

WHAT  
HAPPENED  
AT MIDNIGHT



FRANKLIN W. DIXON

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*What Happened at Midnight*  
“LOOK OUT!” FRANK SHOUTED AS THE BOULDER  
SHOT DOWN THE SLOPE.

HARDY BOYS MYSTERY STORIES

WHAT HAPPENED AT  
MIDNIGHT

By

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

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The Hardy Boys: What Happened at Midnight

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## CHAPTER I

### THE AUTOMAT

“THE invention of the age!” proclaimed Chet Morton, his chubby face beaming as he led his chums through the freshly-painted portals of Bayport’s newest building. “The greatest boon ever conferred on the hungry lads of our fair city! Step up! Step up, young gentlemen, and have your money ready. For a mere five-cent piece, the fifth part of a quarter, the twentieth part of a dollar, one may allay the pangs of hunger. For a dime one may have nourishment. For two dimes, one may feast. For a quarter, one may have a banquet.”

“And for thirty cents,” laughed Frank Hardy, a tall, dark-haired boy who had followed Chet into the building, “you may have the noblest stomach ache that ever doubled you up in a knot.”

“For thirty cents,” said Chet, solemnly, “I’ll just get enough food to work up a good appetite for supper.”

Half a dozen boys from Bayport High School followed Chet into the automat, Bayport’s latest novelty. Its construction had been watched with interest by the boys, “mainly because it has something to do with food,” as Chet said, and on opening day they were among the first to sample its food.

Frank and Joe Hardy, with Biff Hooper, Jerry Gilroy, Tony Prito and Perry Robinson made up the delegation. Laughing and jostling, with the usual horseplay common to lads of their age, they went into the automat and watched with interest as Chet demonstrated the operation of the machines. This boy, who had made himself friendly with the manager of the automat long before the place was open for business, knew all about it. His manner now could not have been excelled by the proprietor.

“You see the food before you, behind the glass,” he declaimed. “You pays your money and you takes your choice. Rather, you takes your choice and then you pays your money. If someone will kindly lend me the small sum of five cents, I’ll show you how it works.”

“Use your own nickel,” said Jerry Gilroy.

“Now, young gentlemen,” pleaded Chet, “as guide and instructor, offering my services free of charge, you shouldn’t expect me to use my own money.

However,” he sighed, “as no nickels are forthcoming and as yonder sandwich looks very tempting indeed, I’ll show you tightwads what to do. There is the sandwich. Here is my nickel. There goes my nickel,” he added, inserting the coin into the slot. “Here comes my sandwich. Very simple.”

Chet took a tremendous bite out of the double layers of bread.

The mechanism of the automat interested the lads, but the tempting array of food held an even greater fascination. In a short time the boys were dropping their nickels with enthusiasm and sampling a great variety of tidbits.

Chet was in his element. The portly youth went industriously about the task of achieving a stomach ache. The Hardy boys and Jerry Gilroy had to join forces to push him away from a display of apple pie.

“You’re blocking the traffic,” said Frank. “Give someone else a chance!”

Chet reached for his last coin.

“I think I’ll spend it on pie,” he said, regarding the coin thoughtfully. “When in doubt, it is always safe to spend your money on pie.”

“They have big slabs of pie here,” remarked Tony Prito, looking into the glass. “Bigger than you can get down at the corner restaurant.”

Chet shook his head. “Do not be deceived, Tony. That slab of pie is not as big as it looks. You see a very large piece of pie behind the glass. You put in your money, open the receptacle and take out a very small piece of pie. That is an automat.”

Three or four boys, lads who lived outside Bayport near Chet Morton’s home, pushed their way forward. Chet and his friends were gathered in a laughing group, not noticing that they blocked the passage.

“Going to stand here jawing all day?” grumbled one of the new-comers. “How about making room for a cash customer?”

“Sure,” said one of his companions. “You High School kids think you own the earth.”

Chet turned his withering gaze upon them.

“First come, first served,” he chirped. “You’ll wait until we’re good and ready to move on.”

“You’d better look out, Fatty,” said the spokesman for the farm boys. “If you take any bigger piece of pie than comes out of those holes, on top of what you’ve already had, you’ll be dead.”



This exchange of civilities appeared to have all the elements of a fair-sized quarrel but anyone who knew the boys would have sensed the undercurrent of good-nature. Two of the farm boys jostled their way forward and attempted to shoulder Chet aside. The stout one planted his feet firmly apart and refused to be budged.

*“Here I’ll stand and here I’ll die  
But I won’t give up this hunk of pie.”*

One of the boys laughed and gave Chet a push. Chet pushed back. The Hardy boys and their chums, grinning, ranged themselves around Chet, prepared to help defend his position.

A slight scuffle ensued. The boys began to jostle one another. No one noticed a big, bullet-headed, blond man who stood nearby, scowling at this exhibition of youthful spirits. The big man, who was roughly clad and whose expression was surly, appeared to take the matter more seriously than the lads.

“Throw them out!” he muttered. “Throw them out of the place!”

At that moment one of the farm boys, pushed forward by one of his companions, stumbled against Chet.

Chet’s foot went out. The boy tripped and went headlong. Unfortunately, Joe Hardy was standing in his path and under the impact Joe went stumbling backward.

He crashed into the blond man.

The big fellow gasped as Joe’s elbow dug into his ribs. His face flushed with anger.

“Sorry,” laughed Joe, not realizing that the fellow would regard the matter as anything more than an accident.

The surly man grabbed Joe by the collar.

“What do you mean?” he growled. “What’s the idea of bumping into me like that?”

Joe tried to wriggle free but he could not break the fellow’s grasp.

“I didn’t mean to bump into you. Let go of my collar!”

“I’ve a good mind to kick you out into the street. Fine state of affairs when a man can’t come into an automat without being trampled on by a pack of rough-necks. You kids think you own the earth.” The man shook Joe violently.

The other boys looked serious. This was going too far.

Frank Hardy stepped forward.

“It was an accident,” he said quietly. “He has apologized. I’d advise you to let him go.”

The blond man sneered.

“You *advise* me, eh? Any more advice from you and I’ll give you the thrashing you deserve.”

Jerry Gilroy, Chet Morton, Tony Prito and Perry Robinson promptly stepped forward.

“Oh, you will, will you?” they chorused.

Their meaning was plain. If the blond man tried to thrash Frank, he would have to deal with the others as well. Even the farm boys were beginning to side with the High School lads. They all sensed that the blond man was an intruder.

Joe’s captor saw that he had, as the expression is, bitten off more than he could chew, but he was stubborn and still retained his grip on Joe’s collar.

“Trying to threaten me, eh?” he blustered. “We’ll see about that. I’m going to call the manager.”

“You don’t need to call me,” said a quiet voice. “I’m right here. And if you don’t release that boy and clear out of here, I’ll call a policeman.”

Mr. Tibbett, manager of the automat, confronted him sternly. Chet Morton went red in the face trying to suppress a joyous whoop of triumph.

## CHAPTER II

### MORE TROUBLE

MR. TIBBETT had seen the whole affair from his office. A disturbance on the opening day of the automat was not at all to his liking but he realized that the pushing and jostling of the boys was nothing more than harmless mischief, while the attitude of the blond man boded trouble.

“You tellin’ me to clear out?” demanded Blondy.

“If you can’t behave yourself. The boy didn’t harm you. He fell against you accidentally and apologized for it, but you seem eager to start a fight. Now get out of here or you’ll find the fight you’re looking for.”

“Aw, is that so?” retorted the big man. With this feeble retort he released his grip on Joe’s collar, turned and slunk out of the place.

Mr. Tibbett turned sternly to the boys.

“Now,” he said, “if you chaps can’t come in here without pushing and shoving each other around, I’ll have to take action.”

“What will you do?” demanded Joe, interested.

“I’ll put the price of pie up another nickel.”

There was a groan of anguish from Chet.

“We’ll be good, Mr. Tibbett,” he said, anxiously. “Honest, we will. No more scrapping, fellows. We’ll behave ourselves, won’t we? You won’t have any more trouble when we’re around, Mr. Tibbett. He won’t, will he, fellows?”

The others burst into laughter at Chet’s anxiety lest the price of pie be raised. Mr. Tibbett smiled and went back to his office, satisfied that his threat would have the desired effect. The little disagreement over, the Crabb Corners lads and the High School boys amicably proceeded to try out the automat in peace.

Frank and Joe Hardy left their friends and went out into the street.

“Don’t forget that we have to call at the jeweler’s for mother’s ring,” said Frank. “She’ll expect us to bring it home to-night.”

“Good thing you thought of it. I’d forgotten about that ring,” Joe confessed. “Let’s call for it right now.”

The two boys are already familiar to readers of this series but to those who are making their acquaintance for the first time a few words of introduction may not be out of place. Frank and Joe Hardy were the sons of Fenton Hardy, a celebrated American detective who had made a name for himself while on the staff of the New York City Police, and who had later gone into practice on his own account. Frank and Joe, although still in high school, were eager to follow in their father’s footsteps, although it must be confessed that Mr. and Mrs. Hardy had other plans for the boys.

It had been their hope that Frank and Joe would enter the university and eventually become professional men, going in for either law or medicine, but whenever this suggestion was broached, the boys became indignant. They wanted to be detectives. Their dream would come true only when they were partners in their own private detective agency.

To tell the truth, they were well equipped to achieve this ambition. They had inherited their father’s talent and already they had learned much from him. They had, indeed, won considerable local fame by their cleverness in solving a number of mysteries that had kept Bayport agog. In “The Hardy Boys: The Tower Treasure,” the first volume of this series, the adventures of the brothers in solving the mystery of a puzzling robbery were recounted. Many other adventures of the boys have been related in succeeding volumes, notably their breathless escapades in an airplane while running down a notorious gang of mail robbers, recounted in “The Great Airport Mystery.”

So successful had they both been in handling the cases that came their way that already each had accumulated a respectable bank account by way of rewards paid them. They had also won over their parents and now Mr. and Mrs. Hardy were resigned to their sons’ choice of a career.

“After we call at the jewelry store,” said Joe, “I want to buy a new necktie.”

“What’s the matter with the one you have?”

“Not smart enough. If we’re going to the Mortons’ party to-morrow night, I want a necktie that will make people sit up and take notice.”

“Particularly Iola Morton,” suggested Frank.

“Well, not *her* especially.” Here Joe felt it best to change the subject. “It ought to be a good party.”

“I’ll say it should. Chet and Iola are going to a lot of trouble. They’re having an orchestra from Bayport and the grounds are to be decorated. Even if Chet does kick sometimes about living on a farm, it’s a fine place for a party.”

“If Chet has anything to do with it, we can be sure of one thing, anyway.”

“What’s that?” asked Frank.

“There’ll be plenty of ice cream.”

“That’s true enough.”

They reached the jewelry store and found that Mrs. Hardy’s ring had been repaired. Frank paid the jeweler the small charge, placed the envelope in his pocket, and they went outside again just in time to encounter the Crabb Corners boys whom they had met in the automat.

The farm boys were far from bad, but they were rough and boisterous, considerably given to horseplay, and when they spied Frank and Joe they surged down upon them.

“Haven’t your gang with you now,” said Job Peters, a hulking, freckle-faced boy. “What should we do with ’em, gang?”

“Make ’em get off the sidewalk,” suggested one of his followers, keeping well in the background.

“Try to do it,” invited Joe.

Job Peters lunged forward with the intention of giving Joe a push but he found, to his astonishment, that his prospective victim had vanished. Stepping deftly to one side, Joe let the clumsy Peters stumble past, and he helped him along by a well-placed kick.

Some of the other boys laughed at Job’s discomfiture. His face was red as he turned around.

“I’ll show you,” he roared, and lunged at Joe again.

This time, although Joe was quick, he was not quick enough to evade a thrust of the other boy’s outstretched arm. It caught him off balance and he stumbled back toward the curb.

None of them had noticed a car standing nearby. A big man was just stepping toward the car, his foot on the running board, when the unfortunate Joe collided with him.

The big man carried a package. Under the force of the impact the package was knocked from his hands. It tumbled into the gutter. The string snapped and

the wrapper broke open.

A violent shove, and the big man thrust Joe away from him. In the next movement he hastily snatched up the broken package from the gutter. Without trying to wrap it up again, and making an evident effort to hide it from those around, he flung the bundle into the bottom of the car.

“You clumsy young villain!” he roared. “That’s the second time to-day! I’ve a good mind to box your ears.”

The voice was familiar. Joe cast a startled glance at the man and recognized him as the roughly-dressed, blond stranger of the automat. He dodged just as the man’s heavy hand swooped toward his collar.

The Crabb Corners boys fled. Frank stepped forward.

The big man’s face was dark with rage. He plunged after Joe but could not catch him.

“I’ll teach you!” he snarled. He swung a vicious blow at the boy but Joe was too quick for him again. However, Joe Hardy was not disposed to run away from anyone and he astonished the stranger by standing up to him.

“If it’s a fight you’re looking for,” flared Joe, now thoroughly angry, “you’re certainly going to have it.”

He raised his fists, fully prepared to enter into combat with the big man, when Frank seized his arm.

“Let me handle this!” Frank turned to the angry stranger. “Just lay a finger on him,” he invited, “just touch him and see what will happen.”

The big man hesitated. He realized that he was on a public street and that already the little disturbance was attracting attention.

“Looking for trouble?” asked Frank coolly.

The man stepped back. Then he turned and strode toward the car. “Clumsy brat!” he flung back over his shoulder.

He scrambled into the car, slammed the door viciously, and drove off down the street.

“Nice, gentle sort of fellow, isn’t he?” said Joe, slowly.

## CHAPTER III

### THE STROKE OF TWELVE

FROM the beginning, the party given by Chet and Iola Morton at the farm was destined to be a success.

With a smart orchestra playing the latest numbers, with boys and girls dancing on an improvised floor of smooth, waxed planks on the lawn under an electrically lighted canopy, with the orchard resplendent in the beauty of gay Japanese lanterns hanging from the branches of the trees, the Morton place was transformed.

“The best party of the year, bar none,” was Frank Hardy’s verdict, and it was echoed by all. The evening was ideal, with a full moon beaming down on the merrymakers from a sky of spangled stars, and the boys and girls who had been invited to the party were objects of envy in the eyes of those not so fortunate.

Chet, plump and smiling, greeted his guests at the gate, while pretty Iola, in a new party dress, received them at the house. When Frank and Joe Hardy arrived, he welcomed them with his usual jovial grin.

“I’m certainly glad you came,” he said. “I’ll be easier in my mind now that I know there are a couple of detectives on the premises.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Joe. “Are you afraid some of the guests may have their jewelry stolen?”

“No. But I wish you’d keep an eye on the ice cream. I certainly don’t want any thief to walk off with *that*,” declared Chet.

Chet mopped the back of his perspiring neck with a handkerchief.

“I’m just counting the minutes until I can get at the ice cream and lemonade.”

“Leave some for your guests,” said Joe.

“I suppose I’ll have to. Do you know,” said Chet, solemnly, “I don’t think I *could* eat all the ice cream or drink all the lemonade we have here to-night.”

“There certainly must be plenty, then,” Frank replied, impressed.

“Mountains of ice cream and oceans of lemonade. The very thought of it makes me cooler already.”

The Hardy boys laughed and went on up to the house, where they paid their respects to Mrs. Morton and Iola, the latter having a particularly warm smile for Joe. He was her special favorite among the boys, just as Frank was the special favorite of Callie Shaw, Iola’s chum.

The party was already getting into full swing when the boys arrived. The orchestra was excelling itself, and in a few minutes Frank and Joe were dancing with Callie and Iola on the smooth floor beneath the lights.

The next few hours passed swiftly and as midnight drew near Chet moved about, beaming happily as his guests assured him that the party was “the best ever.” His happy expression, however, was not entirely due to these compliments. It was because the time for serving the refreshments had now arrived.

And what refreshments they were!

Heaps of sandwiches, great lashings of cake in unlimited quantities, huge pitchers of lemonade, and more ice cream than they could reasonably consume. The Hardy boys, with Callie and Iola, took possession of the steps of the front veranda and settled themselves there with a platter of sandwiches, an enormous chocolate cake, a pitcher of lemonade and heaping dishes of ice cream.

“This,” said Joe, with his mouth full of cake, “has been a real party.”

“It’s too bad,” said Iola, who was a warm-hearted girl, “that we couldn’t have asked everybody.”

She glanced toward the fence. Out in the road they could see a little group of boys who were looking hungrily at the gay scene. Among them Frank distinguished some of the Crabb Corners lads whom they had seen in the automat.

“We might take them some cake,” suggested Callie.

“Better than that. I’ll tell them to go around to the back, and the cook can give them some ice cream, too,” said Iola. “There is more ice cream than we can ever eat, and it will only be wasted. Those boys don’t belong to our crowd, and they’re rather rough, but ice cream tastes just as good to them as it does to us. Come along, Joe.”

Joe obediently followed her down the steps and they moved across the lawn beneath the trees toward the fence skirting the highway. At their



approach, the group of boys scattered.

“I hope they didn’t think I was going to order them away,” said Iola.

“They’ve just gone down the road,” Joe remarked. “If we follow the fence, we’ll find them all right.”

Frank Hardy and Callie Shaw, sitting on the steps, saw Joe and Iola vanish among the trees.

“If Iola makes up her mind to give those boys some ice cream, she’ll see that they get some,” said Callie, with a laugh.

“Even if she has to chase them all the way to Crabb Corners.”

“Yes. She’s the best-hearted girl I ever knew.”

Frank returned to his ice cream again. He had no suspicion that when Joe disappeared among the shadows of the trees he was entering one of the most puzzling mysteries that the Hardy boys had ever faced.

“It must be getting late,” said Callie.

Frank looked at his watch.

“Almost midnight. Oh, well, the party won’t break up until two o’clock at the earliest. We still have a couple of hours of dancing.”

“With that orchestra and floor, it won’t seem like two hours.”

“Not to me, at any rate. I have the best partner here.”

Callie blushed and dimpled at the compliment.

At that moment the big grandfather clock in the hall of the Morton home began to strike.

“Bong—bong—bong—” came the measured strokes.

“Midnight,” said Frank.

The clock was just tolling off the hour of twelve when the calm silence of the night was suddenly broken by a girl’s scream.

It pierced the gloom, and was followed by a hoarse shout. Then, as Frank and Callie stared at each other in amazement, they heard Iola’s voice as she called out:

“Frank! Frank!”

Frank sprang to his feet.

“I wonder what’s happened.”

He leaped down from the steps and sped across the lawn. The scream and the shout had been heard by others and all eyes were turned toward the gloomy mass of trees beyond the lights.

Some of the boys followed Frank, but he outdistanced them all and raced into the shadows.

Down by the fence, near some low-branched trees that grew near the highway, he came upon Iola, sobbing with fright. She ran toward him, almost hysterical with fear.

Joe was nowhere to be seen.

“What happened?” Frank demanded. “Where’s Joe?”

“I don’t know,” stammered Iola. “He heard a noise near the fence and went over to see about it. Then he disappeared. Someone dragged him in among the trees.”

Frank strode toward the fence.

“Don’t go, Frank!” pleaded Iola. “I’m frightened. They may get you, too.”

“Didn’t you see anyone?”

“Just—just a pair of hands. They reached out from the bushes and grabbed him. I screamed. Then I heard him shout and I didn’t hear any more. Someone seemed to be dragging him over the fence.”

Frank plunged into the thicket. There was no sign of Joe. Some of the low branches were broken and there were evidences of a struggle. He listened, but could hear nothing. He scrambled over the fence and emerged on the highway. Here, however, he saw no one.

“It didn’t take me two minutes to get here,” he said to himself. “Where could he have disappeared to in that time?”

He searched about, went up and down the road, scrambled over the fence again and once more searched the bushes. Joe had vanished, seemingly into thin air.

By this time some of the boys from the party had arrived on the scene. When Frank told them what had happened, they immediately joined him in the search. Jerry Gilroy and Perry Robinson, however, did not share his fears that Joe had been kidnapped.

“I think it’s just a practical joke,” said Jerry. “You know, that Crabb

Corners crowd have been hanging about all evening. Probably they saw a chance to throw a scare into the party so they grabbed Joe and took him away with them.”

“Then where are they now? They all scattered when Joe and Iola went down toward the fence.”

“They’re probably hiding in the bushes on the other side of the road. It’s just their idea of getting even for yesterday afternoon.”

The excitement which had prevailed for a few minutes began to die down. Most of the young people at the party accepted Jerry’s explanation and went back to their dancing. Iola, badly frightened, had returned to the house where she was comforted by Callie, who tried to assure her that Joe would soon be back.

Frank, however, was not inclined to believe that the Crabb Corners boys were behind the mysterious affair. The circumstances of Joe’s disappearance were such that he could not regard it as a mere joke. Be it said to the credit of Chet Morton, Jerry and Tony Prito, that they remained with him while he continued the search, although they missed the remainder of the party.

They scoured the bushes on either side of the road, looked for footprints in the dust, investigated all parts of the grounds, but when the party finally broke up at two o’clock they had met with no success.

The dust of the road and the turf near the fence had been so badly trampled that the boys had no idea how many people had been involved in the plot.

“Joe’s a fighter,” Frank pointed out. “It would take at least three or four of those chaps, or a grown man, to handle him.”

“Perhaps they took him home,” suggested Tony.

“That’s an idea. Well, I can’t see that we’ll gain much by searching here any longer. I may find him safely in bed.”

But when Frank returned home and made his way quietly upstairs in the early hours of the morning, he was disappointed. Anxiously, he entered their room.

Joe Hardy had not returned.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE COLD TRAIL

FOR the time being, Frank kept the fact of Joe's disappearance from his mother. He knew that she would be greatly worried, distracted, in fact, and he wished to make one last effort toward locating his brother before breaking the news.

Fenton Hardy, to whom Frank would have ordinarily turned for help, was in the West on an important case. He must depend on his own resources.

So, after a sleepless night, he slipped quietly out of the house shortly after dawn, before the household was astir. He had already arranged with Chet Morton, Biff Hooper and Jerry Gilroy that they should meet at the Morton farm early in the morning, should Joe fail to return.

Chet was waiting for him at the gate. The other boys had not yet appeared. From Frank's downcast expression Chet realized that Joe's disappearance was more serious than they had imagined.

"No sign of him yet?"

"He wasn't at home," returned Frank, soberly. "I don't think there is much of a practical joke about it, Chet. We'll have to get busy."

"I should say so. We should have gotten busy last night. But you know how it was—everybody thought it was just some stunt of the Crabb Corners outfit."

"They wouldn't go so far as to keep him all night. No, this is serious, Chet. I haven't told Mother yet, and we'll make a good search before I do."

"I wish Biff and Jerry would show up. We've lost too much time as it is."

"I think our best plan is to send Biff and Jerry in one direction, while we go in another. You have your car here and we can go out the Shore Road."

Chet nodded agreement. "What I can't understand," he said, "is why anyone should kidnap Joe."

"It's beyond me. The thing seems to have been planned. I think there must have been an automobile waiting down the road. No one saw the affair, except

Iola, and we were all on the scene a few minutes later, yet he had disappeared.”

Chet’s usually cheerful face was grave.

“Perhaps you made an enemy in one of the mysteries you chaps have solved. It may be that Joe is being held for ransom.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised.”

A roadster appeared on the highway just then, driving out from Bayport, and in a few minutes Biff Hooper and Jerry joined them. Their concern, when they learned that Joe had not been found, was deep. Like the others, their first thought had been that the affair was a practical joke, but now they realized that the disappearance of Joe Hardy was a mystery indeed.

“We’ve lost too much time,” said Jerry, briskly. “I vote that we tell the police.”

“Not at present,” said Frank. “I’d rather spend the morning hunting for clues ourselves. If the worst comes to the worst, and we simply can’t find any trace of him, we’ll tell the police.”

“Let’s get busy, then,” said Chet.

He went back to the garage for his car and in a short time the search was under way. Jerry and Biff went toward Bayport, with Biff grumbling that Joe Hardy was “probably hundreds of miles away by now. If we had only taken this thing seriously last night, we might have had a chance.”

This pessimistic opinion, although they would not admit it, was shared by the others.

Before they had been very long on the road the boys began to realize the full extent of the difficulties that confronted them. If Joe had been kidnapped, it was unlikely that his captors would permit him to be seen by anyone; furthermore, his disappearance had taken place at night, at an hour when most people were in bed. Inquiry at various farmhouses along the Shore Road was fruitless.

“No use asking anyone if they saw Joe,” remarked Frank, at last. “It seems clear that he was taken away in a car, so I guess we’d better try to find out if a strange automobile has been seen out this way. Even that won’t help much.”

However, after talking to many people who had neither seen nor heard anything of a strange car the previous night, they encountered a farmer cutting weeds by the roadside. He listened to their story, rubbing his chin dubiously.

“Quite a lot of cars go past my place every night,” he said. “I don’t pay

much attention to 'em. Still, now you come to mention it, there was an automobile came by here early this morning. It woke me up, what with honkin' the horn and puttin' on the brakes, and some men shoutin' at each other."

"At what time?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"It'd be about half-past twelve, I reckon."

"That's the time, all right. Did you see the car?"

"No. I didn't get up. Course my house is right beside the road, and I couldn't help but hear what the man was sayin'. This car come along at a mighty lively clip and when it got in front of the house, the driver slapped on the brakes and then began honkin' the horn. There was some kind of an argument and I heard him tellin' somebody that they must have gone past the crossroads in the dark. The other man started jawin' at him and they had quite a row. Real rough talk, it was. Finally they turned the car around and went back."

"To the crossroads?" said Chet.

"I suppose so. By the way they talked, it seemed that the driver intended to turn at the crossroads. That's about two miles back."

"I remember. One road goes toward Gresham and the other goes up through the truck farms."

"That's right," said the farmer. "Seems to me you haven't much chance of getting trace of the car at this hour of day. It was just after midnight that they were around here. They'd be miles off by now."

With this slight clue, however, Frank and Chet were in no mind to abandon the search. They thanked the man, turned their car about and returned to the crossroads. There they were confronted by another problem. Which road should they take?

"They might have brought Joe up to one of the truck farms and hidden him there," Chet suggested.

"I don't know about that," returned Frank, "All those farms are close together and everybody knows everybody else's business. I'd rather tackle the Gresham road. If we don't find any trace of the car, we can go back and try the road through the truck farms."

"Right you are," assented Chet, cheerfully, as he quickly turned the car onto the Gresham road.

Gresham was a fair-sized town about twenty miles from Bayport. It was

Frank's idea that Joe's abductors were not local people, and the farmer's story about the men who had driven past the crossroads convinced him that if they came from any of the outlying towns or villages, the most likely possibility would be Gresham. So much time had been lost in picking up the cold trail, however, that he had small hope of tracking the car.

As they sped along, they noticed the wreckage of a big touring car in the ditch.

"Someone took a bad spill," said Chet, slowing up. "Nose-dived right into the ditch and turned over."

The tires had already been removed from the wrecked car. It was badly smashed up.

"Hope nobody was killed," said Frank. "That wreck took place within the past day or so, if I'm not mistaken. It hasn't had time to get rusty."

"It hasn't had time to be pulled to pieces, you mean," said Chet. "Abandon a wrecked car for more than a few hours and there won't be much left of it by the time you get back. A lot of people who come along help themselves to something."

A car swung out of a lane some distance ahead. It was a heavy touring car, and although the morning was bright and warm, the boys noticed that the sides were up. The big car swung out onto the road at a high rate of speed, skidded, righted itself, and then roared off toward Gresham.

"Seems in a hurry," observed Chet. "He might have gone into the ditch, too."

Frank did not reply. He was staring fixedly at the other car.

"Look, Chet!" he exclaimed at last, gripping his companion's arm. "Do you see what I see?"

"What?"

"A hand. Look! Isn't that someone signalling?"

Then Chet saw a human hand protruding from the curtains at the rear of the car. The hand waved frantically for a moment, then was suddenly withdrawn.

"You're right!" snapped Chet. "There's something queer about this."

"Chase them! Hurry up!"

Chet leaned over the wheel and pressed his foot on the accelerator. The roadster leaped forward.

The other car had a long lead and was rapidly increasing its speed. It was almost obscured by a cloud of dust. Chet's roadster picked up. The speedometer showed forty, forty-five and then fifty miles an hour as they roared in pursuit.

"We're gaining on them!" declared Frank.

Chet nodded. He was a skillful driver, and as he let the roadster out to the limit, he saw that he was gradually overtaking the big touring car ahead.

Bit by bit they lessened the intervening distance. Trees, farms and hedges flashed past. They caught fleeting glimpses of the quarry through swirling clouds of dust.

Suddenly, the steady hum of the engine changed its note. The motor began to knock. Chet groaned.

"I was afraid of that," he muttered. The roadster began to slow down.

"What's the matter?"

"Engine trouble. I meant to look at it yesterday." He applied the brakes and the roadster came to a stop. Chet looked dismally at the touring car as it disappeared around a distant bend in the road.

"No chance of catching up to it now," he said. "It will be at least half an hour before we get going again."

Frank's heart sank. He felt certain that the person who had signalled to them from the other car was none other than Joe.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCOURAGEMENT

THEY worked feverishly at the stalled engine but Frank soon saw that Chet was right. It would take at least an hour before the damage could be repaired.

“I can do it all right,” said Chet, “but it’s a slow job. Too bad, when we were so near that other car. I’m sure I saw someone signalling.”

“I’m positive of it,” returned Frank, disheartened by this unexpected setback. “If it wasn’t Joe, it was someone in trouble.”

“We needn’t both stay here. I can tackle this alone. Why don’t you put in the time by questioning some of the farmers around here? Perhaps they can give some information.”

Frank agreed that it was a good idea, so he left Chet laboring at the disabled engine and went back down the road.

He went into several farms along the way but met with no success. No one had seen anything of his brother and no one knew anything about the strange touring car they had just pursued. Frank had forgotten the location of the lane from which the car had emerged, so he followed the simple expedient of trying them all in the hope that he might come across the right one.

About a quarter of a mile back down the road he had better luck. There was a man hoeing potatoes in a field, so Frank crossed over to the fence and called to him. Wondering, the farmer shouldered his hoe and stalked through the potato patch.

“A big touring car passed here a little while ago,” said Frank. “It came out of one of these lanes at the right-hand side of the road. I wonder if you noticed it?”

“Big car with the curtains down?” asked the man, after thinking it over for a moment.

“That’s the car.”

“Little roadster coming after it at a lively speed?”

“That’s right. I was in the roadster.”

“Then,” said the farmer, giving him a reproachful glance, “all I got to say to you, young man, is that you’re going to break your neck some day if you travel that fast.”

“We had to. We were trying to catch up with the other car.”

“What for?”

“I think my brother was in it. He’s been kidnapped. What did you see?”

The man plucked a blade of grass and began to chew at it.

“Sure your brother was in the car?”

“No, I’m not sure. We wanted to find out. Our own car broke down.”

“So that’s the way of it, eh? Well, that big touring car you’re talkin’ about came out of the lane that leads up to a roadhouse just a few hundred yards away from here. The next lane up that way.”

“That’s what I wanted to know.” Frank began to scramble across the ditch. “Thanks very much.”

The farmer leaned leisurely against the fence. “What are you in such a hurry about?” he asked. “I can tell you some more about that big car, if you’re anxious to know.”

Frank turned back.

“What do you know about it?”

The man munched reflectively at his blade of grass for a while without replying. Then he said:

“There was a kind of a smash-up near here this morning.”

“I saw it. Car turned over in the ditch.”

“Yep. That’s the one. I thought mebbe there was somebody hurt. I heard the crash from my house, so I came out to see what was wrong.”

“At what time was this?”

“I can’t rightly say. It was early. Real early this morning. It was dark, I remember. When I came down the road, I saw one man holding a flashlight and he was helpin’ take somebody out of the car. When I asked if they needed any help, they told me to mind my own business. Wouldn’t let me even go near the wreck, mind you. Just told me to clear out and mind my own business.”

“Did you see any of the people in the car?”

“There was the man holding the flashlight, and another fellow. Then there was the one I thought was hurt. He was all bundled up in the back seat.”

“A boy or a man?”

“I can’t tell you that. I never got near enough to have a good look at him. The fellow with the flashlight told me to clear out. So I did.”

Frank was possessed by a growing excitement. He was certain that the person “bundled up in the back of the car” was none other than Joe.

“Do you know where they took him?” he demanded eagerly.

“The fellow that was hurt? Sure. I watched ’em from the fence here. They carried him up into the roadhouse. They left the wrecked car where it was. It was all busted to pieces anyway. Then, early this morning, that big touring car came out from Gresham and went up toward the roadhouse. It stayed there until a little while ago and then came out.”

“I suppose the people at the roadhouse will be able to tell me more about these men. Perhaps it was my brother in the back of the car.”

“Mebbe,” returned the farmer, noncommittally. “Them folks up at the roadhouse don’t answer many questions, though, I’ll warn you that. They’re a queer outfit. It’s best not to have too much to do with ’em. Did you say your brother was kidnapped? What’s his name? Where do you come from? How was he kidnapped, anyway?”

Frank was not disposed to answer any of the curious farmer’s questions. The roadhouse was his immediate objective. He felt sure that he was now on the right track.

“Sorry,” he said. “I can’t tell you any more just now. I’m in a hurry. If my brother was in that car I want to telephone to Gresham and have it headed off.”

He left the man still leaning against the fence and went on down the road at a run. He arrived within view of the roadhouse within a few minutes, quite out of breath.

It was a long, low white building with a wide veranda, set back in a clearing among the trees at the end of the lane, and it seemed deserted. He knocked at the door several times without response and was just about to go around the back way, when he heard heavy footsteps beyond the door.

A surly, hard-bitten man in shirt sleeves confronted him. The man looked as though he had been asleep and as if he were angry at being disturbed.

“Well?” he growled.

“Was there a big touring car here just a little while ago?” asked Frank.

The surly man looked at him suspiciously.

“No.”

“I’m sure there was. It came out of this lane.”

“What you tryin’ to do—kid me?” demanded the fellow. “There wasn’t any tourin’ car here that I know of.”

“Weren’t there some men here from the wreck?”

“I don’t know about any wreck. Beat it!”

“But there was a wreck!” declared Frank, becoming angry. “There is a wrecked car right near the lane.”

“What are you askin’ all the questions for?”

“I want to know something about the men who came here from the wrecked car. What did they look like? Was there a boy with them?”

“Seems to me you want to know too much,” snapped the roadhouse man. “There was some people came in here last night. Their car was wrecked. I didn’t see ’em because I wasn’t on duty. They took a room here and stayed the rest of the night.”

“Someone must have seen them.”

“The night-clerk saw ’em, sure.”

“May I talk to him?”

“No. He’s in bed.”

“But this is important,” insisted Frank, desperately. “I want to know if there was a boy with them.”

“And I’m tellin’ you I don’t know. I won’t wake up the night-clerk at this hour of day for anybody, see! These people came here and took rooms and paid for ’em. That’s all that I care about. This morning they had breakfast and then telephoned to Gresham for a car to come here and take ’em away.”

“Did they telephone for a taxi?”

“How should I know? They called up Gresham and had a car come out here for ’em. It wasn’t a taxi, if you’ve gotta know everything. They just left here a few minutes ago.”

“Did you see them leaving?”

“No! And I don’t know anything about this boy you say was with ’em, or nothin’ else. You beat it and leave me alone!”

With that the surly man slammed the door in Frank’s face.

He turned away utterly discouraged. He felt that he had been on the point of getting an exact description of the two strangers and the injured person with them, only to be met with this rebuff. It was evident that the roadhouse man, as the farmer had told him, did not welcome strangers who asked questions.

One thing he knew, however. The touring car came originally from Gresham, and probably it had gone there.

Frank trudged back down the lane out to the main road. He passed in the potato patch the farmer who looked up, leaned on his hoe, and called out:

“Did you learn anything?”

“Nothing much,” returned Frank, trying to force a smile.

“I didn’t think you would,” rejoined the man, and went back to his hoeing again.

Chet was still toiling at the engine when Frank returned. He looked up expectantly.

“Any luck?”

Frank sat gloomily on the running board of the roadster.

“The touring car came out from Gresham to pick up the people from the wrecked car we saw down the road. They had spent the night at the roadhouse.”

“Was Joe with them?”

“I couldn’t find out. I asked a man at the roadhouse and he said he didn’t know anything.”

“He was probably lying,” declared Chet. “Those roadhouse people are pretty cagey customers. They’re always afraid of detectives.” He turned to the engine again. “Never mind, Frank, I’ll have this fixed up in a minute. Then we’ll see what we can learn at Gresham.”

## CHAPTER VI

### BREAKING THE NEWS

“WELL, I guess we’re ready to go,” Chet announced as he gave his hands a final wipe in an effort to rid them of some of the grime and grease that stuck after the repair job.

“Will she run?” questioned Frank.

“Like a sewing machine! Step on the starter and see.”

Frank did so.

“All to the Worcestershire sauce,” he announced. “Let’s go!”

“Gresham?” questioned Chet.

“Where else?”

“I didn’t know but what you had changed your mind.”

“Why should I?”

“Well, you’ve been thinking pretty hard and I notice that when you do that, something happens.”

“Something will happen if I can get hold of the birds who have Joe!” exclaimed Frank, and there was a grim look about his mouth that boded no good for his enemies.

“That’s what we’re going to do,” declared Chet. “We’re going to get a line on those birds in Gresham.”

“Maybe.” Frank was not very sanguine. “Anyhow, let’s see how the old bus runs.”

The car bore out Chet’s prediction and not only started with a touch of the electric foot-button, but continued to run over the road that led to Gresham. The boys rolled into the town, coasting along, somewhat at a loss as to what their first move should be.

“So this is Gresham!” remarked Frank, just as if he didn’t know it.

“What there is of it,” countered Chet. “Is there any particular part you’d

like to see more than another?" he inquired with the manner of a guide to a stranger.

"I guess we'd better go straight to the police," suggested Frank. "The more I think over what happened, the more I believe we should have some official help and action on this game. The memory of that big, burly, light-haired man sticks in my mind."

"He was something of a strong-arm man," agreed Chet. "Yes, I think the police are indicated in a case of this sort."

They stopped the car in front of Headquarters which was typical of the town.

"Well?" half growled the officer behind the desk, which had a brass railing in front.

"Is the Chief in?" asked Frank.

"Who wants to see him?" was the hedging question in answer.

"Well, I suppose we both do," Frank said with a smile, as he turned toward Chet, "but I guess I'm more particularly interested, as it's my brother."

"You say this lad is your brother?" asked the officer. "He doesn't look a bit like you."

"No, we came here to inquire about my brother," Frank went on. "He's missing."

"Oh, a case of a runaway boy. Well, you don't need to see the Chief about that. I can attend to it as well as him. Now, I'll ask you a few questions. What's his name and why did he run away from home?"

"I didn't say he ran away from home!" murmured Frank.

"Yes, you did, too!"

"No, I didn't. I said I had called in reference to my brother who is missing. I didn't say he ran away from home."

"Well, ain't that the same thing?"

"Not at all. It may be a case of kidnapping!" said Frank, sharply.

"Oh, kidnapping! Why didn't you say so at first? Kidnapping! Yes, I reckon this is a case for the Chief. But when you first came in, speaking about a boy running away from home—we get a lot of them kind—why I just thought I could look after it. But if it's kidnapping—that's different. Now if you'll give me a description of the kidnappers——"

“What’s all this, Jim?” interrupted a voice. A good-natured, burly, red-faced man came from an inner room, inspected the two boys with an appraising glance and walked up behind the officer who was seated at a long desk.

“A kidnapping, Chief,” was the answer.

“Kidnapping, eh? Right here in Gresham. That’s bad. I’ll take charge of this myself. Now, then, young men, step into my private office. I always take charge of kidnapping cases. Give me all the particulars and we’ll have the rascals in short order.”

“Oh, but we aren’t dead certain that it is a kidnapping,” said Frank.

“Why,” began the Chief in disappointed tones, “you told Jim that it was!”

“No, I only said it *might* be kidnapping.”

“Oh, it *might*? Well, that’s different. But it’s serious enough. Now, then, let me hear all about it.”

Frank began to tell the story, but the Chief interrupted to ask:

“First let me get your name.”

“I’m Frank Hardy,” was the answer.

“Hum. Any relation to Fenton Hardy, the private detective?”

“He’s my father.”

“Oh! Oh, indeed! Well, this is different. Anything we can do for Mr. Hardy, we’ll be glad to. Why didn’t you say that at first, when you came in? My man would have showed you into my office at once. So, one of the Hardy boys has been kidnapped, eh? Why, this ought to be right in your father’s line, Frank.”

“It might be, but, as it happens, my father is away and Chet and I want to work this out by ourselves if we can. Now we have a sort of clue that seems to lead here to Gresham and we thought maybe you could help us.”

“Sure I can. What’s the nature of the clue?”

Frank, with Chet’s assistance in supplying forgotten facts, told about the big touring car.

“We want to find out if that car has been seen around town,” Frank said.

“Hum! I’ll find out. My men always make a report of anything unusual that they see and this car was a bit unusual, I should judge. I’ll look over the



reports.”

The Chief left his private office, was heard in rather earnest conversation with the officer at the desk and returned to say to Frank and Chet:

“No car like that came into Gresham lately. If it had, some of my men would have spotted it, sure.”

Frank took the liberty of doubting this, but did not mention it. Instead he remarked:

“The men probably branched off in some other direction.”

“Likely,” the Chief agreed. “We’ve got a good police force here and kidnapers and such crooks give this town a wide berth. As for them people at the roadhouse calling up to have a relief car sent—well, maybe that was a stall, as we police say.”

“Maybe,” Frank assented. “But is there any other way of finding out?”

“I’ll call up the Mansion House,” offered the Chief. “They keep open pretty late and they got a regular night-clerk now. Maybe he saw something.” The hotel could throw no light on the matter, however.

“How about the telephone central office?” asked Frank. “They have operators on duty all night long. Maybe one of them might have seen the car going through in the early hours.”

“Good idea! I’ll call ’em up,” offered the Chief.

That clue likewise proved to be a dud, as Chet remarked. Nor did the central telephone office have any record of a call from the roadhouse.

“’Tain’t likely,” the Chief said, “that they would give their right names, or anything they could be traced by, when telephoning in from a roadhouse after they’d done a kidnapping or something like that. They’d most likely lay low an’ wait for some friends to come along and help ’em. Those roadhouse people aren’t to be trusted, either, and if you go around askin’ questions, you may get into trouble. I’ll keep my eyes open and do what I can for you. I think you two had better go back home now and start over again from there. Maybe the lad in the car wasn’t your brother after all, Frank.”

“I’m afraid it was, but maybe you’re right. We aren’t getting anywhere on this clue.” Though he gave in this far, Frank was convinced it was his brother who had waved from the big touring car. “We’ll go back to Bayport,” he concluded.

On the return journey Chet voiced the question that was uppermost in

Frank's mind when he said, cautiously:

"Frank—do you think something could have—happened to Joe?"

"Foul play, you mean?"

"If it was plain kidnapping, there'd be a demand for a ransom, wouldn't there? He's dropped out of sight completely. I'm sorry we didn't get busy the minute we lost him."

"I'm afraid, Chet," confessed Frank. "You know we've made a few enemies in the cases we've covered. Several tough characters have been sent to jail or penitentiary because of us."

"That's what I was thinking of. If one of these men got out and came back looking for revenge——"

"Don't talk about it, Chet, please," begged Frank. "I'm trying to hope for the best. One thing is certain—it wasn't any practical joke. It's serious."

"We should have known that at the beginning."

When they returned to Bayport they met Biff Hooper and Jerry Gilroy, but even before the two spoke, they knew by their expressions that they had discovered nothing.

"Not a trace," said Biff, dolefully. "We questioned scores of people. No one saw him, or heard anything about him. The Crabb Corners crowd were mighty decent. They even offered to start hunting for him themselves."

"That proves they didn't have anything to do with it," declared Frank.

"One of them told me that there was a strange car parked near the grounds last night," said Jerry. "You know that all the guests brought their cars right up the driveway. Well, this particular car was parked, with its lights out, near the fence not far from the place where Joe disappeared."

"I don't suppose," said Frank, with faint hope, "that anyone noticed the license number?"

Jerry shook his head. "No. They couldn't even give a very good description of the car, except that they thought it was a sedan. They didn't see anybody in it. Of course, they thought it belonged to someone who was at the party."

"It didn't," Chet said. "I know everyone who came to the party by car. I know that every automobile was parked inside the grounds because I went around to make sure. I was afraid that if anyone left a car in the road, it might be stolen."

Frank was thoughtful.

“It seems to have been deliberate, then. A car was parked outside the grounds. Joe was grabbed by someone waiting among the trees by the fence. He hasn’t been seen since.”

“And we haven’t a trace,” groaned Biff.

“We’ll just have to keep on searching,” said Frank. “Right now I have the worst end of it. I’ll have to tell my mother.”

“She doesn’t know yet?” asked Chet.

“Not yet. She’ll have to know, though. My father is out West on a case. If he were only here I’d feel that we had a chance. But we’ll have to handle it ourselves.”

The others were sympathetic. They tried to buoy up his spirits, assuring him that Joe would turn up safe and sound within the next few hours, but Frank was not so easily convinced. He was heartened, however, by their assurance that they would organize the other boys and leave no stone unturned toward finding a trace of Joe Hardy.

As he went home, he dreaded the approaching interview with his mother. He saw by her expression, when she met him at the door, that she knew something had gone wrong.

“Frank,” said Mrs. Hardy, directly, “I was just talking to Mrs. Morton over the telephone. She wanted to know if we had found Joe yet. What has happened? Why did you go out so early this morning? Didn’t Joe come home last night?”

Frank walked slowly into the hall.

“I should have told you, Mother, but I wanted to be sure. Joe has disappeared.”

Mrs. Hardy gave a sharp cry.

“Frank! You don’t mean it! How did this happen?”

They went into the dining room and sat down. Then Frank told the whole story; how Joe had been seized by strangers on the grounds of the Morton farm, how they had made no immediate search, because they thought the affair was only a practical joke, and how he and Chet had spent the morning trying to pick up Joe’s trail, but without success.

Mrs. Hardy listened with gradually increasing fear.

“I’m sorry,” repeated Frank, miserably. “I should have told you this morning. But I thought he might turn up, and I didn’t want to alarm you if everything was all right.”

Mrs. Hardy rested a sympathetic hand on her son’s shoulder.

“I know you did what you thought was best, Frank,” she said. “Perhaps it wouldn’t have done any good in any case. We’ll have to do something at once. Have you notified the police?”

“I guess we’ll have to. I’m afraid it’s serious enough for that.”

“I’m sure of it. That will have to be done immediately. You go down and see Chief Collig. Tell him all about it.”

“If only Dad were here!” exclaimed Frank

“He would help a great deal, of course.”

“Should we telegraph him?”

Mrs. Hardy considered this for a moment. “What do you think, Frank?”

“He’s way out in the West, on an important case. It would take several days before he could reach here. He would have to give up the case and perhaps Joe would be found by that time. It can’t be any worse than it is now, Mother.”

“I think you are right. I don’t see any need of worrying your father at present. If Joe doesn’t show up within the next day or so, of course we’ll have to summon your father home. But with the police on the case——”

“And Chet and Jerry and Biff and the rest of us trying to find him!” Frank reminded her.

“Yes. Possibly your father could do no more than you will be able to do. We won’t notify him until we have to. Don’t lose any time, Frank. Go and see Chief Collig right away.”

Frank was surprised at his mother’s calmness. He had expected that she would break down and be utterly helpless in this crisis. She seemed to realize instantly that nothing would be gained by bemoaning the misfortune, and immediately hustled him out of the house to place the matter in the hands of the Bayport police.

He never knew that the moment he had gone down the steps, his mother gave way to a spasm of weeping. She was desperately afraid that something terrible had happened to Joe and that she would never see her son again.

## CHAPTER VII

### AUNT GERTRUDE

Two days went by and the mystery of Joe Hardy's disappearance deepened.

Chief Collig readily promised the assistance of his Police Department, for although the Hardy boys had often worked on important cases in opposition to him, he felt an honest liking for them and he did everything in his power to trace the missing lad. Not only that, but he notified the sheriffs of the adjoining counties, informed the newspapers, and placed all the available machinery of search into operation.

“Where is Joe Hardy?”

That question was on the lips of every person in Bayport, and there was scarcely a soul in the city who was not actively interested in the search. Within two days the affair was a matter of deep concern. Dozens of reports were received at Headquarters, stating that Joe had been seen at one place or another, but when these reports were investigated, it was found that they led to nothing.

There was gloom in the Hardy household. In spite of her efforts to maintain a brave front and conceal the tremendous anxiety she felt, Mrs. Hardy was beginning to show the effects of constant worry and sleepless nights. Frank could scarcely eat. Every spare moment was spent in trying to find some trace of his brother, and in this he was helped by his chums.

They found nothing.

The police went to the roadhouse on the Gresham highway and subjected the surly proprietor to a stern questioning. They came away baffled. The man declared that there was no boy in the party that had come to his place on the night of the car wreck. He insisted that he did not know any of the men who had taken rooms at his house. The names on the register meant nothing. It was impossible to trace them.

In some parts of the city the impression became settled that Joe would never be found. The general theory was that some enemy whom the Hardy boys had been instrumental in convicting had returned to wreak vengeance and

that even now Joe's dead body might be found at the bottom of the cliffs along the Shore Road.

Some of the searchers even followed out this theory and investigated the cliffs and the waters along the Bay. The result was the same. They found nothing.

"We'll wait a week," declared Mrs. Hardy, when Frank again broached the question of telegraphing to Fenton Hardy. "He could do no more than we have already done. I feel in my heart that Joe is alive. If he were dead, I would know it."

So the hours dragged by in alternating hope and discouragement.

On the morning of the third day after Joe's disappearance, the telephone rang. Frank answered.

A familiar voice barked in his ear.

"That you, Frank? How are you? Why did you take so long to answer the phone? How's your mother? What's this I hear about Joe disappearing? Everybody's talking about it! Stuff and nonsense! Utter rubbish! Who would kidnap that young scoundrel? They'd have too much trouble on their hands if they had to look after him. Well—why don't you say something? Here I've been asking you a lot of questions and you haven't manners enough to give me a civil answer. What's the matter with you? Are you deaf?"

"Aunt Gertrude!" gasped Frank.

She ploughed on.

"Who did you think it was? Santa Claus?"

"Where are you, Aunty?"

"At the station, of course. I've just stepped off the train, so naturally I'm at the station. Where did you think I'd be? At the City Hall? You'd better come down and get me. I'm certainly not going to walk, and I always get on the wrong street car and end up in the cemetery or the waterworks, and I won't step into a taxi for the drivers are either blind or crazy, so you'll have to come for me. Mind that you drive carefully. Hurry up, now! I see a strange-looking man eyeing my suitcase and I'm afraid he's going to steal it, so I'll ring off. Goodbye."

Frank gazed helplessly at the telephone and marvelled that the instrument had borne up under the torrent of conversation. So Aunt Gertrude was in the city!

“Oh! Oh!” he breathed.

Aunt Gertrude was one of the pepperiest and most dictatorial old women who ever visited a quiet household. She was a rawboned female of sixty-five, tall and commanding, with a determined jaw, an acid tongue and an eye that could quell a traffic cop. She was as authoritative as a prison guard, bossed everything and everybody within reach, and had a lofty contempt for men in general and boys in particular. When she visited the Hardy home, her two nephews suddenly became paragons of meekness and good behavior, for woe betide the luckless lad who fell into her bad graces!

Underneath this rough and formidable exterior was a very kindly heart, and the boys had long since learned that Aunt Gertrude’s bark was worse than her bite. Strangers either fled from the bossy old lady in terror or hastened to do her bidding in fear and trembling, but the Hardy boys knew by now that her constant stream of violent chatter was not quite as terrible as it seemed.

However, there was Aunt Gertrude waiting at the station and Frank knew he had better step lively if he did not want to hear some plain facts later on. He dashed for the bathroom, washed his face and hands, brushed his hair, then scrambled into his bedroom and put on his best necktie. Aunt Gertrude was a stickler for neatness in others, although her own personal appearance could be charitably described as eccentric. Joe always said she looked as though her clothes had been chosen by a color-blind saleslady and put on her by a cross-eyed maid with only one arm.

He dashed down the stairs and met his mother in the hall.

“Aunt Gertrude is in town!”

“My goodness!” wailed Mrs. Hardy. “And the guest room isn’t tidy. Why didn’t she let me know she was coming?”

“She never does.”

It was one of Aunt Gertrude’s little whims to drop in unexpectedly on her friends and relatives, without a word of warning. She always said she did this so that no one would make a fuss over her or make undue preparations; yet if she stepped into an untidy house, the hostess would always hear about it.

Mrs. Hardy was already half-way upstairs to put the guest room in order. “Don’t hurry back with her,” she said to Frank. “Give me time to tidy up the house.”

Frank hastened out to the garage and scrambled into the handsome but unreliable old roadster. It was a car that looked, as Chet Morton said, “like a

million dollars but drove like thirty cents.” On this occasion, however, it seemed that even the roadster realized that Aunt Gertrude was being kept waiting and that her wrath would be fearful to contemplate if there was any delay. The engine responded without the usual obstinacy, and in a few minutes Frank was heading toward the depot with the old car wheezing laboriously along at a frantic speed of fifteen miles an hour.

He found his aunt standing guard over her suitcase, armed with an umbrella and glaring belligerently about her as though she was prepared to defend her belongings at cost of life and limb, should any ill-advised thief attempt to rob her.

She gazed critically at the car, then at Frank.

“How are you, Aunt Gertrude?” he said politely, taking off his cap. “I’m very glad to see you.”

“You look it!” she snapped. “Where did you get the car? What a dangerous looking contraption! It’s a wonder to me you haven’t broken your neck in it. Looks as if it wouldn’t go less than eighty miles an hour. You’re too young to have a car, anyway.” She turned her attentions from the car to her nephew. “You’ve grown. But you haven’t grown any fatter. What’s wrong? Don’t you eat enough? Or are you smoking cigarettes? If ever I catch you smoking a cigarette, young man, I’ll whale you within an inch of your life. Here, take my suitcase. Don’t stand there gaping. Tell me all the news. I’ve had a dreadful journey. The coach was so dusty I could hardly breathe and there was a baby across the aisle. It yelled and howled all the way. A man ate peanuts and oranges. I’m going to write to the railway company about it. Babies shouldn’t be allowed on trains. And people who eat peanuts and oranges in the day coach ought to be sent to the penitentiary. It’s an outrage!”

Thus complaining, the worthy lady allowed herself to be assisted into the roadster, but in so doing accidentally pressed her hand upon the horn. It gave a terrific squawk. Aunt Gertrude lost her balance and toppled back on the seat, her hat awry.

A meek little man who happened to be passing in front of the car at the moment leaped two feet in the air and reached the curb at one jump.

“Why don’t you put that horn where people will see it?” demanded Aunt Gertrude, when she had recovered her breath. “My goodness! Are you trying to give me heart failure? You know my nerves aren’t very strong. Why don’t you get a quieter horn? That poor man thought he was run over. I thought somebody had thrown a bomb at me. Of all the idiotic, senseless boys, Frank Hardy, you are certainly the worst. I might have expected it. I believe you did



it on purpose.”

“I’m very sorry, Auntie,” said Frank, meekly. “You stumbled against it \_\_\_\_\_”

“Stumble! Me stumble! I did *not* stumble. The horn was deliberately in my way. How did I know it was there? I’ve a good mind to walk.”

Aunt Gertrude settled herself more comfortably in the seat and began fanning herself with a newspaper.

The ride back to the Hardy home was a nightmare. When Aunt Gertrude—who seemed to be in a more critical mood than usual—was not complaining about the horn, she was giving vent to occasional shrieks of alarm when she feared Frank was about to collide with some other vehicle.

“Look! Look! Be careful, Frank! Look where you’re going! Don’t you see that truck coming right at you? Good grief! It’s going to hit us. Stop the car! Oh, what a narrow escape. He just saw you in time. Why didn’t you do something? We might have been killed. Look OUT! There’s a street car. Are you clean crazy? Don’t drive on the tracks! Are you sure we’re on the right street? This isn’t the way we went the last time I was in Bayport. I really believe you don’t know your way about your own town.”

To all this tirade Frank merely replied, “Yes, Aunt Gertrude,” or “You’re quite right, Aunt Gertrude,” or “I’ll try to do better, Aunt Gertrude,” very meekly, and kept his eyes glued on the road while he tried to keep his mind on his driving.

“How long are you going to stay with us, Aunt Gertrude?” he ventured during a momentary lull.

His aunt looked at him suspiciously.

“Anxious to get rid of me already, are you?”

“Oh, no!” Frank assured her hastily. “I was hoping you had come for a long visit.”

“I’ll be here for a month,” snapped the good lady, not at all reassured.

“That’s great!” sighed Frank.

“I think it’s about time I came here for another visit. If I had been here, I’ll warrant Joe wouldn’t have run away. No! Don’t say anything!” she commanded, as Frank made a mild objection. “Don’t tell me he didn’t run away. I know boys. I know ’em well. Young rascals, all of ’em. Always giving trouble and worry to their fathers and mothers and aunts.”

“But he didn’t run away——”

“He did! And he’ll get back home in a hurry if I have anything to say about it. You needn’t explain now. Wait until we get to the house. I want to hear all the facts and then I’ll make up my mind just what to do.”

Aunt Gertrude’s magnificent confidence gave the impression that if she sat down and thought about the matter for a few minutes, she would be able to march out of the house, find Joe directly, and bring him home by the scruff of the neck.

The car drew up before the Hardy home. Aunt Gertrude sighed.

“Always trouble and fuss wherever I go. I wish I could come somewhere for a visit without finding some mix-up that I have to straighten out. Well, here we are! Take suitcase, and mind you don’t drop it!”

“I won’t drop it,” said Frank.

He felt that he faced a very long month.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FAIR-HAIRED MAN

AUNT GERTRUDE arrived at the house something in the manner of a small tornado, kissed Mrs. Hardy, rearranged the furniture in the guest room to her satisfaction, took down a picture in the dining room that offended her eye, interviewed the cook at length and announced what she wanted for dinner, gave instructions as to the exact manner of preparation, and finally sat down in the living room quite exhausted.

“Now!” she said, as though clearing the decks for action. “What’s all this about Joe? Tell me the whole story!”

“We’re so worried!” exclaimed Mrs. Hardy. “The whole city is upset by it \_\_\_\_\_”

“Exactly! Exactly!” declared Aunt Gertrude, as though this confirmed her worst suspicions. “Exactly what I always said about that boy. I always predicted that he would have all Bayport by the ears before he was much older. It’s a wonder to me he hasn’t done it before this. Now, why did he run away?”

“He didn’t run away. We’re afraid he was kidnapped.”

“Fiddlesticks! Boys aren’t kidnapped nowadays. Who would want to kidnap a rascal like him? Laura, you’re too upset to tell this properly. Frank, tell me the story!”

Frank did the best he could, in spite of a constant flow of interruptions from his talkative aunt, but as he related the full story of Joe’s disappearance, her manner changed, and she seemed to abandon her first impression that Joe had caused all this trouble deliberately.

“He didn’t run away!” she declared finally, and cast a challenging look about the room as though both Frank and his mother had been insisting all along that Joe *had* run away. “He certainly didn’t run away. You can get that notion out of your heads. I’ll have to put on my thinking-cap.”

In their younger days, when Frank and Joe heard Aunt Gertrude make any reference to her thinking-cap, they were always vastly interested and awaited the production of this mysterious article of head-gear, but now they knew that

this was only a term of speech. Instead, Aunt Gertrude removed her spectacles, brushed them vigorously with a handkerchief, replaced them firmly on her nose and stared at Frank.

“Now,” she said, while they waited expectantly, “how are you going to go about finding him?”

“We’ve done everything we could. We’ve searched all over the country. We’ve had the police——”

“Police! Bah! A crowd of ignorant ruffians. The police will hinder more than they’ll help. Don’t tell me. I know ’em.”

Aunt Gertrude shook her head as though she had spent a lifetime in intimate contact with the police headquarters of all cities and had been utterly disillusioned.

“If he had simply been kidnapped and held for ransom,” said Frank, “we would have had a request for money by this time. Nothing has happened. I’m afraid some enemy is at the bottom of the business.”

In spite of all her bluster and assurance, Aunt Gertrude had remarkably few suggestions to offer. Everything she mentioned had already been done. Grudgingly, she was obliged to admit that Frank had acquitted himself very well in his efforts to locate Joe.

“But we’ll find him,” she announced. “We’ll think of a way. I’m too tired just now, after that terrible railroad journey. As soon as I’ve had a good night’s sleep, I’ll get busy and we’ll find that boy in a jiffy. What a journey that was! I came only from Gresham, just a few miles, but it seemed as if I came all the way from California. Trouble from start to finish. Trouble at the railway station—I didn’t tell you about that, did I?”

“No,” said Mrs. Hardy, “you didn’t.”

“Well, you know I stopped off at Gresham to spend a few days with Cousin Hattie, and when I was ready to leave, nothing would do but she had to come down to the station with me. As if I couldn’t take care of myself. Nonsense! I told her so. At any rate, after I bought my ticket, I went right out to the train for fear it would go away and leave me. You can’t trust these railroad people. Deceitful, all of them. They’d just as soon start a train and leave you standing there, and then laugh at you. But they don’t put anything like that over on me! Not for one little minute!”

Aunt Gertrude rattled on. They followed her through the details of buying her ticket, over the argument with the ticket-clerk, listened to her tirade on the

stupidity of ticket-clerks in general. They followed her out onto the platform. And then, just as she was about to step onto the train——

“What should happen but a big fair-haired man stepped right in front of me to speak to two other men who were standing on the coach steps. They shouldn’t have been there in the first place. But the big lummoxes stood blocking up the steps and I was just going to give them a piece of my mind, I can tell you, when this clumsy ox of a fair-haired man pushed me aside, as calm as you please, and started talking to his friends.”

“That was very rude,” remarked Mrs. Hardy.

“Rude!” shouted Aunt Gertrude. “It was worse than that. It was an outrage. A positive outrage. I’m going to write to the railroad company about it. Why, the man almost knocked me down. I might have fallen over and broken my arm. But that isn’t all. I said to him: ‘Who do you think you’re pushing around?’ just like any other lady would have said, and what do you think he answered?”

“Didn’t he apologize?”

“Apologize! I should say not. He called me—he called me——” Aunt Gertrude was in such a rage as she recalled the incident that she could scarcely repeat the deadly insult. “He called me an old motorboat!”

“An old motorboat!” exclaimed Frank, appearing to be deeply shocked. As a matter of fact, he nearly snickered aloud, but managed to turn it into a cough just in the nick of time.

“An old motorboat!” declared Aunt Gertrude, impressively. “Can you imagine it? After nearly knocking me under the wheels of the train. Then he calmly went on talking to other two men. Not content with that, one of the men on the steps said ‘Fool!’ right out loud.”

“To you?” asked Mrs. Hardy.

“He wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the fair-haired fellow. I suppose he didn’t have the courage to say it to my face. Then the fair-haired fellow gave him a package. So I started in to give them a bawling out. I told them just what I thought of them. I told them I’d report them to the president of the railroad. But Cousin Hattie—she hasn’t any more spunk than a jellyfish—she dragged me away. She said I couldn’t hope to punish everyone who jostled me. Imagine! As if I was to just stand there and let people push me around and swear at me, and never have a word to say about it. I told Cousin Hattie. I said: ‘I suppose I should have asked him to give me another shove, and then thanked him.’ So I went back and said I’d get on that train if I had to

die in the attempt. But they had learned their lesson, the brutes. The two men got off the steps this time, right quick, I can tell you, and I just got on board as the train began to move. So they scrambled on, too, and I heard one of them say to the big, fair-haired lout on the platform: ‘Well, if we must. Same caves!’ Caves! What rubbish! They would stand talking about caves and keeping people from getting on the train.”

Aunt Gertrude took a deep breath, but before she could summon her energies for a fresh lease of life on the monologue, Frank said quietly:

“Would you know the fair-haired man again if you saw him, Aunt Gertrude?”

“Would I know him?” she snapped. “I should say so. And if I ever run across him again, he’ll know *me*, I’ll warrant. Big, brutish fellow.”

Frank looked very thoughtful. Suddenly he slapped his knee in excitement.

“What’s come over you, boy?” demanded Aunt Gertrude. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Nothing,” returned Frank, evasively. Then he got up from his chair and left the room. The moment he reached the hall he broke into a wild scramble, seized his cap from the rack, and rushed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Aunt Gertrude, open-mouthed with amazement, stared at Mrs. Hardy.

“Laura,” she said, severely, “I wonder if that boy of yours is quite right in the head. Now *what* is the meaning of that?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Mrs. Hardy, no less mystified by Frank’s extraordinary behavior. “Boys are strange creatures. You never know what they’re going to do next.”

## CHAPTER IX

### TOWARD THE CAVES

FRANK lost no time in trundling his motorcycle out of the shed and in a few minutes he was speeding down the road, bound for Chet Morton's home.

He was piecing together the details of Aunt Gertrude's story about the fair-haired man at Gresham. From the moment she had mentioned the name of the town, he had been interested, because it was toward Gresham he and Chet had followed the mysterious touring car, but when she referred to the fair-haired man, he became actively concerned.

He remembered the man with whom Joe had the arguments the day the automat opened. He answered the description of the fellow who had jostled Aunt Gertrude on the station platform. Evidently rudeness and clumsiness were common characteristics of both.

Then the reference to the caves! Calling Aunt Gertrude "an old motorboat." He had been interested in that because it was an unusual epithet to apply to any person; it would probably be used only by someone who had had considerable experience with boats.

"I may be wrong," muttered Frank, as he whizzed up the hill toward the Morton farm, "but maybe we have something to work on this time."

As he drew up before the house and brought his machine to a stop, he saw Chet coming down the steps at a run.

"Any news?" asked Chet eagerly.

"Nothing about Joe."

Chet looked downcast. "I thought you looked rather cheerful about something."

"Joe hasn't been found, but I've some information that might be useful. I'd like to know what you think about it."

Frank then told Chet about Aunt Gertrude's story of the man on the station platform, and of the mysterious reference to the caves. When he had finished, Chet scratched his head dubiously.

“I don’t quite see where that fits in with Joe’s disappearance,” said Chet.

“Don’t you remember the big fellow who blundered against Joe in the automat? And how Joe bumped into him later on and knocked a package out of his hand? This chap at Gresham gave a package to the two men on the train.”

Chet whistled softly.

“That’s right, too. I never thought of him. Big, rough, fair-haired fellow. It might be the same man.”

“And the caves! Do you think that fellow might have had something to do with Joe’s disappearance? Perhaps Joe is hidden in the caves somewhere along Barmet Bay.”

“Where the automobiles were hidden?” asked Chet, excitedly.

He referred to an occasion, more fully related in a previous volume of this series, “The Shore Road Mystery,” when the Hardy boys had investigated a series of automobile thefts resulting in the eventual discovery of the stolen cars hidden in secret caves at the bottom of the Barmet cliffs. But there were other caves known to the boys. At the time of the disappearance of Todham Todd, an eccentric college professor who had dropped out of sight, as told in “The Secret of the Caves,” they had conducted an extensive search in the recesses along the coast.

“We’ll try them all,” declared Frank. “If we can’t find anything along the bay, we’ll go on up the coast. Are you with me?”

“I’m with you! How about the others? We’ll get Biff and Jerry to come along. They’d be mad as wet hens if we found Joe and they weren’t in on it.”

“We may not find Joe,” Frank reminded him, “but I hope we’ll find out more about that fair-haired man.”

“Let’s get going,” said Chet, briskly. Then the ever-present problem of food occurred to him. “If you’ll wait a few minutes I’ll get the cook to fix up a lunch for us. We may get hungry. At least you *may*, but I’m *sure* I’ll be hungry.”

He dashed back into the house. While the cook was making up a package of sandwiches and cake, Chet reached Jerry and Biff by telephone and gave them an inkling of what was afoot. They were, as usual, ready for anything in the way of excitement and promised to be at the boathouse within twenty minutes.

The caves could be investigated only by boat and as it was low water at the



time, they felt that they had best make haste. Frank and Joe were joint owners of a speedy craft known as the *Sleuth*, and they planned to use this motorboat in their search.

In a short time Chet was ready and scrambled into the sidecar of the motorcycle with his precious package of food.

“Let ’er go, professor!” he said cheerfully, and the machine plunged clattering down the driveway in a cloud of dust and gravel.

They found Jerry and Biff already awaiting them at the boathouse, agog with curiosity.

“What’s it all about?” asked Jerry. “Has Joe been found? Do you mean to say he’s in the caves down the bay?”

“I didn’t tell you that,” Chet said. “I told you he *might* be there. We’re going to find out. We’ll tell you all about it when we’re out on the briny deep. Let’s get going!”

Frank unlocked the door of the boathouse and they all scrambled into the *Sleuth*, which was quickly unmoored and thrust out into the open. Frank tinkered with the engine for a moment; it spluttered spasmodically a few times, then burst into a roar. He opened the throttle and the fleet craft shot out into the bay, gradually increasing speed, two white waves of water curling away from the bow.

They left the smoky city behind and headed out across the wide reach of water, with the farms and country homes to the south, and the white line of the Shore Road, climbing high to the top of the grim mass of cliffs, to the north. Toward those cliffs, honeycombed with caves, they were now bound. If their search failed, they would return to the city and make preparations for a longer journey down the coast on the morrow.

There were clouds in the sky and way off toward the open water at the distant end of the bay was a hint of fog. Frank eyed the far-off mist doubtfully. It would take some time to make a close search of the caves on the north shore and if fog came up, their hopes would be ruined. However, he decided that they would have to do the best they could, even if it meant abandoning the search and returning later.

He told Jerry and Biff the story of Aunt Gertrude’s encounter with the fair-haired man, and of the conclusions he had drawn from mention of the caves. Both boys were enthusiastic and declared their belief that he had hit upon the right solution.

“By your aunt’s description of that fellow, I’d say he was the same chap who blundered into Joe in the automat,” said Jerry. “He was always stepping on somebody’s toes, and never had an apology for it, either. An ugly-looking customer.”

“Didn’t seem to be overlong on brains, either,” commented Biff.

“He’ll need all the brains he has if we get on his trail,” Chet affirmed. “If the worst comes to the worst, we’ll give his description to the police and have them look him up.”

“If he is mixed up in Joe’s disappearance,” said Frank, “I can’t imagine why. He wouldn’t kidnap Joe simply because of a silly little quarrel like that.”

“There’s something deep behind it,” Jerry said. “There’s something more behind this than we’ve guessed so far.”

They sped on toward the north shore and gradually drew closer to the high ramparts of cliffs that rose sheer from the waters of the bay. It reminded Frank strongly of the time they had searched the caves in those cliffs for the stolen automobiles, and of the stirring adventures they had experienced before they finally outwitted the car thieves and brought them to book.

The fog was coming up the bay now in a high, menacing gray wall. Chet grimaced.

“We’re not going to make it. That fog will be on us before we get within a quarter of a mile of the caves.”

“I’m afraid so,” agreed Frank. “But I hate to give up now that we’ve come this far.”

“I’ve had a few experiences in fog out on this bay,” grunted Biff Hooper, “and I don’t want to repeat ’em if it can be helped. You never know when some other boat is going to come along and run you down. You can’t see them either, until they’re right on top of you. Let one of those big ocean boats wallop you and you’re done for.”

“Let ’em come,” said Chet, settling back comfortably. “I can swim.”

“A lot of swimming you’d do if an ocean boat ploughed down on you and hit you over the head.”

“Plenty. I’d be swimming long before it ever hit the launch.”

The fog swirled down on them. It came up with deceptive swiftness, hiding the shore from view, enveloping them so that they could scarcely see more than a few yards ahead. Frank had already spied a small tug a short distance

down the bay, heading toward the city, but now it vanished. He reduced speed.

“This,” said Jerry, “is not so good. How long do you think it will last, Frank?”

“You’ve lived in Bayport as long as I have, Jerry. You tell him, Chet. How long does a fog last?”

“Two hours and twenty minutes less than a snowstorm.”

The *Sleuth* felt its way through the clammy mist. To turn back now meant that they would run the risk of a collision with some other boat as they approached the city, so Frank felt that the best plan would be to keep going and hope that the fog would lift shortly. He thought he heard the faint throb of the tug’s engines in the distance but he could not be sure. The fog muffled every sound and rendered it almost impossible to estimate distance or direction.

Then he heard the blast of the tug’s whistle, low and mournful through the heavy cloud. It seemed to be far over to the right, and he judged that he risked no danger from that source.

When the whistle sounded again, it seemed to come from a point not far to the left, and drawing closer, Frank became worried.

“That old tug must have travelled about two miles clean across the bay in half a minute,” remarked Chet.

As he spoke, the whistle sounded again. This time Chet straightened up. The tug seemed to be directly ahead.

“Can you figure that out, Frank?”

“I think the tug is mighty close. It’s hard to tell just where the sound comes from. We’ll just have to go easy and try to see it first.”

“Try to see anything in this fog,” grumbled Biff. “I can hardly see the back of the launch.”

Again the whistle sounded, this time terrifyingly loud, and so close that the tug seemed to be only a few yards away. They could hear the engines. Still the thick mist revealed nothing.

“Up in front, Chet!” snapped Frank. “If you see it, tell me right away.”

Chet scrambled out on the bow. He peered into the gray gloom ahead. Suddenly he gave a yell of terror.

“It’s bearing right down on us!”

Even as he shouted, a heavy dark shadow loomed out of the fog upon them. It seemed inevitable that the tug would run the launch down.

## CHAPTER X

### THE VOICE FROM THE ROCKS

THERE was not a moment to lose!

The engine of the *Sleuth* broke into a sudden clamor as Frank opened the throttle wide, at the same time bearing down on the wheel.

The tug seemed to be sweeping down on them at tremendous speed. It was only a few yards away and it grew out of the mist like a dark shadow of menace. They could even see the figure of a man on the deck, waving his arms wildly. The whistle shrieked.

The launch swerved and shot directly across the bow of the larger boat.

For a breathless second it seemed that nothing could save them. The boys waited for the jarring impact and the crash of the wreck that was only seconds away!

But the *Sleuth* had speed, and Frank's handling of his craft was masterly.

The launch shot clear. The tug went roaring astern. It had missed the *Sleuth* with less than a yard to spare. The little boat was caught in the heavy swell and was pitched to and fro.

It was all over in a moment. They caught a momentary glimpse of the other boat's stern, squat and bulky through the mist, and then the tug was swallowed up again.

Chet Morton broke the silence.

"Oh, boy! Wasn't *that* a close call?"

Jerry Gilroy, who had been thrown off his balance when the launch altered its course so suddenly, scrambled to his feet, blinking.

"Didn't it hit us?" he asked.

"We're still here," laughed Frank.

Biff Hooper shivered. He had been badly frightened. "That's the last time I'll ever come out on the bay when there's a fog brewing," he announced solemnly. "Whew! That was a narrow squeak." He mopped his brow with a

handkerchief.

Chet, now that the peril had passed, quickly regained his usual spirits. He went up to each of the three boys and silently shook hands with them. Then he gravely shook hands with himself and sat down again.

“What’s that for?” asked Jerry suspiciously.

“Congratulating you—and myself.”

“On what?”

“On still being alive.”

The others laughed. “I’d rather you could congratulate us all on being out of this fog,” said Frank. He brought the *Sleuth* back into its previous course, cut down its speed, and again the launch crept toward the north shore, invisible beyond the wall of mist.

He could not venture too close for fear of piling his craft on the rocks at the foot of the cliffs, and for a while he was obliged to content himself with cruising aimlessly back and forth. Within half an hour, however, the boys saw that the fog was clearing. It thinned out, wreathing and twisting like plumes of smoke.

They caught sight of the land rising gloomily out of the mist ahead. They were less than two hundred yards off shore and already far down the bay, abreast of the cliffs.

“Ah! This looks better!” exclaimed Chet with satisfaction. “The fog is clearing up to the king’s taste. We may be able to have our little search, after all.”

The mist rose swiftly and soon Frank was able to proceed with more confidence. He brought the launch in as close to the base of the cliffs as he dared, skillfully avoiding the black rocks that thrust their menacing heads above the surface of the water here and there. They scanned the face of the rugged ramparts of granite in search of the first caves.

“It’s high tide now,” Frank pointed out, “so we’d better investigate only those caves at the waterline. If anyone was hidden there, he would be brought in by boat, at high water.”

Jerry, who had scrambled out on the bow, gestured toward an outcropping of rock about a hundred yards away.

“Here’s our first cave,” he announced.

“I remember it,” said Frank. “We looked into it when we were on the car

theft case. It looks like a cave but it isn't much. It's only a few feet deep. We're looking for those big caves that extend away back into the cliffs."

They passed several small caves, to Jerry's great disappointment, but at last Chet gave a jubilant shout.

"Caves, ho!"

They had rounded a little promontory and the boys saw a ragged row of gaping black holes in the face of the rock, just a few feet above the waterline. These were the caves, some quite small and others so large that "an elephant could walk through 'em sideways," as Chet put it. Frank brought the launch in even closer to the base of the cliffs, which reared high above them to a height of more than two hundred feet of sheer black granite.

"Grand place for high diving," commented Biff.

Frank ran the launch past several of the caves. He remembered having searched them on the occasion of the Shore Road automobile mystery and knew that they were small and shallow. Time would only be wasted by looking into them again. They were so close to the surface of the water that in rough weather the waves went rolling right up to the cave-mouths.

Some distance on he spied the first of the larger holes in the rock, a cave some six feet wide, at a good height above the surface. He ran the boat right in against the face of the cliff, so that by scrambling over the bow one could land on the tumbled heaps of rocks and boulders beneath.

"Hop out, fellows. Take a look at it," he invited. "I'll hold the boat here."

The others needed no second bidding. Within a few minutes they were climbing up the boulders toward the cave-mouth. They vanished into the dark interior. Frank held the nose of the *Sleuth* in shore and manœuvered so that the propeller remained out in deep water.

It did not take the others long to find that the big cave was unoccupied and they reappeared a few minutes later, looking somewhat crestfallen. Frank, however was not discouraged. He realized that they were working on the slimmest of clues, that the fair-haired man and his friends might have made no reference to the Shore Road caves, and that there were many other subterranean caverns yet to be investigated.

"We'll just cruise along the shore and pick out the most likely ones," he said, when they got back into the boat. "There aren't many in which a person might be hidden at all comfortably."

"Comfortably!" sniffed Jerry. "The cave we just looked into is as damp as

a cellar.”

“I can think of about five thousand places I’d rather live in than a cave,” agreed Chet.

The launch edged its way along the face of the cliffs. Whenever they spied one of the larger caves that could be reached easily from the shore, Frank brought the boat in among the rocks and his three companions scrambled up to the gloomy opening in the rock wall; but each time they came back to report that they had met with no success. All the caves were deserted.

As the hours went by, as cave after cave was investigated and they came to a place where the cliffs sloped and began to give way to sandy hills and wooded inclines, they were ready to abandon the search. The biggest recesses, in which Frank and Joe had encountered the car thieves, had been thoroughly explored. But one small opening in the rocks was left, and it was so small and so high above the surface of the water that Chet openly scoffed at the idea of investigating it at all.

“I think we’d better give up. Why would they go to *that* little cave when there are so many bigger ones? We’d have to climb fifty feet among the rocks.”

“It isn’t as steep as it looks,” remarked Frank thoughtfully. “I can see a winding sort of a trail up the slope.”

“I’m game,” said Jerry, shrugging his shoulders.

“We’ll go up closer, anyway.”

Frank brought the launch in toward the rocks and they looked up at the tiny opening in the face of the cliffs above.

“I guess you’re right, Chet,” he admitted. “They wouldn’t climb all the way up there, with so many better caves to pick from. We won’t waste time on it.”

“Suits me,” said Chet. “I’ve lost about three pounds already climbing these cliffs.”

“Better tackle about fifty more caves then, Frank,” suggested Biff, unfeelingly. “If we can get Chet down to normal weight we’ll be doing him a service.”

Frank did not answer. He was gazing earnestly at the winding slope that led toward the mouth of the cave.

“After all,” he said, “I think we will look into it. You can keep watch on



the boat, Chet. I'll go with the others.”

Frank had seen something that had gone unnoticed by the others. It was nothing more than a bit of newspaper lodged among the stones near the cave-mouth, but he felt that its significance was important. It could not have blown down from the top of the cliff, he felt, because the land above was harsh and rocky, far distant from the road, and seldom traversed by human beings. A newspaper, cast from above, would have drifted down to the water. The fact that it was within a few feet of the cave, he felt, was suspicious. It warranted investigation at any rate.

Chet thought there was something behind Frank's sudden decision to explore the little cave and he now repented his remarks about the labor of climbing; but the others had taken him at his word so he glumly seated himself at the wheel and manœvered the boat around so that the others could reach the shore from the bow.

Frank went first. Biff and Jerry followed, wondering at his abrupt decision.

He toiled up the slope. There was no trail in the ordinary sense of the word, but the incline was of such a nature that one could make fair progress in a diagonal direction up the face of the cliff to a ledge some fifteen feet below the cave, and from there on climb directly to the goal.

When Frank reached the newspaper he had seen among the rocks, he picked it up. It was wet and soggy from rain and fog but he recognized it as a copy of the *Gresham Times*, dated two days previous.

His hopes rose with this discovery. Gresham! For the third time since Joe's disappearance the name of that town had entered the scope of his investigations. He thrust the newspaper into his pocket and scrambled on toward the entrance of the cave.

“What did you find?” demanded Jerry, panting for breath.

“Looks like a clue.”

Frank reached the cave-mouth. He peered inside. The place was larger than it seemed from the outside. The entrance itself was small but the cave widened out and seemed to be of tremendous depth.

He took a flashlight from his pocket and switched it on. The beam revealed the rugged, rocky walls of the subterranean chamber. The floor was fairly level. Over to one side he caught sight of an object in the gloom and when he turned the light upon it he saw that it was a small wooden box such as would be used for casing provisions.

“There’s been someone here!” he shouted eagerly, as the others entered the cave behind him. “Look! There’s a box!” The beam of the flashlight swept the rocky floor. “And look here! Some old bread crusts. There has been someone here within the past two days.”

“There’s no one here now,” said Jerry.

The words were still on his lips, when they heard a peculiar sound. It appeared to come from the darkness at the back of the cave.

The sound was repeated. They listened, staring at one another in surprise.

“Someone groaning!” exclaimed Frank.

Biff pointed a trembling finger toward a rampart of rocks about twenty feet away.

“It came from behind there.”

The flashlight played on the low wall of rocks. They could see no one.

Again they heard the groaning sound.

“There is someone in the cave,” declared Frank.

Gripping the flashlight, he advanced toward the rampart of rocks.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE ESCAPE

CAUTIOUSLY, FRANK skirted the low wall directed the brilliant light into the shadows beyond.

Its radiance fell upon a human figure lying bound on a crude pallet of sacking. A feeble voice said:

“Frank!”

“Joe!” he shouted, and sprang forward.

Biff and Jerry gave a joint yell of delight. They scrambled in behind the wall of rocks and bent over the form of the comrade they had given up as lost.

It was indeed Joe, greatly altered from the healthy, happy lad they had known but a few days ago. He looked white and ill; he was so weak that he could scarcely talk to them. His feet were tied together by a stout length of rope.

“It’s great to see a friendly face again!” he said, faintly.

“To think that we weren’t going to search this cave at all!” Frank had already opened his pocket knife and was hacking at the ropes that bound his brother’s ankles. As for Jerry and Biff, their delight was unbounded. They capered about the cave, threw their hats in the air, fired a score of questions at Joe Hardy.

“What happened? Who brought you here? Why did they tie you up? Did they leave you here to starve?”

“I’m hungry,” said Joe, when the ropes were loosened and he was able to sit up. “I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday noon. I’ll tell you all about it later. Just now, I think I’m too weak to say anything.”

They realized that he spoke the truth, so for the time being they did not question him as to the events that had led to his present plight.

“How did you get here? How did you find me?” he asked.

Frank quickly told him about Aunt Gertrude and her encounter with the

fair-haired man at Gresham, how the mysterious reference to the caves had led him to undertake the search and how they had been just on the point of turning back when he had caught sight of the newspaper in the rocks at the mouth of the cave.

“It was certainly a lucky thing for me that you saw the paper,” Joe declared, thankfully. “One of the men had some food wrapped in a newspaper yesterday morning. That must have been how it came to be out there.”

“Was the fair-haired man really mixed up in it?” demanded Frank, curiously.

Joe nodded.

“He was in it, all right. Very much in it. But there were others. I’ll tell you all about it when I feel a little better. It’s a long story.”

Out of consideration for Joe’s evident weakness, they did not ask him any more questions.

“Chet is in the boat,” said Frank. “Do you feel strong enough to come with us now? Gee! Mother will be glad!”

“Aunt Gertrude will take all the credit,” laughed Joe, with a flash of his old good-nature. He got up off the sacks, wavered a moment and would have fallen had not Frank caught him at that instant.

“Can’t you make it?” asked Jerry, anxiously.

Joe shook his head and sat down weakly.

“My legs are so numb from being tied up, I don’t seem to have any strength in them. And then I’m so weak from hunger—perhaps I’d better wait a few minutes.”

“We could carry you,” Biff suggested.

“Oh, no, I’ll be able to make it all right,” Joe assured them.

At that moment they heard a sudden sound. It was a clattering, rolling noise, as if a rock had been dislodged and sent tumbling down a steep incline.

“What was that?” whispered Biff.

Joe got to his feet.

“They’re coming back!”

“Who?”

“The men. Quick! We’ll have to clear out.”

“How can they get in here?” demanded Frank.

“There’s a passage at the back. It leads down from the top of the cliff. Hurry! If they find us here we’ll *all* be prisoners.”

Then, in the distance, they heard voices. The boys did not waste a moment. Joe’s captors were returning.

Frank and Jerry each slipped an arm around Joe’s shoulders and helped him toward the mouth of the cave. Biff ran on ahead. When they emerged into the outer air they looked down with dismay at the slope they must descend before they could reach the boat.

Chet, down in the launch, saw them. When he recognized Joe, he gave a war whoop of joy.

The others motioned frantically for silence, but Chet did not understand their urgent signals and proceeded to put on a noisy celebration of his own. He yelled, pranced about, waved his arms and then, to their horror, began sounding the horn of the launch. The uproar in Joe’s honor was deafening.

There was nothing for them now but hasty and disorderly flight.

The men coming down the passage into the cave would certainly hear the horn and the shouts and make haste to investigate.

Still clinging to Joe, who could scarcely stand, Frank and Jerry scrambled down the slope.

They reached the first ledge in safety, with Biff slipping and sliding down the path ahead; but as they commenced the second half of the journey they heard a yell of alarm behind them.

Frank looked back.

Standing above, at the mouth of the cave, they saw a man. He stared at them for a moment, then turned and shouted to someone behind him. Two other men quickly joined him.

“Leave me, you fellows,” said Joe. “I’m only delaying you. If they catch us, we’ll all be in the soup.”

“Leave you, my eye,” growled Jerry. “If you stay, we all stay.”

Biff had already reached the boat. He shouted something to Chet, who had already seen the men in the mouth of the cave and had stopped his noise. Frank and Jerry, trying to cling to Joe on the narrow path, with the rocks sliding treacherously beneath their feet, made slow progress.

Frank glanced back again.

He saw that one of the men had drawn something from his pocket and was pointing it at them. It was a revolver. One of the others had stooped and was snatching up stones.

The revolver barked. A bullet whistled overhead. Instinctively they ducked and almost lost hold of Joe. A heavy stone went hurtling past them and splashed into the water beside the boat.

Then ensued a veritable hail of stones. The man with the revolver fired again and again and sometimes the bullets came dangerously close, but as the boys were stumbling uncertainly down the path, the fellow's aim was bad.

Biff was in the boat. Chet was in readiness. A heavy rock crashed into the launch, just missing the engine.

“Hurry!” yelled Biff.

Only a few yards more!

They scrambled to the bottom of the incline. One of the three men was running down the path in pursuit.

Jerry leaped up onto the bow.

“Come on, Joe!”

With Frank on the shore and Jerry helping from the boat, Joe was assisted on board and Jerry hauled him to safety. Frank was just about to jump when he felt a heavy blow on the leg. There was a spasm of pain. He lost his balance and fell partly into the water. When he tried to rise, he found his leg doubled beneath him, almost useless. One of the rocks hurled by the men above had found its mark.

The revolver shot sounded again, and a splinter flew up from the bow of the boat.

Biff scrambled out over the side, up to his knees in water. He seized Frank in his arms and helped him to his feet. The pain in Frank's leg was agonizing and he could scarcely stand, but he made a valiant effort and managed to reach the side of the launch, where Jerry grabbed him by the shoulders and helped him into the boat. Biff scrambled up in a moment.

The man on the path was only a few yards away now. More rocks came flying through the air, splashing all around the boat.

Chet was at the engine. It roared as the *Sleuth* backed slowly out from shore. Frank, nursing his injured leg, lay panting in the bottom of the boat. He

looked up and saw the two men in the cave-mouth struggling with a heavy boulder.

“Look out!” he shouted.

Just then the boulder began to move. It rolled forward. The men sprang to one side.

The boulder toppled over the ledge. Then, with gathering speed, it shot down the slope.

Jerry shielded his eyes with his arm.

“We’re done for!”

Crashing as it bounded along, the great boulder plunged toward them. It seemed inevitable that it would smash directly onto the launch!

## CHAPTER XII

### JOE'S STORY

THE launch seemed to barely crawl as it backed away from the rocks. There appeared to be no hope of evading the great boulder that loomed almost directly above.

It shot down upon them.

It missed the craft by inches.

The boulder struck the water with a tremendous splash. Water showered over the boys. A great wave struck the side of the *Sleuth* and almost swamped it.

But they were safe.

Chet gave a yell of relief. The launch was gathering speed now. In another moment it was out in deeper water; he swung the wheel and sent the boat ahead. It shot forward, engine clamoring, and went racing away from the cliff.

The man who had pursued the boys down the slope stood among the rocks, his face wrathful, shaking his fist at them. The *Sleuth* was gathering speed, and raced on out into open water.

Frank got painfully to his feet. The blow from the rock had left an ugly bruise, but the numbness was beginning to subside and he was otherwise uninjured. Chet was shouting excited questions to which no one paid any attention, as Jerry and Biff were trying to make Joe comfortable on one of the long seats. He lay there, completely exhausted by the hasty flight from the cave.

“And I missed it!” Chet was mourning. “I climbed up those cliffs fifty times and searched through every cave between here and Bayport, and when Joe was found, I was sitting in the launch.”

“Good thing you were,” retorted Jerry. “It’s lucky for us that someone was there to get that boat going in time.”

“Why did it have to be me? Some fellows have all the luck. Tell a fellow something about it, anyway. Who were those men who shot at you and heaved



all those rocks? Did you have a fight with them? How did Joe come to be in the cave anyway?"

"You just keep steering this boat, boy, and don't ask too many questions until we're ready for you."

"I think we ought to go back and clean up on that crowd," declared Chet. "They nearly broke this boat into bits."

"I'd like to learn more about them myself," said Frank, hobbling over to where Chet was sitting, "but I think we better leave well enough alone. They're a tough outfit, by the looks of them, and we have Joe to look after. He's in bad shape. We'll have to get him home and put him to bed."

"He looks hungry," observed Chet, sympathetically.

Joe opened his eyes.

"I'm starving."

Chet grabbed the package of sandwiches he had brought with him and took them over to Joe. "I knew these would come in handy," he said. "Dig in."

Joe did not need a second invitation. He "dug in" with such enthusiasm that the others realized that he was ravenous. The sandwiches served to restore some measure of his strength, but they saw that he was in no condition to tell them the story of his adventures until he was rested. Frank satisfied Chet's curiosity about their experience in the cave, bringing loud lamentations from the portly one because he had not been on hand when Joe was found. However, their disappointment in having to wait for Joe's own story was forgotten in the excitement of knowing that they had found him at last, and that the mystery that had enthralled the city for the past two days was finally solved.

They reached Bayport and Joe was immediately rushed to the Hardy home, where his mother's joy and relief at seeing him again made the boys feel that all their efforts had been more than worth while, quite apart from their own happiness at knowing their chum was safe.

He was given a steaming bowl of hot soup, then put to bed, under the excited ministrations of his mother and Aunt Gertrude. There he immediately fell asleep, and Frank related the story of the rescue from the cave.

As he had expected, Aunt Gertrude claimed the credit.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed emphatically. "The fair-haired man, eh? I knew it all along. Didn't I tell you he looked like just the sort of fellow who might

have kidnapped Joe? Didn't I tell you?"

Frank remembered nothing of the kind, but he was too polite to say so.

"If I hadn't come here for this visit, Joe would never have been found," declared Aunt Gertrude complacently. "I told you it wouldn't take me long, once I put on my thinking-cap. And if I had been with you at the cave, those kidnapers wouldn't have gotten off so lightly, either. That's just like a boy. Away you go, after I practically told you where to find him, and you'd never think of asking me to go along with you. Oh no! I can hardly wait until Joe feels well enough to tell us his story. Lucky he wasn't murdered."

It was not until late that evening, after he had been refreshed by a long, sound sleep, that Joe was able to tell them what had happened to him after he disappeared from the Morton farm. He still looked pale and thin, but good food and rest were already beginning to do their work and a trace of color had returned to his cheeks.

"As you know," he said, "I went for a walk with Iola, down by the highway fence. Just as we got near a dark clump of trees someone reached out and grabbed me. I was so astonished that I could scarcely speak for a few seconds and then, when I found myself being dragged over the fence, I shouted for you, Frank. The man who had reached out for me—it was Blondy, by the way—clapped his hand over my mouth and silenced me. He was very strong and he dragged me along the ditch on the other side of the fence over to a car. Then he took a revolver from his pocket and told me that if I raised a fuss, he would shoot me."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Aunt Gertrude.

"Well, I knew I wouldn't have any chance against the gun, so I got into the car. I was curious to know what it was all about, for I couldn't imagine why anyone should kidnap me. For a while I thought it was just some of the Crabb Corners gang playing a practical joke. After I got into the car I caught a glimpse of the man's face and I saw it was our fair-haired friend of the automat."

"But why on earth did he kidnap you?" asked Frank.

"I'm coming to that. At any rate, he drove away with me in the car. We went down the road for some distance and then he stopped. I asked him why he was taking me away and he only said, 'You know too much.' You see, it all went back to the day I bumped into him when we came out of the jewelry store and knocked a package from his hand. You remember, the package fell open. He thought I had seen what was inside it. Well, after we waited about half an

hour, two men came out of the bushes and walked over to the car. They said, 'Is that you, Chris?' and the fair-haired fellow growled at them. 'No names, please.' When they saw me in the car, they wanted to know who I was. It seems they didn't know Chris was going to kidnap me.

"There was quite a row about it. The other two men wanted him to bring me back but he was stubborn 'This kid saw the rocks,' he told them. 'His father is a detective.' The other men called him a fool and said he should have left me alone. They seemed worried. One of them told Chris they didn't want the police after them for kidnapping or possible murder. Then they realized it was too late to let me go, because there would be trouble when I got back to Bayport and told my story.

"They got into the car and drove for about two miles and then one of the men got out. When I last saw him, he was climbing over a fence and heading across a field toward the bay. The others went on, but they lost their way and had to turn around and go back to a road they had missed."

"Chet and I were right, then," exclaimed Frank. "We traced you that far."

"We hadn't gone very far before Chris lost control of the wheel and we crashed into the ditch. I was mighty scared. I thought we would all be killed. They had tied me up and put me in the back seat by this time. The car was wrecked but no one was hurt. Chris and the other man seemed worried because they were afraid somebody would come along and find them. Then Chris said something about a roadhouse nearby, so they agreed to go there and telephone for another car. A farmer came up and wanted to know what was the trouble but they told him to clear out and mind his own business.

"They made me go with them up the road and on up a lane to a roadhouse. The clerk seemed to know them and after some telephoning Chris came back and said we would have to stay until morning before they could get a car to come out from Gresham. They took a big room and let me go to bed but they wouldn't untie me. I couldn't sleep. Chris said if I tried to get away I would be shot. In the morning a car came up to the roadhouse and we went away in it. Just as the car came out of the lane onto the Gresham road, I saw a roadster coming along. It looked like Chet's car, so I managed to get my hands out between the side curtains and signal. I saw the roadster pick up speed, but after a while it stopped."

"Chet and I were in the roadster," Frank explained.

"I was terribly disappointed when the roadster slowed down. The driver of the touring car went on toward Gresham, then Chris spoke to him and he turned down a side road and doubled back toward Barmet Bay until he reached

the Shore Road. I was taken out of the car at a lonely spot and brought across a field into the deserted country above the cliffs. Then I was taken down a passage—I believe it is an abandoned shaft dug there a few years ago when someone thought there was mineral in the Barmet Cliffs—until we came to the cave where you found me.”

“You were in the cave for three days?” exclaimed Frank.

“Never left it. A great deal of the time I was quite alone. They fixed up a few sacks for me to lie down on, but they didn’t pay much attention to me. Once in a while they would bring in a few sandwiches, but I was lucky to get any at all. Between hunger and ill-treatment I was afraid I’d never get out.”

“Why did they keep you there?”

“I wasn’t supposed to know. But at night, when they thought I was asleep, I kept my ears open and I overheard enough to let me in on the secret. They are diamond smugglers.”

Aunt Gertrude opened her mouth very wide. “Mercy me!” she gasped.

“There are four or five in the gang at this end, from what I could gather,” proceeded Joe. “The fair-haired fellow, Chris, isn’t one of the leaders. He hasn’t enough brains. Evidently they have a hold over him on account of some previous scrape he got into, so they make use of him for delivering smuggled diamonds when it isn’t a question of getting by customs officers or detectives. Chris would never have kidnapped me if he hadn’t been so dumb. You see, he had diamonds in that package I knocked out of his hand when we were coming out of the jewelry store that day. He thought I saw them, and because he had a guilty conscience, he evidently decided to kidnap me for fear I’d tell Dad.”

“Plain foolishness,” commented Frank. “Even if you had seen the diamonds, you wouldn’t have known they had been smuggled.”

“Chris isn’t bright enough to figure that out. At any rate, he soon found out what the others thought of it. They didn’t know what to do with me. They were afraid to set me free and yet they didn’t want to put me out of the way.”

“Do you know the names of any of the others in the gang?”

Joe shook his head.

“I know that there are at least five men, and probably more. But they used false names. John Smith. Joe Brown. Bill Jones. Anyone could tell they were assumed.”

Frank was thoughtful. “So we’re up against a gang of diamond smugglers,

eh? That's interesting."

"Now you boys leave well enough alone!" commanded Aunt Gertrude. "Joe is back safe and sound, and we ought to be satisfied. Don't get any notions about tracking these smugglers down, or you'll only end up in trouble. Leave it to the police."

The boys exchanged glances.

"I don't think I'll tell the police about the diamond smuggling end of it," said Joe.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ON THE TRAIL OF CHRIS

A WEEK passed. It was a quiet one for the Hardy boys.

Joe had recovered from his experience in the cave and was an object of envy to the more adventurous-minded boys of Bayport, who saw only the thrilling side of the affair and forgot to think of the wretched hours of cold and hunger he had endured.

By common agreement, he and Frank said nothing about the diamond smugglers. They felt that if Chris and his gang got the idea that Joe did not realize the nature of their lawless activities, their fears would be allayed.

“That,” said Frank, “is what we want. If it came out in the papers that you had fallen into the hands of a diamond smuggling crowd they would take fright and clear out. When they don’t see anything of the sort, they’ll think you don’t know what they were up to, and they’ll probably keep right on smuggling diamonds.”

Together with Chet, Jerry and Biff, the boys returned to the cave in the cliffs a few days later and made a thorough search of the place, but it was evident that the smugglers had abandoned it. This they had fully expected.

“We’ll run across them sooner or later,” Frank assured his brother. “They may lie low for a few days, but if they think they are safe, we’ll have another chance to trip them up.”

Aunt Gertrude, once the excitement of Joe’s return had died down, slipped back into her old familiar niche in the Hardy household—that of chief critic and fault-finder. She kept the boys on their best behavior, gave them daily lessons in good manners, invaded the kitchen so often that the cook threatened to give notice, and once in a while visited Bayport on a shopping expedition that left a trail of confused and indignant storekeepers wherever she went.

“Who is that young man in the jewelry store near the automat?” she demanded one evening on her return from one of these forays. She had been out shopping all afternoon, had visited fourteen stores and had purchased one small package of safety pins.

“I never saw a *young* man working in there,” said Frank. “The only clerk is an elderly fellow.”

“‘A young man,’ I said,” repeated Aunt Gertrude in a tone that did not brook contradiction. “A very conceited, impudent young man. He wasn’t there the last time I was in Bayport.”

“He’s new to me,” remarked Joe. “What happened, Aunt Gertrude? Did he sass you back when you went in to look at the diamond necklaces?”

Aunt Gertrude looked at Joe suspiciously.

“You know very well I didn’t go in to look at diamond necklaces. The young man didn’t sass me back; he was very polite.”

“I thought you said he was conceited and impudent,” Frank reminded her.

“So he is,” retorted Aunt Gertrude. “Not that he said anything in particular to me, but I have a feeling that he would be conceited and impudent if one got to know him. You can’t fool me about young men. He was as nice as pie, but it was all put on. I’ve seen that clerk before.”

“Where?”

“How should I know? I’ve seen thousands of people. I’ve seen that clerk somewhere, and I don’t know where, but I’m sure the association is a disagreeable one.”

“Is that all you have against the poor chap?” asked Frank.

“It’s enough. Mark my words, that young jewelry clerk is bad. Born to be hanged. Next thing we hear of him he’ll be in the penitentiary for robbing his employer.”

This dire prediction left the Hardy boys unimpressed. Too many of Aunt Gertrude’s contacts with young men and boys had been disagreeable, and she had predicted hanging for at least three-quarters of the younger generation.

“Next thing we hear of that young chap, he’ll probably be promoted manager of the store,” laughed Joe, when they were safely outside.

They went down the street. So far they had met with no success in their efforts to pick up the trail of the diamond smugglers again, and Frank was beginning to feel that the gang had become frightened and cleared out, after all.

“I wonder why they operated in Bayport, anyway?” he said. “Wouldn’t you think smugglers would pick on one of the larger cities?”

“Perhaps they are known in other places.”

“That’s possible. Well, they won’t go back to the cave, that’s certain. They’ll be afraid the police are watching the place.”

“I wish I could have heard more when I listened to them talking in the cave,” said Joe. “All I could learn, however, was that they were smuggling diamonds and that Chris was acting as a sort of delivery boy for the gang. I don’t think he has brains enough to be anything else. Where the diamonds came from, who brought them, who were the other members of the gang and where they made their headquarters—I couldn’t find out. Whenever they thought I was asleep, they would begin talking about diamonds, and I kept my ears open, I can tell you. But they were careful not to say too much.”

“We know they’re working around this neighborhood at any rate,” said Frank, reassuringly. “If we keep on the watch, we may run across them again.”

He did not know how soon his words were to be fulfilled.

The boys went down the main street of the city in the direction of the automat. They were usually sure of finding Chet Morton or some of their other chums in the vicinity.

Suddenly Joe gripped his brother’s arm.

“Look!” he said, tensely.

He gestured toward a man walking on the other side of the street.

Frank almost shouted with delight.

The man, tall and thick-set, with a lock of fair hair protruding from beneath his hat, was none other than Chris, the man who had kidnapped Joe.

“Chris!” he exclaimed.

“I’d know him anywhere. Let’s trail him.”

“We’d better cross the street. He may catch sight of us.”

Excitedly, the Hardy boys went across, and fell in behind the fair-haired man. Chris, quite unaware that he was being followed, strode along at a rapid gait.

“Perhaps he’s going to meet some of the others,” suggested Joe.

“We won’t let him out of our sight.”

This unexpected development was more than encouraging. The Hardy boys felt that they were on the brink of making important discoveries about the



diamond smugglers.

They trailed Chris at a respectful distance, always being careful to remain far enough behind so that there were several people between themselves and their quarry. The fair-haired man did not look back. He seemed to be in a hurry.

“I wonder where he’s going?” queried Joe.

“We’ll find out.”

They trailed the big man for several blocks. Then he went across the road and struck off down a side street. The boys were almost obliged to run in order to keep him in sight.

“Perhaps,” suggested Joe, “he has seen us. He may be trying to shake us off.”

“I don’t think so. I think he is going to the railway station.”

“Good-night! If he takes a train out of town, we’ll lose him.”

“I don’t intend to lose him,” declared Frank, grimly. “How much money have you?”

Joe groped in his pockets. “About ten dollars.”

“I’ve fifteen or sixteen. That ought to take us a good distance.”

It was soon evident that Chris was indeed bound for the station. When he came in sight of the big stone building he broke into a run and disappeared through the huge, massive doorway.

The Hardy boys hastened in pursuit.

When they came into the station they saw Chris just leaving one of the ticket windows. He ran across the station, passed through the gate and hastened toward a waiting train.

Frank did not hesitate a moment.

He stepped up to the window the fair-haired man had just left.

“Where to?” asked the agent.

“We were to meet a friend here,” explained Frank. “He’s a big man with fair hair. Have you seen him?”

“Just bought a ticket to New York a minute ago. Is that where you wish to go?”

Frank hesitated. He had not anticipated, that Chris would be going as far as New York. However, having once picked up the trail, he did not like to admit himself beaten at this stage.

“Two return tickets,” he said.

“You’ll have to hurry,” said the agent. “The train is due to leave right away.”

Frank grabbed the tickets. He heard a whistle and saw that the train was just beginning to move.

The boys raced toward the gate.

The train was just gliding out of the station. Joe was ahead and he scrambled up the steps of one of the coaches. Frank followed. In another moment the train would have gathered speed and he would not have dared make the attempt.

“Well,” sighed Joe, “we’re in for it. What will Mother think about this?”

“We’ll telephone her as soon as we reach New York.”

When the boys had recovered breath, they went cautiously into the day coach. They halted in the doorway at the back of the coach and made a quick survey of the occupants.

Alone in a seat near the front of the coach they saw a familiar thatch of yellow hair. Chris, on his way to New York, was comfortably unaware that he had been followed.

The boys sat down.

“And now for New York!” said Frank.

## CHAPTER XIV

### IN THE CITY

MUCH of the success that had attended the Hardy boys in solving the mysteries they encountered had been due to their ability to make instant decisions and to act swiftly. Now, even Frank admitted that their judgment might have been at fault in trailing the fair-haired man to New York.

They had never been to the metropolis before and it was characteristic of the lads that their first visit should be made in this manner, on the decision of a moment, without notifying their home, and starting off with no baggage and very little money.

“Probably,” said Joe as the train roared northward, “we’ll lose him in the crowd as soon as he gets off the train.”

“He’ll have to step lively,” returned Frank but his confidence, too, was ebbing.

They did not lose sight of Chris. The fair-haired man read a newspaper for a while, then seemed to doze off, oblivious of his surroundings.

The train at length reached the suburbs of New York, clattered past miles of factories and houses, and sped on toward the heart of the great city. It was a new experience for the Hardy boys and they were wildly excited as the train roared on over busy streets, passed scores of high buildings under a pall of smoke and finally plunged into the gloom of the vast trainshed.

They watched Chris narrowly as the passengers prepared to leave, but the fair-haired man did not once look back. He put on his hat and lumbered toward the front of the coach.

“We’ll get out at the back and keep an eye on him from there,” said Frank. “Don’t lose each other!”

They scrambled out onto the platform. Passengers were just beginning to file down the steps at the front of the coach and Chris had not yet appeared, so they made their way quickly toward the gates and emerged into the concourse. There, in the enormous, high-vaulted station, booming with hollow echoes, they waited for their man.

Chris stalked through the gates, looking neither to right nor to left, and they quickly fell in behind him. He was a big man, towering above the throng, and they had little difficulty in keeping him in sight. In spite of the crowds that jostled them about, they managed to keep him in view and followed him out into the street.

“What’ll we do if he hops into a taxi?” asked Joe.

“I hope he doesn’t,” Frank said.

“I know, but *hoping* isn’t going to do any good. What if he *does*?”

“Well, then, I guess we’ll have to do the same,” Frank replied. He never took his eyes from Chris, nor did Joe. The man they were trailing seemed quite unaware of their nearness.

“It’s going to be mighty hard for one taxi to follow another in this traffic,” remarked Joe dubiously. “I don’t believe it can be done.”

“Better wait until we see if we have to do it,” his brother suggested. “Anyhow, these New York taxi drivers are pretty clever. I guess if we told one to follow another and made it worth his while, he could do it.”

“Going to cost real money,” Joe objected.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” was the response. “That’s why I’m hoping we won’t have to do it. Money is too scarce!”

The brothers were much relieved when, getting clear of the station, they saw Chris hesitate for a moment on the sidewalk, as if debating whether he would walk or take a taxi. Then they observed him step out briskly.

“Come on!” called Frank quickly. “We have him now!”

“For the time being,” Joe agreed. “We may lose him any moment!”

“That’s just what we mustn’t do!” Frank declared. “Keep your eyes open and I’ll do the same. It will be a lasting disgrace if we can’t follow a trail as plain as this.”

“And as big as that blond!” chuckled Joe. “Go on! I’m with you!”

They needed not only to follow Chris but to take care that he did not suspect they were following him. Once or twice he swung about as they kept after him on the crowded sidewalk, and it seemed as if he were suspicious.

On these occasions both Frank and his brother dodged back in the crowd which seemed to flow ceaselessly along the thoroughfare. After these momentary surveys behind him, Chris hurried on again.

“I don’t believe he saw us,” Frank murmured as they again took up the chase after one of these episodes.

“No, evidently not. But we’re coming to a bad place now. Look at the crowd and there are traffic lights. If he gets over the street ahead of us and we’re held up by traffic, we’ll lose him.”

“Wait until it happens,” advised Frank.

They were anxious as they approached a busy corner where a policeman was directing the flow of automobiles and persons afoot. Just what Joe had feared came to pass. Chris was among the last to slip across the thoroughfare, just as the lights flashed from green to red and the officer blew his whistle sharply.

So quickly did the auto drivers start their machines, that it was impossible for pedestrians to venture into the flow of vehicles, even if the officer had allowed it.

“Just our luck!” cried Joe.

“There he goes!” sighed Frank.

It seemed as if they had lost their man. Joe turned a despairing glance toward his brother but, at that moment, he observed a glance of satisfaction light up Frank’s face.

“Look!” exclaimed the latter, pointing. “We’ll get him again in a few seconds—when the lights change.”

Chris had stopped on reaching the other side of the street to speak to a man. Evidently this man had halted the big blond to ask some direction and Chris obligingly had halted to explain and point out the location of a certain street. He was so careful about it and took such pains with the stranger that he was delayed, as Frank had predicted, until the lights again flashed green.

“Come on!” cried Joe.

“Sure thing!” his brother echoed and once more the chase was on. Again they were trailing Chris. He went along the street for several blocks and then turned into a large office building. There was a row of elevators opposite the entrance and Joe and Frank hesitated a few seconds about following Chris through the revolving doors. Then Joe said:

“Oh, come on! If he gets in an elevator, and we aren’t there, we’ve lost him for sure in a big building like this!”

“I guess maybe you’re right!” Frank agreed.

They hurried in just as Chris stepped into one of the cars and was shot upward amid a clanging of doors.

“We’ve lost him this time, sure!” murmured Joe excitedly.

“Not at all,” spoke Frank, more calmly. “We never could have gotten into the same elevator with him. He’d have spotted us.”

“How are we going to trace him then?”

“Wait until that elevator comes down again and ask the man who runs it what floor Chris got off at. He’ll be sure to remember that big blond—the tallest man in the car.”

“Well, we can try it,” agreed Joe.

They lingered in the lobby until the car, which had taken up Chris, descended and then, getting in, Frank asked:

“We just missed a man we want to see—he got in your car—a big blond man.”

“Sure, I remember him!” the elevator man said.

“What floor did he get off at?”

“The tenth. And, believe me, my car was a good bit lighter when he was off it. He must weigh two hundred and fifty pounds.”

“Close to it,” Joe agreed with a look at his brother.

The car soon filled and shot up again, passengers getting off at different floors. The boys left it at the tenth, each wondering, even though they knew on which floor Chris had gotten off, how they could locate him in the maze of offices.

Again luck was with them, though both realized they were straining her bounty to the breaking point. As they heard the elevator car door clang shut behind them, they looked down a corridor and saw Chris just entering a room. He had evidently been delayed in the hall looking for his ultimate destination. Eagerly the Hardy boys hurried to the door as it closed behind the tall, fair, mysterious man. It was the ordinary office door, partly of ground glass on which were the words:

SOUTH AFRICAN IMPORTS  
WHOLESALE ONLY

“I wonder what he’s doing in there?” murmured Joe.

“I’m with you in wondering,” Frank said, “but I guess we’ll have to take it out that way. We won’t dare follow him in.”

“No, but maybe we can catch on,” Joe suggested.

“Catch on—how?”

In reply the other Hardy boy pointed to an open transom above the door of the South African importing firm.

“We might hear something,” Joe went on in a low voice.

Frank nodded comprehendingly and the two, giving a hasty glance up and down the long corridor to assure themselves that it was empty, stole on tiptoe to the portal and waited.

They heard a confused murmur of voices and were disappointed. Chris and those inside were so far from the door that the words were inaudible. Then, so quickly that they were almost caught, Chris came out of the office. His preliminary rattling of the knob before he really swung open the portal was all that gave the boys a cue to dart away, so that when he actually emerged, they were some distance off, their backs toward him.

Chris did not seem to see them. He was looking at some papers in his hand and the boys saw him go to the elevator and push a button for an ascending car.

“We can’t follow him any farther in here,” whispered Frank. “He’ll spot us, sure.”

“What’ll we do, then?”

“Go down and wait in the lobby until he comes. Then take up the trail again. He’ll have to come down some time.”

“Well, I guess that’s all we can do.”

Waiting until Chris had gone up, the boys took a car down and waited in the big lobby of the ground floor, eagerly watching each car.

It was half an hour before their patience was rewarded. Then amid a carload of business men, they descried the burly form of the big blond, towering above all the others.

“Come on!” whispered Frank to his brother as Chris moved toward the outer, revolving doors.

“Where next, I wonder?” Joe murmured.

Again the chase was resumed in the crowded street. The brothers had little

difficulty in following their man as he was so conspicuous. For several blocks Chris maintained a straight course. Then he swung around a corner and went down a side street. The boys hurried after him and saw him disappear beneath a restaurant sign below the street level.

Joe was crestfallen.

“I guess that stumps us. We’ll have to wait here until he comes out.”

“Not a bit of it. A restaurant is a public place. It’s about time we had something to eat anyway.”

“He may see us.”

Frank went down the steps leading to the restaurant and took a quick survey of the place through the door.

“He is taking a table at the back. Good! He isn’t facing the door. Come on, Joe. We’re not letting him out of our sight.”

Boldly, Frank entered the place, and Joe followed at his heels. It was a cheap restaurant, with a row of booths along one side, and they slipped quickly into one of these compartments. They could see their enemy sitting at a table near the rear wall, but as he was not facing them they were able to make their entrance unobserved.

An untidy-looking waiter came over to them and they gave their orders. Frank dug his hand into his pocket and put their money on the table, after the waiter had departed, and they took stock of their resources.

“We have enough to pay for a hotel room for the night, at any rate, and for a few more meals. Thank goodness, we have our return tickets.”

“We can’t hang around New York very long at that rate,” remarked Joe, doubtfully eyeing their available cash.

“Let’s hope we don’t have to.”

They saw a waiter go over to the table at which Chris was sitting. Evidently the fair-haired man was well-known in the restaurant, for he and the waiter exchanged a few laughing words. Then they saw a slim, sharp-featured man emerge from a door at the back of the restaurant. He went directly over to Chris, sat down and began to talk.

“This is evidently a favorite hang-out of his,” said Frank.

“We’ll know where to find him again if we lose him.”

After a while the untidy waiter brought their orders and slouched away



again. The boys ate, not forgetting to keep Chris and his friend under observation.

The restaurant was almost deserted at this hour. They saw that Chris and the slim man were busily engaged with pencil and paper, and Chris seemed to be explaining something that did not please the other man at all, for he shook his head doubtfully and crossed out some of the figures he had already jotted down.

They heard someone stumbling down the steps that led into the restaurant. Then they caught sight of a fat man with a flushed face, who advanced unsteadily toward the row of booths. It was quite plain that he had been drinking, but the Hardy boys were not prepared to see him stop in front of their booth and regard them sourly.

“What’s the idea of sittin’ at my table?” he demanded.

“Your table?” asked Frank, in surprise.

“Yes. That’s my table you’re sittin’ at. You’d better clear out!” said the fat man, swaying unsteadily and clutching at the side of the booth for support.

“There are lots of other tables,” returned Frank with spirit.

“Sure. And you can have any one of ’em you want except this one.”

Frank decided that nothing would be gained by getting into an argument with the fat man, so he returned quietly to his meal. The boys did not look up.

“Well,” roared the intruder. “Are you gonna move?”

“As soon as we’ve finished our dinner.”

“You’ll move now! That’s my table you’re sittin’ at, and I mean to have it.”

Joe saw a waiter regarding them curiously and he signalled to the man. Reluctantly, the waiter moved toward them.

“Come on, now. Get away from my table. I’m hungry, I am, and I won’t eat anywhere but at my own table.”

The waiter came up.

“What’s the trouble, Mr. Melvin?” he said to the fat man.

“These boys are sittin’ at my table,” declared Melvin in an aggrieved tone. “Make ’em move!”

“I’m afraid they were here first, sir. We have no reserved tables, you know.

Perhaps, if you take another table in the meantime, they'll be going soon," said the waiter soothingly.

"I won't take any other table except my own, I tell you."

"And we won't move until we've finished our dinner," retorted Joe.

The fat man raised his voice.

"You *will* move!" he roared. "You'll move right now."

The waiter looked uneasy. "I can't ask these gentlemen to move, Mr. Melvin. They were here first."

"Ain't I a good customer of this restaurant?"

"Yes, indeed. But there are plenty of other tables, sir. If you don't mind \_\_\_\_\_"

"I *do* mind. These boys can get outa here, or I won't come back to this restaurant again."

The little disturbance had attracted attention. Frank saw that one of the other waiters was looking curiously in their direction and that Chris and his friend had turned and were looking toward them. He saw Chris turn and speak quickly to the sharp-featured man. That worthy looked surprised, nodded hastily and darted toward the door by which he had entered. A moment later he had disappeared.

"Come on, now!" demanded Melvin, in an ugly mood. "What are you goin' to do about it, anyway?"

"We don't want to lose your custom, sir," said the waiter, firmly, "but you'll have to take another table for the present." He turned to the Hardy boys. "I'm sorry this has happened, but you can see that the gentleman is not himself."

The fat man heard the remark.

"Not myself, eh? I'll show you if I'm not myself. I'll heave those boys away from my table right this minute."

He advanced threateningly upon them, brushing the waiter aside. At that moment Frank saw Chris disappearing through the rear door in the wake of the sharp-featured man.

This decided him. They must not lose Chris.

"It doesn't matter," he said to the waiter. "We're not afraid of this fellow, but we'll leave, just to save trouble. Come on, Joe."

They got up from the table and the fat man, breathing defiance and declaring that no person could sit at *his* table and get away with it, promptly sat down in one of the chairs they had just vacated.

The waiter, apologizing profusely, followed them as far as the cashier's cage, but Frank assured him that they were ready to leave in any case.

"He's an ugly customer when he is drinking," the waiter told them, "but he is a personal friend of the proprietor and he spends a lot of money here. I didn't want to offend him unless it was absolutely necessary."

"That's all right," said Frank. He paid the check and the boys ran hastily up the steps and out into the street.

"Why did you run away from that fellow?" demanded Joe, who had not noticed that Chris had left. "We were in the right."

"Chris saw us. I'm sure he recognized us. He cleared out in a moment."

Joe whistled softly. "We'll have to pick him up again."

"He went out the back way. We'll scout around and see if we can find him."

Although the Hardy boys waited around the restaurant for an hour, and kept a close watch on the alley that evidently led to the rear of the building, they did not see the fair-haired man again.

## CHAPTER XV

### ROBBED

THE HARDY boys were disappointed by the outcome of their visit to the restaurant, and they knew that in the teeming millions of New York there was little hope that they would pick up the trail of Chris again.

“However,” said Frank, “I can’t see myself taking the next train back to Bayport now that we’re actually in New York. We’ll take a room for the night, see something of the city, and try that restaurant again to-morrow. If we don’t learn anything more about Chris then, we’ll go back.”

Joe agreed to the program and they went to a quiet little hotel where they took a room for the night, paying in advance because they had no luggage. That evening they wandered about Broadway, enjoying the sights, the blazing electric signs, and the hurrying crowds. They went to one of the big motion picture houses and finally found their way back to the hotel, where they enjoyed a good night’s sleep.

They had telephoned to Mrs. Hardy, who was naturally alarmed by their absence, but when they guardedly explained the reason for their sudden trip to New York she received the explanation with her usual good-nature, warning them, however, to hurry home as soon as possible.

“Aunt Gertrude says to be sure you don’t get run over,” she added, after a brief silence in which their aunt had evidently taken the floor.

Toward noon they made their way back toward the restaurant to which they had followed Chris the previous night. It was almost lunch hour and they found themselves caught in a hurrying crowd of office-workers, pushed and jostled to and fro until they were almost separated.

Frank, on one occasion, felt a sudden tug at his coat as a man shouldered past him, but he thought nothing of the incident at the time. A moment later he caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd. He tried to remember where he had seen the man before, but for a moment the connection eluded him.

“That man just in front,” he said, quietly, nudging Joe. “Is he from Bayport? I’m sure I’ve seen him somewhere.”

They edged forward, to get a better view of the stranger.

“Of course we’ve seen him!” exclaimed Joe.

“Where?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I can’t place him.”

“In the restaurant last night, with Chris. Hurry, or we’ll lose sight of him.”

Then Frank remembered. The fellow was none other than the sharp-featured man who had sat at the table with Chris the previous evening. He quickened his footsteps. Just then they saw the man turn and descend the flight of steps leading into the restaurant.

The boys hesitated.

“Do you think he saw us?” said Joe.

Frank shook his head. “We ought to follow him. Perhaps he is going to meet Chris again. Come on. We can’t pass up a chance like this.”

They had already checked out of the hotel and had planned to take the next train back to Bayport if they failed to run across the fair-haired man. This new development appeared to offer them one last opportunity of finding Chris again, so they went down the steps, following the stranger.

Through the glass doors Frank was just in time to see the sharp-featured man stepping into a booth along the side of the restaurant. Mentally he registered its location.

“Follow me,” he whispered to Joe.

They went inside, passed the cashier’s cage and went toward the row of booths. Several of these were already occupied, as it was near noon and the restaurant was filling up. They drew near the booth into which their quarry had disappeared. Frank hoped they would not have to pass the entrance, as he feared that they would be recognized.

Fate was with them, however.

The next booth was vacant.

They slipped inside and sat down at the table. In a few minutes a waiter came over to them. Frank was relieved to find that it was not the same man who had attended them the previous evening, as he might have made some reference to the squabble with the fat man, and have been overheard in the adjoining booth.

They gave their order and the waiter hastened off.

“There’s someone with him,” whispered Joe.

True enough, they could hear voices from the next booth. They heard a clinking of glasses and they saw one of the waiters enter the booth furtively with something concealed beneath a napkin. One of the men laughed loudly.

“That’s real service, Luigi. Not afraid of the prohibition agents, are you?”

“Ssh!” cautioned the waiter. “Strangers in the next booth.”

“That’s all right. If we want a little drink, we’ll have it, and I’d like to see anybody stop us.”

The boys listened. There seemed to be three men on the other side of the partition. For a while they talked so quietly that the lads could overhear but little. After a time, however, as the glasses clinked again and again, and as the liquor began to take effect, their voices rose.

“Finest quality diamonds you ever saw,” declared one of the men. “None better. We’ll make a clean-up.”

“There’s big money in it, that’s a fact,” came another voice.

“Big risks as well,” the third man reminded them.

“Risks! Who cares about the risks? We’ve got away with it so far, haven’t we? You can’t make big profits without risks.”

“That’s true enough. But I don’t care to spend five or ten years in the pen unless I have to.”

“You won’t have to,” replied one of the others, carelessly. “The system is working without a flaw.”

“Don’t talk so loud. Walls have ears, you know.”

The men lowered their voices. The waiter brought the Hardy boys their orders. They ate slowly, determined to remain as long as possible in order to overhear more from the next booth; but the men beyond the partition were cautious and the Hardy boys had finished their dessert without learning anything further.

The waiter returned.

“Finished, gentlemen?” he said. “It’s noon hour, you see, and we have a big crowd. If you aren’t ordering anything more——”

He was hinting that they might leave the booth vacant for someone else.

But the Hardy boys were not prepared to go away just then.

“We’ll have another order of dessert,” said Frank, quickly.

The waiter departed.

“Well,” they heard one of the men in the next booth saying, “I’m going to Chicago next week to see Taffy. He’s the boy to get in touch with.”

There was a laugh from one of the other fellows.

“You won’t find Taffy there. He’s disappeared for a while.”

“Disappeared? Are the cops after him?”

“Not exactly. But he thought he’d better drop out of sight. You’d never know him if you saw him now.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s down shore in——”

Before the fellow could complete the sentence there was a warning cough from the third man.

“Shut up, you fool! Don’t give things away.”

The waiter returned with the extra orders. The boys were so excited that they paid little attention to the food before them.

“Why won’t you tell me where he is?” demanded the first man.

“Because Taffy wouldn’t like it.”

“Ain’t I a good friend of his?”

“Sure. But it wouldn’t do any good to tell you. He doesn’t want to see any of the old gang at all, right now. If he wants to see you he’ll send for you. That’s all I can say.”

There was a scraping of chairs as the men prepared to go. Frank and Joe turned so that they would not be facing the entrance of the booth.

They heard the men go past.

“We’ll wait a minute,” said Frank, quickly. “Then we’ll follow them.”

The moment they heard the restaurant door close, they leaped to their feet. Frank snatched up the check, they grabbed their caps and hastened out of the booth just in time to see the three men disappearing up the outer stairs.

At the cashier’s desk Frank thrust the check beneath the glass and reached

for the wallet inside his coat. In this wallet he had placed the two tickets back to Bayport, and the rest of their cash.

But the pocket was empty!

Frank turned pale. Hastily, he searched through his other pockets, but without success.

“I’ve been robbed!” he exclaimed.

The cashier eyed him coldly.

“Your check amounts to one dollar and fifty cents.”

“I—I had the money here,” stammered Frank. “It was in my wallet. But now it’s gone!”

“Good-night!” groaned Joe.

“You don’t leave here until you’ve paid your check,” the cashier insisted.

Frank made another search of his pockets. There was no doubt of it. The wallet had vanished!

They were stranded in New York. In the meantime the three men whom they had planned to shadow reached the street level and were immediately swallowed up by the crowd.



## CHAPTER XVI

### MIDNIGHT AGAIN

“ROBBED, were you?” snapped the cashier, “I’ve heard that one before.”

“If I could see the manager,” suggested Frank, “I’d like to explain it to him. My father has friends in the city and we’ll raise the money——”

“Manager isn’t around yet. You’ll fork over a dollar and a half, or else take it out in washing dishes.”

“Just a minute,” said Joe, with a sudden inspiration. He groped in his pockets. “When we pooled our cash yesterday I forgot one pocket. Here it is!”

He triumphantly extracted a two dollar bill.

The cashier sniffed. “Why didn’t you hand it over in the first place?”

Joe breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad I remembered that money,” he said, as he paid the check and took the fifty cents in change. “We’d have been in a bad jam.”

They left the restaurant, pleased that this difficulty, at any rate, had been settled; but on the street outside they took stock of the situation and realized that they were not much better off than they had been before.

“Fifty cents between us, and we’re miles away from home!” said Frank. “We’ve lost track of Chris and his friend. What a mess we’re in!”

“How are we ever going to get back to Bayport?”

“Walk, I guess,” said Frank, gloomily.

“How far is it?”

“About two hundred miles.”

“We ought to get there some time next month if our shoes hold out.”

New York had no further charm for the Hardy boys in this predicament. They wandered about and at last found their way to a small park, where they sat down on a bench.

“Perhaps, if we telephone to Mother, she’ll wire us the money,” suggested

Joe.

“Not a bad idea,” Frank agreed. “Let’s think something out on that line. Where’ll we go to telephone?”

Joe looked up and down the street. On the nearest corner was a hotel, not one of the imposing sort, but sufficiently large to make Joe sure that it contained what he was looking for.

“They’ve probably a telephone station there, with a girl to put through long distance calls,” he suggested. “We can go in and find out how much it will cost to get in touch with Mother.”

“I’m afraid it will cost plenty,” Frank said.

“Well, maybe not. Anyhow, we can try.”

“All right. I’m with you. There’s nothing else left to do now that we’ve lost track of Chris.”

The boys walked into the hotel lobby. Though the place was not one of New York’s most fashionable, it was sufficiently large to boast of a good patronage, and the lobby contained, besides the desk, a flower stand, a newspaper and magazine booth, a cigar counter and, near this, a telephone switchboard at which a pretty girl was busy putting in and taking out corded plugs.

“Ask her what the rate is to Bayport,” suggested Joe to his brother.

“What’ll I do if she says it’s more than a half dollar?”

“Well, we’ll decide that after we see what she says.”

“I hate to back down. But I guess there’s no help for it. We sure are in bad!”

The telephone girl seemed to be having a busy time with calls from hotel patrons in their rooms and with those of the public who drifted in to use the service. Back of the girl’s desk and switchboard were a number of booths into which she directed some callers while others, who seemed to know more about the matter, entered on their own initiative and dropped coins in the automatic boxes. There were, it was evident, two classes of telephone service in this hotel.

“Number?” asked the girl in business-like tones as she put through one call and looked expectantly at Joe and Frank who now stood in front of her desk.

“We—that is I—my brother and I—would like to know the rate to Bayport,” stated Joe, diffidently.

“Bayport? Never heard of it!” said the girl, as if that settled it.

“On Barmet Bay,” Frank supplied. “It’s quite a town.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad to know that,” said the girl with a smile. “Just a moment and I’ll look it up for you.”

She pulled out and put in several more of the brass plugs and at the same time kept up a running comment of numbers interspersed with such remarks as:

“No, they haven’t answered yet! Yes, Madam, I’m ringing them. Of course I’ll keep on ringing. Yes, there’s your party! What’s that? You can’t hear? Well, speak louder. Here’s your party! Say, listen, Sade,” she went on, evidently to some other operator in a moment’s respite, “I said to him—yes, I’m ringing them—I said to him—Oh, will you stop jiggling that hook! You’re making me deaf—” and so on.

It was a few moments after this that she had time to give more attention to Joe and Frank who had stood patiently waiting. Then she asked:

“What place did you want, Oyster Bay?”

“No, Bayport,” Frank answered.

“We don’t want to call it yet,” Joe hastened to say. “We just want to find out what it costs.”

“Tell you in a moment. There’s your party, sir—in seven!” She shot this at an elderly man standing back of the boys and he hurried into one of the empty booths.

The girl ruffled the leaves of a book, ran her pencil down a line of places and looked up to say:

“Bayport a dollar ’n’ fifteen cents first three minutes.”

Joe whistled.

So did Frank.

“What number?” asked the girl looking directly at them.

“I—I guess we don’t want any number,” Joe said with rather a wan smile. “Come on, Frank.”

“Just a minute,” Frank said, struck with a sudden idea. “Are the rates any cheaper at night?” he asked, remembering having heard this somewhere.

“Oh, yes. After eight-thirty it will only cost you seventy-five cents for five

minutes.”

Joe shook his head. Fate seemed to be against the Hardy boys. The girl was not unsympathetic. She evidently guessed the predicament the lads were in, for after a little more hectic telephone talk with unseen persons, she said:

“Why don’t you reverse the charge?”

“How’s that?” asked Frank, not at once understanding.

“Well, I mean if you haven’t got—if you don’t want to pay for a call to Bayport, give me the name of the party you want to reach. I’ll call them up for you and if they are willing to have the charge put on their bill, I can reverse it and you won’t have to pay anything. Shall I do that for you? I can do it, or the girl who relieves me at night can do that for you after eight-thirty, and it won’t cost the party in Bayport much.”

“Say, that’s an idea!” exclaimed Joe. “We can do that!”

Frank shook his head.

“No,” he said in a low voice to his brother. “To let Mother know we are broke, or almost broke, in New York, would only worry her. Of course she’d let us reverse the charge all right, but I don’t want her to worry.”

“I don’t, either,” Joe said.

“Then we’ll let it slide,” Frank announced. “We’ll do something else.”

“What?”

“Let’s go over here and sit down and think a bit.”

They moved away from the desk of the telephone girl and it was obvious that she soon forgot them in the rush of business. There were some vacant chairs near the telephone booths and the boys sat down there. For a time neither of them spoke.

Joe was just going to ask his brother if he had any idea of what they might do, when they were startled to hear the telephone girl call into her transmitter a Bayport number—not that of the home of the Hardy boys, however.

“Did you hear that?” whispered Joe.

“I surely did!” Frank answered.

“Somebody around here is calling a Bayport number.”

“Seems so,” Frank assented. He left the chair and walked along the row of booths. Most of them were occupied, the double-folding glass doors being

closed. In some were women and in others men. In two were giggling girls. In none did Frank or Joe see anyone whom they knew—anyone who could be set down as having a reason for calling Bayport.

In spite of the booths' supposedly soundproof qualities, some of the talk going on in them filtered out. It was after they had strolled up and down the line several times, listening to snatches of one-sided conversation which meant nothing to them, that Joe and Frank, passing the last booth in the row, heard a man say:

“Don't cut me off from Bayport!”

They had another clue!

One look through the glass door of the booth showed that the man who had mentioned Bayport was a flashily-dressed individual, of the kind commonly called “sport.” He looked out and saw Joe and Frank standing near where he was talking and at once put his lips closer to the transmitter as though to prevent anything of what he was saying from leaking out. Noticing this suspicious act, the Hardy boys strolled on.

“Did you see him?” asked Joe.

“Yes, but it didn't mean anything. He was a stranger to me.”

“Same here. But I wonder why he was calling Bayport?”

“I don't know how we are going to find out unless we ask him,” spoke Frank. “That wouldn't quite do.”

“I should say not. Here he comes out!”

The “sport” hastened from the booth, tossed a bill on the girl's desk and, with a muttered “keep the change, sister,” hurried from the hotel.

“That's the kind of a cash customer I like,” said the girl with a frank laugh, as she caught the eyes of the boys. Emboldened by her seeming friendliness, Frank ventured:

“He was calling our town, wasn't he?”

“Yes. Bayport. It's queer I get so much Bayport business in the same day and I never heard of it before.”

Both Frank and Joe were eager to ask who the man had called in Bayport but did not dare. The girl, however, seemed intent on being friendly. She said:

“He had the Bayport Y.M.C.A. Though what a sport like him would call a place like that for, I can't imagine! Yes, lady, I'm calling 'em for you.”

Joe and Frank thought this an opportune time to hurry out. They had an idea they might be able to follow the “sport” who had telephoned the Bayport Y.M.C.A. and learn something about him. Though they were only a few seconds behind him in leaving the hotel, he was not in sight, when they reached the street.

“Another blind lead!” lamented Joe.

“We’ve had plenty of those, lately,” said his brother.

“Well, what are we going to do?” asked Joe. “Come back after eight-thirty and put through a reversed charge call?”

Frank shook his head in negation.

“I’m not going to worry mother,” he declared.

“No, it wouldn’t be right,” Joe agreed. “But say, Dad has several friends in New York. What’s the matter with looking some of them up and asking for a small loan? We must get money.”

“Yes, I guess we must,” Frank agreed. “It will cost only a nickel to make a local call. Or we can do better than that. Look up the address of some of dad’s friends and *walk* to where they are.”

“I’m for that, strong!” cried Joe with a laugh. “We can get their addresses out of a telephone book.”

They went back to the hotel where they had heard the “sport” telephoning to Bayport and, without attracting the attention of the girl at the switchboard, looked in the telephone directory. It did not take them long to locate the names of several of their father’s friends.

“He’ll be the nearest one to tackle,” remarked Joe, pointing to a name.

“Oh, Mr. Blythe. Yes. And it isn’t far to that place where he has his office. Why,” Frank went on as he noted the address, “that’s the same building where Chris went in and we followed!”

“You mean the South African Imports concern?”

“Yes. Queer, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but there’s no connection. We might ask Mr. Blythe if he knows that company.”

“Sure, we’ll do it.”

The brothers retraced their steps to the building where they had so nearly caught the big blond. On the way they talked of the propriety of what they

were going to do.

“I don’t know how Dad will like it, asking a loan from one of his friends,” Frank remarked, dubiously.

“What else can we do, when we’re so nearly broke?” asked Joe.

“Nothing, I suppose. It’s hard luck! If I could only get my hands on the man who took that wallet, I’d let him know what I think of him.”

“So would I. Where do you think it was taken?”

“Must have been near that restaurant. I thought I felt a tug at my coat when we were in a crowd, but I was so anxious to get Chris that I didn’t pay any attention. Well, here we are at Mr. Blythe’s building. I guess our troubles about money will soon be over.”

Alas for their hopes! Mr. Blythe was out, his secretary said, and would not be back for several days.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” Frank answered.

“Will you leave your names?” the girl asked, still smiling.

“I guess it wouldn’t be much use,” said Frank. “Mr. Blythe doesn’t exactly know us. He knows our father and, as we were in New York, we thought we’d call—and—er——”

“Just call,” finished Joe, pulling at his brother’s coat. They went out.

“I’m not going to do that again!” declared Frank as they went out toward the elevator.

“What?”

“Try to ask a loan from any of Dad’s friends. It’s too humiliating.”

“What’ll we do?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to think. But say, as long as we’re in this building, let’s take a look at that importing office where we saw Chris go in.”

“Not a bad idea,” Joe agreed. They went to the tenth floor but on trying the office door found it locked.

“Another blind alley,” remarked Joe as they went down to the street. “We surely are up against it!”

“Let’s go somewhere else and think,” proposed Frank and they wandered

about until they reached Central Park. Being tired, they sat down on a bench.

“Anyhow,” Joe remarked, “we won’t starve to-night, though we may not live high. We still have that fifty cents.”

“What about sleeping?” asked Frank.

Joe gestured toward the bench on which they were sitting.

“Right here. What’s worrying me is how we’ll eat while we’re getting back to Bayport.”

“We can ask for odd jobs along the way. Chopping wood, for instance. Perhaps we can get some motorist to give us a ride. We may get there sooner than we think.”

Joe was thoughtful. “I’m sure we were on the track of something pretty important when we overheard those men talking in the restaurant. They were certainly speaking about diamonds. One of the men was a friend of Chris.”

“I’d give anything to know where they are right now. I think we were on the point of learning all about that gang.”

“Now we’re not much wiser than when we left Bayport. Worse off than ever, in fact.”

“I wonder,” said Frank, “about this man Taffy they mentioned. He seems to be a big man with that crowd. Yet he’s lying low, for some reason.”

“Perhaps the police are after him. Too bad that chap shut up so quickly just when he was about to tell where Taffy was hiding. If we knew that, we would have something to go on.”

Frank shrugged. “Well, we don’t know, and that’s all there is to it. The best thing we can do is to get back to Bayport somehow and wait for a chance to pick up the trail of Chris again. He may be back.”

“After seeing us in the restaurant last night, he’ll probably be a lot more careful if he returns to Bayport. I don’t think we’ll get a chance like this again.”

They idled about Central Park, then explored many of the adjoining streets, impressed with the constant roar and rush of the great city. Naturally disappointed by the outcome of their journey, they soon forgot Chris and the sharp-featured man in the many interesting sights they saw.

When they were hungry they bought coffee and sandwiches at a small lunch counter. This further reduced their capital to twenty cents, but as Joe pointed out, this would be enough to bring them to the outskirts of the city, at



any rate.

“Once we get on the highway,” said Frank, “we may be lucky enough to flag a motorist and get a lift. Lots of people hitch-hike right across the continent that way.”

“I’ll be satisfied if we even get to Bayport. None of this cross-continent stuff for me.”

When night came they strolled down Broadway, admiring the vivid display of flashing lights. At last, however, they went back to the park.

“Thank goodness the night is warm,” said Frank.

“And I’m glad it isn’t raining.”

“Might as well turn in. We have a long day’s walk ahead of us.”

“Don’t remind me of it,” groaned Joe.

The benches were hard and they did not fall asleep at once. Frank was just dozing off into slumber when he heard the solemn notes of a clock in a nearby tower.

He counted the strokes.

“Midnight,” he said.

“What’s that?” asked Joe, sleepily.

“Twelve o’clock.”

“It was midnight when I was kidnapped from Chet’s party. I wonder where we’ll be this time to-morrow night.”

“I wonder.”

Frank made himself more comfortable on the bench. In a few moments he was asleep.

## CHAPTER XVII

### GOOD SAMARITANS

TEN o'clock next morning found the Hardy boys well on their way back to Bayport, although they still had many miles to cover.

By subway, then by street car they had gone a great distance after waking up at dawn, and now they were on the highway that led down the coast. They kept well to the side of the road because of speeding automobiles, and although they had signalled to a number of passing motorists in hope of a lift, they had met with no luck.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we weren't hungry," said Joe.

They were nearing one of the numerous wayside lunch counters, and the smell of fragrant coffee made them realize how hungry they really were.

"I have an idea," remarked Frank, tightening his belt. He walked up to the counter. The proprietor, a red-faced man in a white apron, greeted them pleasantly.

"What'll you have, boys? Hot dogs?"

"Have you any work for us?" asked Frank.

"Work? Are you looking for a job?"

"We're hungry and we haven't any money. If there's anything we can do to earn a meal, we'd be glad of the chance."

The man slapped the counter with a fat hand.

"Come right around to the back," he said. "That rascally boy of mine quit last night and the employment agent hasn't sent me another helper yet. You're not too proud to wash dishes, are you?"

"Not a bit."

The Hardy boys hastened around to the back of the lunch counter. In a little shed they found a great heap of dirty dishes. The proprietor explained that his previous helper had quit, leaving all the dishes of the former evening unwashed.

“There’s been such a rush this morning that I haven’t been able to get around to ’em myself.” He eyed the dishes with marked distaste. “I don’t like washing dishes, anyway. Get busy, lads, and I’ll slap up a meal for you. Hungry?”

“We haven’t had breakfast yet,” Frank confessed.

“Ham and eggs and flapjacks it will be, then.”

With this alluring prospect in sight, the Hardy boys lost no time attacking the ramparts of cups, saucers and plates. They were already half through the task when the red-faced proprietor came into the kitchen.

“That’s the way to work,” he said approvingly. “Hop out to the counter, boys, and get on the outside of some grub! You’ll be able to work faster.”

They found two huge platters of ham and eggs, a great plate of flapjacks, and cups of coffee awaiting them. The proprietor leaned on the counter and regarded them with interest as they ate. As he watched the food rapidly disappearing, he said:

“Didn’t have any breakfast, eh?”

“No, sir.”

“Didn’t eat any supper last night, eh?”

“Only sandwiches and coffee,” said Frank.

“No!” exclaimed their employer. He seemed scarcely able to believe this. “But didn’t you have any lunch yesterday?”

“Oh, yes. We had a big lunch.”

The man wagged his head. “I wouldn’t believe it if you hadn’t told me. From the way you’re lightin’ into the ham and eggs I figured you hadn’t had anything to eat for a week. I wish I had an appetite like that.”

After a while he said: “Where are you going?”

“Down the coast,” replied Frank. “Bayport.”

“It’s a long walk. Why don’t you ask somebody to give you a lift?”

“We flagged two or three cars but they didn’t slow up.”

“That’s no way to get a lift. They probably thought you was hold-up men. People are scared to slow down for strangers nowadays. The proper idea is to hang around a place like this, and then ask ’em when they stop in for something to eat.”

The boys admitted that they had never thought of that.

“You’re new at trampin’, I can see that,” declared the proprietor.

When the boys finished breakfast, the red-faced man jovially said that it did his heart good to see boys eat with such enthusiasm.

“A good appetite is a great thing,” he declared. “Once you lose your appetite, life ain’t worth livin’. Look at me, now. I used to be able to eat real hearty, and enjoy my meals. But now,” he said, mournfully, “I don’t take any real interest in my food at all. Why, just this morning, what do you think I had for breakfast?”

“I have no idea,” said Frank, politely.

“The breakfast I ate this morning,” declared the red-faced man, “wouldn’t make a respectable meal for a sparrow. I used to be able to eat a real meal. This morning, all I could manage was a bowl of cereal—no, two bowls—half a dozen flapjacks with maple syrup, a couple of fried eggs, only three slices of ham, a measly four or five slices of toast, a little bit of jam, and three cups of coffee. Can you imagine that? Scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. There was a time when I really had an appetite!”

The Hardy boys felt that if their new friend ever suffered a return to his old appetite he would eat up all the profits of his lunch counter, but they were too polite to say so. Instead, they went back to the kitchen where they resumed their assault upon the rapidly dwindling stack of dishes.

They were almost finished when they heard the proprietor call out to them. Obeying the summons, they found him in conversation with two pleasant-looking young men who had evidently just stopped for frankfurters and coffee.

“I was tellin’ you,” said the proprietor, “that the best way to pick up rides is to hang around a place like this. Well, I’ve got a ride for you boys.”

One of the young men smiled at Frank.

“Where are you going?”

“To Bayport. We’ve been walking.”

“No need of that, when the rear seat of our car is empty,” said the young man. “We’ll be glad to take you as far as Bayport.”

“Say, that’s just great!” exclaimed Frank. “We’re ever so much obliged. It will save a lot of walking.”

The Hardy boys introduced themselves and the young man, in turn, told them that his name was Keith, while that of his companion was Hallett. The

red-faced proprietor of the lunch counter beamed with pleasure and said they did not need to bother finishing up the rest of the dishes.

“You’ve earned your breakfast, and more,” he declared genially. “It was a real help to me to have those dishes done.” He tossed Joe a quarter. “Mebbe that’ll keep you from starvin’ to death before you get home.”

“Well,” said Mr. Keith, briskly, “we may as well get going. Hop in, boys. Frank, you’d better sit in the front seat with me. Your brother can sit with Hallett. We’ll get acquainted better that way.”

The Hardy boys bade goodbye to the friendly lunch counter man and got into the car. In a few minutes they were speeding down the wide, white road at a lively rate that swallowed up the miles. Frank glanced at his companion.

“This certainly beats tramping!”

“Yes,” agreed Keith, “it seems odd to think of anyone walking when a car can whisk you along at forty or fifty miles an hour. You’d have to go some to reach forty or fifty miles in a day on foot. How do you come to be hoofing it? You certainly don’t look like professional tramps.”

“We’re not. We went to New York and a pickpocket stole my wallet, containing our money and return tickets.”

“Tough luck. Well, you show good spirit by starting out on foot. Strange, but it seems to me your name sounds familiar. You said it was Frank Hardy, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard that name, in connection with Bayport. I remember now. Fenton Hardy. You aren’t related to him, are you?”

“He is my father.”

“You don’t say!” exclaimed Keith with new interest. “You chaps are sons of Fenton Hardy, the great detective! Well, this is a surprise.”

“Do you know him?” asked Frank.

“I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting him,” Keith admitted, “but of course I’ve often heard of him. He’s a big man in his line. I believe he has done quite a bit of work for our department in Washington.”

“What department is that?”

Keith hesitated. Then he said: “Department of Justice.”

It was Frank’s turn to be interested. He looked at his companion in awe.

“You’re not Secret Service men, are you?”

Keith laughed. “I wouldn’t go around the country advertising the fact if I were,” he returned, evasively. “However, seeing you’re a son of Fenton Hardy, I guess you’re a safe person to talk to. Hallett and I aren’t in the Service, yet. But we’re connected with the Department of Justice as investigators.”

“That’s what Joe and I want to be.”

“Following in your father’s footsteps, eh? Well, if you have inherited any of his ability you ought to make good. He’s a top-notch, from all I hear.”

“Sometimes we’ve been lucky enough to run across a case that we could handle. As a matter of fact, that’s why we went to New York and got into this jam.”

Keith was discreet enough to ask no questions. Now that Frank’s identity was established he became more communicative.

“Hallett and I have been chasing up and down the coast for the past three weeks,” he said, “on a case that seems to be turning sour. We’re going back to Washington soon to report and receive further instructions. The fellow we’re after has been too smart for us so far. Diamond smuggling.”

Frank sat up. This was interesting.

“Diamonds!”

Keith nodded. “We’ve been trying to break up a smuggling ring that has been operating somewhere along the coast. Taffy Marr has come East at last, and he has given us a lively time.”

Taffy Marr! Frank remembered the conversation he and Joe had overheard in the restaurant, the vague allusions to “Taffy,” who was now in hiding.

“Is he the head of the gang?”

“He’s one of the slickest crooks in the country. He is leader of this smuggling ring. Just a young chap, Taffy—handsome, innocent-looking fellow—but as smart and cold-blooded as they make ’em. I’d give a year’s salary to land him behind the bars. He came from Chicago a few months ago, organized his gang and got busy. They’ve been flooding the country with smuggled diamonds and the Jewelers’ Association is wild. They’ve offered a big reward if the gang is broken up, for it hurts their business.”

Frank was just on the point of telling Keith their own discoveries concerning Taffy Marr and the diamond smugglers, but he checked himself. After all, they knew very little, and nothing he could say would help the

government investigators. His father had often told him that one of the first requirements of a good detective is to keep his ears open and his mouth shut, and to be wary of confiding in strangers. So he decided to keep quiet. After all, he and Joe had been working on this case themselves and it would be foolish to turn their information over to others.

“Do you think you’ll catch him?” he asked.

Keith shrugged. “We hope so. We thought we were on his trail last week and we pretty nearly laid him by the heels, as a matter of fact, but he gave us the slip. Now he’s dropped out of sight. Probably in hiding somewhere until he feels it is safe to start work again.”

“If we ever chance to run across him,” said Frank, “what would be the proper thing to do?”

“Send a telegram to me at Washington, first shot. I’ll be your friend for life if you pick up Taffy Marr’s trail and give Hallett and me the tip. Not that there’s much likelihood of your finding him, but one never can tell.”

He gave Frank his card, with a secret code number that would insure prompt delivery of any telegram. “This is all in confidence, of course. I wouldn’t go around telling my school chums about it, if I were you.”

“You needn’t be afraid of that,” Frank assured him.

“I imagine Fenton Hardy’s sons know enough to look wise and say little,” laughed Keith.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE NEW CLERK

INSTEAD of spending several days on the road, as they had feared, the Hardy boys found themselves safely back in Bayport late that afternoon.

Thanks to the kindness of the two government investigators, the lads were returned to the door of their home before nightfall. Their mother welcomed them with undisguised relief, for their failure to return on the noon train from New York and the absence of a telephone call had aroused anxiety. When the boys told her the story of their adventures and explained how they had started to walk back home, she did not know whether to laugh or to scold them.

“You foolish lads!” sighed Mrs. Hardy. “All you had to do was send me a collect telegram and I would have sent the money to you by wire.”

“We didn’t like to do that,” said Frank. “We got ourselves into the fix, so it was up to us to get ourselves out of it.”

“A good long walk wouldn’t hurt you,” sniffed Aunt Gertrude. “It would take some of the nonsense out of you. Diamond smugglers! What utter rubbish. If government men can’t catch the diamond smugglers, what chance have you?”

“Just as good a chance as anyone,” spoke up Joe.

“There’s all sorts of crooks in the world. You never know whom to trust, *these* days,” declared their aunt. “Speaking of that fair-haired man—the big bully—who jostled me on the platform at Gresham, I saw one of his precious friends yesterday.”

“What’s that?” asked Frank, interested.

“I saw one of his friends. One of those men who blocked my way on the train steps and called me an old motorboat. Motorboat, indeed!” said Aunt Gertrude, in whose memory this insult rankled. “I just felt like going right into the store and giving him a piece of my mind.”

“Where was he?”

“Remember, I *said* I had seen that new jewelry clerk before. If I see a face



once, I never forget it. That clerk in the jewelry store near the automat. That's who he is. One of the men I saw on the platform at Gresham."

"Are you sure, Aunt Gertrude?" asked Joe.

"Positive. The first time I laid eyes on the man I knew I had seen him somewhere. Yesterday afternoon I went past the jewelry store to see if I could get a look at him again. There he was, standing in the window, large as life and twice as natural, like a dummy in a clothing store. Then I remembered, right away."

"How could you have seen him on the platform at Gresham if he is clerking in a Bayport jewelry store?"

Aunt Gertrude glared at Joe.

"Don't you dare contradict me, young man! I know what I'm talking about. If I say that young man in the jewelry store was one of the men I saw at Gresham, that settles it. Do you think my eyesight is going back on me?"

"No indeed, Aunty," said Joe meekly.

"I should say not."

Frank and Joe were highly interested in their aunt's story. If the clerk in the jewelry store were really one of the two men who had talked to Chris on the station platform, he would bear investigation. That evening they went downtown and met Jerry Gilroy, of whom they made a number of careless inquiries concerning the new clerk.

"That fellow?" said Jerry. "I forget what his name is. He came to Bayport only a few weeks ago. The boys say he isn't a bad sort. Belongs to the Y.M.C.A."

Frank and Joe exchanged glances. It was scarcely likely, they realized, that a crook would belong to the Y.M.C.A.

"The old jeweler says he is one of the best repair men he ever had in the store. Seems to be a good worker," continued Jerry. "He talks as if he is interested in baseball and football, although he hasn't joined any of the clubs yet. Everybody says he is a good fellow."

These recommendations dampened the ardor of the boys considerably. The jewelry store was closed for the day, so they did not have an opportunity of seeing the new clerk, but when they went home that night they agreed that Aunt Gertrude might have been mistaken.

"Probably he was about the same height and build as this chap," said

Frank. "From what Jerry says, he isn't the type of fellow who would be hanging around with Chris."

"Just the same, it was right in front of the jewelry store that I bumped into Chris with the parcel."

"That's true. I had forgotten about that. A jewelry store might be a good place to get rid of smuggled diamonds. We'll keep an eye on this new clerk, anyway."

Accordingly, they went back to the store next morning and entered under pretext of examining some watches. A young man emerged from the back of the shop to wait on them.

He was young, good-looking and soft-spoken. His hair was very black, although his skin was fair, and he proved to be very obliging. As he brought forth the trays of watches, he said:

"Do you fellows play ball?"

"A little," Frank admitted. "Do you?"

"Not very much. I'm not a good ball player, although I like the game. Interested in all kinds of sports, as a matter of fact. I've been thinking of joining the Athletic Club."

"It's a good place to meet people."

"That's right," said the clerk. "I've been in town only a few weeks and I find it difficult to get acquainted."

"Where do you come from?" asked Joe.

"New York. However, I'm not sorry I left. It's easier to make friends in a small city."

He showed them a number of watches, but the boys pretended that they did not see anything that suited them just then.

"Quite all right with me," said the young fellow, cheerfully. "It's no trouble to show you what we have. Drop in again some time."

"We'll do that," promised Frank.

When they reached the street, Joe said:

"We're on the wrong track, all right. That young chap is no more a crook than I am."

"Don't be so sure about that. Do you know who I think he is?"

“Who?”

“Taffy Marr.”

Joe was incredulous.

“The head of the diamond smugglers! You’re crazy! What makes you think that?”

“Did you notice his hair?”

“Sure. He has black hair. And you told me the government agent said Taffy Marr was a fair-haired fellow.”

“Yes, but this man’s hair looks as if it had been dyed. His skin is not the color for that dark hair, and there’s no show of beard. I’m sure there would be if it was as black as his hair.”

Joe was thoughtful. “You’re sharper than I am. I never noticed that.”

“He’s young, he’s handsome, he’s innocent-looking, and he knows something about the jewelry business. Aunt Gertrude says she saw him talking to Chris. He has dyed his hair. It all hooks up pretty well, I think.”

“What do you think we should do? We can’t go in and ask him if he is really Taffy Marr.”

“No, but we can send a wire to those government men in Washington and have them come up here and take a look at him. They’ll know Taffy Marr by sight.”

“Good idea,” declared Joe, and they immediately set out for the telegraph office.

There Frank drafted a telegram to his friend Keith in the Department of Justice, using the card the government operative had given him. The telegram read as follows:

BELIEVE WE HAVE PICKED UP TAFFY MARR STOP  
SUGGEST YOU COME HERE AT ONCE

“That ought to bring them to Bayport on the run,” he said with satisfaction, as he read the message over.

“We ought to keep an eye on that jewelry store,” suggested Joe, when the telegram had been dispatched. “Maybe Chris or some of the others will show up again.”

“If Chris shows himself around Bayport, we won’t lose track of him a

second time.”

They went back to the shop and loitered about in front of the place. Once in a while they varied the program by watching from across the street or by going down to the end of the block. They did not see Chris or any other suspicious character entering the store.

They were standing on the curb, when Joe suddenly nudged his brother.

“I think he’s wondering why we are hanging around here.”

Frank looked back.

The good-looking young clerk was peering at them through the window. When he saw that he was observed, he hastily withdrew.

“I guess we’d better move on,” said Frank. “If he becomes suspicious of us, he may clear out right away.”

“As long as he thinks he is safe here, we won’t have to watch him very closely. It’s time we were home, anyway.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### PURSUIT BY PLANE

NEXT morning it occurred to Frank that more information about the mysterious clerk might be obtained from the proprietor of the jewelry store, whom they knew well.

“Why didn’t we think of that before?” said Joe. “The clerk must have given references and we could check up on them.”

“I don’t want to walk right into the store and start asking questions. The clerk might overhear us. We’ll telephone.”

So, in the privacy of their father’s office, they telephoned to the owner of the jewelry store.

“We’d like some information about your new clerk, Mr. Arnheim,” said Frank. “Where does he come from? How long has he been with you? Where did he work last?”

“You’d like to know about *that* loafer, eh? You’d like to know where he came from, is it? And I’d like to know where he went to now,” said Mr. Arnheim.

“Has he left you?” gasped Frank.

“Quit! Resigned! Left the job! Gone away from here! Without giving me any notice, the rascal. He telephones me from the Y.M.C.A. this morning and says he don’t feel well, so he won’t work for me no more. And leaves me without a clerk, so I got to wait on the store myself.”

“How long is it since he telephoned to you?” asked Frank, quickly.

“Not more than ten minutes ago by the clock since he told me, and me entitled by law to one week’s notice from the loafer.” Mr. Arnheim was evidently very angry. Frank did not wait to sympathize. He thanked the old jeweler, then replaced the receiver and turned to Joe.

“We must have frightened him last night. He has skipped out.”

“When?”

“He telephoned Arnheim ten minutes ago that he was leaving the city.”

“Then we may pick him up yet. We’ll try the Y.M.C.A. He may have left directions for having his mail forwarded.”

The boys dashed out of the house and Frank wheeled his motorcycle out of the shed. Joe got into the sidecar, and in a few minutes they were speeding down the street in the direction of the Y.M.C.A.

Luck was with them.

Just as they approached the building, they saw a man carrying a club bag walk quickly down the steps, and jump into a waiting taxi.

“That looks like him!” shouted Joe.

Frank nodded. He had recognized the man, even at that distance, as the young jewelry clerk. The taxi drew away from the curb and went on down the road.

The motorcycle drew up behind the taxi. The Hardy boys were jubilant. A few minutes later and the clerk would have been gone.

“Hope he doesn’t go to the station and take the train for New York,” muttered Joe.

“We’ll follow him, anyway. I believe he is Taffy Marr.”

They trailed the taxi through the city streets, and as it neared the railway station they were convinced that their quarry was about to leave Bayport by train. However, to their surprise, the taxi did not stop at the station, but went on past and turned into a road that led out of the city.

They followed at a safe distance, and trailed the speeding automobile through the outskirts of Bayport out onto the highway. Then Frank had an inkling of the clerk’s destination.

“The airport!” he exclaimed.

“Looks like it. He must be in a hurry to clear out if he is going by airplane.”

“He must have more money than the average jewelry clerk if he is going to charter a special plane. The regular passenger plane left an hour ago.”

It was soon evident that their man was indeed bound for the airport. The taxi turned off the highway and plunged along a dirt road that led to Bayport’s new flying field in the meadows to the west of the city. The motorcycle slowed down, because Frank did not want to arrive at the airport immediately after the

taxi, and thereby run the risk of being recognized by the clerk.

They saw the car enter the flying field and proceed toward the row of buildings that comprised the local offices of the aviation service. At the entrance to the field Frank brought the motorcycle to a stop.

“We’d better go on from here on foot,” he said to his brother. “He may have noticed the motorcycle trailing him.”

They parked the machine by a nearby hedge and went on down the road. Before they had reached the buildings they saw the taxi returning, heading back toward Bayport, and then they saw the clerk leave one of the offices in the company of one of the aviators and cross the field toward a waiting plane.

“He’s losing no time about making his getaway,” remarked Joe.

They watched the clerk get into the airplane. The aviator took his seat at the controls, a mechanic gave the propeller a flip, the engine roared, and in a few minutes the big machine trundled across the level field, gathering speed until at last it left the ground, cleared the telephone wires at the far end of the field, and went soaring off into the air.

“We won’t give up just yet,” said Frank, quietly.

In the preceding volume of this series, “The Hardy Boys: The Great Airport Mystery”, the adventures of the boys in baffling a plot to rob the air mail were related. As a consequence of their good work at that time the boys had won the friendship of the airport officials, and when they entered the headquarters of the service they were given a warm welcome.

“Well, look who’s here!” exclaimed Manson, the officer in charge. “You don’t come to see us very often.” He shook hands with the boys. “What can we do for you? Want to take a little joy-ride?”

“We’re after information,” said Frank, briefly. “A man just came here in a taxi and went up for a flight. Can you tell us where he is going?”

Manson shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he replied, “but we don’t know. He went up in one of the independent planes. He bargained with one of the freelance aviators to take him up. It was none of our business, of course, and we didn’t hear him say where he wanted to go. What’s the idea?”

“That’s a setback. We’ve been following him. I guess he was too smart for us. We thought we’d be able to learn his destination, then wire on ahead to have him picked up.”

“A crook, eh?” said Hanson. “Well, you boys did us a good favor once and maybe we’ll be able to return it. Would you like to follow him by plane?”

“I’ll say we would!” exclaimed Joe, enthusiastically.

“We have only one plane at liberty just now and it’s a battered old crate, but maybe it will do. It was smashed up a few weeks ago and it hasn’t been up since it was repaired. One of the boys was just going to try it out this morning. I think it’s good for a few hundred miles, though. If you care to take the chance——”

Frank considered for a moment. “What do you say, Joe?”

“Let’s go!”

“You’d better take parachutes, of course,” said Hanson. “Just in case anything happens.”

“We’re ready,” said Frank.

“Good!” Manson beckoned to an aviator standing nearby. “Tom, these boys want to follow that plane that just went out. Take them up in the old bus and do your best to follow that other ship.”

“Right!” said the aviator. “Come on, boys!”

He led the way into a storeroom at the back, where he supplied the boys with parachutes, seized one himself, and then they went outside. He brought them over to an airplane already on the field.

“I think the old crate will stand up,” he said carelessly, “but it’s best to be careful. If she has any of her old speed left, we’ll catch up to the other ship without any trouble.”

Some of the mechanics came over, and while they helped strap on the boys’ parachutes, Tom clambered into the plane and tuned up the engine. In a few minutes he signified that he was ready.

“Running smooth as silk!” he announced. “All set?”

“All set!”

“Climb in, then.”

They took their places in the plane, the parachutes beneath them. One of the mechanics stepped up to the propeller.

“Contact!”

The great blade began to spin. The engine clamored. The plane began to



move slowly across the ground.

It gathered speed, bumping over the surface of the field. The boys could see the distant fence and the line of telephone wires. They were scarcely aware that they had left the ground until they saw the fence suddenly dip away beneath them. A moment later they were skimming high above the wires, and when they looked down they saw the fenced fields and the ribbon of road below.

Their pilot gestured toward the west.

Far in the distance they saw a tiny speck in the sky.

It was the other plane.

The Hardy boys felt a thrill of exultation. They did not notice a rising bank of gray fog that obscured the ocean to the north, a misty cloud that was already beginning to obscure the countryside. Fog, the unconquerable enemy of the aviator, was looming down upon them!

## CHAPTER XX

### JUMP!

THE deafening roar of the engine forbade conversation. The boys sat in silence as the plane throbbed on toward the west.

In a few minutes they saw that the other ship had altered its course and was now speeding north. Their pilot immediately banked and took the same direction, hoping to make up distance and come in on the tail of the other machine.

It was then that the Hardy boys saw the fog bank.

Already it obscured a great area of coast; hung far out over the distant ocean. Frank was dubious as he watched that greasy cloud. If the other plane plunged into the mist, it could easily shake off pursuit. He saw that their own pilot had altered the course again. He was heading into the northwest in an effort to skirt the edge of the fog bank.

The mist came down rapidly, in swirling clouds. They soon saw that if they hoped to keep the other plane in sight at all they could not go too far to the west. Their pilot brought up the nose of the machine and they began to climb, hoping to get above the fog. But, as they headed north and met the advancing cloud, they found themselves in the mist before the machine could gain altitude.

The other plane had vanished.

The fog engulfed them.

It was an odd sensation to be flying high above the invisible earth, in a gray void that obscured all familiar things. The plane seemed to be alone above the world. Everything had disappeared.

“We might be flying upside down and we wouldn’t know the difference,” thought Frank.

Their pilot held to a straight course and increased his speed, hoping to run through the fog and pick up the other plane when visibility returned. The great bank of mist evidently extended over a greater area than they had supposed. Minute after minute went by and still the opaque grayness persisted. They saw

the pilot peering at the instrument panel, evidently puzzled about something, and they did not realize they were lost in the confusing mist.

The plane drummed on into the white wall that seemed to recede before them. There was not the slightest break in the enveloping mist; not a glimpse of blue sky; not a patch of distant earth.

Frank saw that Joe's face bore a look of disappointment. He knew that his brother thought there was little hope of ever sighting the other plane again. For his own part he had slight confidence.

Suddenly the roar of the motor was stilled.

The only sound was the humming of the struts. The nose of the plane dipped sharply and the big machine went into a dive.

The boys did not know what had gone wrong, but the pilot waved back to them in a gesture meant to be encouraging. He had thrust the stick far forward and the plane was plunging down through the fog at terrific speed.

Down swept the ship. The boys were alarmed, but not frightened. They knew that some engine trouble had developed and that a forced landing in the fog would be perilous; but they knew that there must still be some hope, otherwise the pilot would have signalled to abandon the plane.

The rush of air took their breath away. Then, as abruptly as it had ceased, the roar of the engine broke out again.

The pilot eased the stick slowly back and the plane gradually came out of the dive, flattened out and began to climb again.

Frank took a deep breath. Joe grinned. Their relief was short-lived. It soon became evident that the motor was by no means in perfect shape. It stuttered, balked, missed fire and picked up again, no longer throbbing steadily with the regularity it had displayed at the beginning of the flight.

The pilot looked back and they saw that his face was anxious. He shook his head and gestured toward the ground, invisible below.

It was obvious that he wanted to make a landing, but with the earth hidden by mist this was impossible. The boys peered down through the fog, hoping to catch a fleeting glimpse of the ground, but only the heavy grayness met their eyes.

They knew the consequences of a blind landing in that mist. It would be disaster, perhaps death to them all.

The engine died again and they experienced a thrill of fear, but once more

it picked up its uneven beat.

“Feed pipe choked, I’ll bet a hat,” said Frank to himself.

Forgotten was the other plane. Their whole concern now was for their own safety, to escape from the blinding fog and again see the friendly earth beneath them. Once they sighted the ground, the pilot could pick out a field and make a forced landing.

Frank felt for the straps of his parachute. If the worst came to the worst they might have to jump. He did not relish the prospect. To leap from a crippled plane in mid-air, with fog blanketing the earth below, was an adventure that did not appeal to him.

The pilot was working desperately in an effort to bring the engine back to its old steady clamor, but the trouble seemed to grow greater. The plane bucked and plunged laboriously.

If only the fog would lift!

The gray mist remained impenetrable. High above the earth the Hardy boys crouched in the crippled machine, hoping against hope that the pilot would be able to bring them through safely. From the harassed expression on the man’s face, they knew that the situation was desperate.

Suddenly the engine stopped again. The nose of the machine dipped and the plane went into a long, swift dive. It straightened out, banked, then dived again at screaming speed.

It came out of the second dive and rose swiftly. They waited for the reassuring roar of the engine but it remained mute.

The speed of the dive carried the machine for some time but gradually faltered, and the pilot banked again, coasting in a wide, slow spiral.

“We’re sunk!” he yelled back at the boys. “You’ll have to take to the ’chutes!”

“Jump?” shouted Joe.

The man nodded. “The engine is done for. Choked up. I don’t dare try a landing in this fog. We’ll crack up, sure. Hurry up! I’ll keep her at this altitude as long as I can. Crawl out on the wing, watch for my signal, then jump clear! Count ten, then yank the rip cord!”

It was uncanny to scramble out on the swaying wing, in a dead silence as the plane coasted through the gray mist.

“Keep cool!” said Frank. “Jump clear!”

“It’s not the jumping that worries me,” said Joe, “it’s the landing.”

They knew that in the fog they would have no idea of what lay beneath. For all they were aware they might be plunging directly toward a lake or into a city street.

Out on the wing they clung for a moment; glanced back at the pilot.

He raised his hand, then brought it down sharply.

“Jump!”

Frank went first. Joe waited a moment in order that he might get clear, as there was a possibility that their parachutes might become entangled if they leaped together.

Frank leaped clear of the swaying plane, and dropped like a plummet through the fog. Then Joe shot downward, the bulky parachute at his back.

Twisting and turning through the air, the lads plunged toward the earth. Desperately Frank groped for the ring of the rip cord. It eluded his grasp. Sudden panic gripped him.

He was plunging toward the earth at terrific speed, a parachute at his back, but unable to find the ring that would open it.

Every second was precious. He knew that even if he found the ring, it would be a few moments before the parachute would open. In the meantime he was dropping toward the earth at ever-increasing speed. He might already have reached an altitude too low to permit the parachute to open in time.

Then his groping hand found the ring. He gripped it convulsively and tugged at it.

Nothing happened. He still shot down through the clouds of mist!

Just as he was about to give up hope, there was a crackling sound above him, a sudden jerk as though a gigantic hand had grabbed him about the waist, and he found himself floating gently through space with the parachute open above him.

Through the wreaths of mist he glimpsed another object.

It was a parachute similar to his own, dropping slowly through the fog. Joe, at least, was safe.

But what of the pilot and the crippled plane?

What lay beneath them?

CHAPTER XXI  
ON THE SHORE ROAD

FORTUNE favored them.

Through the thinning fog, Frank caught sight of a freshly-ploughed field beneath him. A moment later he dropped with a jolt into the furrows, then found himself dragged head-over-heels across the field until the billowing parachute finally crumpled and collapsed upon the ground.

He disengaged himself from the straps and got to his feet. A dark shadow loomed through the mist at the far end of the field. It was the other parachute.

Joe's swaying body just cleared the fence and then he, too, tumbled into the furrows and was dragged across the earth by the parachute until it snagged in a shapeless mass.

A hurtling shape whizzed through the fog, toward a bank of trees dimly visible beyond the fence.

It was the airplane, plunging wildly to the earth. It landed among the trees with a terrific crash. Then followed silence.

Frank ran toward his brother.

"Are you all right, Joe?"

Joe was already scrambling to his feet, struggling with the straps.

"No bones broken," he announced, cheerfully. "What a thrill that was! I wouldn't mind trying it over again."

"We're lucky!" Frank gazed toward the wreckage of the airplane. "Let's go over and see if the pilot got out all right. If he didn't jump in time, I'm afraid it's all up with him."

Great was their relief, when they had climbed over the fence and made their way toward the wreckage, to find that the pilot was safe. He had leaped from the plane when he saw that there was no hope of finding a landing place in the fog, and his parachute had brought him safely to earth. He shook hands with them warmly.

“You made it, eh? That takes a load off my mind. I would never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you chaps!” he declared. “I’ve been worried sick even since I came down.”

“You had to let the plane go?” said Frank.

The pilot shrugged. “Nothing else to do. It would have been suicide to stick with the ship and try to find a landing place in this fog. The moment you boys went over the side I set the stick level, crawled out on the wing and hopped into space. The plane is a wreck, and I can’t say I’m sorry.”

When they examined the crack-up they saw that the machine was, indeed, smashed beyond all possibility of repair. The pilot took the whole business casually enough.

“All in the day’s work. I’m sorry that other ship got away on us, though.”

“I had forgotten all about it,” Frank confessed. “We’ve had our own troubles to think about.”

“We may get word of him from some of the other airports. Our chief worry now is to find out where we are and to see about getting back to Bayport.”

People of the neighborhood, who had heard the crash, were now hastening to the scene. In a short time a crowd had gathered. Cars began to appear in the nearby road from a village not far away. The farmer on whose property they had landed introduced himself and brought them to his house, where the pilot immediately made use of the telephone and got in touch with the Bayport flying field. He reported the accident and, having learned from the farmer that they had landed some forty miles northwest of Bayport, assured headquarters that he would return with the Hardy boys as soon as possible.

Frank and Joe were crestfallen because the young jewelry clerk had given them the slip. When they returned to Bayport that day, they made every effort to find some trace of the other airplane; but, although the flying field officials got in touch with other airports, they were unsuccessful. Winging its way into the fog that morning, the plane had shaken off pursuit.

“He’ll probably never come back,” said Joe, regretfully. “If that fellow was really Taffy Marr we missed a fine chance.”

“We did the best we could. I’m sorry I sent that telegram to the government men. They’ll have their trip for nothing.”

Keith and his companion, however, did not arrive in Bayport until noon of the next day. They had been detained on important business in Washington and could not get away any sooner. To say that they were disappointed when the

Hardy boys told them that the suspect had taken flight would be putting it mildly.

“Cleared out by airplane, eh?” said Keith, bitterly. “That’s Taffy Marr all over.”

“We’re not sure this man was Taffy Marr,” pointed out Frank, “but we thought it wouldn’t do any harm to have you come here and look him over.”

“Describe this fellow,” suggested Keith.

Frank gave a complete description of the young jewelry clerk. The investigator nodded. “I think you were right,” he said, “but this should settle it.” He drew a photograph from his pocket and showed it to the Hardy boys. “Does that look like him?”

“Outside the fact that this man’s hair was black, that’s his picture,” declared Frank, positively.

“This is a recent photograph of Taffy Marr. There’s no doubt that he is the man who gave you the slip by airplane. Well, there’s nothing for us to do now but try to trace that plane. We won’t gain anything by hanging around Bayport. I guess we’ll just get busy and check up on all the airports within a reasonable distance. Personally, I think he went to either New York or Philadelphia and we may be able to pick up his trail in those cities.”

As the investigator said, they would gain nothing by remaining in Bayport. Within an hour they were on their way again but they promised to stop over on their return, should they fail to pick up the trail of Taffy Marr.

The next two days passed quietly. The Hardy boys heard nothing from the two government men. They had little expectation of ever seeing Marr again, and certainly they had no hope that he would show himself in Bayport.

In this, however, they were wrong. On the second evening after the two government investigators had left, Frank received a telephone call from Mr. Arnheim of the jewelry store.

“You asked me the other day about that loafer who clerked here for me,” said Arnheim.

“Yes,” replied Frank, eagerly. “Have you heard from him?”

“He hasn’t come near me. Not a word of apology would I get. He is in town and he did not come in to see me. What is the matter with that fellow? Is he a crook?”

“He’s in town? When did you see him?”



“I did not see him,” said Arnheim. “But my little boy saw him on the street not one hour ago. If ever I lay my hands on that fellow, I will tell him a few things.”

Frank was excited. “What street?”

“Just around the corner from here. My little boy saw him. When he noticed the lad, what did he do? Did he say ‘Hello’ to him, like a gentleman would? No. He went across the road, like the police were after him, or something.”

“He may come to see you, Mr. Arnheim. If he does, will you call us up?”

“He won’t come to see me, the loafer. He is afraid of what I will say to him. But I’ll call you up if he does, just the same.”

Arnheim rang off. Frank turned to Joe and hurriedly told him what the jeweler had said.

“Let’s get the motorcycle and go look for him. If he’s in the city, we ought to be able to run across him. Most of the boys know the fellow by sight. Oh, if only those government chaps would come back!”

“We’ll have to handle it ourselves, I’m afraid. Let’s go!”

Within a few minutes they were speeding through the streets in the motorcycle, scanning all the passers-by in the hope of catching a glimpse of the elusive Taffy Marr. They met Biff Hooper and Tony Prito, who knew the young jewelry clerk by sight, but they had not seen him that day. They promised, however, to be on the lookout for him, and Biff volunteered to go around to the Y.M.C.A., in case the clerk had gone back there for his mail.

They searched until dark, but without success. They met Biff again. He reported that the clerk had not put in an appearance at the Y.M.C.A. building, nor was he at any of the city hotels.

“He’s lying low, there’s no doubt of that,” said Frank. “We’ll try the railway station. Maybe he came to town for only an hour or so.”

Just then a portly man in plain clothes hailed them from the sidewalk. It was Detective Smuff, one of the staff of the Bayport police force.

“Call up your home, youngsters,” he growled. “Your mother has been trying to locate you for the last half hour. She called the police station and asked me to find you.”

The boys were surprised. This was unusual.

“It must be important,” said Frank. “Thanks very much, Mr. Smuff. I’ll call up the house right away.”

He went into a nearby store and asked permission to use the telephone. When he heard his mother's voice on the wire he asked, anxiously:

"Anything wrong, Mother?"

"I've been trying to find you. There are two young men here in a car. They arrived about an hour ago and have been waiting to see you. One of them says his name is Mr. Keith."

"From Washington?"

"Yes. I believe they have something to do with the government."

Frank almost cheered.

"They couldn't have come at a better time! Tell them we'll be at the house in a few minutes!"

He ran out of the store and joined Joe at the curb. "The government men are back!" he exclaimed breathlessly, as he clambered into the saddle of the motorcycle. "Now we'll get some action!"

They sped back to the house and there they found their two friends awaiting them.

"We're just on our way back to headquarters," said Keith, "and we thought we'd drop in for a few minutes. We haven't had any luck. We've spent two days trying to trace that confounded airplane and it seems to have disappeared into thin air."

"But we've had news of Marr!" exclaimed Frank.

"You have! Where is he?"

"Right here in Bayport. He was seen on the street late this afternoon. We've been trying to find him."

The two men sprang to their feet.

"We'll find him," declared Keith, grimly. "If he's in the city at all, we'll pick him up. Come on. There's plenty of room in the car for all of us."

After a brief word of explanation to their mother, the Hardy boys left the house and all four got into the car.

"What luck!" declared Keith. "Just as we were going to give up the search altogether!"

"We told a couple of our chums to keep on the lookout for him," Frank said. "If he hasn't left the city by now, we should be able to run across him."

They set out to resume the search and for the next three hours, well on into the evening, they patrolled the streets, seeking a glimpse of the fugitive. They asked innumerable questions and were able to find a few people who had seen the former jewelry clerk, so they were satisfied that he had not, as they feared, left the city.

At eleven o'clock, just when they were about to resign themselves to a second failure, they saw Tony Prito, who waved excitedly to them from the curb.

"I saw that fellow you were looking for," he announced.

"Where? When?"

"He's at the garage down at the next corner. I saw him not three minutes ago, as I came past. He's driving a blue roadster. If you hurry, you'll see him."

They wasted no further time, but thanked Tony, and sped on. When they came in sight of the garage they were just in time to see a blue roadster disappearing down the street.

"That's Taffy!" said Keith. "Now we'll just trail him and see what he's up to."

"Why not grab him now?" asked his companion.

"I have a better plan than that. We can arrest Marr any time we wish, now that we're right behind him, but I have an idea he is in Bayport for a purpose. Maybe we'll make a bigger haul."

They followed the roadster through the city streets for some time. At last it headed toward the outskirts, then raced on out into the country.

"He's going out the Shore Road!" exclaimed Frank.

"Where does that lead to?" Keith asked.

"It doesn't lead anywhere in particular, unless he turns and goes toward Gresham. It leads along the cliffs overlooking the bay."

"The cliffs, eh? I thought as much."

It was beginning to rain. They kept the roadster in sight, a vague, dark shadow bouncing along through the night. They could see the slate-colored waters of Barmet Bay, and the lights of boats riding at anchor. The Hardy boys were tremulous with excitement.

Keith switched out the headlights of their car. If Taffy Marr looked back, he might know that he was being followed. It was more difficult to follow the

slippery road in the darkness now, but they crawled along in the wake of the fugitive. At last they saw that the bobbing headlights of the other car were motionless.

“He’s stopping above the cliffs,” said Frank.

Keith applied the brakes.

“We’ll stop, too, and go forward on foot. We’ll find out what Taffy Marr is doing on the Shore Road at this hour of night!”

## CHAPTER XXII

### DIAMONDS!

THEY got out of the car, in the pouring rain.

Thunder rolled and crashed. The black sky was split by vivid flashes of lightning as the storm approached its height.

With Keith in the lead, gripping a revolver in his hand, they made their way up the wet road. Hallett, the other man, also took a revolver from his pocket.

“Do you think there’ll be trouble?” whispered Frank.

“Maybe,” returned the investigator. “Taffy Marr is a dangerous man. We’re not taking any chances with him. He got away from the police in Chicago a few weeks ago, after a gunfight, and got wounded. I think that’s why he’s been hiding in Bayport. Besides, we may have more than Taffy to settle with.”

“He’s gone to meet some of the others?” asked Joe.

“Probably. He wouldn’t come out here alone at this hour of night to look at the scenery. We may make a real haul out of this.”

“Quiet,” warned Keith, who was ahead.

They went on in silence. At length they reached the other roadster. For a while they remained hidden in the bushes by the roadside until they were satisfied that the car was deserted, then they went on again.

“There’s an old road here,” said Frank. “It leads down the cliffs to the shore.”

“Good!” said Keith. “That’s where he has gone, then.”

He stepped over to the roadster, snapped on his flashlight, and raised the hood. He fumbled at the wiring for a moment, then came back.

“I’ve fixed *that*,” he told them, with satisfaction. “Even if he does give us the slip again, he’ll never drive that car back to Bayport. I disconnected the wiring.”

“What now?” asked Hallett.

“We’ll go down the road.”

With rain teeming from the black sides, they made their way toward the rough road leading down the side of the cliff. Occasionally a flash of lightning illuminated the entire hillside, and then they crouched low in the shelter of the bushes, fearing that they might be seen. On one of these occasions, Frank caught sight of a dark figure standing on the shore below.

“He’s down there, all right,” remarked Keith, who had also seen the man. “Now we’ll wait and see what happens.”

Halfway down the side of the cliff they halted. From the shore they saw the momentary gleam of a flashlight.

“He’s signalling to someone,” suggested Hallett.

From out in the bay they saw an answering gleam. The light flashed once, twice, then went out completely.

A few minutes later there was a flash of lightning that bathed the entire bay in a livid glare. In that light they had a glimpse of a small rowboat swinging inshore on the waves.

“We’ll meet that boat,” said Keith, quietly.

They went down the slippery road, up to their ankles in mud, drenched with rain. Through the storm they heard a faint shout, and then they saw the gleam of light on the shore again. Taffy Marr was guiding the boat toward the beach.

As the boat was borne closer by the rolling waves, they heard the rattle of oar-locks. When they reached the base of the cliff, they crouched in the wet bushes. Thirty feet away they could distinguish the figure of a man among the rocks.

Marr switched on his flashlight again. In its gleam they saw the boat, swept on by the waves, bow high in air. It shot forward, then grated on the shingle. A man sprang out and then before the next wave came in, he and Marr hauled the boat up on the shore.

“All right!” said Keith, and sprang out from the bushes.

He levelled his revolver at the dim figures on the beach.

“Put up your hands!” he shouted.

There was a yell of dismay. Then the darkness was cut by a tongue of

flame. A revolver barked. Keith fired. Hallett pumped two shots over the heads of the men on the beach.

They rushed down onto the shore. Frank caught sight of a man running toward the shelter of the cliffs and he raced in pursuit. Behind him he could hear shouts, another shot, the sounds of a struggle.

The man plunged on into the darkness, but Frank overtook him swiftly. Then the fellow suddenly turned, crouched, and as Frank came up he lashed out with his fists.

Frank dodged the blow, then grappled with the man. They closed together, wrestled to and fro for a moment, and then a clenched fist caught Frank full in the face, sending him sprawling.

He scrambled to his feet. His antagonist turned and fled. Again Frank overtook him, sprang and tackled him, bringing his quarry down.

There, in the pouring rain, they battled furiously. The man fought and kicked. They rolled over and over on the beach, almost toward the water. Frank felt the man's fingers at his throat but he managed to wrench himself free. His opponent lunged suddenly and flung him to one side, tried to scramble to his feet again, but Frank plunged after him.

In the meantime, the others were battling near the boat. A burly smuggler levelled a revolver directly at Keith, but the investigator knocked the weapon from his hand and closed with him. Hallett was rolling on the beach in a desperate struggle with another, while Joe had plunged knee-deep into the water and tackled a man who was trying to haul the boat out into the waves.

Joe managed to pull the fellow away from the boat and they lashed out at one another. Joe was knocked down and for a moment he found himself beneath the water. He emerged, choking and gasping, and following the man up onto the shore, sprang at him again. His antagonist was big and strong. He turned and aimed a blow at Joe that would have knocked him out had it landed, but Joe side-stepped neatly and came in, planting blows to the man's body. The fellow grunted and doubled up with pain.

Keith and his antagonist fell apart and squared away, crouching. Keith raced in. His fist shot out. The other man tried to dodge but he was too late. The fist caught him full on the point of the jaw and he tumbled back, dropping unconscious on the beach.

With one of the enemy out of the way Keith whirled about and saw Joe and the big man wrestling desperately. The big man kicked out and swept Joe's feet from beneath him. Joe tripped and stumbled headlong. Then Keith sprang

in, just as the man swung around. There was a brief exchange of blows. The big fellow crumpled up under the lashing fists, began to whimper with pain. He made only a futile effort to defend himself, and then went down, and lay gasping.

Hallett, in his turn, had an easier time of it. His man was armed with a revolver but Hallett wrenched it from the fellow's grasp, and the smuggler immediately surrendered. He raised his hands above his head.

"I give in!" he growled. "Don't shoot, mister. I give in."

Hallett led his prisoner back to the others. Keith was bending over the two men on the shore. There was a jangle of handcuffs as he manacled their wrists together.

"Where is Frank?" he asked, suddenly.

They heard a faint shout from the darkness. Keith and Joe ran down the shore.

There they found Frank, bruised and bleeding, sitting astride his opponent.

"Boy! What a fight!" exclaimed Frank, happily.

Keith turned the flashlight into the face of Frank's prisoner.

"Taffy Marr!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it's Taffy Marr!" snarled the captive. "And you'd never have caught me if it hadn't been for this brat!"

"Caught at last, eh?" said Keith. He bent down and seized Marr by the collar. "Up on your pins, Taffy! We've been looking for you, my lad. You and your gang won't smuggle any more diamonds for a while."

He hauled Marr to his feet and snapped handcuffs about his wrists.

"I should have known better than to come back to Bayport," muttered Taffy. "One last haul and I would have been able to leave the country for good."

"It was your last, all right," laughed Keith. "It's the last diamond haul you'll attempt for a good many years. But you won't be leaving the country."

They went back toward the boat. There they found Hallett standing guard over the other prisoners. In his hand he held a package wrapped in oilskin.

"I found this on the beach," he explained. "That's the parcel Taffy was waiting for."



There was a muttered oath from Marr. "I guess the jig is up," he confessed, wearily.

Keith ripped open the package. Beneath the oilskin he found a small cardboard box. He removed the cover and there, in the gleam of the flashlight, he saw dozens of sparkling stones!

"Diamonds!" exclaimed Frank.

"Taffy Marr's last haul," said Keith, jubilantly. "This is the evidence that will break up that gang."

"You would never have gotten it, if I had used my head," snarled Taffy. "I thought these confounded boys were suspicious of me. But who would be afraid of a pair of kids?"

"That's where you guessed wrong," remarked Hallett. "You thought you were too smart for them."

Keith turned to one of the other prisoners.

"Did you leave anyone on the boat?"

The man shook his head. "There was only the three of us," he confessed, unhappily. "Marr said he would be waiting here at midnight, and we were to bring the diamonds to him. I'll tell the whole story, mister, if it'll make my sentence any lighter. We brought the diamonds down the coast. We've been bringing them in for the past month, and delivering them to Chris, at the caves up the shore."

"Where is Chris now?"

"Try to find him," snapped Marr.

The other smuggler was eager to ingratiate himself with the government men.

"He's at Gresham. If you'll ask the judge to go light on me, I'll tell you where you can find him and all the rest of the gang."

"You yellow dog!" declared Marr. "Keep your mouth shut and take your medicine like a man."

"I don't see why I should get a long term in prison and see all the others go scot-free," said the smuggler, sullenly. "Us men have done all the hard work, and you and Chris have stayed ashore. You got us into this mess and you're more to blame than any of us."

"You put us on the track of Chris and the rest of the gang," said Keith,

“and we’ll see what we can do toward getting a lighter sentence for you. But, in the meantime, I think you’ll all be safer if you’re locked up in Bayport jail.”

He glanced at his watch.

“It’s exactly midnight,” he said. “A mighty good day’s work, I call it.”

Frank and Joe exchanged glances. They remembered the previous midnights of the adventure, beginning with the stroke of twelve when Joe had been kidnapped from the Morton farm, and they remembered how they had slept out in the park in New York, listening to the clock striking midnight above the roar of the city.

They went back up the hillside. The prisoners were sullen and resigned. Even Taffy Marr realized that his criminal career was at an end and that he faced a penitentiary term for his lawless deeds.

“How you sneaked up on me, I can’t tell,” he growled, as they struggled up the slope through the rain. “What a fool I was to show myself around Bayport again. It ruined the whole game.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to think it over for the next ten years,” said Keith, coldly.

Hallett drove Taffy’s roadster, one of the smugglers beside him. The Hardy boys and the others got into Keith’s car. They started back to Bayport through the rain.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ANOTHER MIDNIGHT

THERE was an informal party at the Morton farm the next night. Chet felt that something had to be done to celebrate the latest triumph of the Hardy boys.

“Besides,” he said, “the gang hasn’t had a chance to hear the whole story of that affair.”

“The papers are full of it,” Frank pointed out to them.

“I know. The newspapers have had columns, telling how the diamond smugglers were captured and how Chris and his friends were rounded up, but we’re all eager to hear the story from you and Joe.”

“If you expect us to make a speech about it, you’re mistaken.”

“We just want to hear the yarn from start to finish.”

So that night, when the Hardy boys and their friends were gathered at the farm, and after a few dances Chet shut off the radio, they all went out onto the veranda.

“We’re all waiting,” he said to Frank. “The whole story, right from the beginning.”

“You were all here when it began. It happened at midnight, you remember, when Joe was kidnapped.”

“We know that Chris kidnapped him because he was afraid Joe had seen the diamonds that day he blundered into him in front of the jewelry store. I suppose he had gone there to turn over a package of diamonds to Taffy Marr.”

“Exactly,” said Joe. “Taffy Marr was in hiding but he was still helping the gang as much as he could. Arnheim, the jeweler, didn’t know that smuggling was going on under his very nose.”

“Come on, Frank,” begged Jerry Gilroy. “Why did the gang operate here in Bayport?”

Frank smiled. “I see I’m in for it. Well then, here goes.”

He told them the story of their adventures in New York, then related how they had met the two government operatives on their way back to Bayport, how they had heard about Taffy Marr, and how the young jeweler's clerk had aroused their suspicions.

“Taffy Marr *had* dyed his hair. That was how he managed to escape being picked up by the local police. They were warned to be on the lookout for a fair-haired fellow, so they never thought about the new jewelry clerk. From what Keith and Hallett tell us, he has been known as the head of one of the biggest smuggling rings in the country. They specialized in diamonds and for a long time they were bringing them into the States by way of Boston and New York. Recently, however, the government learned what was going on and the customs authorities were warned to be on the lookout for Taffy's men.”

“Why weren't they arrested in Boston or New York?” asked Iola Morton.

“Because they learned that the customs people were suspicious. So they took to leaving the regular steamers at Halifax. From there they came down the coast in small fishing boats and brought the diamonds in at some of the little ports. After a while that became too dangerous, because the government men were watching the ports, so they looked around for an easier way. They chose Bayport, because of the little inlets and caves. The fishing boats would come in to Barmet Bay and the smugglers would row in to the caves, meet Chris or some other member of the gang, hand over the diamonds and go away again. Then Chris would bring the diamonds either to Taffy Marr, in Bayport, or to some other men who would see that they were disposed of. That's why he was so frightened when Joe knocked the package from his hand that day we had the quarrel at the automat.”

“What was Chris doing in New York?” asked Biff Hooper.

“He went there to meet some of the men who got rid of the diamonds in the city. He had already met Taffy and one of these fellows at Gresham, when Aunt Gertrude saw them, but they had some argument about the price. Taffy didn't dare go to New York himself, for fear he would be arrested, so he sent Chris up to bargain with these men and get a better price for the diamonds. Chris saw us and managed to give us the slip, so we had to come back to Bayport. From what Taffy Marr has told us since, Chris wasn't successful in his errand, so Taffy decided to run the risk of going to New York himself. He was afraid to go by train, because there are always detectives in the Grand Central station, so he went by airplane. While there he got word that another fishing-boat had gone down the coast and was to land a package of diamonds here.”

“So he had to come back?”

“If he had avoided Bayport, he might have been safe. He didn’t realize we were watching for him, so he took the risk. Fortunately, the government men stopped off in Bayport to see us, and we were able to get them to help us. If they hadn’t been along, I doubt if we could have tackled the gang by ourselves.”

“And after you captured Taffy and the others—?” asked Callie Shaw.

“One of the smugglers became frightened and thought he might get a light sentence if he told all he knew. So he explained how the diamonds were picked up at Halifax and brought down the coast. He also told where Chris and the others could be found, near Gresham. They were living in a deserted farmhouse near the town, where they could easily drive over to the Shore Road and wait in the cave for the boats. Keith and Hallett raided the farmhouse, with some of the Bayport detectives, at about three o’clock this morning and captured Chris and his friends.”

“Chris didn’t protect any of the others,” said Joe, taking up the story. “He was angry at the men in New York, because they beat him down on the price of the diamonds, so he told their names. Then Keith sent a telegram to New York and some city detectives rounded up the rest of the gang.”

“It said in the newspaper that you might get a reward,” remarked Tony Prito.

“There was a handsome reward out for Taffy Marr, after that Chicago affair, when he got wounded,” replied Frank. “Joe and I are entitled to the reward because we gave the government men the tip that led to their arrest.”

“That’ll help the old bank account,” declared Chet.

“It certainly will. Besides, the Jewelers Association had a standing reward for any information that would lead to breaking up the smuggling ring. We’ll collect that, too. All in all, we stand to get two or three thousand dollars out of the affair.”

Chet whistled. “I think I’ll go into the detective business,” he said. “It seems to be profitable.”

“We don’t get rewards every day.”

“Your father will be proud of you when he comes back from the West,” said Callie Shaw.

Joe laughed. “Aunt Gertrude can knock the conceit out of us when we

think we've done something big. She gave us a lecture for being out late last night, and when we told her about helping round up the diamond smugglers, she said that we'd never have known about them if we hadn't gone nosing into affairs that didn't concern us. If she ever knew we had been up in that airplane and had to take to the parachutes she'd have heart failure!"

"I know if I'd been up in the plane with you that's what *I* would have had," declared Chet. "The pilot would have had to push me out. Catch me jumping into space with nothing more than a parachute that *might* open! On second thought, I don't think I'll turn detective after all. It's too dangerous."

"Besides," his sister reminded him gently, "it takes a certain amount of brains."

"As usual," sighed Chet, with mock resignation, "you have the last word. Well, we've heard the story. Now let's dance!"

He and his chums did not know that another story was soon to be in the making. It was to recount some hair-raising adventures "While the Clock Ticked." Chet's only interest now lay in enjoying himself.

He turned on the radio again and for the next hour the Hardy boys and their chums enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Since the next day was Sunday it had been agreed that the party would cease at twelve o'clock.

Eventually the clock struck the hour of midnight.

The Hardy boys looked at one another.

"Remember, Joe, what happened at midnight the last dance we had here?"

"Yes," answered Joe. "And I remember what happened at midnight twenty-four hours ago during the storm when we laid Taffy Marr and his gang by the heels!"

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *What Happened at Midnight* by Franklin W. Dixon (Stratemeyer pseudonym).]