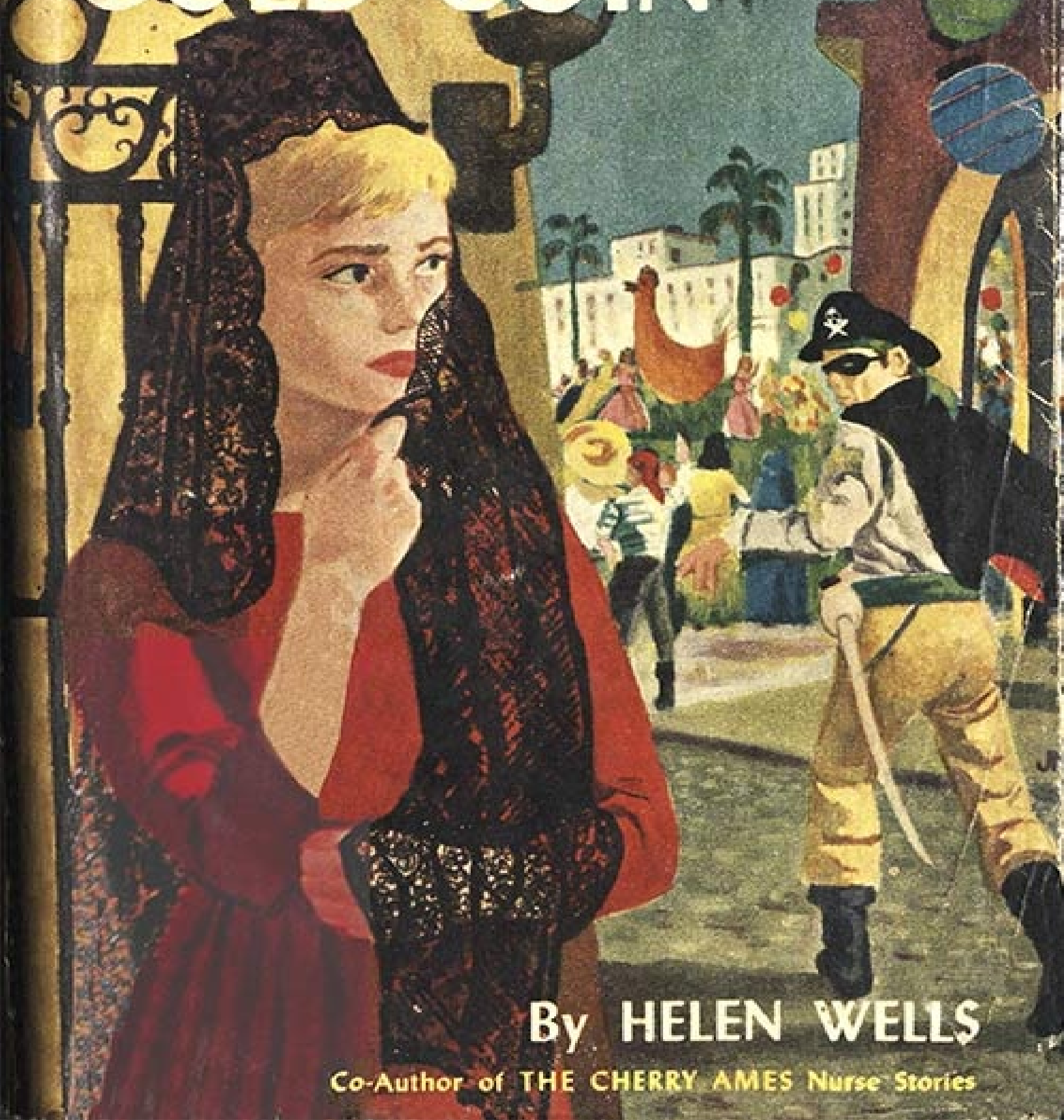


THE VICKI BARR AIR STEWARDESS SERIES

THE CLUE OF THE GOLD COIN



By HELEN WELLS

Co-Author of THE CHERRY AMES Nurse Stories

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THE CLUE OF THE GOLD COIN



THE CLUE
OF THE GOLD COIN

Helen Wells



In the case was a clue to the gold coin theft

THE VICKI BARR FLIGHT STEWARDESS SERIES
THE CLUE OF THE GOLD COIN

BY HELEN WELLS



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CHAPTER I

Sunshine Assignment

SWIRLS OF HEAVY SNOWFLAKES, DRIVEN BY A BRISK wind that whistled across the vast expanse of concrete runways that is New York City's Idlewild Airport, dashed against the big picture window in the Personnel Lounge and spiraled back into the murky whiteness of the winter morning. Inside the comfortable room, four girls, all dressed in the trim, blue uniform of Federal Airlines stewardesses, sat in soft leather armchairs.

"Of all the luck!" One of the girls, a tall brunette, grinned as she shook her head in mock despair. "Here it is, the middle of the worst winter we've had in years, and what do I draw as my new assignment? New York to Chicago! The two coldest towns in the world! And you two, you lucky kids, get the Florida run!"

Vicki Barr tucked a strand of her ash blond hair in place, and her laugh tinkled like Chinese chimes stirred by a gentle breeze.

"Your trouble, Sue," she said, "is that you don't wish on stars. Now the other night, flying down from Boston, I looked out the window and there was Venus hanging up in the sky as bright and pretty as you please. So I just said, 'Star light, star bright, first star I've seen tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might get the wish I wish tonight ...'"

"Oh, now, go away!"

"No. I really mean it. I said, 'I wish I am assigned to the Florida run.' And the next morning the Chief Stewardess called me into her office and told me that my new assignment was New York to Tampa."

Sue chuckled. "Vicki, you little vixen, I don't know whether to believe you or not. But just the same I envy you. When I think of Chicago in this weather ..." She shuddered. "B-r-r-r-r! And I do mean B-r-r-r!"

"I envy you," one of the other girls spoke up. "You kids are really going to have fun! I was reading the other day about the big pirate carnival they have every year about this time down in Tampa. It's supposed to be as gay and giddy as the New Orleans Mardi Gras."

"That's the Gasparilla Pirate Festival," the fourth girl, Vicki's co-stewardess, volunteered. Cathy Solms was a tall, slender girl about Vicki's own age, with flaming red hair that contrasted sharply with the pale blue of her perky cap. "And you're right. Vicki and I are going to have buckets of fun." She winked at her flight partner and grinned. "By the way, Vicki, I wonder what big things are happening out in Chicago this winter."

"Don't rub it in," Sue said. She glanced at the pattern of snow swirling up against the wide window. "If this keeps up, it doesn't look as if any of us will get away from New York."

"Maybe not you," Vicki replied. "But we go out on schedule. I checked with operations as I came in, and south of Washington there's not a snow cloud in the sky. Remember, it's the weather at landing, not at take-off, that counts."

At that moment, Johnny Baker, copilot on Vicki's flight, stuck his handsome, crew-cut blond head in the door.

"Let's go, kids. No day off for you two," he said with a wide grin. "We're taking off on the nose. Meet

you in five minutes at Gate Five.”

Vicki and Cathy picked up their flight bags and topcoats, and headed for the door that Johnny had closed after him.

“Give our love to the ice on Lake Michigan,” Cathy said over her shoulder.

“And don’t slip on the ice when you walk away from your ship,” Vicki added with a smile.

“Get out,” Sue said, “before we throw you out. And oh, yes,” she added, a smile twinkling in her eyes, “give our best to that pirate fellow!”

▪

Four hours later the big DC-6-B four-engine plane put up its port wing as the pilot banked to swing into his landing pattern. Vicki, strapped in the stewardess’s jump seat for the landing, looked out the window at the tropical vista spread all around her. To her left, as the pilot banked, the window was filled with bright blue sky, cloudless except for a few white wisps that floated high overhead. Through the window across the aisle, she could look down on the sand of the beaches, gleaming golden in the early afternoon sun, the vivid aquamarine blue of the waters of the Gulf, and the crisp green of the lawns and gardens that surrounded the glistening white houses.

Then the plane straightened, passed over the busy streets of the old city, over the scattered houses in the suburbs, and at last the hangars and runways of Tampa International Airport swept into view over the leading edge of the wing. The big plane shuddered as Captain March, the senior pilot, lowered his wing flaps to check the landing speed. Then the runway rushed up to meet the ship, and there was a shrill whine as the tires hit the concrete strip.

In her natural element, the air, the huge plane was as effortless and graceful in flight as a soaring gull. But on the ground, her wings vibrated and seemed to droop, and she shook all over like some great, tired clumsy beast as she lumbered forward to the unloading gate.

The instant she felt the ship land and steady on its taxiing course, Vicki unfastened her seat belt and got to her feet, ready to help her passengers collect their things and get ready to disembark. Ten minutes later she and Cathy were standing in the open plane doorway saying good-bye to the last of them, three small children, who, with their mother, had been making their first trip by air. The little girls had been fascinated by the flight, and Vicki had spent all of her spare minutes—which on a short flight like this one, and with hot lunches to be served to eighty passengers, were very few—answering their eager questions.

Then, rapidly, the two stewardesses checked through the big cabin for any belongings their passengers might have left behind.

“I hope our hotel is on the beach,” Cathy said, stopping for a moment to gaze out at the warm sunshine. “I can’t wait to start working on a Florida tan.”

“I’m staying with Louise Curtin’s family,” Vicki said. “At least for the first few trips.”

“Louise Curtin?”

“She was in my class at the University of Illinois,” Vicki explained. “Her family lives down here. When I wrote that I was going to be on the Tampa run, she phoned me the minute she got the letter and insisted that I absolutely *must* stay with them on my layovers.”

“It’s nice to have friends,” Cathy sighed. “Much better than a hotel room.”

Federal, like all other airlines, provided hotel accommodations for their crews when they were away from home. In New York, Vicki shared an apartment with several other Federal Airlines stewardesses.

“That reminds me. I have another friend in Tampa,” Vicki said. “I’ll have to look him up.”

“Ah!” Cathy said, brightening. “Do I smell romance in the air?”

Vicki laughed. "I hate to disappoint you, Cathy. But Joey Watson is a boy who works here in the Federal warehouse. He's an orphan, poor kid, a cousin of Bill Avery, the pilot who taught me to fly."

Cathy's eyes widened. "To *fly*? Don't tell me you're a pilot as well as a stewardess!"

"I've had my private license for two years." Vicki smiled. "But I don't have a chance to get in much flying time when I'm in New York. Anyway," she went on, "Joey was dying to learn to fly, and Bill asked me if I'd mind putting in a good word for him with Federal's personnel department. There happened to be an opening here, and Joey got the job. So, you see, there goes your romance. I'm afraid Joey thinks of me more as a mother."

Cathy surveyed Vicki's slim, trim figure, looking her up and down with an expression of exaggerated appraisal on her face.

"You don't look like the mother type to me, gal."

"All right." Vicki chuckled. "Make it big sister if that suits you better."

At that moment the door to the flight deck opened and Captain March entered the main cabin, followed by Johnny Baker, the copilot. The captain had a leather brief case tucked under his arm and both men carried blue canvas overnight bags stamped with the name and insignia of the airline.

"How did it go, girls?" the captain asked.

"Smooth as silk," Vicki answered. "Everybody seemed to enjoy themselves, and one or two went out of their way to say so."

"Fine," the captain said briskly. "That's good. Now let's check in and get out to the hotel. I could use a swim."

As the four crew members walked from the plane to Federal's operations office in the airport building, Vicki explained to Captain March about her invitation to stay with the Curtins.

"And oh, yes," she continued. "A young friend of mine works as a cargo handler in the freight warehouse." She told the captain briefly about Joey Watson and how she had helped get him his job. "Do you suppose it will be all right if I go over and say hello?"

"I don't see why not," the captain replied. "Just be sure to check with the foreman first. They don't like to have unauthorized personnel wandering around."

A few minutes after they had made their routine check-in, Vicki said good-bye to her fellow crew members and strolled leisurely in the direction of the big warehouse building.

A heavy-set man lounged in the warehouse doorway, holding a half-consumed bottle of coke in his hand. He looked quizzically at Vicki as she approached.

"Can you please tell me where I can find the foreman?" Vicki asked politely.

"You're talkin' to him," the man said. His square-cut face was expressionless, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"I'd like to see Joey Watson for a minute. Is he on duty this afternoon?"

"Yep. You a friend of his?"

Vicki put on her prettiest smile. "Well, sort of," she said. "I haven't seen him for some time, and if I may, I'd like to say hello."

"Just a second," the foreman said. "I'll go get him." He turned and disappeared into the huge building.

Vicki looked in through the open door. Piles of boxes, cartons, and bulky sacks stood stacked like islands on the big expanse of floor. Cargo handlers were busy sorting these, loading some on small motor carts and unloading others that had just been taken off incoming planes. Backed up at a long platform that ran the length of the opposite side of the building were half a dozen trucks waiting to pick up the cargo for local delivery. Other workmen weighed outgoing boxes and bales, and nailed cartons up more securely. The whole place had an air of quiet efficiency.

A tall, young figure dashed out of the dimness of the big room and ran up to Vicki, a big smile spread all across his eager face.

“Miss Vicki!” he cried breathlessly, holding out his hand. “I never expected to see *you* here!”

“Hi, Joey!” Vicki greeted him. She took his outstretched hand, and he pumped hers in a warm but excited handshake. “How’s the job going?”

“Swell, Miss Vicki! Just swell!”

Joey Watson was eighteen, tall, thin, and with long arms that dangled awkwardly from his skinny shoulders. As he stood grinning contagiously, he reminded Vicki of a friendly, energetic, oversized puppy. She couldn’t help grinning back at him.

“Well,” Vicki asked, “are there enough airplanes around here to suit you?”

“There sure are. I’d have taken any kind of job, even sweeping the place out, just to be around planes. And I can’t thank you enough for getting this one for me.”

Just then the dour foreman reappeared.

“Oh, Van,” Joey said eagerly, “I want you to meet Miss Vicki Barr. She’s a Federal stewardess and—” he added, his eyes shining, “a pilot.”

Van mumbled an acknowledgment of the introduction. “Don’t take too long a break, boy,” he said to Joey. “Ed will need you on his cart to meet the three-fifty flight from Dallas.”

The foreman nodded briskly to Vicki and walked off. Vicki looked after his wooden, uniformed figure. Was he naturally chilly, or just a nose-to-the-grindstone type? Oh, well! It really didn’t matter. She’d probably never see him again. She turned her attention back to Joey.

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a pilot”—she smiled—“whatever you may think.”

Joey’s face wrinkled up in a grin. “Anyone who can fly is pretty big in my book.” He pointed to an area of concrete strip between the warehouse and a service hangar next door. “See that Beech sitting over there?”

A small, twin-engine Beechcraft stood on the strip. The cowling had been removed from one of her engine nacelles and a man stood on a step-ladder tinkering with the motor.

“That’s Steve Miller,” Joey said. “He’s a charter pilot here at the field, and he’s promised to teach me to fly.”

“Why, that’s wonderful!” Vicki exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with pleasure. She knew that being able to fly was the most important thing in the boy’s life.

“Steve’s the best,” Joey went on enthusiastically. “So’s Van Lasher—he’s the fellow I introduced you to just now. Gosh! Everybody around this airport is pretty swell.”

“You just naturally like everybody that has anything to do with airplanes, don’t you, Joey?”

“I sure do,” he admitted. “Say, Miss Vicki, how long did it take you to solo? Were you nervous the first time?”

Vicki smiled. “See here, young man, if we start talking flying you’ll *never* get back to work.”

“I guess you’re right,” the boy said, laughing. “It wouldn’t do to lose this job, now that I’m getting ready to be a fly boy for real.”

Vicki said good-by and promised to look Joey up again. Then she walked back to the airport building.

Even though it had become a common, everyday sight to her, an airport waiting room never failed to fascinate Vicki. And this one at Tampa was particularly interesting. Passengers from incoming planes carried heavy coats that they had worn when they had left the northern winter weather. Sometimes friends, tanned and wearing gay-colored sports clothes, were waiting to greet them.

Through the big picture window She could see the air taxis waiting at one end of the field. Anyone who wished to fly across Tampa Bay to Clearwater or St. Petersburg, or across the Caribbean to Cuba or

Mexico, could charter a plane like the one Joey's instructor—Steve Miller—flew. Everything seemed so easygoing and carefree here, Vicki thought, in this sun-kissed land where the breeze was scented with the perfume of flowers.

She stopped at the Federal reservations counter where she had left her bag, picked it up, and then went out the building's main entrance to look for a taxi.

Twenty minutes later the taxi pulled up at the Curtins' home, and Vicki, carrying her bag and topcoat, stepped out. She stopped for a moment, after she had paid her fare, to look at the dignified old house. It was red brick, old-fashioned and comfortable-looking, surrounded by a close-clipped lawn and rambling flower gardens. Two tall palm trees flanked it on either side. She opened the iron gate and walked down a flagstone path to the front door.

Before she could ring the bell, the door flew open and there stood Louise, looking more grownup than Vicki remembered her, with her dark hair done up in a chignon and a big smile of welcome on her beautiful, delicately tanned face. Louise had written that she was doing social work, but Vicki found it hard to believe that this lovely, vivacious girl could confine her energies to anything so unglamorous.

"Vicki! How wonderful to see you again!" Louise hugged her and then stepped back and appraised her. "You've changed!"

Vicki laughed. "It's pretty wonderful to see you, too. But you don't have to sound so accusing. You've changed yourself!"

"You're so poised now, Vicki, and so *très chic* in that lovely blue uniform. I remember you used to be shy."

"Still shy sometimes, and I'm *très* delighted to be at your house. You were darling to ask me. Are you actually a social worker these days? *You*, our southern belle?"

"Only a volunteer, whenever the agency needs me. But tell me—"

A tall, slim figure ran lightly down a broad staircase at the end of the entrance hall.

"That's enough of this college reunion stuff, Louise. Introduce your kid sister!"

Louise laughed, apologized, and introduced Nina. Nina managed to tell Vicki, all in one breath, that she was only a year younger than Louise, had left college to take a fashion job in a Tampa dress shop, and thought flight stewardesses "have the most glamorous job in the world." When Vicki said her job involved some serious know-how about aviation and practical nursing, and dealing with people in general—and was not entirely glamorous—Nina refused to believe it.

"Sheer glamour," she insisted. "Even better than being an actress. I'm sure of it."

Louise looked amused and suggested that they had better invite their guest into the house. The girls showed Vicki to the guest room upstairs and waited, chattering about the plans they'd made for her, while she unpacked the few things she had brought with her and changed from her flight uniform into a bright cotton afternoon dress.

"Better bring more dresses on your next flight," Nina warned. "You'll need them for parties and going out."

They went back downstairs to the living room, which in late afternoon was filled with cool shadows and perfumed with the fresh scent of flowers wafted in through the open windows.

"I'll fix us something cool to drink," Nina said, and disappeared. A few minutes later she reappeared with a tall, frosty pitcher of lemonade and three glasses on a tray.

"What does *your* sister do, Vicki?" Nina wanted to know. "College? Career? Romance?"

Vicki explained that Ginny was still in high school, and that her plans for the future kept changing from day to day as some new idea took her fancy.

Louise wanted to hear news about The Castle, the big rambling home of Vicki's family in Fairview,

Illinois, which got its name from the fact that its tower and balcony really did resemble a castle, and which Louise had visited as often as she could when she and Vicki were classmates at State University. She asked about Mrs. Barr's rock garden; Freckles, the Barr spaniel; and what news Professor Barr brought home from the university. Vicki answered the torrent of questions as best she could, for it had been several weeks since she had been home.

The three girls chattered on and on without noticing the time, and were surprised when a cheerful male voice broke into their conversation:

"Well, where is she? Where's the little flier?"

A gray-haired man of medium height stood in the doorway to the room. He was dressed in a dark-blue business suit and wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses.

"Dad!" Louise cried, jumping up.

Vicki got to her feet and went forward, smiling, to take Mr. Curtin's outstretched hand. He was just the sort of father she'd expected Louise to have—a substantial businessman, soft-spoken, cheerful, cordial, good-humored. The smile he gave Vicki in return was the very essence of southern hospitality.

"It's nice of you to take in a stranger," Vicki said.

"You won't be a stranger in Tampa very long, Vicki," Mr. Curtin answered. "We'll see to that, won't we, girls?"

He sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"You came to town at just the right time," he said, exhaling a spiral of smoke that drifted upward and hung in a golden ray of late afternoon sunlight which slanted in through a window. "You'll be here for the Gasparilla Pirate Festival."

"Dad's on the committee," Nina said excitedly. "He's going to be a pirate. And Louise and I are going to be señoritas."

Vicki smiled mischievously. "I'm afraid you don't look like a pirate to me, Mr. Curtin."

"You just wait until you see me in a big, black beard, a patch over one eye, and a bandanna tied around my head. Maybe you'll change your mind."

"Dad looks simply ferocious," Louise grinned. "Why, he even frightens *me*!"

The four were talking and laughing gaily when the housekeeper came in to announce dinner. Mrs. Tucker was a large, comfortable-looking woman, with gray hair rolled into a knot on top of her head and wearing a crisply starched white dress. They followed her into the dining room and seated themselves at the table.

"I'm sorry Mother isn't here to meet you, Vicki," Louise said, as the housekeeper served the steaming dishes of food, "but she got a wire the other day saying that Grandma was ill, and she flew out to Oregon to see her."

"Vicki will meet her when she returns," Mr. Curtin said. "For I trust, young lady," he said to Vicki, "that you will consider this your home whenever you are in Tampa."

The pleasant conversation continued as they leisurely ate the delicious dinner. Inevitably it returned to the coming festival.

"One of the stewardesses was talking about it before we left New York," Vicki said. "She said it was a sort of Mardi Gras, but that's about all I know."

"It's an old tradition with us," Mr. Curtin explained. "I think you might be interested in how it all started."

"I certainly would," Vicki answered. "It sounds intriguing."

"Well, about two hundred years ago, in 1783 to be exact, an officer in the Spanish Navy named José Gaspar mutinied and seized his warship the *_Florida Blanca_*. Then he turned pirate, changed his name to

Gasparilla, meaning Little Gaspar, and began to prey on the merchant ships of all nations. He made his headquarters in the islands around Tampa Bay, and whenever a merchantman came by, he rushed out, captured it, killed the crew, stole the cargo, and then burned the ship.”

“And this cutthroat is the patron rogue of Tampa,” Nina put in. “Louise thinks it’s too disgraceful.”

“Oh, really, Nina. I never said quite that—”

Mr. Curtin laughed as he went on with the story.

“Be that as it may, old Gasparilla’s luck held out for thirty-eight years. Then, one day in 1821, he made a fatal mistake. He pounced on a lone brig which he thought was an unarmed merchantman, but it turned out to be an American warship, the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. And Gasparilla’s goose was cooked. Within minutes, his ship was a mass of flames.”

“So the Navy finally captured him?”

“Not Gasparilla! The old devil wrapped a heavy iron chain around his waist and leaped into the sea, still brandishing his cutlass.”

“And now Daddy is going to be a lovely, bloodthirsty pirate too,” Nina said impishly.

Mr. Curtin smiled. “I’d better tell Vicki the rest of the story before she thinks we’re all crazy down here. You see,” he continued, “since Gasparilla had made Tampa Bay his headquarters, we decided to use him as an excuse for a mid-winter festival and a week of fun. A group of Tampa businessmen formed an organization called Ye Mystic Krewe. You spell Krewe with a capital K and an e on the end. And aside from Festival Week, we’re as sedate as any Rotary Club.”

“You’re not very sedate when you capture Tampa,” Louise said.

“No,” Mr. Curtin admitted with a grin, “I’m afraid that for that particular week we turn into little boys again playing pirate. A few years ago we raised the money to build a full-rigged sailing ship, an exact replica of Gasparilla’s *Florida Blanca*. On Monday morning—this year it will be February tenth—we all dress up in pirate costumes, sail the *José Gasparilla* up the Bay, and capture Tampa. Then, for the rest of the week, everybody has fun—dancing in the streets, balls, torchlight parades. Then, on Saturday, we sail away and give Tampa a chance to catch its breath until next year.”

Vicki’s eyes were shining with excitement as Louise’s father finished his story.

“It *does* sound like fun! I just can’t wait!”

“Nina and I are going to ride on one of the floats in the big torchlight parade,” Louise said, her own eyes Sparkling. “We’ll be all dressed up like Spanish señoritas, in mantillas, shawls, red dresses ...”

“And red roses clutched in our pearly teeth,” Nina insisted.

“Why can’t I be a señorita too?” Vicki demanded. “That is”—and her face fell at the thought that she might miss the fun—“if we’re not in New York that day.”

“Whoever heard of a blond, blue-eyed señorita?” Mr. Curtin teased.

“I have,” Nina said. “In the north of Spain—”

“Dad,” Louise interrupted, “tell Vicki about the old Spanish doubloons.”

Mr. Curtin explained that a collection of ancient gold coins, gathered together from all over the world, was currently on display at a museum in New York.

“And since pirates and old gold coins seem to go hand in hand,” he continued, “we thought it would be an added attraction for the Festival if we could put them on display here in the Royal Palms Hall during Gasparilla Week. So I wrote New York, and it turned out we were in luck. The exhibit is scheduled to close in New York just a few days before our Festival opens. And they agreed to let us exhibit them. So at least one part of the Gasparilla Festival will be authentic this year. Ye Mystic Krewe may be counterfeit pirates, but those gold coins will be the real thing. Very real indeed!”

The table talk drifted to other subjects—the Florida beaches, the Florida sun, Vicki’s and Louise’s

school days at State University. And after dinner, Vicki and the two Curtin girls took a short walk along the moonlit, palm-lined streets.

Later, when Vicki had said good night and slipped into bed, she realized that the excitement of the day—seeing a romantic new city and meeting an old friend—had made her pleasantly tired. She dropped off to sleep almost as soon as her blond hair touched the cool linen pillow. And her dreams were filled with visions of pirate ships and pirate gold.

CHAPTER II

A Strange Trip

THREE MORNINGS LATER VICKI, CATHY, AND Johnny Baker strolled across the concrete apron in front of Gate Five at Idlewild to board the ship for their return run to Tampa. Today the skies were clear, but the wind blowing across the huge airfield carried the crisp, cold bite of winter, and small snowdrifts were still piled up against the heavy wire fencing that enclosed the passenger area.

"Where's Captain March?" Vicki asked Johnny. "He's late this morning, and that's not like him."

"Captain's already on board," the copilot said. "He boarded her in the hangar."

"What's the matter?" Cathy laughed. "Doesn't he trust the ground crew to see that she's ready to fly?"

"Don't ask me," Johnny replied, grinning good-naturedly, "I'm just the copilot. I take over the controls when the captain tells me to and I don't ask questions. Then one of these days, if I'm a good boy, I'll be a captain myself. I'll know all the answers, but of course I won't tell them to the rest of the crew. So there's no use asking me anything—not now or a couple of years from now when I've got another stripe on my sleeve and am sitting up there in the captain's seat."

"You're a big help," Cathy scoffed.

"I told you I was," Johnny said.

As the three entered the plane from the landing ramp, Captain March emerged from the flight deck, followed by a stocky man wearing a blue business suit under a light-gray topcoat.

"This is Mr. Jones," he said, making the introductions. "Miss Barr, Miss Solms—Mr. Baker."

Mr. Jones nodded briefly to each of the crew members in turn.

"Mr. Jones is making the flight with us," the captain explained. Then he said to Mr. Jones: "Just take any seat you like, sir. These young ladies will see that you get anything you want."

Mr. Jones removed his topcoat, handed it to Cathy, and sat down in an aisle seat opposite the door. He took a folded newspaper from his jacket pocket and began to read. Captain March and Johnny Baker disappeared through the forward door that led to the flight deck. Cathy had carried Mr. Jones's topcoat to the wardrobe amidships. Vicki followed her down the aisle.

"It looks as if something's up," she said in a low voice.

"I don't go to the movies for nothing," Cathy remarked. "That Mr. Jones has 'cop' written all over him. We must be carrying something pretty important today. A shipment of diamonds, maybe, or gold."

Gold! Suddenly Vicki remembered the antique gold coins that were being sent from the New York museum to the Pirate Festival in Tampa. Could they possibly have them on board this flight? That could account for Mr. Jones and the captain riding the ship out from the hangar. And especially if, as Cathy had suggested, Mr. Jones had "cop" written all over him. Oh, well—! She shrugged off the thought. If they were carrying a shipment of gold, she'd never know about it.

Vicki looked at the passenger list which she still had under her arm. There was Mr. Jones's name all right, along with an assortment of other typical American names: Smith, Cooper, Levin, Carpenter, Fagan, Morris ... One name caught her eye. She pointed it out to Cathy.

“F. R. Eaton-Smith. My, that sounds important. Who do you suppose he could be?”

“Sounds English,” Cathy commented. “But let’s go. Here they come.”

An attendant had opened the wire gate, and now the passengers for the flight were streaming across the apron to the loading ramp. Vicki stood by the plane’s open doorway, the passenger list in her hand, and checked off the names one by one as the passengers entered.

“You are Mr.—?”

“Cooper.”

Vicki made a check beside his name.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Cooper. You’re bound for Atlanta.”

Atlanta was their one stop en route to Tampa. Vicki studied the man’s face quickly but carefully. Part of her job was to make her passengers feel welcome on board by remembering their names. The man walked down the aisle and took a seat by a window.

One by one the passengers filed through the doorway. An elderly couple. A woman with a little girl. A young man and woman in their early twenties who displayed all the familiar outward appearances of being honeymooners. The next man had a distinguished air about him. He was portly, dignified, well-dressed. His rimless glasses were so highly polished that Vicki could not see his eyes behind them, only brilliant reflections of sunlight.

“I am Mr. Eaton-Smith.” His voice was as dignified as his appearance.

So this was F. R. Eaton-Smith! His appearance certainly fitted his name. She turned to the next passenger.

He was a thin, frail old man, wearing a battered felt hat over his badly trimmed gray hair and a shabby overcoat with a frayed collar. He clutched a battered violin case under his arm, as though he had been unwilling to trust it with the rest of the luggage in the cargo compartment. He certainly didn’t look, Vicki thought, like a man who was accustomed to first-class air travel.

“Good morning,” Vicki said brightly. “Your name, sir?”

The old gentleman looked startled. “I—I’m Amos Tytell, miss.” He looked around the big cabin. “Where—uh, which seat is mine?”

“Take any seat you like, Mr. Tytell,” Vicki said. “But if you want to look at the scenery, I’d suggest that you sit next to a window. We’re going to have clear weather all the way.”

Finally the last of the passengers trooped aboard. The door was closed, the landing ramp wheeled away by the ground crew, and Captain March started his engines. One by one the big, four-bladed propellers whined as they turned over slowly, then coughed and spat small puffs of blue exhaust smoke and suddenly burst into a steady roar, the revolving blades making bright, shiny disks that gleamed and sparkled in the morning sun. The big ship vibrated with the pounding of the air stream against her sides and strained at the wheel brakes like a race horse impatient for the start. At last Captain March taxied out to the end of the runway, waited for his signal from the tower, and when he got it, gunned the ship down the concrete strip and lifted her into the air as smoothly and gently as a bird.

Once the airplane was off the ground and droning up to cruising altitude, and the NO SMOKING—FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign had blinked out, Vicki and Cathy made their way up and down the aisle, chatting with their passengers, offering them chewing gum and magazines, and doing everything they could to make them comfortable and put them at their ease.

Mr. Eaton-Smith interested Vicki particularly. Maybe, she thought, it was his curious double name with the hyphen in the middle. Now, with his hat off, she could see that his large Roman-looking head was a little bald on top. And Vicki was again impressed by his air of dignity. When she came to his aisle seat, she said politely:

“Anything I can get for you, Mr. Eaton-Smith? A cup of coffee? A magazine perhaps?”

Mr. Eaton-Smith smiled. It was a curiously mechanical smile—polite but certainly not warm or cordial.

“No, thank you.” Then he added: “I think we’ll have a pleasant flight today.”

“Yes,” Vicki said. “Clear skies all the way. I can see that you’re a veteran air traveler, sir.”

Mr. Eaton-Smith seem flattered. “Yes, I think I might call myself that—since I’ve flown just about all over this globe of ours.”

“Oh?” Vicki said. “Are you a foreign correspondent? A writer?”

Mr. Eaton-Smith beamed. “No, but you’re close. I’m a travel lecturer, and I operate a small travel agency in Tampa. Just to have a sort of headquarters, as you might say.”

“Just ring if there’s anything I can do for you,” Vicki said.

“I certainly will, and thank you.”

The frail old man sitting across the aisle from Mr. Eaton-Smith was certainly not a veteran air traveler. Vicki could tell that at a glance. He actually looked frightened as he sat tensely in his seat, still wearing his overcoat and with his violin case clutched between his knees. A breath-taking panorama was unfolding just below the window next to which he was sitting. But he was paying no attention to it, staring intently at the back of the seat in front of him.

“Are you feeling all right, sir?” Vicki asked gently. “May I take your overcoat?”

“No—no, thank you, miss. I—I’m cold.”

Vicki bent over him anxiously. Why, this man was half fainting!

“Are you feeling ill, sir?”

“Hungry,” he whispered.

“Just a minute.”

Vicki hurried to the galley. Obviously, Mr. Tytell could not wait until lunch was served. She placed a sandwich and a cup of coffee on a tray and carried it back to the old man.

“There,” she said. “That should make you feel better.”

He was so exhausted, or so nervous or ill, that his thin, heavily veined hands shook, and Vicki had to help him hold his coffee cup. She did not attempt to talk to him as he ate. When he had finished, he smiled at Vicki gratefully.

“I feel better now.”

“That’s good. But why did you let yourself grow so weak?” She knew it was against the rules to ask personal questions, but she felt a genuine concern for this frail old man. “You didn’t have breakfast, did you?”

“No.” A tremor seemed to pass over his face.

And what a sensitive face it was, Vicki thought. She had known musicians before. She knew what dreamy, impractical people most of the old ones were. Was this man starving? His suit coat, underneath his overcoat, was worn and threadbare. His thin, gray hair looked as though it hadn’t been cut in months. His ticket showed that he was going to Tampa.

“The Florida sunshine will do you a lot of good, Mr. Tytell. Are you visiting your family in Tampa, or friends?”

He raised his weak, pale-blue eyes to hers. “All the family I have is my grandson. And he’s in—in a school in New York. Yes, I’m going to visit friends.” He hesitated and grew silent.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Vicki said hastily. “It’s a long flight and I just thought you’d like to talk. But now perhaps we’d better wait till after lunch.” She looked at her watch. “That won’t be long now, and you can have a good hot meal.”

She removed the tray from his lap and started to walk away, but the old violinist plucked at her sleeve.

"Please don't leave, miss. I'm glad of a chance to talk. You don't know how lonesome I am. And you're the first kind person ..."

The eyes in his worn face were pleading. Vicki sat down in the empty seat beside him. Poor, frightened little scarecrow of a man!

She touched the violin case. "You must be a musician," she said encouragingly.

"This isn't a very good instrument. Just an old fiddle. I had to sell my good violin to pay for—" Again his voice broke off and he fell silent.

"You'll be in Tampa just in time for the Gasparilla Festival," Vicki said, trying to cheer the old gentleman up.

"The—the *what*?"

"The Pirate Festival. Didn't you hear about it when you planned this trip? It's the gayest time of the whole year."

The old man sighed. "It isn't as if I had exactly *planned* this trip."

"Why, it sounds as if you didn't want to go to Tampa at all, Mr. Tytell!"

"But if I—" The old man's voice sounded scared. For an instant he closed his tired eyes. "I'm talking too much. Excuse me, miss."

Vicki got up.

"Miss, what's your name?"

"Victoria Barr. But all my friends call me Vicki."

"Thank you, Vicki." Mr. Tytell relaxed in his seat and closed his eyes.

As Vicki turned to go down the aisle to the galley, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Mr. Eaton-Smith, from his seat across the way, was looking at her and Mr. Tytell with a curious interest. The next moment, the dignified gentleman turned his attention again to the magazine he had been reading.

Now it was time for lunch, and Vicki and Cathy had their hands full preparing lunches for the more than sixty passengers who were on the flight today.

She glanced out a window. The ship was flying above Virginia now, where scattered white patches of snow were melting in the brown fields. Soon they would be approaching the green fields of the Carolinas. There wasn't much time to get the passengers fed. Vicki forgot everything in her concentration on her job.

Vicki worked her way up the aisle of the plane serving the luncheons, carrying one tray at a time, making sure that each passenger had a cushion on his lap upon which to rest it, inquiring whether he would care for coffee or tea. When she came to Mr. Eaton-Smith's seat, she noticed that he had moved across the aisle and was now sitting next to old Mr. Tytell. The old man was dozing, his eyes closed. Mr. Eaton-Smith put a finger to his lips.

"This gentleman seemed to be ill," he whispered. "I thought I had better move over here and see if there was anything I could do for him."

"That's very kind of you, sir," Vicki said, as she placed Mr. Eaton-Smith's lunch tray on his lap. Old Mr. Tytell's eyes fluttered, and their glance caught Vicki's for a split second. They looked like a begging puppy dog's eyes, she thought.

In a few minutes she had brought the tray for the old man and helped him steady it on his lap. He picked up a fork and began to toy listlessly with his food, keeping his eyes fixed upon his plate.

Back in the galley, cleaning up the remains of the lunch, Vicki couldn't get her mind free of the shabby old man.

Promptly on schedule, Captain March circled his plane over Tampa and landed.

The mysterious Mr. Jones was the first person to get off when the ground crew pushed the landing ramp

up to the door. He spoke briefly to one of the crewmen on the ground, and the two of them stepped around to the tail of the plane, next to the baggage-compartment door.

Then Vicki saw the rest of her passengers off the ship and said good-bye to each one as he was leaving.

"I hope you had a pleasant trip, Mrs. Peterson. Ride with us again, Mr. Levin. Good-bye, Mr. Harper."

She saw old Mr. Tytell coming toward her, still clutching his battered violin case. Close behind him was Mr. Eaton-Smith.

"Good-bye, sir. Have a pleasant stay in Tampa."

"Good— good-bye, Miss Barr." He glanced back over his shoulder for a moment in the direction of his seat, and when his eyes returned to Vicki they held an odd, hopeless look. "Thank you again."

Behind him, Mr. Eaton-Smith was visibly impatient at the delay. He brushed against the old violinist's shoulder, and Mr. Tytell, feeling the slight pressure, lowered his head and seemed almost to scurry through the exit door.

Speaking mechanically to the other passengers as they left, Vicki kept an eye on the tired old man as he went down the ramp and across the apron, Mr. Eaton-Smith following at his elbow. She wondered who was going to meet Amos Tytell. But he walked straight on through a group of people who were obviously waiting to greet incoming friends and was soon swallowed up in the crowd.

With the last of the passengers gone, Vicki and Cathy went rapidly through the big cabin on a final inspection tour. The empty seats were reclined at all angles; pillows, magazines, and newspapers were scattered over them in confusion. At one seat she picked up a small package that had been forgotten. She'd take it to the *Lost-and-Found* desk in the terminal building.

In the seat that old Mr. Tytell had occupied something peculiar caught her eye. It was a Tampa visitor's guide, part of the travel literature and other reading matter carried in the plane's seat pockets. But it was folded in the shape of a sort of pyramid and was standing upright on the seat.

"Odd," Vicki thought, and reached over to pick it up. As she did so, she noticed that the exposed page was an advertisement for a restaurant located in Ybor City, Tampa's old Latin Quarter. The restaurant was called the Granada, and under the name was the slogan: "The liveliest and most popular meeting place in Tampa's famed Ybor City."

The words "meeting place" were underlined by a wavery pencil scrawl!

Had the old man left this as a signal? She remembered his furtive over-the-shoulder glance as he was leaving the plane. Maybe he had a job at the Granada playing in the orchestra. But why hadn't he come straight out and said so? Vicki wrinkled her pretty brows in a puzzled frown. Was something strange going on here? Or was she just imagining things?

She tucked the folder into her jacket pocket and went on with her work.

CHAPTER III

An Odd Offer

VICKI SAID GOOD-BY TO CAPTAIN MARCH, JOHNNY, and Cathy and strolled leisurely through the air terminal waiting room, watching the milling crowds of people which always fascinated her. One could certainly pick out the “Yankees” who had just come in, she thought. Their northern winter pallor contrasted sharply with the deep sun-browened skins of the local residents. It suddenly struck Vicki that she was a “Yankee” herself. “I’ll have to go to the beach and start working on my own sun tan,” she thought, “the first time I have a day off.”

A rack of colorful picture post cards caught her eye. Gosh! Here it was her second trip to Florida and she hadn’t sent a single card! That was the first thing any respectable Florida visitor did!

She selected a dozen of the most exotic cards, those that depicted wide sandy beaches, palm-lined streets, the moonlight over Tampa Bay, and the *José Gasparilla* sailing up the Bay with hundreds of bright pennants flying from its masts and its deck crowded with Ye Mystic Krewe.

Leaning on the counter, she addressed one to her father, one to her mother, one to Ginny (who adored getting mail in her own name), one to Bill Avery, and one to each of the girls who shared her apartment in New York.

Then, just for fun, she addressed one to Mr. Curtin, to Nina and to Louise. On each of these last three, she wrote: “I’m so glad to be here. Love, Vicki.”

She bought stamps from a machine on the counter, mailed the cards in a postal drop nearby, and strolled on to the main door to hail a taxi.

On her way, she passed the terminal snack bar. An ice-cream soda, it suddenly occurred to her, would taste just about right on a hot day like this. She pushed open the swinging glass doors and entered the dim, air-conditioned room.

The first person she saw was Joey Watson, sitting in one of the booths. She started toward him, then checked herself when she saw that another man was sitting in the seat opposite him. Vicki decided not to intrude in what probably was “man talk.” She slipped into the next booth, with her back to the man who was sitting with Joey.



Vicki decided not to intrude

The man was speaking in a low voice, but it was deep-toned and resonant. The man spoke with a soft Spanish accent, and had a peculiar, almost indiscernible, lisp. Since he was separated from Vicki only by a thin plywood partition, she couldn't help hearing every word he said. She paid no attention to the conversation, and ordered her soda from the waitress.

Then a sentence caught her ear.

"... and you're such a nice kid, Joey, that I want to help you. You're smart and ambitious, and I like to help boys like you."

"But why should you want to help *me*?" Joey's voice was puzzled. "You never saw me before. And—Why, I don't even know your name."

"Now that *does* surprise me a little, Joey. With all the business I do with Federal Airlines, I'm surprised you don't know the name of Raymond Duke."

"I—I think I have seen your name on cargo consignments," Joey said hesitantly.

"Sure you have, kid," the man said. "I'm one of the biggest importers in Tampa. And you can bet that I've heard about Joey Watson. Your boss, Van— Van— What's his name—?"

"Van Lasher."

"Sure. Van Lasher says you're the smartest man he's got. He tells me you're saving up for flying

lessons, and that you need money real bad. Well, I can fix that, kid. If you work for me, I can put a lot of money your way.”

Vicki’s ears pricked up. This conversation was certainly taking a curious turn! Now she began listening intently, careful to catch every word. She felt responsible for Joey Watson, and the proposition this man seemed to be trying to make to him sounded mighty strange indeed!

“Now in my business,” the man went on, “I can always use a smart boy. Think you’d like to work for me? I pay mighty well.”

“Gee, Mr. Duke,” Joey said, “I’ve already got a good job. I like to work around airplanes, and I’m already starting to take flying lessons. Or I’ll be starting—any day now. No—thanks a lot—but I don’t think I’d like to leave the airline.”

“Who said anything about leaving the airline, kid? What I want you to do is work for me in your spare time—do odd jobs, run errands, things like that. Why, I’ve got a job coming up that will pay you— How does a hundred dollars sound?”

“A *hundred dollars!*” Joey almost shouted.

“Not so loud, boy! Not so loud!” the man cautioned. “I don’t go around offering good jobs to everybody I see. I don’t want every Tom, Dick, and Harry pestering me for work. This is confidential. Just between you and me.”

“Gee,” Joey said, “I—I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? A hundred smackers would sure pay for a lot of flying lessons, boy. At the rate you’re going, you’ll be an old man before you get your pilot’s license. Look, Joey, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You agree to work for me, and I’ll give you twenty-five bucks in advance.”

Vicki heard the man flip some crisp bills.

“Look at that, kid. That’s just to show I trust you. And there’s plenty more where that came from!”

“Gosh, Mr. Duke, I’ll have to think it over.”

“Nothing doing!” Vicki heard Mr. Duke say. “When I make a man as good a proposition as this, I expect him to say yes or no. Besides, I’ve got a job that needs to be done right away. Now what do you say, boy? That money looks pretty good, doesn’t it? I’ll bet you never saw that much before in your life. So what is it? Yes or no?”

“Gee, Mr. Duke!” Joey’s voice was wavering with indecision. “I— Honest, I’ll have to think it over.”

“Okay!” Mr. Duke’s voice rose slightly, and seemed to Vicki to have an angry, exasperated tone. “But look here, kid. You keep your lip buttoned about this. If the word got around about me having a good job open, every boy in Tampa would be after me. So not a word to anybody. Okay?”

“Okay,” Joey said. “I’ll let you know.”

“You do that. But remember what I said about keeping quiet.”

Mr. Duke got to his feet, picked his Panama hat off the hatrack by the booth, and started for the door. He was tall, thin, sleek, and slightly overdressed. The shoulders of his jacket were just a little too padded, Vicki thought, and the lapels a little too pointed. His hair was thick and black and curly, his long face was deeply tanned, and a hair-thin mustache spread across his upper lip.

On impulse, Vicki stood up and casually followed him out the door of the snack bar and across the terminal building. When he stepped out into the sunshine of the taxi loading ramp, she hung back as he whistled for a cab. A taxi pulled up, and before Mr. Duke got in, he said to the driver: “Granada Restaurant. Ybor City.”

Granada Restaurant! Ybor City! Vicki’s hand felt for the travel folder in her jacket pocket. Why, that was the restaurant old Mr.—what was his name?—Tytell had tried to call her attention to! If he really *had* been trying to call her attention to it by leaving the folder on his seat in such a peculiar way with the

words “meeting place” underlined!

Vicki shook her head in bewilderment. It all seemed too curious to be a coincidence. The frightened old man on the plane—the travel folder—and now this odd-looking man making such a strange proposition to Joey—and then going to that very same restaurant!

It seemed too curious to be a coincidence, but for the life of her, Vicki couldn’t make any sense out of it. Maybe she’d better go back to the snack bar and have a talk with Joey.

When she entered the air-conditioned room again, the booth at which Joey and the strange man had been sitting was empty.

Vicki shrugged and smiled to herself. “Vicki Barr, with your imagination, you ought to write mystery stories! You see a deep, dark plot every time you look around! You could be spending your time better at the beach, getting that Florida sun tan!”

She thrust all suspicions from her mind and went out to find a taxi.

CHAPTER IV

Pirate Gold

ONE OF THE NICEST THINGS ABOUT VICKI'S NEW York-Tampa assignment was staying at the Curtins' home. Yesterday afternoon, after Vicki had come from the airport, she and Louise had gone to the beach for a swim—and to begin “work” on Vicki's Florida sun tan. After dinner, Mr. Curtin had taken the three girls to the movies. Appropriately enough, it had been a picture about pirates.

“You see,” Mr. Curtin had said, smiling, “we're real pirate-minded here in Tampa. We want to give the tourists a real good run for their money.”

Vicki loved the guest room—which was now called “Vicki's room”—with its flowered curtains and its big four-poster bed. And everyone in the family, including Mrs. Tucker, the housekeeper, were understanding about hard-working airline stewardesses and why they sometimes had to sleep late in the morning.

Now the three girls were at lunch—brunch for Vicki—at a small table on the side porch. The sun was shining brilliantly through the tree-tops and making little puddles of golden light on the tiles of the floor. The air was still, and held a heavy perfume of oleander and hibiscus. Up in the trees, songbirds twittered merrily. Birds are smarter than people, Vicki thought, they all go South for the winter.

“You'll be back in Tampa tomorrow, won't you, Vicki?” Louise asked.

“Not tomorrow,” Vicki corrected her. “Sunday. Then one more trip and I'll have a few days' rest leave.”

“Perfect! We'll spend the whole time at Clearwater Beach just relaxing and lying in the sun,” Nina said enthusiastically. “Daddy will take us out to Ybor City for dinner—and you'll come to my shop and see all the lovely things we have. Then we'll ...”

“Nina, dear,” Louise interrupted, “Vicki says this is a *rest* leave.”

Nina shook her silky black hair impatiently. “Oh, who wants to rest when there are so many more exciting things to do?”

“I thought you had a job,” Vicki said with a grin.

“Sure I have. And I work mighty hard at it too. But there's always time to have fun.”

“This young dynamo wears me out,” Louise laughed. “I have to work, too, you know, Nina, and Vicki has to rest. But we'll manage to have fun, don't you worry.”

All three were chatting gaily when Mr. Curtin stepped out through the open French windows onto the tile floor of the porch. His face looked drawn and haggard, and worried wrinkles creased the skin around his eyes.

“Dad!” Louise cried, jumping up. “Whatever are you doing home at noon?”

“Come and sit down, Daddy,” Nina said solicitously. “We're just finishing, but I imagine Mrs. Tucker can manage to find something for you.”

Mr. Curtin slumped into a high-backed wicker chair.

“An awful thing has happened, girls,” he said. He took off his glasses with a nervous gesture, rubbed his eyes, and ran his hand through his thinning gray hair. “I’m the chairman of the committee, and I feel responsible. But—” He stopped and shook his head. “But I don’t know what to do about it.”

Louise ran to her father’s side and took his hand in hers.

“My goodness, Daddy! You look as pale as a ghost. Whatever has happened?”

“Get me a cup of coffee, honey,” Mr. Curtin said. “I think I need something to steady my nerves.”

Louise ran to the kitchen. When she returned with a steaming cup of coffee, and her father had taken a few sips, Mr. Curtin took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair.

“When it happened,” he said, “I was so stunned I just had to walk around for a while and think.”

“Daddy,” Nina said, her eyes wide, “if you don’t tell us what happened, we’re all just simply going to bust.”

Mr. Curtin managed a smile. “Sorry, honey. I’m not thinking very straight.” He paused a moment, then continued. “You remember I told you the other night about the collection of antique gold coins that my committee was bringing down here from New York to exhibit during Festival Week? Well, the case from the museum was delivered to the exhibition hall this morning. Being the committee chairman, I was there to receive it. It was all secure, and wrapped tightly around with steel bands. But when we opened it, we found that it was filled—not with the gold coins—but with worthless pieces of scrap iron.”

Vicki’s mouth dropped open, speechless. Louise clapped her hand to her lips and her eyes grew wide. Nina said, “Daddy! That’s impossible!”

“Yes, that’s what you’d think,” her father replied.

“Had the box been tampered with?” Louise asked, after a minute.

“It didn’t seem so,” Mr. Curtin said. “As I say, it was taped with steel bands, and the shipping label from the museum in New York was intact. It had come down from New York yesterday by air express ...”

“Air express?” Vicki almost screamed the question. “Then it might have come down on *our* flight!” Suddenly she remembered the mysterious Mr. Jones, whom Cathy had said had “cop” written all over him. And there was the odd fact that he and Captain March had boarded the airplane in the hangar. Before she could marshal these confusing thoughts in her mind, Mr. Curtin went on.

“That’s right, Vicki. Air express. The case stayed in the warehouse out at the airport overnight—under a heavy guard, I might add—and was delivered to the exhibition hall about ten o’clock this morning.”

“And it hadn’t been tampered with, opened up?” Vicki asked the question again.

“If it had,” Mr. Curtin said, “it was the cleverest tampering job I’ve ever seen.”

“What—what were the coins worth?” Vicki asked.

“From the standpoint of their value as antiques,” Mr. Curtin answered, “they were priceless. For the gold they contained, figuring gold at thirty-five dollars an ounce, possibly a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe twice that.”

“Whew!”

“But who could have stolen the gold?” Nina asked.

“Lots of people,” Vicki said. “The people at the museum who packed it. The transfer people who trucked it to the airport. The cargo crew at the New York airport. The cargo crew here at Tampa. The truckers who delivered it from the field to the exhibition hall. Heaven knows how many people could have got to that gold shipment.”

“At any rate,” Mr. Curtin said, “the Tampa police called in the FBI. If the FBI can’t clear it up, I don’t know who can.”

CHAPTER V

The FBI Takes Over

AFTER MR. CURTIN HAD EATEN A HURRIED LUNCH and departed for committee headquarters to await any new developments in the gold coin mystery, Vicki and her two hostesses went for a stroll through the ornate flower gardens that surrounded the big brick house.

“Look, Vicki. Did you ever see such gorgeous camellias in your life? And just look at these wonderful poinsettias. They’re just simply Mother’s pride and joy! Did you know that poinsettias were invented—I mean, actually *invented*—by a man up in Charleston named Mr. Poinsett? I don’t rightly know quite how he did it, but he crossed one flower with another, and ...”

Nina rattled on and on about the flowers that grew in such brilliant profusion in the gardens. Vicki nodded absently and tried her best to be interested, paying what she hoped were the right compliments at the right time. But she couldn’t seem to get her mind off the theft of the gold shipment and that her plane might have been carrying the valuable coins.

“Miss Vicki! Oh, Miss Vicki!”

It was Mrs. Tucker, calling from the porch steps.

“Miss Vicki, you’re wanted on the phone.”

Vicki hurried up the garden path, followed by Louise and Nina. She picked up the telephone in the hall.

“Vicki Barr speaking. ... Oh, hello, Captain March. ... But I thought we weren’t taking off until three-thirty. ... Oh? ... Yes. ... Yes, of course I can. ... Half an hour. ... Yes, sir. Good-by.”

“What’s up, Vicki?”

“I don’t know. That was Captain March, chief pilot of my plane. I have to report in half an hour to the airport manager’s office.”

Nina’s hand flew to her mouth. “Do you suppose it has anything to do with ... with the ...”

Vicki had to smile at the younger girl’s excitement.

“If you mean with the crate of gold that was stolen yesterday, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised. Now I have to change and run.”

Fifteen minutes later Vicki was again in the lower hallway, dressed in her flight uniform and with her blue flight bag in her hand.

“My convertible’s out front,” Louise said. “Hop in and I’ll have you at the airport in no time.”

“I’m coming too,” Nina declared.

The three girls piled into the sleek little car, and in minutes it was whisking through the city streets. Then they left the town behind and were rolling along the causeway, a long, sandy strip that ran across the bright blue waters of Tampa Bay. Palm trees swished their heavy fronds in the gentle breeze that blew across the Bay and silhouetted their umbrellalike tops against the blue sky. Bathers and surf fishermen lined the pink-yellow sand of the beach. Nina, as usual, wanted to talk, to speculate about the mystery. But Louise remained silent, concentrating on her driving, and Vicki replied to Nina’s avid questions with “I

haven't any idea, Nina!" or "Gosh, I wonder!"

At last they drew up before the entrance to the terminal building with five minutes to spare. Vicki hurriedly said so long to her friends, and went directly to the manager's office.

Johnny Baker and Cathy Solms were standing outside the closed door. Both were wearing their flight uniforms.

"Hi, there," Vicki greeted them. "What's up?"

"You know as much as we do," Johnny said, puzzled. "The skipper called the hotel half an hour or so ago—he'd left earlier this morning—and asked us to show up here. Maybe we're hauling some important VIP back to New York this afternoon. But heck, that's no reason to rush us out here, just before Cathy and I were going to take one last quick dip in the surf."

Cathy's eyes lighted up. "Maybe it's a planeload of movie stars!"

"Or maybe some South American dictator who was kicked out last night." Johnny laughed.

Vicki was pretty sure she knew why the crew was assembled here. She remembered Mr. Curtin saying: "The Tampa police have called in the FBI." But she saw no point in mentioning this. Maybe, for all she knew, the FBI was keeping the whole thing a deep, dark secret while they worked behind the scenes.

So she simply said, "If I have my choice between South American dictators and movie stars, I vote for movie stars."

At that moment the door to the manager's office opened to reveal Captain March's frowning face.

"Will you come in, please."

The three filed in through the door.

Aside from Captain March, the only other person in the room was a short, heavy-built man in a tan gabardine suit. His crew-cut hair was salty black and he had a tired look about his eyes.

"Sit down, sit down," he said briskly but courteously. "This shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

Slowly, intently, his eyes went from one member of the crew to the other. Then he straightened his shoulders, rested his hands on the sides of the desk behind which he was sitting, and leaned slightly forward.

"My name's Quayle. John Quayle. Special Investigator, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Well, she'd been right, Vicki thought. She stole a sidelong glance at Cathy and Johnny. Both were openmouthed with surprise.

"Captain March tells me that you were his crew on Federal Airlines Flight Seventeen, New York to Tampa, yesterday, February seventh."

The copilot and the two stewardesses nodded automatically.

"Flight Seventeen," Mr. Quayle continued in a droning voice, "was carrying an especially valuable item of cargo. A crate of antique gold coins from the National Numismatic Museum in New York consigned to the Royal Palms Hall here in Tampa. These coins were to have been put on display next week during the Gasparilla Festival. It is impossible to estimate the value of this shipment. I can only say that it was priceless."

Mr. Quayle looked at his audience in silence for a long moment.

"When that crate was delivered to the Festival committee at the Royal Palms, it appeared to be exactly as it was when it left the museum. But when the committee members opened it, it was found to contain, not the gold coins, but an equivalent weight in iron-and-steel scrap."

Johnny and Cathy gasped. Vicki looked at Captain March. His eyes were impassive. Naturally, she thought, he had been told about this before the rest of the crew.

"Only two possibilities have occurred to us," the FBI man went on, "as to how the theft could have been accomplished. One: the crate could have been opened, the gold removed, and the scrap metal put in

its place. Two: the crate of scrap could have been substituted for the crate of gold somewhere en route.”

Again he paused to let his words sink in.

“As to the first possibility, there was no sign of tampering. As to the second, the crate undoubtedly had been packed and labeled at the museum in New York. The label was genuine.”

Again Vicki noticed that Cathy and Johnny were listening in breathless silence.

“I might add,” Mr. Quayle went on, “that a private detective employed by the museum, a man named Jones, accompanied the gold on your flight. But his presence was only routine. It is quite obvious that nothing could have happened to the shipment while your plane was in the air. The gold could only have been stolen under the following circumstances: (a) at the museum in New York; (b) en route from the museum to Idlewild Airport; (c) at Idlewild itself; (d) while cargo was being loaded into your plane; ah ...” Mr. Quayle scratched his head and grinned a tired grin. “What’s the next number? ... oh, yes ... (e) during your brief stop in Atlanta; (f) while lying in the warehouse at Tampa overnight; and finally (g) while it was being transferred to the Royal Palms.”

He paused. “Do I make myself clear thus far?”

Johnny Baker grinned. “You lost me a couple of letters back.”

Everyone in the room took advantage of Johnny’s wisecrack to let off their tension with a laugh.

“At any rate,” Mr. Quayle said, “that is the picture. At the moment our agents are checking every possible angle in New York and Atlanta. I just wanted to have this talk with you because, after all, you were crewing Flight Seventeen, and I wondered if any of you had noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“May I ask,” Captain March inquired, “when the theft was discovered?”

“Your airplane landed at approximately three-fifteen yesterday afternoon. The cargo was taken from the ship to the warehouse. So far as we know, very few people knew that such a consignment was coming—only the people on the Festival committee—and so the airline didn’t want to make a special production out of it. They figured it would be safer to let it go through with the other air express. Nonetheless, Mr. Jones—the private detective who flew down with you—stayed in the Federal Airlines warehouse all night last night. Now, to answer your question, sir.”

Mr. Quayle nodded at Captain March and resumed his narrative ...

“A bonded air express truck picked up the crate this morning at seven-thirty and delivered it to the Royal Palms Hall. There the delivery of the crate was taken by a committee of the Festival people—I believe a Mr. Curtin was in charge—and it was opened. The crate was then found to contain only worthless scrap iron and bits of lead and steel.”

Vicki spoke up. “Mr. Quayle, I’m a house guest at the Curtins’. I learned about the theft from him at lunch, not quite an hour ago.”

All heads turned in Vicki’s direction, like those of spectators at a tennis match.

“Did Mr. Curtin say anything that I haven’t mentioned?” the FBI man asked.

“No, sir. He told me just about the same thing that you have.”

“All right, then. That is the entire picture. I might add that we have interrogated all of the airport employees and Federal Airlines people on this end who could possibly have come into contact with the shipment. The only reason that I am talking to you, Flight Seventeen’s crew, as I said a moment ago, is to ask if you noticed anything out of the usual routine either before, during, or after the flight.”

He looked around slowly, his penetrating eyes going from Captain March, to Johnny Baker, to Cathy, and finally to Vicki.

“As you are aware,” Captain March spoke first, “I knew that we were carrying an especially valuable cargo yesterday. Frankly I didn’t know what it was, and I didn’t ask. I didn’t even look at the label. I met Mr. Jones by prearrangement in the hangar at Idlewild. This was an unusual arrangement, but it was

orders and I didn't question it. Together we supervised the loading of the crate into the cargo hold of my airplane. We then got aboard, and I personally taxied the ship up to Gate Five. There we picked up the rest of our crew"—he nodded his head at Vicki, Cathy, and Johnny—"and as soon as we had taken our passengers and their luggage on board, we took off. When we sat down at Tampa, Mr. Jones stayed with the plane until all cargo had been unloaded. I'm afraid, sir," he concluded, "that that is everything I can tell you."

"Very good, Captain," Mr. Quayle said. "Have you anything to add, Mr. Baker?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you, sir," Johnny said. "I boarded the plane after Captain March had taxied her out to the apron in front of Gate Five. When all passengers had come aboard, the captain took her off and up to cruising altitude. That was fourteen thousand feet. He then turned the controls over to me. Bill and I—I mean, Captain March and I—then took turns spelling each other at the controls until we reached Atlanta, our one stop en route to Tampa. After leaving Atlanta, I again took over until we were ready for our approach to Tampa. The captain asked me if I would like to take her down, and I said I would. I touched down, I believe, at three-seventeen."

Vicki couldn't help smiling at Johnny's serious recital. Three-fifteen wasn't close enough to suit him! It had to be on the nose. *Three-seventeen!*

"And so, Mr. Baker, you saw nothing unusual?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

Mr. Quayle now turned to Cathy.

"And you, miss?"

"I—I'm afraid I haven't anything to tell you either, sir. Miss Barr and I tried to make the passengers comfortable—she usually works the forward part of the ship while I work aft—and then it was time to serve lunch. Then we straightened up, and—Well, I honestly didn't notice a thing out of the ordinary."

"Thank you, Miss Solms," Mr. Quayle said wearily. This was obviously a job that he had to do, and he wanted to get it over as quickly as possible. "Did you notice anything that might help us, Miss Barr?"

Vicki couldn't erase the picture of the sick, tired old violinist out of her mind. It might all be silly, she told herself. But then again ...

She told the story exactly as it had happened. From the time he had boarded the airplane, bewildered, hungry, almost starved, until he had gotten off and she had found the folded travel brochure on his seat.

"But what makes you think this old musician had anything to do with the theft of the gold coins, Miss Barr?" Mr. Quayle asked, obviously impatient.

"Nothing makes me think so, Mr. Quayle," Vicki answered. "You asked me if anything unusual had happened on the flight. Mr. Tytell was unusual, and I thought I had better tell you about him."

"Quite right! Quite right!" John Quayle said, nodding his head and fumbling with a file of papers on the desk in front of him. "At the moment I can't see how the incident could have any bearing on our investigation, but I'll keep it in mind."

Captain March spoke up. "May I ask a question, sir?"

The FBI man looked up curiously. "Certainly. Of course!"

"What security precautions were taken here last night, between the time we landed the crate of coins and the time they were picked up this morning?"

"That's a fair question," Mr. Quayle said. "And since you were the crew that flew it down, I see no reason why you shouldn't know. As I have told you, Mr. Jones, the private detective who flew down with you, stayed in the warehouse with the shipment all night. So did the foreman of the warehouse crew—a Mr. Van Lasher. He's an old and trusted employee and I believe he's been with Federal for quite some time. In any case, the coin shipment was moved into a small room within the warehouse where valuable

cargo is often kept under lock and key. No flights were due in that night, and no night crew was on duty; so Jones and Lasher stayed with the shipment until the morning work crews reported, keeping awake with coffee and cigarettes. It was a lonely watch and pretty dull. Lasher admitted that he had dozed off lightly once or twice. And then Jones sheepishly admitted that he might have done the same thing. But they were both on guard all night, and one or the other was awake and alert at all times.”

“And nothing happened?”

“Only one thing. Shortly before midnight, Lasher had gone to an all-night lunch counter to refill the coffee jug, and Jones was in the warehouse by himself. The warehouse was dark, lighted only by a few scattered light bulbs.”

“Then the warehouse wasn’t locked?” Captain March asked.

“Oh, yes, the warehouse is always locked, unless a night crew is working. The only people who had keys were the foreman, Van Lasher, and the night watchman. The watchman made his regular rounds that night, but he saw nothing unusual.

“Well, as I said, Jones was by himself when he heard a sound, as though someone had stumbled into a pile of packages or crates that were stacked on the warehouse floor. He jumped to his feet and shouted, whereupon the intruder dashed across the warehouse and out the door that leads to the loading ramp. Lasher had left the door unlocked when he went to get the coffee. Jones could hear feet pounding over the concrete floor and tried to catch the intruder in the beam of his flashlight. Just as the man dashed out the door, he seemed to drop something.”

Mr. Quayle paused a moment, and Johnny Baker said, “Then you *do* have a suspect?”

“No,” Quayle said thoughtfully, “I’m not sure that we do. When Lasher returned with the coffee, he turned on the lights and the two of them looked around. What the prowler had dropped was a flashlight. From the name inked on a piece of adhesive wrapped around the handle, Lasher recognized it as belonging to a young fellow who worked in the warehouse day crew, a lad named Joey Watson.”

Vicki drew in her breath sharply, then quickly covered up her inadvertent expression of surprise by putting her fingers to her lips and coughing lightly. She looked quickly at Cathy and Captain March, remembering that she had casually mentioned Joey’s name to them the other day. But both the pilot and the stewardess seemed to have forgotten all about it.

Mr. Quayle continued. “When the crate was opened at the Royal Palms Hall about nine this morning and the theft discovered, the police immediately called me in on the case, since the interstate aspect of the affair put it under Federal jurisdiction. I immediately began questioning the ground crew and warehouse personnel. Young Watson was at work as usual and I questioned him along with the others. He admitted that the flashlight belongs to him; said he kept it in his locker in the warehouse. But he denied being around the airport at all after he knocked off work for the day. He claimed that he and a pal of his had gone to a movie last evening and then straight home to their boardinghouse. One of my men is checking his story as a matter of routine.”

Captain March was asking another question, but Vicki’s thoughts had gone off in a dizzying cycle of speculation. The flashlight that the prowler had dropped last night was Joey’s! Only yesterday afternoon a foreign-looking stranger had offered Joey a large sum of money to do some kind of “work,” the nature of which he had taken pains to keep obscure! On leaving Joey, the stranger had directed his taxi to the Granada Restaurant in Ybor City! On the plane, old Mr. Tytell had tried to call her attention to the same restaurant—or had he? Could there possibly be any connection between the seemingly unrelated events? Should she reveal these half-formed thoughts—that didn’t seem to make any sense even to her—to Mr. Quayle? He hadn’t been too impressed when she had told him about Mr. Tytell’s queer behavior on the plane. No, she decided. Joey was already under a cloud of suspicion. No use involving him any deeper. She’d have a talk with Joey first.

Her mind came back to the discussion that was going on.

“... and so,” Mr. Quayle was saying, “for the moment we’re at a dead end. The crate that was delivered to the exhibition hall was identical with the one shipped from the museum. If it had been opened and metal scrap substituted for the gold coins, it was the cleverest job I’ve ever seen.”

Vicki remembered Mr. Curtin saying the same thing.

“Maybe the coins were taken out of the crate in the museum in New York before the crate was shipped,” Johnny Baker ventured.

“That’s the baffling thing,” Mr. Quayle said. He shook his head, and his brows wrinkled in puzzlement. “The curator of the museum personally checked on the contents and stood by while the crate was closed and sealed just a few minutes before it was given to the crew of an armored truck for delivery to Idlewild.”

“Well,” Captain March concluded, “all I can say is that you’ve got the darnedest mystery on your hands that I ever came across.”

“You can say that again,” said Mr. Quayle.

Outside the office door, the crew of Flight Seventeen looked at each other for a long moment without speaking.

“What do you make of it, skipper?” Johnny Baker asked.

“I don’t even try.” The captain grinned. “I’ll leave that to the FBI.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll meet you all at the loading gate in forty-five minutes.” He turned and walked away.

“Come on, gals,” Johnny said brightly. “I’ll buy the cokes.”

“Not for me, thanks,” Vicki said. “I have an errand to do.”

She watched Johnny and Cathy stroll away in the direction of the soda fountain, and stood still a minute wondering what to do. Should she go over to the warehouse to talk with Joey? No, better not. No use calling attention to the fact that the stewardess of the plane that had brought in the gold was a friend of the only person thus far who was suspected of having a hand in stealing it. Maybe she’d find him in the snack bar. She directed her steps to the small air-conditioned restaurant. Inside, she looked all around, but there was no sign of Joey.

Well, she thought, there’s nothing she could do now. She’d just have to wait until she got back to Tampa on Sunday. Maybe a couple of extra days would give her a chance to straighten out these wispy, formless thoughts that were buzzing around somewhere in the back of her head.

CHAPTER VI

New York Interlude

WHEN, SIX HOURS LATER IN NEW YORK, VICKI entered the large apartment she shared with five other Federal Airlines hostesses, she found the place a shambles. Furniture was piled up helter-skelter. Canvas covered parts of the floor, and paint buckets and stepladders were stacked in corners. A wave of turpentine-flavored air assailed her nose at the same time that a pounding rhythm of swing-and-sway music from the record player blasted in her ears.

“The lost is found!” Celia Trimble greeted her gaily. “The stranger has returned! Come in, stranger! We’re having a party!”

Vicki waved her hand around at the jumble of scaffolds, paint buckets, and stepladders. “What in the world ...?”

“We’re being painted, Vicki! At last, after two years of pestering the landlord, we’re finally being painted! And to honor this eventful occasion, we’re giving a party. You’re just in time.”

Vicki stepped over the piles of newspapers, brushes, buckets and paint-splattered overalls, and entered the apartment’s big living room. Apparently the painters hadn’t got this far, for the room seemed to be in a fair semblance of order. The rug, however, had been thrown back and two couples were dancing to the swing beat of the music. Dot Crowley was dancing with Pete Carmody, the newspaper reporter, and Jean Cox with Vicki’s former copilot, Dean Fletcher.

When the four spotted Vicki in the living-room doorway, Dean stopped in mid-step and led Jean over to her.

“Well, well,” he said. His tanned face split in a big grin. “How does my little ex-crew member like the sunny South?”

“It’s the greatest.” Vicki laughed.

“Then how come you haven’t got a Florida sun tan?”

“I’m working on it,” Vicki replied. She looked up at the tall flier. “But you’re tan enough for both of us.”

“This tan I got down in Mexico on my vacation,” Dean assured her proudly. “And you know what, Vicki? Remember that hidden valley we discovered down there? Darned if I didn’t find it again while I was flying around this time. And”—he grinned archly—“without you!”

“Impossible!”

“Look, you two,” Jean said. “Why don’t you dance while you talk? I’ll go help Mrs. Duff make the sandwiches.”

Dean Fletcher danced as well as he flew. And that, Vicki knew, was good.

“Think we’ll ever be assigned to the same crew again?” Vicki asked, as Dean whirled her around to the swing of the music.

“In this business”—Dean smiled—“you never can tell. But I have my fingers crossed. I miss you.”

At that moment the music stopped while the record player changed, and Pete Carmody came ambling over. The reporter was tall and thin, and unlike Dean Fletcher, his skin looked as if it hadn't been exposed to the sun for years.

"Hi, Vic!" the reporter said. "We had a whale of a story on the wire today about Tampa. Aren't you on that run?"

Vicki nodded her head.

"Was the story something about gold coins?"

"It was! Know anything about it?"

"Oh, nothing much," Vicki said, crinkling up her mouth in mock unconcern, "except that my plane was carrying the gold."

"What?" Pete almost shouted.

"Don't get excited, Pete." Vicki smiled. "My flight had the gold on board. We didn't know it until we were questioned by the FBI at noon today. So I'm not what you'd call a news source."

"I can see the headlines now," Pete said. "Vicki Barr—famous airlines hostess and gold thief. Admits holding up plane carrying treasure in mid-air. Makes off with booty." He stopped his kidding and grew serious. "No fooling, Vic. Do you know anything I could use?"

"Seriously, Pete," Vicki said, "not a thing. I don't know how much of a story your paper got, but I can tell you that the Tampa police—and the FBI—are up against what they admit is a blank wall."

"You mean to say," Pete asked, "that somebody just waved his magic wand and a chest of gold was changed to a chest of nuts and bolts?"

"Pete," Vicki said, "that's just exactly what it looks like."

At that moment Mrs. Duff, the girls' housekeeper, appeared with a heaping platter of sandwiches. She followed this with a steaming pot of coffee and a cool pitcher of milk.

After the supper was eaten and Mrs. Duff had cleared away the dishes, Pete Carmody got to his feet and clapped his hands for attention.

"We will now," he proclaimed, "play charades. Miss Vicki Barr will captain one team and I will captain the other. Vicki, take your first choice of players."

In the winter-crisp air of New York, and the informal atmosphere of the apartment which she shared with her friends, Vicki relaxed and gave her mind over to the problem of how to act out "A horse—a horse—my kingdom for a horse!"

But deep in her subconscious, like chips of wood in a whirlpool, names and people and things were churning themselves up and around and over and over—Joey's flashlight, a slick Latin-type importer, a sick old man on an airplane, a restaurant in Ybor City, a tired-looking FBI man trying to solve a challenging case.

She was glad when the party broke up early and she could tumble into bed.

"Isn't this turpentine smell awful?" Jean said as she turned out the light and pulled the covers up over her head.

"You won't believe it, Jean," Vicki said, "but it smells like oleander. And I wish it wouldn't."

CHAPTER VII

Ybor City

NEW YORK HAD BEEN ICY COLD AND COVERED with a blanket of snow. Now, as Captain March banked his big airplane into the landing pattern over Tampa, it was as though Vicki were on some kind of futuristic spaceship coming down into a completely different world. Funny, she thought, this morning it was winter, this afternoon it's summer.

When the ship rolled to a standstill in front of the unloading gate and the big door was swung open, Vicki breathed in a deep breath of the thick, sweet-scented air and sighed contentedly. "Golly," she thought, "I'm falling in love with Florida! Me! A girl from Illinois!"

She quickly went through the routine of checking in at flight's end, and then once more found herself face to face with the problem of what to do about Joey. She knew that she had to talk with him, but again she decided against going to the warehouse to see him. It would be better to get his address from Personnel and call him at his boardinghouse.

Just as she was making this decision, she heard a cheerful, familiar voice:

"Hi there, Miss Vicki!" Joey's eager face certainly didn't look like that of a suspected criminal. "I saw your plane come in, and I asked the boss for a few minutes off to come over and say hello."

"You're just the person I wanted to see, Joey," Vicki told him. "Come over to the snack bar and I'll buy you a coke."

"Nothing doing!" The boy grinned. "I'll come with you, but the cokes are on me."

Vicki led the way to one of the booths, and when they had ordered, she said seriously, "Look here, Joey. You may be in trouble."

Joey frowned, then his face brightened in his infectious grin.

"If you mean about that flashlight they found the night the gold shipment was stolen, forget it."

"Forget it?"

"Sure. It was my flashlight all right. But either it was stolen from my locker, or I had left it around and somebody picked it up. The FBI men quizzed me about it, but I proved that I couldn't have been anywhere near the airfield that night. I room with a fellow by the name of Pete Saunders. He works in the terminal checkroom. Well, that particular night, Thursday, I met Pete after work and we ate supper at Cicco's Italian restaurant down by the docks. Then we went to a movie and got home a little after twelve. I told all this to the FBI man, and Pete told him too."

"What I was thinking about," Vicki said, "was the job offer that man made you in here the same afternoon—the man who promised you a hundred dollars to do a job for him and offered to give you twenty-five of it in advance."

Joey's eyes widened.

"How—how in the world did you know about that, Miss Vicki? I haven't mentioned it to a soul. Not even Pete."

"It just so happened, Joey, that I was sitting in the next booth—this very one we're in now—and I

couldn't help overhearing."

All Joey could say was an astonished: "Gee!"

"Have you seen him again? Mr. Duke? Wasn't that his name?"

Joey finally found his voice. "Gosh, no! I figured he was nutty or something. Offering me all that money out of a clear sky. I wouldn't have touched it for anything. It sounded either crazy or crooked, and I didn't want any part of it."

Vicki breathed a deep sigh of genuine relief. She'd been pretty sure that Joey wouldn't get himself mixed up in something wrong.

"If I were you, Joey," Vicki said, "I'd go to Mr. Quayle, the FBI investigator, and tell him about your conversation with Mr. Duke."

"Gee, Vicki!" Joey was so startled by the suggestion that he neglected to add the usual "Miss" which he automatically put in front of her name. "Do you think Mr. Duke might have had something to do with the stolen gold?"

Vicki thought for a swift moment. Her vague, unformed suspicions wouldn't make any sense to the boy. She said: "Not necessarily. But some mighty peculiar things have been going on around this airport. And even though you proved that you weren't in the warehouse Thursday night, it was your flashlight the prowler dropped, and up to now you're the only person who has come under suspicion. I think you ought to go to Mr. Quayle, if, for no other reason, than to show that you want to do everything you can to help him. Besides, sometimes little odd, unrelated facts can be the key that opens up the whole mystery. I'm not saying this one is," she added hastily, "I'm just saying that it could be."

"Gee!" Joey said again. "If you think I should, I'll certainly do it."

"And do it right now," Vicki advised, "before you report back to work."

Joey looked anxiously at the clock over the lunch counter.

"I'm supposed to be back on the job in five minutes. Van's a good guy, but he gets sore when people are late."

"Just tell him the FBI sent for you again. I know it's a sort of fib, but under the circumstances I think it will be all right. And it ought to satisfy your boss."

As the two were about to get up from their seats, a tall, dark-haired young man in a leather windbreaker loomed over the booth.

"Hello there, Joey!" His browned face smiled at Vicki. "Hello," he said.

Joey jumped to his feet. "Hi, Steve! Miss Vicki, this is Steve Miller, the pilot I was telling you about the other day."

"Hello, Steve." Vicki returned his smile. "Do you think you can make a pilot out of this fellow?"

"I think so. At least, I give him 'A' for eagerness."

"But you've got to admit that I took over the controls for a while yesterday." Joey beamed.

"That's right. And almost flipped us over on our back. You're a pilot, Miss Barr—oh, Joey's told me all about you—so you tell him that you've got to learn to fly level before you can do nip-ups and bells. Just as you have to learn to sit on a horse while he's walking, before you can keep your seat when he's going at a gallop."

"That's true, Joey." Vicki smiled. "You do exactly as Mr. Miller tells you, and we'll pin a pair of wings on you yet."

"It's been a pleasure, Miss Barr," Steve Miller said as he turned to go. "Maybe some afternoon when we're both free you'd like to take my ship up for a spin."

"Thanks awfully. I might just take you up on that one of these days." She turned to Joey. "Now you do what I suggested before you go back to work."

“Sure thing, Miss Vicki,” Joey said.

▪

Vicki came downstairs late on Monday morning. Except for Mrs. Tucker puttering around somewhere back in the kitchen area, the big Curtin house was quiet as a church. At the sound of Vicki’s footsteps on the stairs, the housekeeper popped her head out the dining-room door.

“Morning, Miss Vicki. I’ll have some breakfast on the table for you in a jiffy. You don’t want to miss the big goings-on downtown this morning. This is the day the pirates land.”

Vicki sat down at the big dining table and Mrs. Tucker brought her a glass of orange juice.

“You can’t live in Florida without having orange juice for breakfast,” she remarked. “And the girls left you this note.”

Vicki opened it and read:

“Dear Vic: Had some errands to do, so Nina and I have gone on ahead. Wanted to let you get your beauty sleep. Don’t miss the big pirate invasion. The ship comes in about noon. I’ll manage to find you in the crowd—I hope. Love, Louise.”

Vicki looked at her watch. Ten-thirty. She’d have plenty of time. She ate her breakfast and read the morning paper. It was devoted almost entirely to the coming visit of the *José Gasparilla* and the pirate crew that was expected to land and conquer the city shortly after noon. Headlines in the New York papers yesterday had been devoted to the United States new satellite. Here a small story about it was almost lost at the bottom of page one. Vicki giggled. This week Tampa turned back the clock and the calendar a hundred and fifty years!

There was one story on an inside page that caught her eye. It was a follow-up on the theft of the gold coins. The carefully worded account contained no new facts, simply stated that the local police and the FBI were pressing their investigation and that Mr. John Quayle, chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the Tampa district, was confident that the case would be broken soon. There was no mention of Joey Watson or the flashlight clue.

The part of the story that most interested Vicki was a spread of pictures of the antique coins that had been forwarded from the museum in New York. Even in the black-and-white newspaper reproduction, she could see that the coins were of exotic design and extraordinarily beautiful. One showed a huge bird in flight. Another bore the likeness of a sea nymph, her hair blowing above the waves. A third showed the profile of a forgotten queen wearing a tall, many-pointed crown. Her face was encircled by laurel branches and the entire coin was rimmed with stars. On a hunch, Vicki tore the picture out of the paper and slipped it into her purse.

When Mrs. Tucker came in to clear the table, Vicki asked, “Aren’t you going downtown to see the fun?” The housekeeper smiled a motherly smile. “I haven’t missed one yet.”

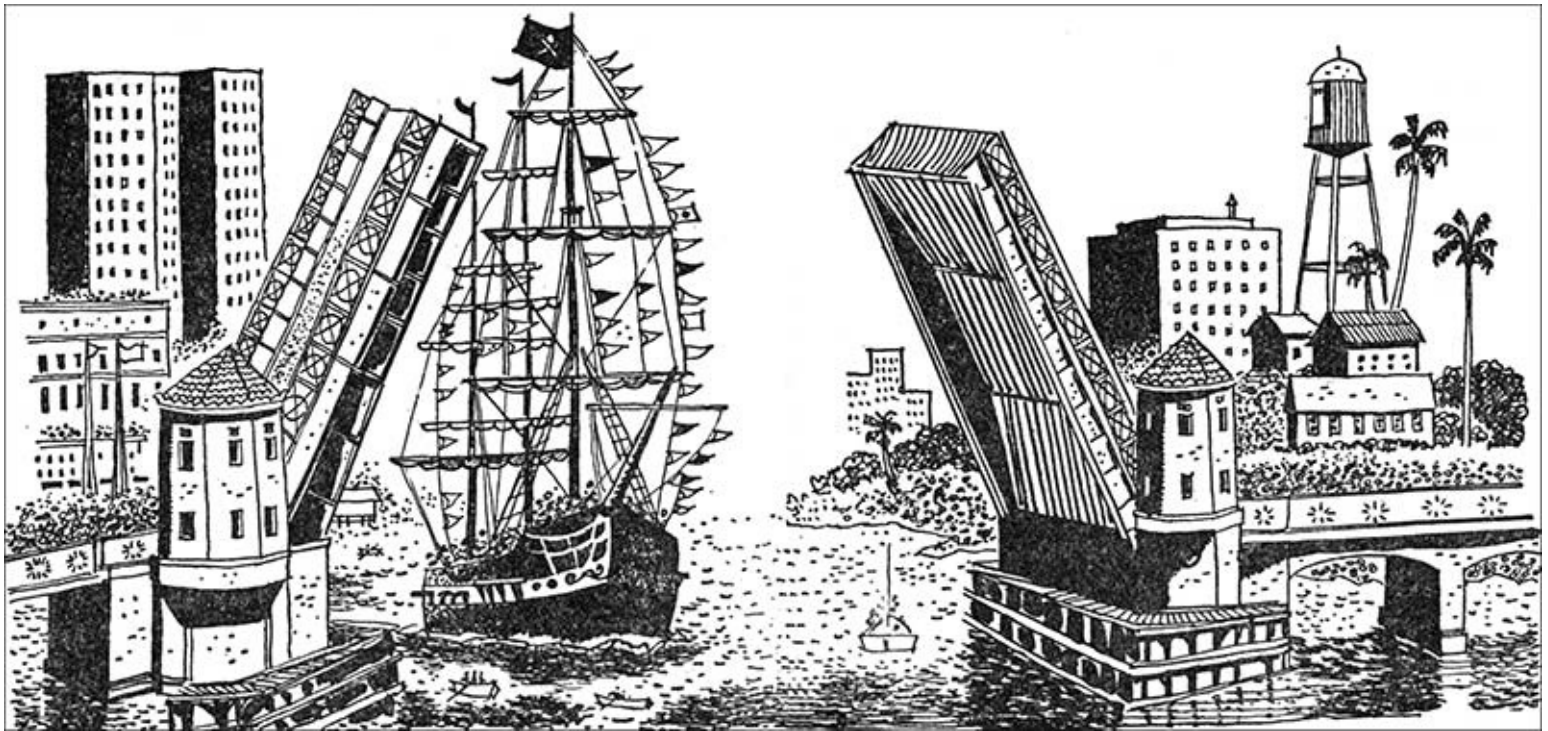
Outside, the sun was shining down out of a cloudless and brilliantly blue sky. A gentle breeze blew in from the Gulf of Mexico, ruffling the fronds of the tall palms that lined the streets and serving to make the heat bearable. As she approached the downtown part of Tampa, the traffic grew heavier and the crowds thicker until, by the time she had made her way to the waterfront, the throng was so jammed that she could hardly push her way through. Golly, Vicki thought, she’d never seen so many people in one place in all her life! Not even in New York. The paper had said that more than half a million people were expected to jam the streets today, and Vicki estimated that the figure couldn’t be far wrong. This was more than four times the normal population of the city. She wondered how all of them had managed to find places to stay.

She elbowed her way to the front of the crowd just in time to see a big drawbridge swing up to allow a big sailing ship to enter the upper Bay. It was an authentic-looking pirate ship, a full-rigged sailing vessel. Hundreds of colorful pennants flew from lines rigged all over its superstructure, and its decks and yardarms were jammed with men in fierce-looking pirate costumes, waving cutlasses and shooting pistols into the air. The ship's sails were furled and a pair of tugboats, tiny by comparison, were pushing the big ship through the water.

Dozens of cruisers, sailboats, outboards, and skiffs were clustered all around her, like chicks around a mother hen. Everybody was shouting and yelling. People in the crowd that milled around Vicki were craning their heads to see over other people's heads, and fathers were holding little children on their shoulders to let them see the fun. Peddlers circulated through the crowd carrying trays of souvenirs—pirate flags, Confederate flags, tiny brass figures of pirates, pistols, cutlasses, and model ships.

Caught up helplessly in the surging throng, Vicki was pushed this way and that. But she found that she too was cheering and shouting with the rest of them and having the time of her life.

Then the pirates landed, amid a wild chorus of cheering and yelling and firing of blank pistol shots. The costumed members of Ye Mystic Krewe clambered onto gaily decorated floats, and amid the strident music of half a dozen bands, the parade began to move slowly up the street away from the docks.



On one of the floats, wearing a huge black beard, an eye patch, and brandishing a revolver in the air, Vicki saw a figure that looked vaguely familiar. She blinked and stared a second time. It was Mr. Curtin! He wore a striped red-and-white sash around his waist, and on his head was perched a tricornered hat with a huge skull and crossbones painted on its front.

Carried along by the tide of the crowd, Vicki waved frantically and yelled at the top of her voice: “Hi, Mr. Curtin! Hi, Mr. Curtin!”

Finally he saw her and waved back. “Yo-ho-ho, Vicki, and a bottle of rum! Where are the girls?”

“I don’t know!” Vicki shouted. But by this time the crowd had swept her away, and in an instant she lost sight of Mr. Curtin and his float.

The whole city was enjoying itself. When she finally wormed her way out of the middle of the huge

throng, Vicki could see couples dancing in the streets under the waving palms to the music of the bands. Children were running around everywhere, carrying balloons and little toy models of ships and pirate swords. Over at the wharf, now securely tied up and deserted by its crew, the *José Gasparilla*, its pennants flapping in the gentle breeze, rocked to the motion of the water and squeaked as its sides rubbed against the rubber-tire fenders that lined the dock.

Free at last from the thickest part of the crowd of swarming people, Vicki stopped to catch her breath. There wasn't a chance in a million, she thought, that she would find Nina and Louise. Well, it was a pleasant day, so why not walk around and see the sights! She hadn't had a chance to do much sight-seeing since she had been in Tampa.

At that moment her eye was attracted to a painted sign atop one of the dockside buildings:

VISIT GLAMOROUS YBOR CITY—
Enchanted Land of Fiesta and Romance

Ybor City! The Granada Restaurant! The little old man on the plane had appeared to be trying to direct her attention to it. The mysterious Mr. Duke had gone there after his peculiar talk with Joey. She hadn't been able to rid her mind of the nagging thought that these two events might be connected. So why not go and see the place for herself? She walked for some time through the crowded streets before she could find an empty taxi.

Ybor City was quite different from the modern section of Tampa. Here the streets were narrow and ancient buildings of brick and stucco sat flush with the sidewalk. Unlike the broad, palm-lined boulevards of modern Tampa, there were few trees in evidence in Ybor City. Some of the buildings had doorways of intricate iron grillwork, and on some, balconies overhung the sidewalks to make sheltered arcades. This Latin Quarter of Tampa, Vicki thought, was indeed a city within a city, a bit of old Spain dropped down in the middle of a modern American metropolis.

She saw signs in some of the store windows printed in Spanish, and most of the people in the streets, aside from those whose clothes and bearing marked them as tourists, had a dark-haired, dark-complexioned Latin look. Flags, small gold-colored ships, and other souvenirs of the Gasparilla Festival filled the shopwindows and were hawked by peddlers on the street.

Attracted by the old-world charm of the Quarter, Vicki stopped the taxi, paid her fare, and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She was in no hurry and decided to walk around and see the sights and visit the Granada Restaurant when she came to it! She walked leisurely down the street.

As she passed an old brick house with an iron grill around its doorway, she noticed a sign: F. R. EATON-SMITH—TRAVEL AGENCY.

Now why was that name so familiar? Suddenly she remembered. Of course! That was the name of the man on the plane the other day—the day the gold was stolen—the man who had told her he was a world traveler and lecturer and operated a travel agency in Tampa. It struck her as a little odd that he should have his office out here in the Latin Quarter instead of downtown Tampa. The windows were filled with attractive travel posters from all over the world.

She halted momentarily to look at them, and at that moment a truck pulled up to the curb and stopped. The driver stepped up to Mr. Eaton-Smith's door and rang the bell while two other men wrestled a large crate out of the back of the truck and deposited it on the sidewalk. The crate was marked *Air Express* in large letters, and Vicki noticed casually that it was securely wrapped around with metal bands.

Just then Mr. Eaton-Smith answered the bell and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Crate for you, sir," the truckman said.

"Just carry it into the front hallway, boys," he said.

His glance went to Vicki, whose progress along the sidewalk had been momentarily blocked by the truckmen and their burden. As he stared at her, he looked exactly as he had on the plane when he had

given her a hand with old Mr. Tytell—dignified, slightly portly, slightly bald, and with his eyes scarcely visible behind the highly polished, rimless glasses.

He smiled, stepped up to Vicki, and offered his hand.

“Well, well,” he said, “aren’t you the little hostess from the airplane the other day?”

“Hello, Mr. Eaton-Smith,” Vicki said, accepting his hand. “It isn’t often that I run into my passengers after they have left the plane.”

“And it’s a real pleasure to see you again, Miss—”

“Miss Barr,” Vicki said.

“Oh, yes, of course. Miss Barr. This is a pleasant time to be visiting Tampa, with the Festival in full swing.” He glanced over his shoulder. “If you’ll excuse me, Miss Barr, I’d better attend to this express shipment.”

Nodding his head politely, he disappeared into the house.

Vicki strolled on, and turning a corner, saw a sign that read: GRANADA RESTAURANT. It was on a street with the un-Spanish name of Fifth Avenue.

The Granada was a colorful restaurant, and judging by the number of people seated at the tables, a popular one. The foyer just inside the door was floored with bright mosaic tile as were the walls of the room. A tiny fountain in the middle of the hall was surrounded by small potted palms and brightly colored flowers. A huge archway provided the entrance to the restaurant proper.

As Vicki paused under the archway and looked around the room, a dark-haired waiter, wearing a short white jacket, stepped up and greeted her with typical Spanish politeness.

“You’re meeting someone, señorita?” He spoke with a soft Spanish accent.

“No. I’m alone.”

“Then here’s a nice table for you.” The waiter led the way to a small table in a corner. “Will this be comfortable?”

For Vicki’s purpose, the corner table was perfect. Sitting here, she could view the entire room and the entrance as well. She herself was half shielded by a cluster of palms growing out of a blue-and-white urn.

In the opposite corner of the room, a musician in a Spanish costume was softly playing Spanish tunes on an accordion.

To the waiter who was standing by, she said, “Do you have other musicians here, possibly at night?” She indicated a piano beside which the accordionist was standing as he played.

“*Sí, sí!* At dinner we have also the piano and a violin.”

Vicki’s heart quickened. A violin! Maybe she was on the right track after all!

“Your violinist?” she asked. “Is he a tall, thin, elderly man with gray hair?”

The waiter laughed and slapped his expansive stomach as though Vicki had made a funny joke.

“You do not know Pedro, señorita. He is big like me. Even fatter.” He put his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss into the air. “But his violin—it is the sweetest in Ybor City.”

“Then you don’t know a violin player named Mr. Tytell?”

The waiter wrinkled his brows and slowly shook his head. “Tytell-a?” He put a soft vowel sound on the end of the name. “No, señorita. Only Pedro plays the violin at the Granada.”

Vicki’s heart fell as quickly as it had leaped up a moment before. To cover her disappointment, she gave her attention to the menu the waiter had handed her. She wasn’t hungry, having eaten a big breakfast only a short time before, but she felt that she had to order something to justify her presence. She ordered a sandwich with an unpronounceable Spanish name.

The sandwich fascinated Vicki. It contained sausage, cheese, sliced tomato, sliced olives, pimento, and capers. And it was so huge that it would have made a complete meal by itself. Along with it, the waiter

brought a silver pot of coffee, which, when he poured it into a delicately made demitasse cup, proved to be as thick and sweet as hot chocolate. Vicki looked around the room as she nibbled at the sandwich's ample contents.

Most of the patrons were Americans, tourists in town for the Festival, she guessed, by looking at their pale, untanned faces. Scattered among them were people with distinctly Spanish faces, many of them dressed in colorful Spanish costumes. These, she knew, must be the natives of the Quarter. The air was filled with a cheerful babble of conversation that was a mixture of English and Spanish.

Suddenly a loud, cheerful Spanish-accented voice made Vicki turn her head sharply. Raymond Duke was coming through the arched doorway.

"Arturo!" he hailed the waiter who had served Vicki's lunch. "*Cómo está?* How goes it?"

"*Bueno*, Señor Duke!" The waiter's dark eyes and broad smile beamed a hearty welcome. It was plain that Raymond Duke was a regular patron of the Granada.

"Hello, Duke!" a group at a nearby table called. "Come over and sit with us."

Duke stepped briskly to their table, shook hands all around, and sat down in an empty chair.

"Was it hot in Havana?" one of the men asked.

"Not on Veradero Beach." Duke flashed a white-toothed smile.

A few more words and Duke excused himself. He sat down alone at a small table with his back toward Vicki. After ordering his lunch from the ubiquitous Arturo, he took some papers out of his pocket and settled down to read them.

Every minute or so, as Duke was eating his lunch, various people stopped by his table to say hello. "How's the Duke?" "That was a mighty fast trip to Havana!" "What's the good word, Duke?" He certainly was a popular man in Ybor City, Vicki could see that plainly.

Duke took his time finishing lunch. Vicki sipped at her coffee and finally ordered another pot which she didn't want. At last, Duke called for his check, paid it, and got to his feet. Vicki called for her own check at the same time, and by the time Arturo had taken her money and returned with her change, and she had stepped out once again into Fifth Avenue, she saw Duke's tall, broad-shouldered figure down at the end of the block.

Vicki had come to Ybor City on the off-chance that she might again see the little old man from the plane. Instead, she had run into the mysterious Mr. Duke, the man who had offered Joey some kind of "job" on the afternoon before the gold robbery. Could there possibly be a connection somewhere? She didn't see how, but since she'd come this far, her detective instincts were too keen to let her stop now.

She sauntered in Duke's direction.

It was well that she walked slowly. Duke was stopped half a dozen times in two blocks by people who loudly addressed him as "The Duke" and exchanged pleasantries with him. Finally he turned into the hallway of a house, pressed the buzzer, and when it was answered, disappeared through the door. Clearly this was neither his house nor his office or he would have gone in without ringing the bell. Vicki waited on the street for fifteen minutes, looking in the shopwindows and trying her best to act like a tourist. But Mr. Duke did not reappear. On an impulse, she retraced her steps to the Granada Restaurant.

The big room was now more than half empty, settling down as do all restaurants into the mid-afternoon doldrums. Arturo, the waiter, was sitting at a table writing out the evening menus in Spanish, in purple ink, on large sheets of yellow paper. He looked up as Vicki approached.

"Yes, señorita?"

"It's about Mr. Duke. I have some business with him. Unfortunately I don't have his address. I thought possibly you might help me." She took a dollar bill from her purse and placed it on the table. "This is for your trouble."

The waiter took the bill and slipped it into his pocket. “Ah, yes,” he said. “But weren’t you here at lunch when Mr. Duke was here?”

“Yes—” Vicki hesitated. “But he was speaking to so many people—”

“*Sí, sí!* I understand. And you wish to know where he lives?”

“That’s right. Or the address of his office.”

Arturo shrugged. “To find the Duke is like putting your finger on quicksilver. But his home is on Columbus Drive at the corner of Thirteenth Street. A red-brick house with a balcony. Perhaps you can find him there.”

Vicki inquired the way to Columbus Drive, and when the waiter told her that it was two streets up, she thanked him and left the cool interior of the restaurant.

Walking along the street, fascinated by the colorful costumes of the people and by the open-air stands where white-capped chefs were serving steaming hot bowls of bean soup to any passer-by that wanted one, Vicki took stock of the situation.

She knew that Mr. Raymond Duke was a regular patron of the Granada Restaurant. But since, on Thursday, she had heard him direct a taxi to take him there, this was not startling news. From the snatches of his various conversations with people in the restaurant that she had overheard, she knew that he had many and varied business connections. But he had told this to Joey, so again she had learned nothing new. Old Mr. Tytell was *not* playing in the Granada’s orchestra. She had leaped blindly to a conclusion that he was employed there when she had found the marked travel folder on the seat the elderly man had occupied.

What she had expected to discover in Ybor City, Vicki didn’t know. But what she had actually found was absolutely nothing. There really didn’t seem to be much sense in going on to Mr. Duke’s house. But since an impulse had made her inquire about his address, and since she was within a block of the house, there was no reason why she shouldn’t go on.

When she turned the corner into Columbus Drive, she saw that it was no different from any other street in Ybor City. The same curio shops, the same restaurants, the same crowds of festive people, the same sidewalk peddlers. She found the house with no difficulty. A balcony of wrought-iron grillwork overhung the front door.

She stood before the house for several minutes, looking at the intricate, old-fashioned grillwork over the door, peering at the heavily curtained windows. She was about to move on when the door opened and a man stepped out.

It was old Mr. Tytell! He still looked as shabby and harassed as he had on the plane. His sparse gray hair was still as badly in need of trimming. There was the same bewildered, hunted look in his eyes.

When he looked up and saw Vicki, he recognized her immediately. He clasped her hand, almost desperately, she thought.

“Miss Barr!” he whispered. “Do you remember me?”

“Why, certainly I do, Mr. Tytell.” Vicki said, trying to keep her voice calm and normal in tone. The unexpected sight of this old man who had been so much in her thoughts had sent her heart to pounding. So there *was* some connection between Tytell and Duke and the Granada Restaurant—and possibly with Duke’s talk with Joey, and—her imagination took a wild leap—maybe even with the stolen gold! But she said evenly:

“It’s nice to see you again. You look much better than you did the last time I saw you.” This was a fib—if anything the old violinist looked paler and more worried—but she felt that she had to say something to keep him here until she could put the mixed-up thoughts that were spinning around crazily in her head into some order. “A few days in Florida seem to have done you a lot of good.”

The old man still clung to her hand.

“Miss Barr—I want—I have to talk to you—”

At that moment a voice boomed from the open doorway.

“Old man! Get going!”

Raymond Duke stood in the entryway, glowering under dark eyebrows.

“Yes, sir,” the old man muttered, and he scurried away like a frightened rabbit.

She looked at Duke. His dark frown had magically become a white-toothed smile. He bowed his head graciously.

“Ah,” he said, “the young lady from the restaurant.”

This observation again set Vicki’s heart to pounding. Had Duke seen her the day she’d overheard his conversation in the airport snack bar? She stammered a reply:

“The—the restaurant?”

“Ah, yes. It isn’t every day that a lovely young lady lunches at the Granada alone. Raymond Duke has an eye for beauty—if you will allow me to introduce myself—and even though you sat by yourself at a corner table, believe me that I noticed and admired you.”

Again Vicki noticed the slight lisp in his voice as he spoke.

Relieved, Vicki smiled. This was a break she certainly hadn’t expected—a chance to talk with this man, who like old Mr. Tytell, had been so much in her thoughts these past few days.

“I am flattered, Mr. Duke,” she said coyly.

“I see,” Duke said casually, “that you are acquainted with our elderly friend.” He nodded at the retreating figure of Mr. Tytell who was hurrying down Columbus Drive, and at that instant, turned a corner and disappeared from view.

“Not really,” Vicki replied casually. “I met him on the airplane coming down from New York last week. My name’s Vicki Barr. I’m a stewardess on Federal Airlines and Mr. Tytell was ill. That’s why I remembered him so well.”

“Ah, so,” Duke said, his smile never leaving his dark-skinned face.

“Does—does he work for you?” Vicki asked hesitantly. “He told me that he was a musician, a violinist.”

“Possibly he plays the violin. I don’t know. But here in Ybor City he works as a handyman. Runs errands.” He shrugged. “An old man can’t do much to earn a living.”

“I’m a little surprised,” Vicki ventured, “that, in view of his circumstances, he came to Florida from New York by first-class air travel.”

Again Duke’s face darkened momentarily, but the smile reappeared almost instantly. And once more he shrugged his shoulders in the gesture that is almost as much a part of the Spanish language as spoken words.

“*Quién sabe?* Who knows?”

The conversation had come to a dead end. Vicki would have liked to prolong it, but she didn’t know what to say.

“It’s been pleasant meeting you, Miss—ah—Miss Barr,” Duke said. “Visit us in Ybor City again.” He inclined his head in a short, nodding bow. “*Adiós.*” And with that he turned and disappeared through the doorway.

Vicki walked slowly down the street. At the corner she hailed an empty taxi and directed the driver to the Curtin residence. Then she leaned back wearily in the seat and attempted to put in order the scrambled thoughts that still spun crazily in her head.

She had been right after all! She still couldn’t imagine what the connection between Duke and old Mr.

Tytell could be. But the old man *was* running errands for Duke, and seemed frightened half to death! And he *had* whispered desperately: “I have to talk to you!”

Maybe she was letting her imagination run away with her. But one thing she was sure of. It was time to have another talk with Mr. Quayle of the FBI!

She leaned forward in her seat.

“Driver,” she said, “I’ve changed my mind. Take me to the airport.”

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Quayle Again

“COME IN, MISS BARR.”

The FBI man greeted Vicki with a tired smile and offered her a chair. He looked as though he hadn't had too many hours of restful sleep during the past few nights.

“I had a talk with your young friend, Watson, yesterday. I suppose that's why you're here.”

Vicki nodded.

“It was wise of you to have the lad come and see me. I certainly agree that Mr. Duke's proposal to him was a most unusual one. As soon as the boy left I tried to contact Duke, but discovered that he was in Cuba and was expected back today.”

“Yes, I know,” Vicki said.

Mr. Quayle looked at her sharply for a moment and then went on:

“However, I did make some discreet inquiries about him. It appears that he is in the import-export business, engaged in trade between the United States and Cuba. So far as I can tell, his trading is thoroughly respectable and legitimate, being principally concerned with sugar, although he also deals in laces, perfumes, antiques, and other luxury items. He seems to be fairly well known here at the airport, since a great many of his shipments come in by air express and air freight.”

The FBI investigator grinned and reflectively stroked the stubble on his square jaw.

“You remarked a moment ago that you knew Mr. Duke had been in Cuba. Do I gather that you have been doing some sleuthing on your own?”

“A few things were worrying me,” Vicki said seriously, “and I didn't want to bother you with them until I had a little more to go on. The other day—” She paused and then started over again. “You may remember that when you questioned our crew the other day I mentioned an old man on the flight who seemed to be behaving in a peculiar manner? At the time you didn't attach much importance to it.”

Mr. Quayle nodded his head slowly as he thought back over the Friday meeting.

“Uh-huh,” he said.

“Well,” Vicki went on, “I saw him again today.”

As Vicki told her story, the FBI agent listened in attentive silence. Vicki repeated her experience with Mr. Tytell on the plane; how Mr. Eaton-Smith had helped to keep the old man calm; how Mr. Tytell had been so anxious to talk at first, but had lapsed into silence after she had served his lunch; and how she had found the travel folder that seemed to direct her to the Granada Restaurant in Ybor City. She told the story in more detail than she had on Friday, so that Mr. Quayle would get all the background that led up to her present vague suspicions and feeling of unrest.

Then she told about overhearing Raymond Duke's conversation with Joey Watson in the snack bar and her surprise when Duke directed the taxi driver to take him to the same restaurant that was named on the travel folder Mr. Tytell had left in his seat.

“And so this afternoon, after the pirate crew had landed, I decided to go out to Ybor City and see this restaurant for myself. I thought that maybe Mr. Tytell might be playing his violin in the orchestra.”

Mr. Quayle remained silent, puffing on an old smoke-blackened briar pipe and nodding now and then and muttering “Yes. ... Yes. ... Uh-huh. ... I see.”

Vicki went on with her story. She told about seeing Mr. Eaton-Smith again at his office; of seeing Raymond Duke at the Granada; and finally, of finding old Mr. Tytell apparently working as an errand boy for Duke.

“He seemed frightened half to death, Mr. Quayle,” she continued. “He clutched my hand like a little boy and kept saying, ‘I *have* to talk to you.’ I don’t know what it all adds up to, if anything. But I can’t help having a strange feeling about it.”

“Yes,” Mr. Quayle said, “I can see what you mean.”

“In the first place,” Vicki said, “if Mr. Tytell is so poor that he hadn’t eaten the day I saw him on the plane, and if he has to make a living by running errands, why was he flying to Florida on a luxury airplane? Why didn’t he come by bus, or at least on an economy coach flight?”

“That’s an interesting question,” Mr. Quayle agreed.

“Maybe I’m imagining things, Mr. Quayle. But it was Raymond Duke who made that strange proposition to Joey. It was Joey’s flashlight that was found at the scene of the robbery. It was old Mr. Tytell who tried to direct me to Ybor City—and who I found today at Raymond Duke’s house so scared he could hardly talk. All of these odd coincidences, somehow, seem to tie together. Anyway, I thought it was time to talk to you.”

“You are a very wise young lady, Miss Barr,” Quayle said, knocking out the ashes of his pipe into a tray on his desk. “And you’re a good detective too. You have good instincts. And good hunches.”

He got up from his chair.

“Let’s keep this meeting a secret between you and me. You’ve given me some ideas that I’m going to look into. Meanwhile, continue to keep your eyes open. And don’t hesitate to come straight to me with any other notions that may occur to you.” He smiled his quiet, friendly smile. “As I said, you’re a pretty good detective.”

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Curiously enough, Vicki was back in Ybor City that night, having dinner with the Curtins. This time they ate in a restaurant called the Spanish Park. It was very much like the Granada, Vicki thought, with archways, tiled floors and walls, potted palms and tinkling fountain.

Dinner began with an assortment of fruits and a spicy Spanish bean soup called *Sopa de Garbanzo*. Mr. Curtin told her that this soup was the speciality of Ybor City and that it was served free at street booths all during Festival Week. She remembered seeing the soup booths on the sidewalks that afternoon.

The dinner continued with Cuban bread baked in a banana leaf; then chicken cooked with yellow rice and a whole assortment of spicy vegetables. It was topped off by coconut ice cream served in a coconut shell.

As she ate, Vicki looked around at the people in the restaurant. They seemed to represent about the same cross-section of Americans and Spanish-Americans she had seen in the Granada at noon. A small orchestra played soft Spanish music. It had a violinist, but he was a short, fat man wearing Spanish clothes. She wondered what Mr. Tytell was doing. Then she shook these thoughts out of her head. She had told her suspicions to the FBI. That was all she could do at the moment. Mr. Curtin was telling a joke, and she joined in the laughter.

When they left the restaurant, the air of Ybor City was full of the Pirate Festival. A peddler offered a tray of the souvenirs Vicki had seen that afternoon—small pirate ships, pistols, cutlasses, and pirate figurines, all made of bright coppery-gold metal. Mr. Curtin bought one of each. “For little Ed Ernest, the boy next door,” he explained.

“You *will* be back in Tampa for the torchlight parade on Thursday night, won’t you, Vicki?” Louise asked.

“I certainly will,” Vicki replied. “From your description of it, I couldn’t miss it for the world.”

As they were driving home through streets crowded with merrymakers, Vicki asked:

“Have there been any developments in the gold coin mystery, Mr. Curtin?”

Louise’s father shook his head.

“The FBI hasn’t a single clue to go on. It is as though some ancient alchemist reversed himself and muttered a few magic words that changed a chest of gold into a chest of nuts and bolts.”

Vicki remembered that Pete Carmody had said exactly the same thing the other night in New York.

CHAPTER IX

Skull and Crossbones

HEAVY STORMS, CARRYING SNOW, HAIL, FOG, AND winds of gale proportions had swirled down out of the northwest and enveloped the entire Atlantic seaboard from the Carolinas northward in the worst weather of the year. All flights out of New York had been canceled for twenty-four hours, and so now it was Thursday afternoon, instead of Wednesday, when Captain March touched down the tricycle landing gear of his big DC-6-B on the concrete strip at Tampa airport.

The usually calm and placid air had been as rough as a rolling sea even at the plane's normal "over weather" altitude for the first two hours of the flight; and since the ship was packed to capacity due to yesterday's cancellations, Vicki and Cathy had their hands full.

But here, over Florida's west coast, the sun shone brightly. The blue waters of Tampa Bay caught a billion sunbeams and threw them back up into the sky like a shower of tiny diamonds. Below, the palm trees fluttered their long fronds in the lazy breeze.

It had been just a week ago today, Vicki remembered, that their ship had carried the cargo of gold coins that had seemed to vanish so mysteriously into thin air. She wondered if Mr. Quayle had acted on the information she had given him after her adventures in Ybor City—or if there had been any new developments of any kind in the mystery of the stolen gold coins. Well, in any case, she'd soon find out. But right now she had better get a move on if she wanted to be in time for tonight's big event.

It was late by the time she arrived at the Curtin home. Mrs. Tucker, the housekeeper, met her at the door. "We heard about the bad weather in New York on the radio," Mrs. Tucker said, "and weren't sure whether you were going to make it today or not. The girls went on ahead to take their places on the float for the parade. They said to tell you to meet them for dinner about eight o'clock at the Spanish Park, the restaurant you all went to the other night."

Vicki saw that Mrs. Tucker was carrying a light coat over her arm, as though she had been just about to go out. The housekeeper added:

"Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Vicki, before I leave?" She smiled half-apologetically, as though a woman of her age and dignity should be aloof from such gala goings-on. "I thought I'd go and see the parade myself."

"You go right ahead," Vicki said cheerfully. "Don't worry about me. Maybe I'll see you in Ybor City." She hurried upstairs to her room, slipped out of her blue uniform, showered, and then wriggled into a sleeveless, red silk dress with a flaring skirt that she had bought especially for the occasion. With her silvery blond hair she might not look much like a Spanish señorita, but at least the bright crimson dress was a gesture.

When her taxi set her down on the edge of the Latin Quarter, the old streets, with their archways extending out over the sidewalks, were teeming with people. Some wore the light-colored sports clothes that marked them as tourists and sight-seers. Most of the men and women, and practically all the children—of whom hundreds were running around laughing and shouting—were in costume. Some were dressed

in Spanish clothes, others wore pirate outfits. Music poured from loud-speakers over the sidewalks and from distant bands. Vicki supposed the unseen bands must be on the floats which were probably forming up somewhere out of her sight for the parade.

At the curbs the free bean-soup stands were doing a lively business. Red roses, geraniums, and varieties of other brilliant flowers spilled out of windows and strewed the sidewalks. Some of the younger people were dancing in the streets. Several groups were singing. Some people were already finding places along the street and craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the coming parade.

A gay spirit of carnival had Ybor City in its grasp, and Vicki joined in the laughter as she allowed herself to be carried along on the human tide of the huge crowd. She stopped at one sidewalk shop to buy a souvenir for her young sister Ginny. She chose one of the miniature imitation-gold pirate ships that seemed to be the Festival's most popular souvenir, and slipped it into her handbag.

She paused again to buy a red rose from an old woman who was selling flowers under an arcade. As she slipped it into her hair, two boys with a guitar stopped and serenaded her with a few rhythmic chords. Vicki couldn't control the impulse to whirl gaily around in a Spanish dance step.

She wound up against an iron grillwork gate and paused to catch her breath. She looked up and a familiar sign caught her eye: F. R. EATON-SMITH—TRAVEL AGENCY. Underneath it was a hastily lettered cardboard placard: WELCOME TO THE GASPARRILLA FESTIVAL. *Open House—Refreshments.*

Inside, the house was a blaze of light. People were going in and out in a steady parade. On impulse, Vicki walked up the three steps to the entryway and entered the hall.

At a long table against one wall, two señoritas were serving cakes and fruit punch. Vicki accepted a cake from a tray and a glass of punch.

"Is Mr. Eaton-Smith around?" Vicki asked one of the serving girls. She thought it would be polite, and in the spirit of the evening, to thank her host for his hospitality.

The girl laughed gaily, and waved a hand aimlessly in the direction of the several rooms that led off the center hall.

"He's around somewhere. Anywhere."

"What a wonderful old house," Vicki thought as she looked around. "It must be at least a hundred years old. Maybe more." The broad doorways were hung with heavy brocade drapes, and huge oil paintings, so dark with age that she could hardly make out the subject matter, decorated the walls. She wandered aimlessly into the next room. At the doorway she stepped aside to avoid a man and woman who were coming out.

As she did so, her toe struck an object on the floor that was half hidden behind an ornate screen. It was a violin case, scuffed, battered, and gray with age. There seemed to be something vaguely familiar about it; then, suddenly, she remembered the case that Mr. Tytell had carried so lovingly on the plane.

She looked at it more closely. Yes, the leather had worn away on the handle to expose the metal clasp, in the same way the old man's case had been worn when she sat beside him in the plane. She bent down and lifted the lid gently. Inside was a fiddle that appeared to be as old and time-worn as the case. She looked for initials or some identifying mark on the inside of the lid, but there were none.

Oh, well, Vicki thought, there must be a thousand old violins in a place as music-minded as Ybor City. She went on into the room.

On the shelves of a long built-in cabinet that lined one wall were dozens of the little metal ships and swords and pirate figurines that were being hawked by peddlers all over the city. Or were these real works of art and Mr. Eaton-Smith a collector? She picked up one of the ships to look at it more closely. No, it was just like the one she had bought a few moments ago for Ginny—just a cheap little gold-colored metal figure. Odd, though, that Mr. Eaton-Smith should have so many of them. Maybe he gave them to prospective customers to advertise the Pirate Festival.

Strolling casually around the room, admiring the paintings and the antique Spanish furniture, she came presently to a door that opened into a dimly lighted room not much larger than a storage closet. Three men stood inside, talking in low half-whispers. Facing her was Mr. F. R. Eaton-Smith, looking as dignified as usual in the polished rimless glasses that gave his eyes such a shiny look. His face was slightly averted as he talked earnestly with a tall, dark-haired man who was dressed in a bullfighter's costume. A third man, stocky and heavy-set, stood with his back to the door. He was wrapped in a heavy black cloak and wore a big pirate's hat. Vicki could see that he was wearing a black mask over his eyes.

This was no time to interrupt, even to say "Thank you," and she was about to leave when the bullfighter turned his head. When Vicki saw Raymond Duke's long, deeply tanned face with its thin black mustache, she involuntary gasped. At the sound Mr. Eaton-Smith looked up, a look of surprise on his face.

"Who's there?" he said sharply, and stepped toward the door.

"The airline stewardess!" he exclaimed. "Miss Barr!"

"Hello, Mr. Eaton-Smith," Vicki said, hoping that her voice didn't sound as nervous as she felt. "I—I was just looking for you to pay my respects."

"So I see," the travel agent said coldly, staring at her intently through his shiny spectacles.

Raymond Duke stepped forward and made her a slight bow, a broad white-toothed smile gleaming in his dark face.

"Ah! The lovely lady of the restaurant! Welcome to our fiesta!"

The third man had seemed to stiffen at Mr. Eaton-Smith's mention of her name. He remained frozen in his tracks, his broad back turned to the doorway.



The men were talking in low whispers

“There are refreshments in the hallway, Miss Barr,” Eaton-Smith said. “Please enjoy yourself. I will join you in a moment.”

Vicki turned away, relieved to be free of the awkward situation, but with a hundred thoughts tumbling over and over in her head in wild confusion, each one seeming to cry out for recognition.

So there was some sort of connection between Duke and Eaton-Smith! She had found old Mr. Tytell half frightened out of his wits leaving Duke’s house. He had cried: “I *have* to talk to you!” And now the old man’s violin case in Eaton-Smith’s house! She was sure of that now! If Mr. Tytell was also working as Eaton-Smith’s errand boy, was he as frightened of him as he had been of Duke? And did all these things have any bearing on Duke’s strange proposition to Joey? And to the fact that Joey had been the only suspect up to now, at least so far as she knew, of the theft of the pirate gold? And who was the third man who had stood with his back to her? Was there something familiar about that stocky figure? She had obviously surprised them while they were talking about something they didn’t want overheard. If not, why Mr. Eaton-Smith’s brusque manner after his politeness of the other day, and the open hospitality of his house tonight?

All these thoughts flashed through Vicki’s mind in the short time it took her to walk across the room. As she was entering the hallway, a heavy black figure brushed past her, bulled its way through the people

who had entered in response to Mr. Eaton-Smith's welcome sign, and bolted through the door into the street.

As he flashed past her, Vicki caught a glimpse of a white skull-and-crossbones design on the front of his hat. He might be the key to the mystery! She had to find out! She started after him.

Somewhere behind her she heard the lisping, accented voice of Raymond Duke saying urgently: "Keep her here a few minutes! Don't let her go now!"

As she dashed through the doorway she heard a muttered oath.

CHAPTER X

The Torchlight Parade

IN THE STREET OUTSIDE IT HAD SUDDENLY GROWN dark, with the last, brilliant red rays of the setting sun bathing the housetops to the west in a crimson glow. The crowds in the street had become even heavier and noisier, and down at the end of the block, Vicki heard the blaring bands and saw the bobbing flames of the torches as the parade went by.

She looked around frantically. How was she ever going to spot one man in this mad, confused throng? Then, down the block, moving in the direction of the parade, she saw a stocky figure, his black costume standing out in the sea of so many colorful costumes. He was pushing his way ruthlessly through the mass of people that jammed the street.

She ran after him, stumbling, bumping into people, sometimes nearly falling, but never letting that broad, black back out of her sight. Then the man came to the corner, at the intersection of the cross street along which the noisy, colorful parade was passing. He slipped into the gay crowd of marchers and was lost to sight. She turned her head to look back over her shoulder. The tall figure of Raymond Duke, with his shiny bullfighter's cap perched jauntily on his head, was moving rapidly in her direction. With a little gasp, Vicki ran to the passing line of marchers, and then she too was swallowed up by the parade.

Now she was carried along by the merrymaking marchers like a chip of wood in a swift stream. Some groups were parading six or eight abreast, with clasped hands forming a barricade through which she could not pass. She dodged around them, squeezed between other marching couples, squirmed and twisted and tried to forge ahead through the slowly moving column. Now and then, just often enough to be sure he was in the stream of moving bodies ahead of her, she caught a swift glimpse of the black-robed pirate.

Now and then she glanced behind her to see if Duke was following. If she could keep track of the man she was after by his black cloak, Raymond Duke would have no trouble keeping *her* blond hair in sight!

At that moment the moving line of marchers ground to a slow stop. Just ahead was a float, standing still as its driver waited for the parade to move again. Looking up at the float, she saw Louise Curtin, wearing a white silk dress and a black lace mantilla over her dark hair, sitting on a throne of red and white flowers and waving to the people below her.

"Louise! Louise! It's me! Vicki! Right here below you!"

Startled, Louise looked all around and then finally saw Vicki's upturned face. She waved and shouted a greeting.

"Louise! Your mantilla! May I have it please?"

Louise didn't seem to understand. "My—my mantilla?"

"Oh, please, Louise!" Vicki reached up pleadingly. "I need your mantilla! Quick, Louise! Oh, *please!*"

Louise's eyes widened at the urgency in Vicki's voice and the expression on her face. She whipped the lace from her head and handed it down to Vicki's waiting fingers. Vicki quickly wrapped it around her bright blond hair and looked again, desperately, for the man in the black cloak. He was nowhere in sight, and her heart sank. Then, far up ahead, she caught sight of him. She elbowed her way through the stalled

crowd, drawing angry glances from people that she was pushing rudely aside.

She clutched the mantilla tightly around her throat as she ran and stumbled forward. No need to worry about Raymond Duke following her now! With the red dress and black head covering, she looked like any one of the thousand other girls in the great crowd.

Once she saw the masked man turn hurriedly around in her direction. Did he see her? With her identifying blond hair covered up, she didn't think so. If only she could manage to move faster! One thing she was pretty sure of. He would stay in the parade. The heavy mass of costumes would be his best protective cover. Walking up one of the side streets by himself, he would be much too conspicuous.

Then, once again, she caught sight of Duke's tall figure. He was peering all around. But under the protection of her black mantilla, she felt safe. She turned her head away and plunged on.

She didn't dare look back again, lest Duke accidentally spot her face. Her breath was coming in painful gasps now, but she fought her way on, never taking her eyes from the pirate's black cape and black hat.

Then, half a block ahead of her, the moving parade seemed to be widening out, losing its marching form, the marchers spreading out and milling around in aimless circles like a thin stream of water that has suddenly flowed into a round, cuplike pool. The floats ahead of her stopped, some of them pulling out of line. Obviously this was the end of the route. The parade was breaking up. The black-clad figure was forever lost in the surging eddy of human figures.

Vicki found herself pushed up against an iron fence that surrounded a statue. She clung to it while she caught her breath. All around her, groups of people went off arm in arm. Musicians from the bands strode by carrying their instruments under their arms, or occasionally pausing to blow out a wild note in sheer exuberance. Vicki felt lost, discouraged and alone.

Then she took stock of the situation she was in, and reflected on the wild chase of the last half hour. Supposing she *had* caught up with the black-robed pirate? Suppose he had suddenly stopped and confronted her? What could she have said? Would she have pulled the mask from his face?

As she was thus lost in thought, a cheerful voice behind her said: "Vicki!"

She turned around. It was Louise.

"Hi there, Vic! How do you like our Gasparilla Parade?"

Vicki managed a grin. "I wouldn't want to be in one every day." She took the black lace from her head. "Thanks for the use of your mantilla."

Louise frowned as she took the shawl. "Back there a while ago, when you asked me for this, you seemed—well, almost desperate. Was anything wrong, Vic?"

"I guess maybe my face was showing my excitement." Vicki laughed, passing the incident off lightly. "I guess I sort of felt out of place without a costume."

"I don't blame you," Louise said, forgetting the incident. "Now let's go join Daddy and Nina at the Spanish Park."

The meal was a gay one. Louise and Nina laughed and talked about the parade, and Mr. Curtin told funny stories about the antics of the members of Ye Mystic Krewe. Vicki joined in the gaiety, but her mind was far away—seeing the frightened old violinist in front of Duke's house; Duke, Eaton-Smith, and the masked pirate whispering in the little room and startled at her appearance; the pirate running away from her in the crowd; and finally, Duke appearing to follow her.

"You're very quiet this evening, Vicki," Mr. Curtin remarked on the drive home.

"She's tired," Louise said. "Don't forget she had a long trip down from New York today."

When they arrived at the house, Mrs. Tucker was there before them.

"A messenger just delivered this for you, Miss Vicki," she said, handing over a large manila envelope.

Vicki took the envelope and continued on her way to her room to wash up. Inside the room, she opened

the flap and pulled out the contents.

They consisted of the skull-and-crossbones insignia crudely cut from the front of a cardboard pirate's hat, like the one the masked man had been wearing tonight, and a crudely penciled note:

“Airline-hostess work is safe! Stick to it! Keep out of things that don't concern you! This is a solemn warning!”

A cold hand gripped her heart.

CHAPTER XI

The French Sand

VICKI HAD A RESTLESS NIGHT. THIS WAS UNUSUAL, because her healthy young body ordinarily enabled her to drop off into restful slumber almost as soon as she turned off the light. But last night she had been disturbed by fitful dreams of big old houses with murky rooms, ghostly pirate figures chasing her, and strange creatures lurking in wait for her around dark corners. The face of old Mr. Tytell floated through her dreams, frightened and pleading, and that of Raymond Duke with his leering, white-toothed smile.

Once she woke up and lay awake for a long time, thinking about the skull and crossbones and the threatening note. It couldn't be a prank! She was obviously getting close to something—and those involved were trying to scare her off. It could be nobody else but the masked pirate, Raymond Duke, and, she was sure of it, Mr. Eaton-Smith. Although until she had surprised him in his home last night, it had never crossed her mind that the mild-mannered travel agent might be mixed up in any kind of shady dealings.

The note also implied that one of the three knew a great deal more about her than she had suspected—specifically where she was staying in Tampa. She didn't think Duke or Eaton-Smith could possibly have found out during the short time between the parade and her return with the Curtins. Maybe the third man then—the pirate—!

She got up and dressed early, and was having orange juice and coffee by herself in the dining room when Louise and Nina came downstairs.

“Well, well!” Nina laughed. “We thought you were the late sleeper of the household! Was the excitement of last night too much for you?”

“*You don't know the half of it!*” Vicki thought to herself, but she smiled and said: “I never had so much fun in my life.”

“Then get ready for some more fun,” Louise said. “I believe you said your vacation starts today?”

“Change of plan,” Vicki told her. “I didn't have a chance to mention it last night. I'm to make one more trip. Leave here tomorrow, return on Sunday. Then I have a whole week to soak up that Florida sun and get the tan Nina was teasing me about.”

“Wonderful! That fits right into the plan!”

“What plan is this?” Vicki wanted to know.

Louise's eyes twinkled. “Daddy's promised us all a trip to Havana. He says that after Festival Week he needs a rest, and he's sure we do too. He had planned for us to fly over on Monday—we can get there from here in a couple of hours. Then we'll spend two or three days seeing the sights, shopping in their wonderful markets for laces, jewelry—”

“They have some of the most wonderful combs and brooches and things made of tortoise shell and coral!” Nina interrupted excitedly.

“... and taking in some shows and night clubs,” Louise went on, “and just having a high old time.”

“That sounds perfectly wonderful,” Vicki said enthusiastically. “I've never been to Havana and it's one

place I've always wanted to visit!"

"Then get yourself ready, Vic. We'll have the time of our lives!"

After breakfast, Nina excused herself to go to the shop. She *did* have a job, she assured Vicki with a big smile, even though she managed to find plenty of time to enjoy herself. "And since today and tomorrow are the last two days of the Festival, we'll probably be swamped with tourist business."

"I have to go down to the Welfare Agency this morning," Louise said, getting up. "Can you find plenty to do by yourself, Vic?"

"Don't worry about me," Vicki assured her. "I have some shopping to do to get myself ready for Havana."

After the girls had departed, Vicki telephoned Mr. Quayle's office and made an appointment to see him in half an hour.

In the taxi going to the airport, she fell to wondering about the identity of the third man, the masked pirate in the black cloak. He had known that she was staying at the Curtins'. The only people in Tampa who knew that were Mr. Quayle and the Federal Airlines personnel. Could the pirate be connected in some way with the airline? Well, she decided, the riddle was too much for her now. But she was going to do her best to find the answer!

When she entered the FBI investigator's office—he had now taken up more or less permanent quarters in the airport's administration building until the gold coin case was solved—his secretary looked up.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Barr," she said. "You had no sooner hung up than Mr. Quayle called to say that he was detained. I told him about your call and he asked if you could see him at ten." She looked at her watch. "It's only nine-fifteen now. I'm terribly sorry if this holds you up."

"No indeed." Vicki smiled. "I'll go sit in the passenger lounge and watch the planes land and take off."

The secretary grinned. "Isn't that sort of a busman's holiday, Miss Barr?"

Vicki strolled through the terminal waiting room, then decided to go outside and stand in the sun. She still couldn't get over the wonderful fragrance of the perfume-laden Florida air. She couldn't seem to get enough of it. "I guess I'm just a hick from Illinois," she chided herself.

As she sauntered along the walk outside, breathing in refreshing lungfuls of the scented breeze, a familiar voice hailed her:

"Hi there, Miss Vicki! Wait up!"

It was the irrepressible Joey Watson, his usual broad grin splitting his freckled face.

"What are you doing out of uniform? Aren't you flying today?"

"I'm like an old firehorse who can't resist the sound of alarm bells." Vicki smiled. "Only in my case it's the sound of airplane motors."

"I know what you mean," Joey said. "I feel the same way." He fell into step beside her. "Look, Steve is taking me up for a lesson in a few minutes. Have you got time to come over and take a look at his ship? It's a peachy two-engined Beech."

"Are you sure the field people won't mind?"

"Of course not," Joey said. He opened the heavy wire gate that led out onto the concrete apron. "Come on."

Steve Miller was standing at the step that led into the little cabin of his charter plane. He wore light-brown slacks and a gabardine flying jacket. He wheeled around and smiled broadly when he saw Vicki approaching at Joey's side.

"Oh, hello, Miss Barr," he said. "Did you come to take me up on that spin?"

"Not this morning, Steve," Vicki said. "I've got things to do. But I may some other day real soon."

"You do that, Vicki—Miss Barr," Steve said.

“I will,” Vicki promised. She looked at the trim little plane, and nodded her head approvingly. “Nice airplane you have here.”

“We like it,” Steve said, evidently pleased. “It may seem like a lot of airplane to be giving our young friend his first flying lessons in, but she handles just like an automobile.”

“I know,” Vicki said. “I’ve flown in Beeches before.”

“Good deal,” Steve said.

Just at that moment a blond-haired young man strode toward them from a twin-engine Cessna that was parked farther up on the concrete apron. He gave Steve a semimilitary salute and said, “Hello!”

“Come over here, Roy,” Steve called. “I want you to meet a friend of mine.”

The blond young pilot looked at Vicki as he said, “I’ve met your student, Steve, but ...”

“This is Miss Vicki Barr,” Steve told him. “Licensed pilot and Federal Airlines hostess. Vicki, this is Roy Olsen. He’s a charter pilot out of Saint Pete. He comes over the Bay occasionally to take the bread out of our mouths.”

Roy Olsen grinned. “Don’t you believe it, Miss Barr. I just fly over here now and then to help relieve the load on the Tampa boys.”

He had an infectious grin, and Vicki liked him immediately.

“I hate to break this up,” Steve Miller said, “but if I’m to give Joey a lesson before the warehouse boss starts yelling for him, we’d better take off.” He climbed into the cabin and went forward to the cockpit. “Come on, kid,” he said over his shoulder. “Strap yourself in, and don’t touch that wheel until I tell you to.”

Joey touched his thumb to his forefinger in the time-honored airman’s salute to Vicki, and followed Steve into the plane.

Vicki watched as they taxied out onto the runway, and getting the go-ahead from the traffic tower, took off.

“I’ll see you again, Mr. Olsen,” she said to the flier from St. Petersburg.

Again the young man grinned and said, “Good deal!”

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“Mr. Quayle,” Vicki asked, after she had told the latest of her adventures, “do you think I’m seeing bogeymen in the closet?”

John Quayle had listened attentively as Vicki recounted her experiences of last night—the visit to Eaton-Smith’s house; her discovery of the violin case; her unexpected stumbling upon the tourist agent, Duke, and the third man whispering together in the darkened room; Duke’s whispered “*Don’t let her go yet! Keep her here!*”; the masked man’s flight; her chase after him; Duke’s pursuit of her in the costumed crowd; receiving the threatening note on her return home.

“No, Miss Vicki Barr,” John Quayle said serious as he puffed on his old pipe, “I don’t think you’re seeing bogeymen at all. I think you’re teaching me a valuable lesson that they forgot to include in the FBI training course—never underestimate the feminine point of view.”

He blew a thick, blue smoke ring that drifted lazily toward the ceiling.

“I started out with the cold, hard fact that a shipment of gold coins had been stolen in some mysterious way. You, on the other hand, started out with the warm, human fact that an old man was unhappy and a young boy seemed headed for trouble. I concentrated on trying to find the thieves. You concentrated on trying to help the old man and the boy.”

He paused again and smiled.

“Does this sound like a lecture?”

“Why—no, sir,” Vicki said politely.

“Well, it should sound like one—because it is. A lecture to myself.”

He picked up the telephone. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll take a little closer look at a certain importer and a certain travel agent.”

Vicki got up from her chair.

“And one more thing,” John Quayle said. “The next time you see something that doesn’t feel right to your woman’s intuition, come and tell me about it.”

Vicki took an airport bus back to Tampa and got off in midtown. Her head was spinning as she tried to puzzle out the tangled events of the past week and put them together in some logical order. But the sun was too bright and the air was too sweet and clean for gloomy thoughts. Her mind leaped ahead to the fun she’d have in Havana.

She sauntered along the street aimlessly, looking into shopwindows. She stopped in front of an art supply store and was casually examining some pictures that were on display when a familiar figure inside the shop caught her eye. It was the old violinist, Mr. Tytell!

She entered the store just as the old man was saying to the clerk in his quavering voice:

“... and five pounds of French sand, please.”

“I’m afraid you’ve almost bought us out of French sand these past few days, sir,” the clerk said. “Not very much demand for it here. But we should have some left. I’ll see.” He turned to go.

Vicki looked around the store. Mr. Tytell seemed to be alone. This was her chance to talk with him. She walked up to the counter and said, “Why, hello, Mr. Tytell.”

At the sound of her voice the old man turned and a smile broke over his lined face.

“Why—why, it’s Miss Barr.”

“You were in such a hurry the last time we met that I didn’t have much opportunity to say hello.”

She remembered the old man’s frantic plea: “I have to talk to you!” If he really did have something important to tell her, now was the time to draw it out.

“Mr. Duke said that you were working for him. He seems like a pleasant man.”

At the mention of Duke’s name the old man’s eyes again took on a frightened look. He nodded his head and for a second his eyes fell.

“Y-yes.”

“Do you also work for Mr. Eaton-Smith?” Vicki asked casually.

As he had on the street in Ybor City, the old man grasped her hand and stammered, “M-Miss Barr—I feel that you’re my friend—the—the only friend I have—” His eyes were pleading in his ashen face.

At that moment the clerk reappeared with Mr. Tytell’s package. The old man fumbled nervously in his pocket to get the money to pay for it.

So the old man really is in trouble, Vicki thought. But how could he possibly be connected with Duke and Eaton-Smith—and the man in the pirate cloak?

“Mr. Tytell, did you leave a message in the plane that day for me? A travel folder?”

“Y-yes. And you found it!” For a second his eyes lost their frightened look. “Miss Barr—I—I need help. I have to talk with you.”

“Then let’s find a quiet place and talk,” Vicki said soothingly.

“No, no. Not now.” He looked furtively out into the street. “Mr.—Mr. Duke is waiting for me. In his car down at the corner.”

The old man lowered his voice to a whisper. “When do you fly again to New York, Miss Barr?”

“Tomorrow,” Vicki answered, surprised at this question. “Tomorrow at three-forty-five. Federal Flight Seventeen.”

“I’ll be on that plane, Miss Barr.” Tytell’s voice was so low that even standing beside him, Vicki could hardly make out the words. “They won’t stop me! I’ll be on that plane.”

He turned quickly and went out the door.

CHAPTER XII

The Disappearance

PROMPTLY AT THREE O'CLOCK VICKI ENTERED the airport terminal building. From a pay phone she put in a call for Mr. Quayle's office upstairs. He had asked her to report anything to him that didn't "feel" right to her. Her meeting with Mr. Tytell yesterday certainly qualified as not "feeling right." She had tried to call him yesterday but had been unable to reach him.

But, once again, the FBI man wasn't in his office. His secretary thought he'd be back shortly.

Vicki went to the reservations desk to look at the passenger list for Flight 17. There was his name, all right. Amos Tytell. So the old man had made it! Before this day was over, Vicki thought to herself, she ought to have the answers to a lot of troubling questions!

She looked around. The old man was nowhere in sight.

"Has Mr. Tytell checked in?" she asked the clerk at the desk.

The girl looked down her list.

"Why, yes. He was in over an hour ago to validate his ticket." She looked at her watch. "About one-thirty."

Then he must be somewhere around, Vicki knew. Possibly in the snack bar.

She had plenty of time, so she sauntered toward the restaurant. There was no sign of the old man at the counter or any of the tables, but Captain March was sitting on one of the stools, hastily gulping a cup of coffee.

"Vic," he said, "you're just in time to do me a favor. I can't find my best pair of pigskin gloves, and I think I may have lost them somewhere in the terminal. I have to rush to weather briefing, so be a good girl and see if they might be at *Lost-and-Found*. You'll know them by the Abercrombie label."

Vicki walked across the big waiting room, casting her glance around for Mr. Tytell, but he was nowhere to be seen. At the *Lost-and-Found* desk, the boy in charge grinned when she asked about the captain's gloves.

"These were turned in Thursday," he said, reaching under the counter and coming up with a new pair of pigskin gloves. "These the ones?"

As she took the gloves, Vicki's eye caught sight of an object lying on the lower shelf behind the boy.

"What's that?" she asked sharply, pointing. "That—that violin case?"

The boy turned and picked it up.

"One of the porters found this old fiddle about an hour ago. Is it yours, miss?"

Vicki looked at the worn leather case, with the frayed handle that exposed the metal of the clasp. It was Mr. Tytell's, no doubt of that. But now it bore fresh scratches and there was a dent in the side as if someone had stepped on it.

"Where was it found?" Vicki's voice took on a strident note as a dark wave of dread swept over her.

"Outside somewhere. The porter didn't say just where."

Vicki turned and ran up the stairs to Mr. Quayle's office on the second floor. When she burst through the door, the secretary looked up and shook her head.

"He hasn't come back yet, Miss Barr. And I really don't know when he'll be in. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"May I leave him a note?"

"Certainly. You'll find paper on that desk over there."

Vicki hastily scribbled a message, telling the FBI investigator about her meeting with Amos Tytell yesterday; his checking in at the reservations desk; and her finding of the battered violin case that appeared to show marks of a struggle.

She folded the note and gave it to the secretary. Then she went down the stairs with a heavy heart.

Twenty minutes later, when the passengers boarded her plane, she looked in vain for Mr. Tytell among them. But when the last of them had come aboard, and the ground crew had secured the door and wheeled away the loading ramp, he was still absent.

Since finding the violin case in *Lost-and-Found*, Vicki had had an awful feeling that he would not board the plane.

CHAPTER XIII

Havana

WHEN VICKI ARRIVED BACK IN TAMPA THE NEXT day, she went directly to John Quayle's office to see if he had any news of Amos Tytell. The office was closed. She found a taxi and drove to the Curtins'.

Nina and Louise were in a flurry of packing for their Havana trip, trying to decide which dresses they would need for the various things they planned to do.

They both burst out in a torrent of excited babble when Vicki entered the room.

"Look, Vic. Which evening dress do you think looks better? The green or the white?"

"Just look at this lovely new bathing suit I bought at the shop today!"

"You'd better start your own packing, Vic. Daddy plans on leaving bright and early in the morning."

Vicki had to smile at their enthusiasm, but her pleasure in the projected trip to Cuba was dampened by her worry of what had happened to elderly Mr. Tytell.

"Wait until I change," she said. "Then I'll help you pack and you can help me."

In her room, Vicki threw her bag on the bed and took the telephone book from the table. It hadn't occurred to her to wonder whether Mr. Quayle lived in Tampa. If he didn't, she'd have to ask Mr. Curtin where she could find him. He'd certainly know. But she didn't want to worry him with her own involvement in the case unless she had to.

She was in luck. John Quayle's name was in the book. She dialed his number and waited. In a moment his familiar voice answered the phone.

"Mr. Quayle? ... This is Vicki Barr. I hope you don't mind my calling you at home like this on a Sunday afternoon, but I was worried about Mr. Tytell. Did you find out anything about him?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Barr," the voice on the other end of the phone said. "As soon as I got your note yesterday, I put one of my men on the job of tracking him down. But so far, no luck. We found that he had been living in a cheap boardinghouse in the Quarter, but his landlady apparently hasn't seen him since yesterday."

"Oh, dear!" Vicki said.

"Don't worry, Miss Barr. I'll let you know as soon as I hear something."

"I won't be home for a few days, Mr. Quayle. The Curtins are taking me to Havana. But if I can be of any help by staying ..."

"Now see here, young lady. You just go on to Havana and enjoy yourself. The FBI will find him, don't you worry."

Vicki thanked him and started to hang up, then she thought of something else.

"Did you find out anything about Mr. Duke and Mr. Eaton-Smith?"

"It appears that both of them are out of town ..."

"Gone?" Vicki almost shouted the word. "Maybe they forced Mr. Tytell to go with them! Maybe they ..."

Mr. Quayle's good-natured laugh came over the wire. "Better not jump to conclusions, Miss Barr. Mr. Duke told some friends that he was going out of town on business. He didn't say where. And Mr. Eaton-Smith's office said that he had flown to Nassau. We're making a check, of course, on the basis of the reports you made to me. But you have to remember that both men are respected businessmen here in Tampa and that the nature of their businesses compels them to travel a good deal. We can't barge in with charges we have no way of proving. But again, don't worry. If they've done anything unlawful, we'll find out. Now you run along to Havana and have a good time."

Vicki thanked him and hung up.

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Early the next morning Mr. Curtin and the girls boarded a Federal Airlines plane for Havana. It was fun, she thought, as she leaned back in the reclining seat, to travel as a passenger. Both the stewardesses on the flight were old friends with whom she had flown many times. They made a point of waiting on her with mock pomp and ceremony, and referred to her, sometimes two and three times in one sentence, as "Madame."

"Is Madame comfortable?" "Would Madame care for one or two lumps of sugar in Madame's coffee?" "Is Madame sure she won't get airsick?" "Has Madame ever flown before?"

Nina and Louise giggled at the joke and played up to it. Everyone was having fun. This, Vicki thought, is the way a vacation should be! All the fears and uncertainties that had crowded her mind for the past week vanished like magic.

The plane landed briefly at Miami, and then took off again for the short hop over the Keys and across the blue Straits of Florida to Havana.

They checked into a luxurious hotel, surrounded by vast green lawns and towering palm trees. Then quickly they unpacked their clothes and set out to see the sights.

For the next two days, Mr. Curtin escorted the three girls on a whirlwind round of fun and good times. He knew the old city thoroughly, but for Vicki and the Curtin girls it was a round of wonderful discoveries.

They went to the race track, the beaches, the historic old forts and the fascinating museums during the mornings and afternoons, and in the evenings to the theater and afterward to a night club where the orchestra played Spanish music and the dancers whirled and stamped their feet in all manner of Latin fandangos.

On the third morning—or maybe it was the fourth, Vicki had lost track of time in the wonderful world of Havana—Mr. Curtin said at breakfast:

"Today we're going to see something that you've never seen before, a real Spanish-American market place down in the Old City."

"What's so special about it?" Nina asked.

"Some people call it the Thieves' Market," Mr. Curtin explained. "In the old days the pirates and freebooters went there to sell the loot they had taken from captured ships. And even today, it's a place where stolen goods are sold."

"Oh-h!" Nina said. "A Thieves' Market! I can't wait to buy something!"

"Not so fast, Missy!" Mr. Curtin laughed. "I said we were going to look, not to buy. It's still a crime to receive stolen goods."

"But if it's all right for the thieves to sell things," Nina persisted, "it should be all right for me to buy them."

“Not on your life! The authorities down here occasionally shut one eye to certain practices that help make a tourist attraction. But *I* don’t!”

“Then I’ll do it when you’re not looking,” Nina teased.

“And you’re not too big to be spanked if I catch you.”

The girls giggled at this exchange, and then Mr. Curtin went on:

“Seriously though, this market is a strange combination of fine legitimate shops and black-market operators. What say we go out to Veradero Beach this morning for a swim, and then take in the market this afternoon?”

The Thieves’ Market was a cobblestoned square, with an ancient stone fountain in the middle and shops and outdoor cafés on all four sides. A few men, most of them dressed in nondescript clothes, lounged in the doorways. Two or three small parties of American tourists sat at the café tables.

“Let’s sit down and order limeades,” Mr. Curtin suggested, “and see what happens.”

They didn’t have to wait long. A tall individual, dressed in a soiled seersucker suit and a Panama hat that had seen better days, sauntered up to their table. From his coat pocket he extracted a bottle of perfume that Vicki recognized as a famous French brand.

“For the young ladies,” the man said in broken English. “Five dollars.”

Vicki knew the perfume cost three times that in New York or Tampa.

Mr. Curtin pretended to think it over. Then he handed the bottle back to the man and shook his head. The peddler returned the bottle to his coat pocket and walked away as casually as he had approached.

In a few moments a second man strolled up to their table, an old suitcase in his hand. Without a word, he put the case on the tabletop and opened it. Inside was some of the most beautiful lace Vicki had ever seen. She couldn’t repress an exclamation of admiration.

“Ah,” the man said, revealing broken yellow teeth in a wide grin. “The señorita knows fine lace. Direct from Spain, señor! A great bargain.”

Again Mr. Curtin pretended to be trying to make up his mind. And again he shook his head no.

“My goodness, Daddy!” Louise exclaimed when the man had gone. “That’s the dreamiest lace I ever saw in my life. Can’t we buy just one teeny little piece? It would look wonderful with my new white evening dress! What do you say, Daddy?”

Mr. Curtin laughed. “Am I going to have to spank you too? That’s stolen goods, honey. We look just for fun. But that’s all.”

A third man detached himself from a doorway and headed in their direction.

“Here comes another one,” Nina said. “You must look like a rich American, Daddy.”

When the man revealed the object he had for sale, everyone gasped. It was one of the tiny souvenir ships from the Gasparilla Festival in Tampa. But instead of being cheap brass, this one gleamed like pure gold.

Mr. Curtin’s eyes flashed. “Where did you get this?”

The man smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Solid gold, señor. I sell cheap.”

“Solid *gold*?” Vicki repeated incredulously.

“Sí, señorita. Solid gold.”

Mr. Curtin laughed. “We’re from Tampa, fellow. We could buy all of those we wanted last week for a quarter. I must say you’ve done a nice polishing job. But go and find yourself another sucker.”

He waved the man away.

“Well, girls,” he said, “have you seen enough?”

“I’d like to buy something for Mother and Ginny before I leave,” Vicki said. “But I certainly wouldn’t want to buy stolen goods.”

“As I told you this morning, Vicki,” Mr. Curtin said, “this market is a curious mixture of thieves, smugglers, and honest men. Just across the square is Manuel Rodriguez’s jewelry shop. He specializes in Spanish antiques, and he’s thoroughly respectable. Maybe we can find something there.”

Mr. Curtin paid for their limeades, and they strolled across the cobbled square.

Manuel Rodriguez’s jewelry shop was completely unlike the Thieves’ Market that existed just outside its windows. The interior was plain and dignified, and glass display cases along its walls held beautiful pieces of finely wrought silver and gold.

A small man, wearing a trim swallowtail coat and a pince-nez, stepped out to greet them.

“*Señor y señoritas*,” he said, rubbing his hands together as though he was washing them in the air. “What may I do for you?”

“We’re just looking around,” Mr. Curtin explained.

“Please do,” the little man said. “If there is anything I can do—” He smiled and shrugged.

The girls browsed among the display cases; Nina keeping up a running chatter of “oh’s” and “ah’s.”

“Look here, Vicki,” Louise called from across the shop. “Come and see this necklace. It’s really the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen!”

As Vicki stepped to her side, she pointed out a huge emerald, the size and shape of a bluebird’s egg, suspended on a woven cord of spun gold. But it was not the emerald that made Vicki gasp with astonishment when she looked into the case. It was a heavy gold chain in the tray beside it.



The souvenir ship gleamed like pure gold

Hung on the end of the short gold chain was a large gold coin. It was the exact duplicate of one of the stolen coins that had been pictured in the Tampa newspaper. There was the profile of the queen wearing a high crown, the laurel wreaths that encircled the head, and the ring of stars around the rim.

Vicki was sure of it! Then she remembered the picture she had torn from the paper. She put her handbag on the top of the case and began to explore its contents. She finally found the clipping under a pile of loose change, bobby pins, lipstick, nail file—and all the other assorted odds and ends with which girls clutter up their handbags. She unfolded the piece of paper and compared the picture with the coin in the display case. There was no question about it. It was the same coin!

“Vicki,” Louise exclaimed, “what in the world are you doing?”

“Look at the coin on that heavy chain, Louise. Isn’t it the same one that’s in this picture?”

Louise looked at the coin in the case and then studied the newspaper clipping.

“Why, yes,” she gasped. “It certainly is. But where did you—”

“Sh-h-h!” Vicki cautioned.

The little jeweler had come up behind them.

“Yes?” he said expectantly.

Vicki pointed to the coin and chain.

“Can you tell me the price of that piece, sir?”

“The señorita has a good eye for antiques,” the jeweler said. “But I am afraid that this particular piece is not for sale.”

Vicki raised her eyebrows. “Not for sale?”

“I regret to say it is not. We made the chain to order to accommodate the coin.”

“Do—do you have any other antique coins like this one that you could sell me?”

“I only wish I did,” the jeweler replied. “But again I must tell you no. The coin belongs to a Señor Ramon Garcia who brought it to us.” He tapped his pince-nez with a fat finger. “But wait! Señor Garcia is an importer, and sometimes deals in antiques. It is possible that he has other such coins.”

“Could you give me his address?”

“Certainly, señorita.” The jeweler talked as he wrote a name and address on a piece of paper. “It is quite possible that *El Duque* may have something interesting ...”

Vicki’s heart leaped into her throat and for a moment almost choked her.

“Did you say *El Duque*?”

“Sí, señorita,” the jeweler said, giving her the piece of paper. “Among his friends in *Habana*, Señor Garcia is known affectionately as *El Duque*.”

El Duque! The Duke! Vicki’s head was spinning.

“I—I wonder if Mr. Garcia—*El Duque*—is the same man we met at the hotel last night, Louise. You remember he said he was an importer too.”

“Why, I don’t remember meeting ...” Louise began.

Vicki cut her short. “Is Mr. Garcia a short man,” she asked the jeweler, “not quite as tall as you, with a bald head and a goatee?”

The jeweler laughed. “It is plain that you did not meet *El Duque*, señorita. Señor Garcia is quite tall, quite thin, with dark hair and a small mustache. No, no. That was not *El Duque*.”

Suddenly all the crazy notions that had been spinning around inside Vicki’s head, like the flashing colors of a kaleidoscope wheel, exploded into a great sunburst of light, and little bits and pieces settled into place and put themselves together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The stolen gold coins! This coin in the display case certainly was one of them!

The jeweler’s description of Ramon Garcia fitted Raymond Duke to a T. *Ramon* was Raymond in Spanish! And *El Duque* was The Duke! Raymond Duke had an import business with offices in both Tampa and Havana!

She remembered Mr. Curtin saying on the morning that the theft of the gold coins had been discovered: “The thieves could never sell the antique coins. It’s the gold itself they wanted!”

She remembered the row on row of souvenir ships on the shelves in Eaton-Smith’s house.

She remembered what French sand was. It was used by metal casters to make molds!

The ship the peddler had tried to sell them a few minutes ago! It really had been solid gold!

It all sounded too crazy to make sense. She didn’t quite see how all the pieces fitted together. But deep down in her bones she knew they did!

That little ship that the peddler had offered them was made from gold melted down from the coins that had been stolen from Flight 17!

She had to have that gold ship!

“Mr. Curtin,” she said, and her voice was so urgent that it trembled, “please come outside.”

Mr. Curtin looked at her, puzzled. Then, when he saw the expression on her face, he followed her out

the door.

“Vicki,” he said anxiously, “are you ill?”

“Mr. Curtin—the man who offered us that Tampa souvenir—he said it was solid gold—” Vicki stammered, not quite sure how to explain the confused thoughts that were still spinning around in her head.

“Yes?” Mr. Curtin said. “Of course, it was just a fake.”

“Mr. Curtin,” Vicki blurted out, “I’ve got to buy that ship! Will you lend me the money—and—and help me find that man?”

“But—but I don’t understand,” Mr. Curtin said.

“Please trust me, Mr. Curtin! Please believe me! It’s important! I’ve just got to have that gold ship!”

Mr. Curtin didn’t understand. But he was conscious of the desperate urgency in Vicki’s eyes, and in her voice. He knew she was a level-headed girl, not one to be carried away by foolish notions. He had found that out during the short time she had been his daughters’ house guest.

“Just a minute,” he said, and turned back into the shop.

“Louise,” he said. “Nina. You girls stay right here. Vicki and I will be back in a moment.”

“But, Daddy ...”

“Look, Nina,” Mr. Curtin said sternly, “I haven’t time to explain. Please stay here. It’s important.”

Then he went outside and joined Vicki again.

Vicki was looking wildly around the Thieves’ Market. The man who had offered them the gold ship was not in sight.

“Let’s walk around,” Mr. Curtin said. “He’s bound to be in the square some place.”

They saw the man who had tried to sell them the perfume, and then the grinning, broken-toothed character who had shown them the lace. But of the peddler with the gold ship there was no sign. They walked around for ten minutes, peering into every doorway, but still with no success.

Then Vicki saw a familiar figure emerge from a doorway at the far end of the square.

“There he is, Mr. Curtin! Stop him!”

Mr. Curtin raised an arm and waved it urgently. “Hey, there!” he yelled, somewhat undignified for a staid American businessman. “Stop! Wait a minute!”

The man glanced once over his shoulder, then ducked into an alley and disappeared.

“Oh, no!” Vicki groaned.

“Come on, Vicki,” Mr. Curtin said, and broke into a run. Vicki followed at his heels.

They came to the alley, but there was no one in sight. At its end was a small restaurant with dirty, fly-specked windows. Vicki peered inside. The man was hurrying through a back door into what must have been the kitchen.

“I’ll get him,” Mr. Curtin said, and stepped inside.

Looking through the dirty glass of the window, Vicki saw Mr. Curtin speaking earnestly to the man behind the counter. The man listened, then turned and spoke through the doorway. And then, to Vicki’s vast relief, the peddler appeared. Mr. Curtin spoke to him briefly, and the two came outside.

The Cuban took the little gold ship from his pocket and Vicki breathed a thankful sigh.

“Where did you get this?” Mr. Curtin asked, as he had done when the man had first approached them in the square.

Again the man shrugged.

“All right,” Mr. Curtin said. “Never mind. How much?”

“Solid gold,” the man repeated. “One hundred dollar.”

Mr. Curtin took the ship from the man’s outstretched hand and passed it over to Vicki. It was so

unexpectedly heavy that she almost let it drop. She looked at it carefully. It gleamed with the rich luster of pure gold. More than ever, Vicki was convinced that her crazy notion was right.

“Please buy it, Mr. Curtin.”

“Fifty dollars,” Mr. Curtin said.

The Cuban shook his head. “Eighty-five.”

“Seventy-five,” Mr. Curtin said, “and that’s my last offer.”

The man shrugged. “You drive a hard bargain, señor.” He held out his hand. “Seventy-five.”

Mr. Curtin counted out the bills from his wallet and the man turned and disappeared into the shabby restaurant.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Curtin. I’ll give you a check as soon as we get back to the hotel.”

“Now, young lady,” Mr. Curtin said, “maybe you will explain what this is all about.”

“I’ll explain later, Mr. Curtin. Please trust me. But where can we go to find out if this really is solid gold?”

“The jeweler,” Mr. Curtin said, “in the shop where we left the girls.” They retraced their steps to the shop of Manuel Rodriguez.

Nina and Louise were still in the shop. They both looked at Vicki and their father curiously. When she saw the little ship in Vicki’s hand, Louise gasped.

“The gold ship, Vicki! What in the world ...?”

“I’ll explain later,” she promised. Then she handed the ship to Mr. Curtin who in turn gave it to the fat little jeweler.

“I just bought this,” he said. “I wish to know what it is made of. I will gladly pay your usual fee.”

The jeweler looked at the ship closely.

“Are you interested in the figurine as an object of art, sir, or in the gold it might contain?”

Mr. Curtin looked at Vicki inquiringly.

“In the gold, sir,” Vicki said.

“Very well. The exterior obviously is gold. The weight seems right. Whether, under the surface, it is made of lead or some other base metal we can tell only by boring into it. It will take only a few minutes.”

He bowed slightly to excuse himself and disappeared behind a heavy curtain into the back of the shop.

Both Nina and Louise were bursting with curiosity.

“Vicki,” Louise said, “if you don’t tell us what all this mystery is about, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Neither will I,” Nina said.

“At the hotel,” Vicki said. “I’ll tell you everything when we get back. But not a word until then.”

In a moment the jeweler returned. His face was wreathed in a smile.

“Señor,” he said, “I am happy to tell you that this piece is of solid gold. It is very valuable.”

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“Now, Miss Mystery Girl,” Mr. Curtin said when they were once more in their suite at the hotel. “Can you tell us what this is all about?”

Vicki’s mind was still in a whirl. Now she was sure she had the secret of the stolen gold coins! She didn’t know how they had been stolen, or by whom. But she was pretty sure she knew what had happened to them.

“Nina,” Vicki began, “I want you and Louise to promise me—cross your heart and hope to die—that you won’t breathe a word of this to anyone. If you do, all of us may be in terrible danger.”

Nina's mouth popped open and she stared first at Louise and then back to Vicki.

"Nina talks a lot." Mr. Curtin smiled. "That's her nature. But she can keep quiet when she has to. Isn't that right, honey?"

Both Nina and Louise nodded in silent, open-mouthed agreement.

"All right," Vicki said. "I'll start at the beginning."

She told her story in detail, from the time she had first noticed the sick old man on the plane straight through to her adventures on the night of the torchlight parade and the mysterious disappearance of old Mr. Tytell at the airport. She explained about her relationship with Joey Watson and her reports to John Quayle.

She took the newspaper clipping from her handbag.

"Then I saw that gold coin this afternoon in the jeweler's shop. It was this one right here." She gave the paper to Mr. Curtin.

"Then the jeweler's description of Ramon Garcia—remember, he called him *El Duque*?—couldn't have been that of anyone but Raymond Duke. And then I remembered the little Gasparilla ship the man tried to sell us by saying it was solid gold. And all of a sudden all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. It was you, Mr. Curtin, who suggested that the thieves didn't want the gold coins themselves because they'd be too hard to dispose of, but the gold they contained. If the gold figure the man offered us in the Thieves' Market today had been anything but a copy of the Ybor City souvenirs, I probably never would have suspected anything. But since it was, I knew there must be some connection with Tampa."

Mr. Curtin laughed. "The way you wormed that description of Ramon Garcia out of the man in the jewelry shop would have done credit to Sherlock Holmes."

Vicki's eyes sparkled. "Where do you think I got the idea?"

"What I don't understand," Louise said, "is how the peddler in the Thieves' Market got the gold ship model. Surely the people who took the coins wouldn't plan to dispose of the gold by offering it to American tourists at ridiculously low prices."

"That," Mr. Curtin said seriously, "is something that I am sure the FBI will be able to find out. And now, Vicki, I think you had better get on that telephone and put in a person-to-person call for John Quayle in Tampa."

CHAPTER XIV

The Third Man

JOHN QUAYLE MET THEIR PLANE AT THE TAMPA airport the next morning. He took the little gold ship that Vicki had been carrying in her handbag.

“Better not let this go through Customs,” he said. “We don’t want anybody, even the Customs people, to know about it at this stage. If you will come with me, Miss Barr, I’m sure your friends won’t mind taking care of your luggage.”

When the two of them were alone in his office, Mr. Quayle looked at Vicki for a long moment with a big smile on his face.

“The last time you were here, Miss Barr, I said that you were a good detective. Now I want to repeat it—doubled. Of course you were lucky, too, when the peddler offered to sell you the gold ship and when you saw the coin in the jeweler’s shop. But a good detective is one who is smart enough to take advantage of such breaks. And on the basis of the information you gave me yesterday over the phone, we’ve broken this case wide open. All but one or two small details, and we’ll soon know all about those too.”

A dozen questions popped into Vicki’s mind, but she contained her curiosity and let the FBI man go on.

“We found out all about Raymond Duke and his business connection in Havana as Ramon Garcia, his real name by the way. We searched his house from top to bottom and found nothing. He, of course, was gone. Then we made a search of F. R. Eaton-Smith’s place, and that time we hit the jackpot. Most of those old-fashioned Spanish houses had their kitchens in the basement with big brick ovens for baking bread built into the wall. But the oven in Eaton-Smith’s house was extra special. It had been lined with modern firebrick, fitted with high-intensity gas burners and converted into a kiln. It was in this kiln that the gold coins were melted down and recast in the form of the souvenir ships. We found a handful of the antique coins that had been overlooked in the thieves’ haste to get the job done, and they’ve been identified. We also found all the metal-casting equipment, including the molds that had been made from the cheap souvenirs. Needless to say, we didn’t find Eaton-Smith. He, too, had flown the coop.”

“And poor old Mr. Tytell ... he just *couldn’t* have been one of the gang. Did you find *him*?”

“We haven’t yet found him, but we did find out all about him. He was an expert goldsmith, and ...”

At the word “goldsmith” Vicki gasped. Then he was one of the thieves! It just didn’t seem possible!

“... until a few years ago was regularly employed,” Mr. Quayle went on. “Then, apparently, his health broke down and he couldn’t hold a regular job. Our New York people went to work investigating him the day you reported him missing from your flight for which he had picked up his reservations. We’ll know more about him soon.”

“It hardly seems possible,” Vicki mused, “that all those preparations in Mr. Eaton-Smith’s house could have been made after the coins were stolen.”

“That’s right. They couldn’t have been. Somehow, Eaton-Smith knew that the gold was coming to Tampa, and when. So he made his preparations well in advance. Our New York people are working on that angle too. But when we find him and Raymond Duke—and I assure you that the FBI will find them—

we'll learn about that, and a lot of other things too."

"There was that third man," Vicki said. "The masked pirate I followed in Ybor City."

"When we get the others," Mr. Quayle said, "we'll find out about your pirate friend too, never fear."

"The curious thing to me," Vicki said, "is how the coins were stolen in the first place. According to Mr. Curtin—you remember he was on the committee that arranged for the exhibition—the packing case didn't show any signs of having been tampered with at all."

"That puzzled me, too. But because it was so puzzling it gave me an idea that we're working on."

"An idea?"

Mr. Quayle smiled. "Don't worry. I'll tell you all about it at the proper time. You've been our Number One operative on this case, and I'll certainly tell you everything after I've found out whether or not I'm right."

Mr. Quayle patted the gold ship which he had put on his desk.

"It's amazing," he said "what people will do to get this pretty yellow stuff. Now you go on and enjoy the rest of your vacation. I'll call you if I need you."

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When Vicki went back downstairs to the main terminal waiting room, a light rain was falling outside, one of those sudden showers so peculiar to southern Florida that seem to come out of nowhere and stop as suddenly as they start. Since she didn't have a raincoat, she decided to wait it out.

She strolled over to the big plate-glass observation window that looked out on the airfield. Then she saw something that made her heart pound, and a cold hand seemed to clutch her throat.

A short, stocky man, wearing a long black raincoat and a black hat, was striding across the concrete apron in the direction of the freight warehouse. He carried a valise in his hand. Vicki would have known that hurried walk anywhere, and the long black coat, and the fact that she was looking at his back, made it all the more recognizable.

It was the masked pirate of the torchlight parade!

She hesitated for a second, debating whether or not she should call John Quayle. Then she decided against it. In the time it would take to make a phone call or to run upstairs to his office, the man would be gone. She dashed out into the rain.

The man strode on, not looking back. He passed the open warehouse door and walked on in the direction of a twin-engine Cessna that stood on the apron beyond it. Roy Olsen, ignoring the light rain, was standing beside his plane, fiddling with the door handle. Steve Miller's Beechcraft stood some distance away.

As the man passed the warehouse, Joey Watson appeared from out of the interior.

"Hi, Van!" he called. "Going somewhere?"

Van! Van Lasher! The warehouse foreman! So he had been the masked pirate!

Vicki ducked into the open door, and dragged the surprised boy with her.

"Look, Joey," she said breathlessly. "I haven't time to explain, so just do as I say. Call Mr. Quayle. He's in his office. Tell him that Van Lasher is the third man. Have you got that, Joey? Tell Mr. Quayle that Van Lasher is the *third man*!"

"But—but—" the boy stammered.

"Joey!" Vicki snapped. "This is important! Tell Quayle that Van is here and it looks as if he has chartered Roy Olsen's plane to take him somewhere. I'll do what I can to stall him. Now hurry, Joey!"

Hurry! And you'd better use the phone in the office."

When she reappeared at the open door, Vicki could hear Roy Olsen arguing with Van.

"But look, mister! I have to have clearance for a flight to Cuba. I just can't pick up and go on the spur of the moment."

"All right," Van said, "I'll double my offer. Five hundred dollars!"

"Sorry, mister. If I did a thing like that I'd lose my license for sure."

"Look here," Van said. "I'm in a tremendous hurry. I missed my plane, and if I'm not in Havana by two o'clock I'll lose a lot of money. I'll make it a thousand. How's that?"

"Gee, mister, I'd like to take you," Roy said, "but I just can't do it for any price unless I have legal clearance."

"All right," Vicki heard Van say, "how long will it take you?"

"Twenty minutes maybe. A half hour at the most."

"Okay," Van said. "But hurry it up."

Vicki breathed a deep sigh of relief. The delay would give Quayle and the airport police plenty of time to get here!

Just at that moment Joey rushed out of the interior of the warehouse.

"Miss Vicki," he shouted excitedly, "I got Mr. Quayle!"

At the sound of Joey's voice Van wheeled around. When he saw Vicki, his face contorted in a horrible expression of anger. He whipped a pistol from his coat pocket and stuck it in Roy Olsen's ribs.

"All right," he snarled, "I'm tired of all this stalling! Get in that airplane or I'll blow you apart!"

Roy, shock at the sudden turn of events showing in his white face, opened the door and climbed into the ship. Van followed at his heels.

Vicki almost panicked. Van was getting away—and he had to be stopped! She looked in the direction of the terminal. There was no sign of Quayle and his men. She looked inside the warehouse. By the time she called any of the other workmen and explained the situation to them, Roy's plane would be air-borne. And there would be nothing they could do, anyway, against a desperate man armed with a gun.

These thoughts flashed through her mind in a split second. Then she saw Steve Miller's plane. She made a dash for it.

When she reached the Beechcraft, Vicki opened the door and scrambled in. By the time she had stumbled up the narrow aisle between the passenger seats and settled herself behind the wheel, she could hear the grinding noise of the Cessna's starter and see its twin propellers slowly turning over. Quickly she flicked the ignition switch and jabbed at the starter buttons. As she did so, the engines of Roy's plane caught with a tremendous roar and the propellers flashed in dazzling disks of reflected sunlight and a wild spray of falling rain.

At that moment the motors of the Beechcraft started, and Vicki spun the wheel to taxi the ship into Roy's path.

With Van Lasher's gun at his back, Roy had no choice but to try to get his plane into the air. He swerved just in time to miss the wing of the Beechcraft by inches and headed out crosswise over the landing field.

Vicki opened the throttle wide. The Beech was a more powerful ship than the Cessna and it answered the throttle like a race horse hurtling out of a starting gate. Vicki pushed the wheel forward hard to keep the ship from taking off into the air.

Again she intercepted Roy, and again he swerved in time to avoid a collision. Vicki said a silent prayer that no passenger plane was coming in for a landing, with all this crazy taxiing going on. Certainly by now the tower would have seen the two planes racing madly across the field and warned off any ships that might already be in the landing pattern.

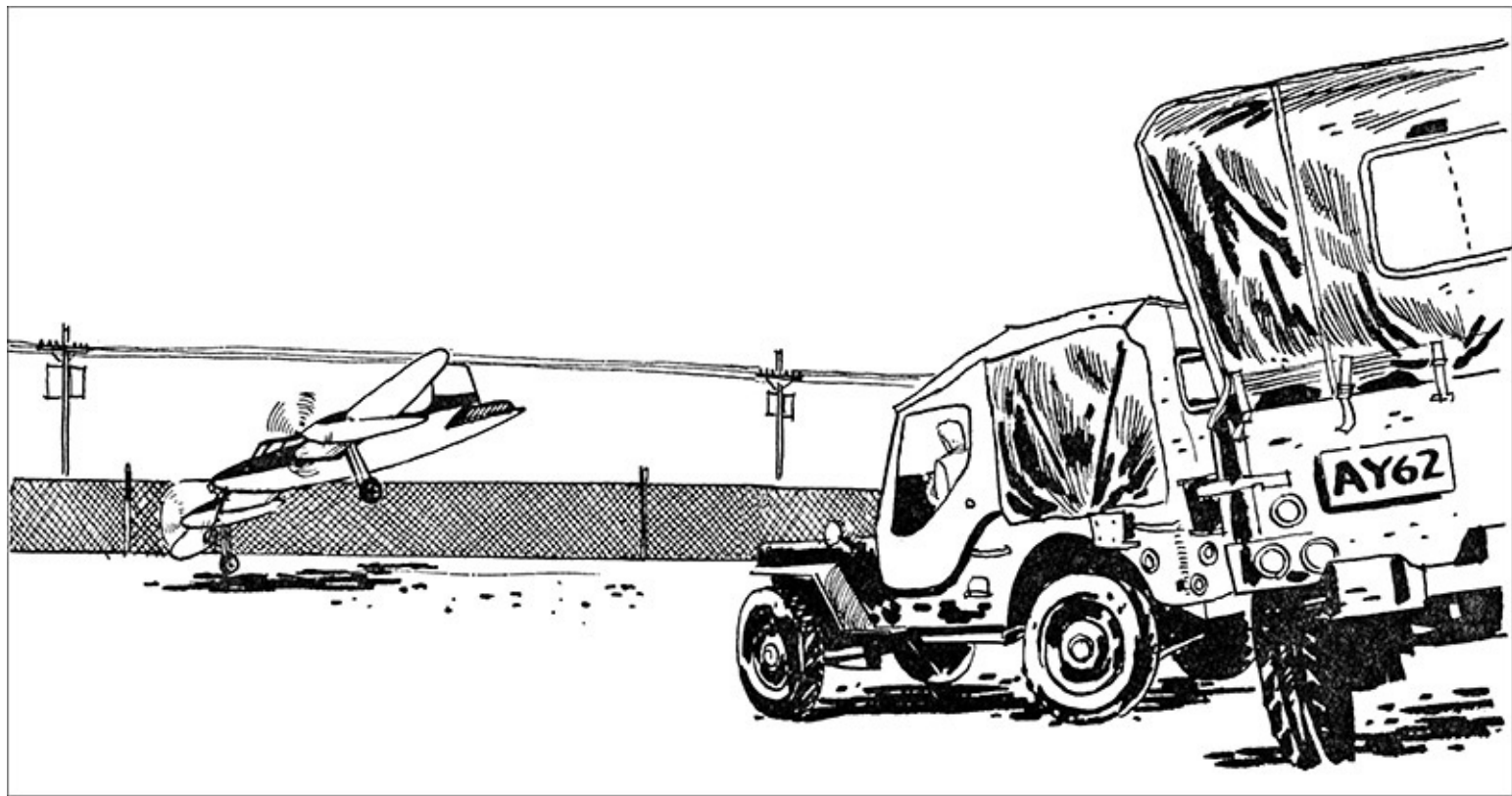
Roy had straightened out now, and again was heading up the field. Van must indeed be desperate, for he apparently was ordering Roy at gun point to make a downwind take-off.

Vicki took a last-ditch chance and cut in front of the Cessna again. A collision at seventy miles an hour might kill everyone in both ships. But Vicki had only one thought—to keep the other plane from getting into the air. Again, Roy swerved just in time, almost scraping his left wing against the high steel-mesh fence that edged the field.

Out of the corner of her eye, Vicki saw two airport jeeps dashing across the field in their direction. That would be Quayle and the police getting into the chase. Just then there was a smacking sound in front of her and a small round hole appeared in the glass window only inches from her head. Van was using his pistol to scare her away!

Once more, Roy tried to straighten out for a take-off. And once more Vicki managed to intercept him and make him swerve away. At the same time, the two jeeps cut in ahead of him. Roy tried to swerve out of the way of this new menace, and in doing so the tip of one wing caught the wire of the fence. The Cessna pivoted in a sort of exaggerated ground loop, fell over onto its injured wing, and came to a shuddering stop. Roy cut the engines, and the whirring propellers slowed down and came to a standstill.

At the same time, Vicki cut the motors of the Beech and slammed on the wheel brakes.



Instantly a swarm of uniformed policemen surrounded the Cessna. As Vicki watched, her heart pounding wildly after the excitement of the chase, Van Lasher came out of the plane's door and stepped onto the ground, his hands high in the air. In a moment Roy Olsen followed him and walked around to survey his wrecked plane. Vicki saw Mr. Quayle walk up to Lasher, say a few words, and wave him off in the custody of the police.

She got up from the pilot's seat, walked slowly back down the aisle, all the energy drained from her in these past few harrowing minutes, and climbed down the step to the ground.

The FBI man came up to her, smiling.

“I might have known it was you in that plane. Thanks to your keen instincts, we’ve caught all the other people in this gold coin case, so it just naturally figures that you’d trap Lasher. If I’m not careful, J. Edgar Hoover will fire me and give you my job.”

Vicki was looking sorrowfully at the wreckage of Roy Olsen’s beautiful plane. John Quayle read the thoughts that were so clearly showing in her face.

“Don’t fret about that plane, Vicki,” he said. “I imagine the insurance company will be glad to take care of the damage.”

Roy Olsen joined them just in time to hear Mr. Quayle’s final words. He was still pale and shaken, but he was able to manage a smile.

“Vicki,” he said, “my hat’s off to you. I was never so glad to make a crash landing in all my life.”

CHAPTER XV

The Mystery Solved

IT WAS A PLEASANT SUNDAY AFTERNOON, TWO DAYS after Vicki's hair-raising experience with Steve Miller's airplane. Vicki, Mr. Curtin, Nina, Louise, John Quayle, and Joey Watson were sitting on the Curtins' broad patio sipping cool fruit drinks and relaxing. A gentle breeze blew through the flowers and trees that surrounded the big brick house, and Vicki could feel its gentle fingers patting her on the cheek.

"So if it hadn't been for this young lady," John Quayle was saying as he raised his glass and made a toast to Vicki, "I'm afraid all of us would still be in the dark about the theft of the gold coins, and the thieves would be well on their way to parts unknown. But now, thanks to her, all of the gang except Amos Tytell are safely behind bars. Since the old man was an unwilling accomplice, we released him, and, for the first time since he came South, he's enjoying himself here in Tampa waiting to be the key witness at the trial."

"The newspapers," Mr. Curtin said, "didn't tell all the details of the story, not enough anyway to satisfy those of us who had a part in it. Frankly, Mr. Quayle, that's why I invited you here today. Are you at liberty to give it all to us? I suddenly found myself caught up in the middle of it—first when our committee opened the crate of scrap metal, and second when I bought that gold ship in Havana—but frankly I'm still at sea."

Mr. Quayle took a long sip of his drink. "It might be well," he said, "if I started at the beginning." He paused for a second to marshal the thoughts in his mind, and then went on.

"It all started out with Eaton-Smith. He had, as we finally found out, a pretty shady career behind him. He had never been arrested, though, and that's why it took our people so long to track down his past. He had become friendly with a certain Max Schmidt in New York. Max didn't have a record either, but Eaton-Smith discovered that he wasn't above making a dishonest dollar if he thought he could get away with it. Max was a man-of-all-work at the Numismatic Museum, and when Eaton-Smith learned that your committee, Mr. Curtin, had requested that the antique coin exhibit be sent to Tampa, the two of them went to work on an elaborate scheme to steal them.

"First he contacted Raymond Duke who had, he knew, a business in Havana under the name of Ramon Garcia and who also was not reluctant to steal several hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold. Through Duke he got in touch with Van Lasher."

"But I thought you said Van was an old Federal Airlines employee with a good record," Vicki interrupted.

"He had been for the past eight years, Vicki, and that's what almost fooled us. After you reported that skull-and-crossbones warning, we started digging a little deeper into the background of all employees at the airport here. And we found out that he had served a prison term in Texas ten years ago for larceny. When he got out of prison, he changed his name and went to work for Federal Airlines. So far as we can tell, he had kept his record clean ever since. But Duke, who had been involved in a deal with Lasher some years ago, approached him on the gold coin job. And again, the prospect of all that easy money was

too much for him.”

He took another sip of his lemonade.

“It is this kind of case that is always toughest to break. Where you are dealing with people who are known criminals, you automatically suspect them when a crime is committed. But all of these men had an outward cloak of respectability that acted as protective coloration.”

“But Mr. Tytell?” Vicki began, unable to control her curiosity about the old man who had so aroused her sympathy.

“I’m coming to him,” Quayle continued. “He had been an expert jeweler and goldsmith as I told you the other day, Vicki, and Eaton-Smith ran into him in New York. When this gold coin business came up, the old man immediately came to Eaton-Smith’s mind. Eaton-Smith went to him and told him that he had a good job for him in Tampa. The old man was so grateful that he didn’t say he hadn’t eaten in twenty-four hours. That’s why he was practically starved when you saw him on the plane.

“Eaton-Smith picked him up in a taxi on the morning of—let’s see—Thursday the sixth. On the way to the airport, Tytell made certain inquiries about the job and Eaton-Smith evaded them. Then, when Eaton-Smith told him that the two were going to travel on the plane as if they didn’t know each other, the old man began to get suspicious. Being old and sick and hungry and nervous, he began talking to you, Vicki, after he was on the plane. Eaton-Smith noticed this, moved over into the empty seat beside him, and told him in no uncertain terms to keep his mouth shut. Then Tytell knew for sure that something was wrong and he became badly frightened. That’s when he left what he hoped you would discover as a message in the form of the folded travel folder. The Granada Restaurant thing was an accident. He was trying to tell you that he would be in Ybor City, where he knew that Eaton-Smith lived.”

“But how in the world did he think Vicki could help him?” Louise asked.

“He wasn’t thinking clearly at all. Remember that he was badly frightened and desperate.”

The FBI man stopped for a moment.

“Am I keeping this straight enough for you?”

Everyone nodded silent assent, and he continued:

“Well, for weeks Eaton-Smith and Raymond Duke had been scheming to steal the coins. Max Schmidt in the museum in New York had found out that the shipment would be made by air, since the closing of the exhibit in New York and the opening of the Festival here were only a few days apart. Part of Schmidt’s work at the museum was handling packing and shipping details. Schmidt then made up an exact duplicate of the crate that the coins would be shipped in. He loaded this duplicate crate with scrap metal and shipped it in advance to Raymond Duke. When it was received, Van took it to the small inside room of the warehouse where valuables were kept overnight and covered it up with a canvas tarpaulin. Being the warehouse foreman, Van’s movements were never questioned. Of course, at this point, there was nothing for anyone to be suspicious about. So when Schmidt in New York advised Duke that the gold was coming on Federal’s Flight Seventeen—your ship, Vicki—they were all ready to snatch it. It was only a coincidence that Eaton-Smith and Tytell were on the same plane.

“Since he was the warehouse boss, it seemed natural for Van to offer to sit up with the private detective who had accompanied the shipment and whose main reason for coming to Tampa was to guard the coins while they were on exhibit at the Hall. Jones, of course, was glad of the company. And Van had figured out a pretty cute gimmick. He knew that the all-night guard duty in the warehouse would be a pretty dull affair, so he brought along a thermos jar of coffee which he went out at regular intervals to refill. He had also provided himself with some very mild sleeping pills. Sometime during the night he slipped one of the pills into Jones’s coffee. Since Jones had been up all day, and had had a fairly tiring plane trip too, the mild pill was just enough to put him into a sound sleep and give Van a chance to switch the crates. Schmidt had sent him a set of duplicate labels from the museum in New York. So Van soaked the original

labels off each crate with a solvent solution, and put the label addressed to Duke on the crate of gold, and the label addressed to the Festival committee on the crate of junk. Since the solvent had thoroughly dried by morning, there was no way to tell that a change had been made. Then he switched the bills of lading, covered up the genuine crate with the canvas—and that was all there was to it.

“When it was all shipshape, he woke the detective up, and so far as Jones knew he had only slipped off for a moment into a brief nap. The bit about the prowler, Joey, was staged by Van to indicate that someone had been snooping around. It was just by chance that he used your flashlight. You had left it on top of your locker and Van happened to see it.”

“And so,” Mr. Curtin said, “the theft was accomplished by the simple device of Van Lasher switching the crates.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Quayle said, “it was as simple as that. The next morning, at the same time the fake crate was delivered to your committee, the crate containing the gold was delivered to Raymond Duke. Naturally, we checked on all deliveries made that morning, but Duke showed our man the bill of lading for a shipment of perfume, and we had no reason to doubt him.”

At that moment Mrs. Tucker interrupted with a plate of sandwiches and a fresh pitcher of lemonade. Mr. Quayle turned his attention briefly from the gold coins to the food.

“Being a bachelor,” he said to the housekeeper, “I don’t often get chicken sandwiches like these.” He helped himself to another one.

As she sipped on her lemonade Vicki couldn’t get her mind off the old man who had been the starting point of the whole case so far as she was concerned.

“How,” she asked, “did Duke and Eaton-Smith get Mr. Tytell to work for them after he found out what was going on?”

“By another simple method,” the FBI man replied. “They threatened to kill him if he made a false move.”

“But when I saw him in Ybor City and in the art supply store no one was with him,” Vicki said. “So he couldn’t have been completely a prisoner. Why couldn’t he have gone to the police? They’d have protected him.”

“They had one other weapon,” Mr. Quayle said. “It appears that the old man has a grandson in New York. Tytell was unable to support him and the boy is in a charitable institution. They threatened to hurt the boy if Tytell went to the police. Naturally, the Tampa police would have gotten in touch with the New York force to assure the boy’s protection. But the old man was scared out of his wits and wasn’t thinking straight. That’s why he was so frightened when you saw him that day in front of Duke’s house.”

“But he did try to get away on my plane to New York,” Vicki reminded him.

“There’s no accounting for what people do when they get panicky,” Mr. Quayle said. “He saw you in the store that day and the idea of running away on your ship suddenly occurred to him. He had come to look on you as a friend, Vicki, since you were the only person who had acted friendly toward him. He had seen Eaton-Smith’s air-travel credit card lying on his desk. So, having no money, he tried to use it to pay for his ticket when he picked it up at the airport. Naturally, the Federal people called Eaton-Smith, and he and Duke drove to the airport, found the old man, forced him into the car and took him back to Ybor City. He lost his violin case in the struggle.”

The FBI man took a long sip of his lemonade. “I’m certainly doing a lot of talking,” he said.

“If you stop now,” Louise said pertly, “I’ll take away that tray of chicken sandwiches.”

“In that case—” Quayle reached for another sandwich. “Now where was I?”

“What I don’t understand,” Mr. Curtin said, “is how that peddler in Havana happened to have the solid gold ship he sold us.”

“We got him, too,” Quayle said. “But let me go back a little. Eaton-Smith had a very ingenious idea about shipping the gold out of the country. He bought up several crates of those little Festival souvenirs, on the pretext of giving them to his customers. You saw some of them at his house, Vicki. He then forced Tytell to melt down the coins and cast the gold in the shape of the little ships. He then recreated the souvenirs, putting several layers of the gold ships under the cheap ones, and Duke shipped them to Ramon Garcia in Havana. If the Cuban customs people bothered to open the crates at all—don’t forget that Ramon Garcia was constantly shipping things in and out of Havana—they would have seen the souvenirs on top and pass the shipment. Naturally, they would have no reason to suspect that the crates held anything more valuable than cheap novelties. And, of course, it worked.

“Now for the man who sold you the gold ship in Havana. He was a handyman who worked at odd times around Duke’s place. When Duke was removing the gold from the crates of souvenirs, he was careless to let the fellow get a good look at one. He recognized it for what it really was, and when Duke’s back was turned for a moment, slipped it into his pocket.”

“And thereby,” Mr. Curtin volunteered, “providing us with the one piece of concrete evidence that solved the mystery.”

“Don’t you mean solid gold evidence, Daddy?” Nina teased.

“It’s a good thing we went to the Thieves’ Market that afternoon,” Vicki remarked.

“No,” Quayle corrected her. “It’s a good thing that you have all the instincts and the quick mind of a good detective, Vicki. You were smart enough to put all the odds and ends of evidence together and come up with the right answer. Not everyone has that talent.”

“Me, for instance.” Mr. Curtin laughed. “I saw the same things Vicki did, and they didn’t mean a thing to me.”

“Now there was nothing in the world to connect Raymond Duke and Eaton-Smith in any way with that gold shipment except Van Lasher. And that’s where you come in, Joey.”

“You mean that offer of a job that Duke made me?”

“That’s right. The three of them could never afford to be seen together. They were even afraid to use the telephone, lest a message somehow be intercepted when Van was out of the warehouse. But obviously they had to keep in touch. Since you were always around the warehouse with Van, the idea was to use you as a messenger boy. They figured you needed the money badly enough to do as you were told, and that you would believe any cock-and-bull story Van cooked up to explain the need for secrecy. Of course, if everything went right, there was no reason for you or anyone else to connect either of them with the missing gold. But you turned them down, and they were afraid to approach anyone else. So Van used the cover of the torchlight parade in Ybor City, where almost everyone was in costume and most people were masked, to meet with his confederates. That’s why he ran away when he recognized you, Vicki, and lost himself in the crowd. And that’s why Duke went after you, to hold you up by some pretext or another until Van could get away. Van sending you that threatening note was another dumb play. He thought it might frighten you into keeping quiet.”

“That proves he doesn’t know Vicki very well,” Mr. Curtin said.

“And again you used your detective’s intuition when you saw Van walking across the airfield toward Olsen’s plane, and recognized him as the pirate. If you hadn’t followed him, Olsen would have got his clearance papers and taken Van to Cuba as a matter of course.”

“But why was Van running away in such a hurry?”

“Well, up to that morning everything had gone according to plan. Eaton-Smith and Duke, having shipped all the gold to Cuba, went there themselves and took the old man with them for safekeeping. They planned to stay there, under cover, until they could make arrangements to dispose of the gold, possibly in South America. Then they would simply ditch the old man and fade away. Van was completely in the clear up to

that point, so the plan was for him to stay here working at his job until everything had blown over. Then he was to join them.

“However, Van was pretty leery of you, Vicki. It was obvious to all three that you were doing a lot of poking around where you had no business to be. Van saw me meet you at the plane Friday morning and take you to my office. Since he knew the plane was inbound from Havana, he began to smell a rat. He followed us upstairs, saw that my secretary was away from her desk, and took a quick peek through the keyhole.”

“He was taking an awful chance of having your secretary walk in and catch him,” Vicki suggested.

“That’s true. But he figured he was taking a worse one if he didn’t find out what we were up to. He saw the gold ship model on my desk, and he knew the jig was up. He hurried to his rooming house, which is just on the edge of the field, picked up some money that Eaton-Smith had given him in advance for emergencies, grabbed his raincoat and hat, then hurried over to make a quick deal with Roy to fly him to Cuba. When he saw you had followed him, he got panicky and pulled his gun. You know the rest of the story.”

The FBI man drained the last of his lemonade.

“It’s been quite a case,” he said.

“Just one other thing,” Mr. Curtin said. “How did you locate Duke and Eaton-Smith so fast?”

Quayle smiled. “When Lasher saw that we finally had him, he told us the whole story from the beginning, including where we could pick up Eaton-Smith, Duke, and old Mr. Tytell.”

“That poor old man,” Vicki said. “This whole thing has been terrible for him.”

“On the contrary,” Quayle said, “it probably will turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to him.”

“What?” Vicki could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“This Florida climate was just what he needed,” Quayle said. “Even with what he’s been through, his health has improved considerably in the few days he’s been down here. A man with his skill as a jeweler shouldn’t have any trouble finding work in Tampa. He can bring his grandson down, and start living a normal life again.”

Vicki’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, I’m so glad for him. So very glad!”

The FBI agent rose to go.

“Miss Vicki Barr,” he said, “it’s been a pleasure working with you. I’ve said it before and I say it again—you’re a darn good detective.”

Vicki blushed in spite of herself.

“This crime was much worse than an ordinary theft,” Quayle said. “Those ancient gold coins were a living part of history. They were irreplaceable and priceless. Those men who stole them and destroyed them, all but the handful we found in Eaton-Smith’s house, did a terrible thing. The jury and the judge will show them no mercy. It’s fortunate that we recovered the gold, but compared to the original coins, it is virtually worthless. There’s a whole vault full of gold up in Fort Knox.”

He grinned. “When I say the gold is worthless, I am speaking only in a comparative sense of course. I don’t think you’ll find this altogether worthless, Vicki.”

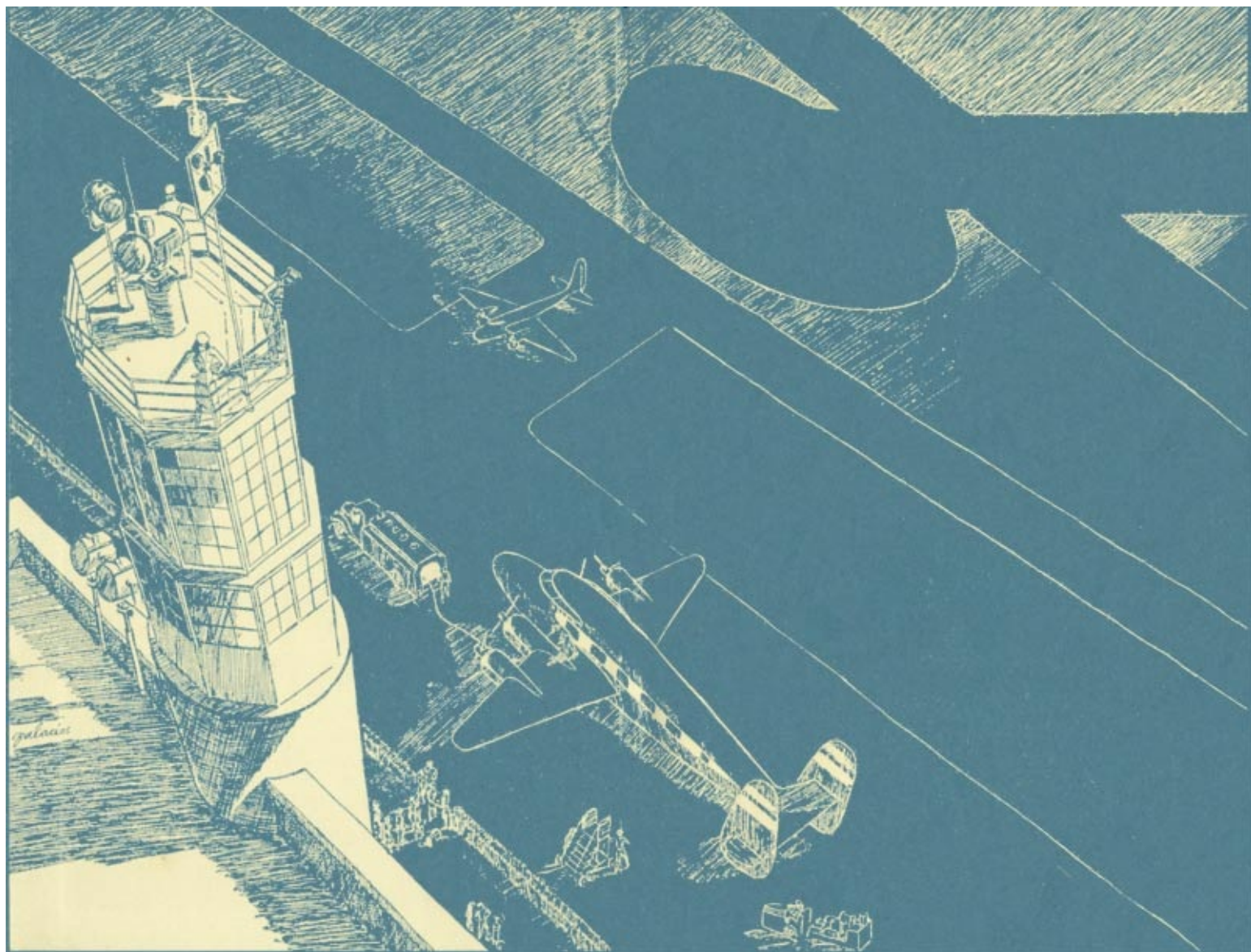
From his pocket he took the little golden ship that Vicki had first seen in the Thieves’ Market.

“For your invaluable help in solving this case, the insurance company wants you to have this as a reward.”

He reached over and put the ship’s model in Vicki’s hand. The polished gold glistened in the afternoon sun.

“If I ever have another case as perplexing as this one, I may call on you for help, Vicki. You’re a darn

good detective.”



Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been standardized. Other changes to the original publication are as follows:

- Page 9
“Hi, Joey!” Vickie greeted him. *changed to*
“Hi, Joey!” Vicki greeted him.
- Page 148
flashing colors of a kaleidscope wheel *changed to*
flashing colors of a kaleidoscope wheel
- Page 172
He way trying to tell *changed to*
He was trying to tell
- Page 175
she sipped on her lemondæ *changed to*
she sipped on her lemonade

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