddered, and Spike went on:

“I sure was out, and for quite a while, I guess, because when I did come to my senses, I realized that I was trussed up like a turkey ready for the oven—hands and feet tied, eyes bandaged, mouth covered with adhesive tape, and so on. I knew I wasn’t outdoors, for I was lying on something hard, like a floor, and in a very cramped space. So I guessed that he had me in his hideout. I didn’t even know it was a boat—at first, for, of course, I hadn’t actually seen the boat under the catbriar. I wondered why he bothered to fix me up that way, when it would have been so much easier to finish me off and leave me in the bushes.

“I heard him fussing around near me, and once or twice he brushed close to me, even gave me a kick or two. Right from the start, I made up my mind that I wasn’t going to struggle or try to free myself, or show any sign of consciousness. I thought I’d be better off and learn more, if I seemed to be totally unconscious. So I lay, as dead as a door-nail, apparently, for hours and hours—eternities, it seemed to me! You see, I had real hopes that I’d be found before it was too late, by some of you. Very late the night before, after you’d all gone to bed, I called up John Gunnarson at the store. He was expecting it. Every one there was in bed and out of the way, so he’d sneaked down into the store to wait for my call.

“I told him what I was planning to do next morning—have a search around the point, and he was to be on hand. We thought we might corner the rascal right then. But, like an idiot, I thought next morning that I’d take a look around up where the truck had been first, and, of course, I didn’t realize that John was going to get a chance to ride down with Harvey. Anyhow, we managed to miss each other, and after a long wait, John went back to the store, hoping to hear from me there. He

never heard anything, of course, till the Professor called him up toward dark and said he'd better get down to the point, as I hadn't showed up since morning, and you girls and he were going down there to hunt me up. Before I left that morning, I'd told the Professor that if I didn't show up before sunset, to get in touch with John Gunnarson at the store, and get the Coast Guards on the job, too.

"Well, to go back to me tied up there in the Nazi hidey-hole and playing dead! It was late afternoon, I figured—though it seemed centuries to me—when Fritzie began to get restless, stamping around and muttering to himself. I think he realized that the weather had changed, the fog gone and getting colder, and that it would be an ideal night for him to be off. He began talking to himself in German, which language I happen to understand because I had to study it in connection with my science courses. Every once in a while he'd bust out and call me all sorts of names for butting into his plans—'American swine' was the least objectionable of them! The rest wouldn't bear repeating. I gathered from other things he said that he was aching to get away, and would have to that night—or drop the whole thing. I also gathered that he planned to take me along, just as I was, and dispose of me by the simple process of dropping me into the sea. He worked his transmitter for a while, but didn't seem to get much satisfaction out of that, and finally he took to cursing out old Ben for his contrariness and declared he'd go after him as soon as it was dark, and bring him back to help, if he had to do it at the point of his gun!

"That was where I began to pick up a bit of hope. If I could only get free while he was gone, or if some of you happened to get here and find me, the day might still be saved. I played deader than ever after that, even when he came over and kicked me two or three times, to see if I showed any signs of life.

"I thought he'd never get going, but finally I heard him scrambling out and then there was silence. When he didn't come back after a while, I started struggling about to try to loosen the ropes. Didn't make much progress with that, he must have tied some fancy knots! And then, all of a sudden, I heard more noise from outside. I was sure he'd changed his mind and come back again, so I went back to playing possum once more. But when you started to bang the door down, I knew some one had arrived for the rescue—and I pretty near fainted from sheer joy! You know what happened after that."

"But, how did John Gunnarson find us?" demanded Stacy breathlessly.

"Oh, that was fairly easy," Spike enlightened them. "To begin with, he saw your car standing right at the path to the bay. He followed that path out to the shore, saw that no one was in that locality, and then began tracing footprints back, with his flashlight. He saw where there was a mess of them right around that opening to the

little catbriar path, turned into it, and even discovered a piece of cloth he recognized as your ski-suit, Stacy, hanging on one of the briars. The rest was easy. He had only to follow the path.”

“But you haven’t told us yet how he got the Nazi and old Ben,” Stacy continued to probe. “We’re wild to hear about that!” Spike grinned.

“As a matter of fact, he didn’t have much trouble about that,” he continued. “You see, the Coast Guards knew all along that there was something brewing down here, but they had been warned to keep hands off till we gave the go-ahead signal. We wanted to catch this johnnie just right—with all the goods on him, so to speak—and not let him have a chance to mess things up. So they waited till they got the okay, and that came last night. Before he left the store, John gave them the signal to hide out around old Ben’s place, and keep him from leaving it if he should try to. And if any one else came up the shore and joined him, to nab both of them together. He had another group posted down near where we were, in case of need.

“After we left the hideout, he took that group back to it, posted them in the bushes and told them to get the Nazi guy if he should come back, either by boat or through the briar path. Then John sprinted up to Ben’s place, and, sure enough, there were the two of them in Ben’s houseboat, covered by the Coast Guards’ weapons. The Nazi was fighting mad and poor Ben was bewildered and scared to death, not realizing, of course, what it was all about. John clapped handcuffs on both of them, and they were taken away to await their fate.”

“But, poor Ben!” cried the tenderhearted Betsy. “They aren’t going to treat him like—like that other one, are they? He didn’t do anything really wrong. I—I was sure he’d never take part in such a dreadful thing—if he really knew about it. He thought it was something quite different.”

“No,” agreed Spike. “I’m certain they’ll exonerate Ben, but, of course, they’ll have to hold him till they’ve made a thorough investigation. Just at present, they’ve only his word for it, and he’ll have to prove his innocence by producing those letters he got from the candy salesman. But I think he’ll come out all right in the end. The only really illegal thing he did was hiding that boat down on Mr. Drew’s property. And, do you know, I think he got a sort of obscure satisfaction from that. He’s never forgiven Mr. Drew for taking down that shack of his, and this had seemed to Ben a sort of roundabout way of getting even with him. But I rather imagine Mr. Drew will be willing to overlook that, considering the way things turned out.”

They were all silent a moment, thinking it over. Then Stacy burst out:

“But, Spike, what about this terrible bomb that Nazi had? Did they find that? And was that what you were looking around for last night?”

“I was wondering when you’d think of that!” grinned Spike. “In fact, that’s the crux of the whole affair. Mr. Drew was really more anxious to get hold of that bomb—intact—than he was to get the Nazi. You see, it is something very special in the way of demolition bombs, something new that only the Nazis have discovered and perfected, and Mr. Drew was wild to examine it, see its workings, perhaps improve on it and then turn out some of them himself. If it weren’t for wanting that bomb so badly, we could have rounded up on this fellow and taken him in several days before we did. But we were horribly afraid he’d manage to destroy it if he got in a tight place. And while the plot wouldn’t have come off, we’d have lost the secret of that bomb mechanism.”

“Well, did you find it?” cried Stacy, too impatient to learn this than to hear about the weapons mechanism.

“I’ll say we did!” he chortled exultantly. “We went down there early this morning and ransacked the whole place. Nearly took the boat apart. We went over the ground around it first, to see if there were signs he’d buried it anywhere. We did find a fresh hole dug back in the bushes, but it was open and empty, and we decided that he had buried it when he first came, but had dug it up, probably that morning, and put it somewhere in the boat, because he was expecting to leave so soon. Or maybe the night before. So it had to be in the boat. It was nowhere in the open part of it, nor apparently in the cabin. But at last we found a loose board in the floor of the cupboard, and there it was, in an oblong, wooden box, and the whole thing wrapped in a piece of blanket. It was only about a foot and a half long, would have fitted in his suitcase. John Gunnarson took it in charge and has delivered it to Mr. Drew to be examined over at the plant. I’m going to be allowed to take part in the analysis of it—and I can hardly wait to see the inside workings of that baby!” Stacy leaned back in her chair and sighed:

“Well, thank goodness it’s over! But the thing I regret is that every one did something pretty useful except me. I guess I was only in the way, most of the time.”

“Don’t you believe it!” retorted Spike, hotly. “Why, do you realize that it was *you* who discovered the first real clue to the fact that things had begun to happen? You took notice of that calico-crab shell up there in the old house and thought it odd, when most people wouldn’t even have seen it—or thought anything of it if they had!” Stacy chuckled.

“You’ll laugh, Spike, when I tell you that I thought *you* were the one who had put it there, that first night. You certainly acted very mysterious that first afternoon you were here. And the morning you followed Betsy and me into the house, we were certain of it!”

“I saw those shells for the first time myself, that morning,” said Spike, “after you two had gone, and couldn’t make any sense out of them—that, and the queer way you two were acting. But they certainly gave me a line, after you’d explained how you found them, and how they were being changed about. And Betsy, here, did yeoman’s service in keeping us posted on affairs up at the store. It was when she told me about Ben buying all the food, that night, that I knew the end was close at hand. You both did a grand job, and, best of all, you kept your heads, in that tight spot we were in at the boat last night.”

Both girls flushed with pleasure at his praise. Spike wasn’t given to undeserved compliments, and they were gratified to realize that they had been able to do their bit in this curious and important affair. To cover their embarrassment, Stacy hurried on:

“There’s just one more thing I’d like to know. I don’t suppose you know it yourselves, or if you did, you wouldn’t tell us. But it’s this. How did Mr. Drew ever get wind of this plot? That seems the oddest thing to me!”

“Well, we didn’t know that ourselves, till to-day,” admitted Spike. “But Mr. Drew, who was there at the questioning of the prisoners, finally said he could tell us, since the thing was all over, and I guess he won’t mind our telling you. It came from a Nazi officer, who was a prisoner up in Canada. He was very ill and not expected to live, and said he wanted to see a clergyman before he died and get something off his conscience. I guess he wasn’t a real Nazi at heart, and had begun to see the evil of the whole darned set-up. Anyhow, he knew about the plot, pretty much in detail, told it all to the clergyman and asked him to warn Mr. Drew, after his death. The clergyman traveled all the way down from Canada to have a personal interview with Mr. Drew, early in the fall. So there you are!”

Spike yawned and stretched luxuriously, apologizing for it by admitting that he still hadn’t caught up with his sleep. They all relaxed after the tension of the long recital and settled back to think over the details that now dovetailed in so perfectly to complete the picture that had puzzled them so long. The afternoon sun was trailing down to its setting over the bay, a cold wind was whipping through the cedars, and a thin film of ice was beginning to form along the shore. Suddenly Betsy questioned, in a timid voice:

“I just happened to think about that man over at the Drew plant, who—who was in this plot, too. Did they find out who that was?” Spike roused himself from having almost dropped into a nap.

“They sure did!” he replied. “Mr. Drew said his investigators had got on the trail of one of them who’d been acting a bit suspiciously just lately. They finally caught him in his home, working a sending and receiving radio-set, that night of the fog. He

finally broke down, after considerable grilling and admitted the whole thing. But he didn't know much about what was going on over here. He only knew he was to meet this other fellow at a certain remote spot, at the time he was warned to by radio, and receive the bomb. He's going to get what's coming to him, of course.

"And, oh, by the way, Professor, shall we tell the girls about Mr. Drew's message to them? He said to tell you two he's more grateful than he can ever express for all you've done. He's coming down here to-morrow to thank you in person—and I shouldn't wonder if he has some surprises for the two of you. He's a swell guy, is Mr. Drew! He's offered me a grand job in his research department, and am I tickled about it!"

"Oh, Spike!—can't you tell us—about the surprises?" cried Stacy.

"Nope! Don't know them myself, and wouldn't tell if I did!" The aggravating Spike lay back on the couch and pretended to go to sleep. The Professor only smiled, as if he were enjoying the secret, and went off to find some more tobacco for his pipe.

"I always thought you were an annoying creature, Spike!" announced Stacy in mock severity. "But in this case, I forgive you, and Betsy and I will now go and provide for the afternoon eats!"

"You can always thrill me with eats," declared Spike, "and I'll admit you're a good provider—a good scout all around—both of you are!"

"He's a pretty good scout himself!" murmured Stacy to her dazed companion, as the two sauntered toward the kitchen.

"He certainly is!" agreed Betsy enthusiastically.

They all sat by the fire later, the food consumed, the excited chatter of questions and answers quieted down, contented and silent, each busy with his or her own thoughts.

Stacy was thinking: "Well, it's all over! . . . It was rather terrible, while it lasted . . . but thrilling. I'm afraid life'll seem rather humdrum after this. . . . I do wonder what Mr. Drew will have to say, when he comes to-morrow? I hope he does something nice for Betsy. . . . She's an absolute dear! . . . I never knew her really well till now. . . ."

Betsy was thinking: "How wonderful it's been! . . . It's given me something to think of all the rest of my life. . . . To-morrow . . . or next day, I'll have to go back to the store . . . and begin 'standing and waiting' all over again, with a vengeance! . . . But, at least, I've got this to remember . . ."

Professor Newhall was thinking: “Now that this unpleasant business is finished, I can go back to my book and work in peace and quiet, I hope. . . . But what of these young folks? What does this terrible war . . . and the future hold for them? . . . Stacy must go to college and finish her education. Perhaps with Drew’s help she can take that extra art course she’s been longing for, and we felt we couldn’t afford.

“. . . Spike has his career cut out for him. . . . But what of this nice young Betsy? I hope Drew’s going to do something pretty generous for her. . . . Send her to a good school . . . or something of the sort. I’m sure that’s what he had in mind. She certainly deserves it. . . .”

Spike wasn’t thinking at all—for he had fallen fast asleep!

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Case of the Calico Crab* by Augusta Hueill Seaman]