

WHILE THE CLOCK TICKED



FRANKLIN W. DIXON

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While the Clock Ticked

“I’LL TELL MY STORY WHILE THE CLOCK TICKS,”
CACKLED THE MADMAN.

THE HARDY BOYS MYSTERY STORIES

WHILE THE CLOCK
TICKED

By
FRANKLIN W. DIXON

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The Hardy Boys: While the Clock Ticked

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CHAPTER I

A STRANGER IN TROUBLE

JOE HARDY looked out of the second-floor window.

“That man leaving here is certainly excited,” he said to his brother.

“He didn’t stay long,” remarked Frank, coming over to the window. “I heard the door-bell ring just a minute ago. I guess Aunt Gertrude wouldn’t let him in.”

They watched the stranger who strode down the walk. The man seemed greatly agitated. When he reached the pavement he hesitated, looked back at the house, snapped his fingers, stamped his feet; then suddenly turned down High Street toward the river.

He had gone no more than a few paces, however, before he turned back and passed the gate once more. He was an elderly man, plump and very well dressed, with a flushed, clean-shaven face.

“Looks mad about something,” said Joe.

“Maybe Aunt Gertrude gave him a piece of her mind.”

They watched the stranger until he strode rapidly out of sight and then they finished dressing. The boys were preparing for an all-day hike and picnic with some of their chums.

When they were ready they went downstairs.

They found Aunt Gertrude, who was keeping house in the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Hardy, busy knitting. As long as the Hardy boys had known their peppery and dictatorial aunt they had never known her to be without her knitting; nor had they ever known her to exhibit a sweater or a pair of socks as the result of these labors.

“Where are you boys going now?” she snapped, peering at them above her spectacles.

“We’re going on a hike with the fellows, Aunt Gertrude,” replied Frank.

“Hike!” she sniffed. “More trouble, I’ll be bound. Probably get drowned or run over by an automobile.”

“Who was the man, Aunty?” inquired Joe, wanting to change the subject.

“Don’t know! Don’t care!”

“He seemed to be excited.”

“That’s not my look-out. He wanted to see your father.”

“Did you tell him Dad was away?” asked Frank.

Aunt Gertrude glared at them.

“That’s just like a boy. I should say I did *not* tell him your father was away. It isn’t safe to let strangers know you’re alone.”

“He looked harmless,” said Joe.

“You never can tell,” returned Aunt Gertrude. “If I had told him we were alone here he might come back tonight and murder us all in our beds.”

The boys smiled at this blood-curdling idea.

“I guess we could take care of him. You should have let him in, Aunty,” ventured Frank. “Maybe he wanted Dad to solve a mystery for him.”

“What if he did? Your father can’t solve any mysteries when he’s on a vacation, three hundred miles away.”

“Maybe we could have helped him.”

Aunt Gertrude laughed mirthlessly. “The conceit of you!” she exclaimed. “Just because you’ve been lucky enough to round up a few thieves once in a while—and don’t forget that I helped nearly every time—you think you’re ready to step into your father’s shoes.”

At that moment the door-bell rang.

“Dear me!” sighed Aunt Gertrude. “A body can’t have a minute to herself in this house. Just when I sit down to do a little work, either the door-bell rings or you boys come in asking questions.”

The Hardy boys were already in the hall. The moment the door-bell rang the same thought had entered their heads; perhaps the excited stranger had returned.

When they answered the door they found their expectations realized. The plump, well-dressed man stood on the threshold.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, evidently relieved that the ring had not been answered by Aunt Gertrude. “You’re Mr. Hardy’s sons, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Frank. “Can we do anything for you?”

“I’m in great trouble,” said the stranger. “I must get in touch with Mr. Hardy at once.”

“Perhaps you’d better come in and tell us about it,” suggested Joe. “Dad isn’t at home just now.”

The stranger stepped inside and they invited him into the living room. Aunt Gertrude, with one burning look of indignation, rose from her chair, grabbed her knitting and flounced out of the room, muttering wrathfully to herself.

“Isn’t Mr. Hardy in the city?” demanded the visitor.

“He’s away on a vacation.”

The man made an impatient gesture. “I must see him,” he declared. “Expense is no object. Mr. Hardy is the only man who can help me. Can’t you locate him for me and have him come back?”

The boys looked dubious. Their parents were in the Maine woods on a camping trip, far from telephones or telegraph offices. They explained this to their caller. Then Frank said rashly:

“Perhaps, if you tell us something of your difficulty, we can help you ourselves.”

“You!” exclaimed the man incredulously. “Why, you’re just boys.”

“We’ve solved several mysteries,” Joe told him. “We’re trying to be detectives, like our Dad.”

The stranger shook his head. He did not care to entrust his troubles to these youngsters.

“I couldn’t think of it. I want you to try to locate your father as soon as possible, either by telephone or telegraph. My name is Raymond Dalrymple.”

“From Lakeside?” they asked.

“You’ve heard of me?” queried Mr. Dalrymple. He seemed pleased that they recognized his name.

“Indeed we have,” Frank assured him. “You’re a banker, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Dalrymple, fanning himself with his hat. “If you locate your father, let him know that Raymond Dalrymple needs him. At once. It’s very important. As a matter of fact, it’s a question of life and death.”

The boys were impressed, for Mr. Dalrymple’s tone was serious.

“We’ll do our best,” they promised. Frank pointed out that they did not have a great deal of hope, however. Both the boys were curious to know the nature of the banker’s problem but he did not volunteer any information.

“I’ll be back this evening,” he said in his loud, cheerful voice. “Remember now. If you locate him, tell him I said it was a matter of life and death. He *must* help me!”

“Why not try the local police?” suggested Joe.

“Local police!” snorted Mr. Dalrymple. “Bah! Don’t talk to me about the local police. This is a job for a real detective.”

He strode toward the door. Then suddenly, noticing the boys’ outing clothes, he said:

“Going on a hike?”

“Yes,” replied Frank. “We were just starting out. The weather is too fine for staying indoors.”

“Which way do you plan to go?”

“Out on the Shore Road.”

Mr. Dalrymple grunted and appeared to consider something.

“Shore Road, eh?” he said. “You’ll be passing the old Purdy house, then.”

“Probably,” returned Joe. “Why?”

“Never mind. Never mind. Take in the Purdy house if you’re out that way, though. It may interest you, if you like to solve mysteries.”

The boys stared at him. They had never heard of any mystery in connection with the Purdy place.

“Do you mean that?” exclaimed Frank eagerly. “What’s mysterious about it?”

Mr. Dalrymple shook his head.

“I’m not telling all I know,” he said gruffly. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything in the first place. But take my tip and look the place over. Not

that I expect you'll ever get to the bottom of the mystery, though."

He refused to commit himself further and in a few moments he strode off down the front walk. The Hardy boys looked at each other.

"I wonder what's on his mind?" said Joe.

"He didn't seem to think we could help him. As for getting Dad back, it's hopeless. Matter of life and death, he said. I wish I knew what it was all about."

The thought of a mystery of this caliber was enticing. They were disappointed that Mr. Dalrymple had refused to tell them more about it.

"Well, even if he didn't tell us his own troubles, he gave us a tip on another mystery, anyway," said Frank. "Believe me, we won't pass up the Purdy house on our hike today."

Aunt Gertrude came into the room just then.

"What did he want?" she asked.

"You should have stayed, Aunt Gertrude," said Joe. "He's a very nice man. We had quite a chat with him."

"I know that," she snapped. "I asked you a question. What did he want?"

"You should have let him in when he came to the door the first time," said Frank evasively. "He wasn't a robber."

"Never can tell," grumbled Aunt Gertrude. "When you boys are as old as I am, you'll have sense enough to know that you shouldn't let every Tom, Dick and Harry into the house."

"His name wasn't Tom," said Frank.

"And I'm sure it wasn't Dick," chirped Joe.

"Nor Harry," finished Frank.

"I don't care what his name was," said their aunt. "You should be careful about letting strangers into the house."

Frank turned his pockets inside out.

"If he'd been a hold-up man he would have got thirteen cents from me."

Aunt Gertrude left the room in disgust. It was not until she was outside that she became aware of the fact that the boys had not answered her question. She still did not know why the stranger had called.

CHAPTER II

THE PURDY PLACE

CHET MORTON and Biff Hooper, chums of the Hardy boys, called for them within a few minutes of the banker's departure and the lads set out on their hike, Aunt Gertrude's gloomy predictions and tart advice ringing in their ears.

"Don't go in swimming. Don't get run over. Don't talk to strangers. Don't be late."

And so on. Aunt Gertrude could never quite cure herself of the habit of treating her nephews as if they were a pair of feeble-minded infants, quite unfit to be allowed out without a guardian.

The boys did not tell Chet and Biff about the visit of Mr. Dalrymple, and their chums had no suspicion that there was any motive behind the suggestion that they follow the Shore Road route in their hike.

"Suits me," said Chet, who was a plump, cheerful boy, good-natured and always ready to agree to any plan. "We'll get just as much fresh air and sunshine out on the Shore Road as we will back by the airport."

"You're not thinking about fresh air and sunshine," chaffed Biff Hooper. "You mean, the lunch will taste just as good out on the Shore Road as it will anywhere else."

This was a friendly dig at Chet's fondness for food but he took it in the right spirit, beamed complacently, and said that he hoped his appetite would never fail him to such an extent that he was particular where lunch was served.

"It doesn't matter to me where I eat," he said, as they strolled along the road on the outskirts of Bayport. "I can enjoy my lunch anywhere—out on the Shore Road, out on the east road, in a swamp or in a tree or on a raft—just so long as I eat. By the way you fellows talk you'd think I was greedy, or something. It isn't that. I'm just healthy, and a growing boy needs food _____"

“Look out!” yelled Frank suddenly.

Chet’s monologue on the subject of food broke off abruptly and he leaped wildly for the side of the road.

A heavy touring car, with the curtains up, came careening around the curve.

It was travelling at a terrific speed. It took the curve on two wheels, straightened out, and shot toward the boys with a roar.

If it had not been for Frank’s warning cry they would have been run down. As it was they had to jump for their lives, scattering wildly to opposite sides of the road. Chet landed sprawling in a ditch, with the breath knocked out of him.

It was all over in a moment. The touring car disappeared around the next curve in a cloud of dust. They could hear the roar of its exhaust as it sped toward Bayport.

The Hardy boys picked themselves up from the embankment and looked across the road at Chet and Biff, who were tangled up in a heap.

“Good night!” exclaimed Frank. “That was a narrow squeak.”

“We’d have been run down like a flock of hens if you hadn’t shouted,” gasped Joe. “A man who drives a car like that ought to be put in jail.”

Chet, who had already picked himself up and was brushing off his clothes, expressed himself on the subject of the reckless driver with no little eloquence and bitterness.

“Now that,” he declared, shaking his fist at the cloud of dust that was the only evidence of the car’s passing, “is what comes of letting a lunatic take the wheel of an automobile. Four promising young lives could have been snuffed out for all he cared. He wouldn’t even have come back to take us to the undertaker’s.”

“I think,” muttered Biff, rubbing his bruises, “that I broke the record for the standing broad jump. Look, I was standing here and I landed there. It beats the jump I made at the school athletic meet last year.”

“Never even sounded his horn!” declared Joe hotly.

“All I hope,” added Frank, “is that he passes a good, hard-boiled speed cop within the next two blocks.”

The boys warmly agreed that jail was much too good for the driver who had so nearly run them down; but as there was nothing they could do about it, the car having vanished before they could take the number, they dusted their garments and went on their way again.

Chet entertained them with his views on the proper punishment for a demon driver, the most dreadful items of which consisted of a diet of stale bread and water for two months and a forcible study of algebra and geometry for twelve hours a day under pain of no dinner at all.

While the boys are trudging out on the Shore Road toward the outskirts of the city, let us introduce them more definitely to readers who have not already made their acquaintance in other books of this series.

Frank and Joe Hardy were the sons of Fenton Hardy, a noted American detective who had won such fame while with the New York Police Department, that he had retired to go into private practice for himself.

He had moved to Bayport, a pleasant little city on Barnet Bay, where he had quickly enhanced his reputation by handling many difficult and delicate criminal cases for the government, large corporations and private individuals. The study of his home on High Street was a treasure-house of disguises and records and souvenirs of the problems he had solved.

Frank and Joe Hardy, his sons, were not yet out of High School, but they had already determined to follow in the footsteps of their famous father. Mr. and Mrs. Hardy were eager that their sons should enter professions, such as law or medicine, but the boys meant to be detectives.

Already they had shown their ability. In the first volume of this series, "The Hardy Boys: The Tower Treasure," they had solved a mystery that had puzzled Bayport for days and which had baffled the city police. In "What Happened at Midnight," the preceding volume of this series, the Hardy Boys went through many thrilling adventures, in the course of which Joe was kidnapped, before they finally rounded up a gang of jewel thieves.

Frank's suggestion to Mr. Dalrymple, therefore, that they be allowed to try their hand at solving his difficulty was not as absurd as it had seemed to the banker. When he hinted at a mystery surrounding the old Purdy place on the Shore Road, he could not have given the information to anyone who would have appreciated it more than the Hardy boys.

They reached the Purdy Estate within a few minutes. The roof of the old house could just be seen above the trees, but the grounds themselves were enclosed by a high stone wall.

“Let’s take a look around the Purdy place,” Frank suggested innocently.

“Nothing to see there,” returned Biff. “It’s been closed up ever since Jason Purdy died.”

“Then we won’t need to be afraid of being chased off the grounds,” Joe pointed out. “Look what happened when we investigated that deserted house on the cliff. We ran into a real bang-up mystery that time.”

“You won’t find a mystery in every deserted house near Bayport,” said Chet, “but I suppose we might as well look around. It seems to me that Jason Purdy had an orchard. We might find some apples.”

This was so characteristic of Chet that the other boys chuckled. It occurred to Frank that if the Purdy place was closed up they might find the gate locked; but they were surprised and delighted to find the huge iron gate ajar, and when they ventured up the roadway they came upon a uniformed figure standing beside a motorcycle under a tree.

“Motorcycle cop!” said Frank. “I wonder what brought him here?”

The policeman, a broad-shouldered man with a pleasant face, was mopping his brow as the boys approached.

“See anything of a big touring car with the curtains down?” he demanded, as they approached.

“I should say we did!” Chet informed him. “If we hadn’t jumped like a bunch of grasshoppers we wouldn’t be here now. Travelling about two hundred miles an hour that car was, and if——”

“You met him?” exclaimed the officer. “That’s just my luck. Gave me the slip. When I saw this gate open, I thought the car had gone in here.”

“We didn’t exactly meet him,” grinned Chet. “I was just going to say ‘Here comes a car’ when I heard Biff saying, ‘Which way did it go?’ We didn’t exactly meet him. He just sort of happened, like a flash of lightning.”

“Why were you chasing the car?” asked Frank.

“River thieves,” said the policeman briefly. “At least, I think they were river thieves. When I saw the car running along with drawn curtains I got suspicious and pulled up alongside to question them, but the driver stepped on the gas and gave me the slip.”

“Not much chance of catching them now,” said Joe. “Maybe the Bayport police will trip them up.”

“Let’s hope so,” returned the officer. “I might as well get back on my beat.”

“What do you know about the Purdy place?” asked Frank.

The man shrugged.

“Nothing much, except that it’s been closed up since Purdy died. And yet, I wonder who left that gate open? I’ve never known that gate to be unlocked in the last three months.”

“Maybe there’s someone around. Do you mind if we explore?”

“It’s none of my business,” said the officer, trundling his motorcycle away from the tree. “I’m not the watchman.”

With that he sped away.

Chet Morton looked at his watch.

“We could eat now,” he said hopefully. “There’s a nice place beneath these trees.”

“We’ll explore first and eat afterward,” Frank decided.

They found little of interest about the Purdy Estate. The grass was long, weeds were thick and the grounds neglected. The big stone house was locked up, and the boys, of course, made no attempt to enter. On the cinder path leading to the front of the house, however, Frank discovered something that interested him.

It was a fresh footprint.

A few minutes later, when he examined the front door, he noticed something else. The lock had become slightly rusty from disuse, but there were a few gleaming scratches that told him a key had been inserted in the lock quite recently.

“Perhaps it was only the caretaker,” he said to himself. However, Mr. Dalrymple’s hint that there was some mystery connected with the Purdy place made such trifles as the footprint and the scratched lock take on greater significance.

“What do you think of the place?” he said to Joe quietly.

“Just an abandoned house, as far as I can see,” returned his brother.

Frank was not inclined to take this matter-of-fact view. The open gate, the footprint and the scratched lock were clues that indicated that the place

had been entered not long before. Perhaps there was someone in the house at that very moment.

“I wonder,” he said.

CHAPTER III

MR. DALRYMPLE RETURNS

THE HARDY boys would willingly have spent more time investigating the Purdy place, but Chet and Biff were beginning to show signs of curiosity and impatience.

“I don’t see why you’re so interested in this dump,” grumbled Chet. “It’s just an empty house. Let’s get on with our hike. I don’t mind telling you that I’m beginning to feel faint with hunger.”

“You’re always that way,” returned Joe unsympathetically. “Come on, then. Let’s go!”

The boys left the Purdy place and resumed their journey down the Shore Road. Every little while Chet would see an inviting patch of grass beneath the trees, and this invariably brought from him the suggestion that it would be an ideal place to stop for lunch.

In each case he was overruled.

“There’s a better place farther on,” Frank would say. “We want to picnic beneath the trees, near a running stream.”

They walked on and on beneath the hot sun.

“Now there is a fine place,” Chet said at last as he halted and mopped his brow. He was pointing to a shady grove not far from the road.

Biff winked at the others.

“Lots of shade,” he remarked, “but the grass is all trampled down. I don’t like to picnic where there isn’t nice grass.”

Chet sighed, and they went on. A few minutes later he scrambled over a fence and announced that he had discovered the perfect picnic spot.

“Lovely green grass and plenty of trees. Come on, fellows. Let’s eat.”

“How about water?” asked Joe cheerfully. “Is there a nice stream?”

Chet went back to investigate. He returned dolefully with the news that there was no stream.

“Then,” said Frank firmly, “we’ll have to go on until we find one.”

“Gosh!” groaned Chet as he shouldered his pack again. “You fellows are mighty particular.”

Half an hour later he scrambled into a nearby field in order to follow the course of a brook, and in a little while his whoops of joy told them that another picnic place had been discovered.

“*Now* we can eat,” he shouted gleefully as he returned. “There’s a lovely meadow and a beautiful stream of cold running water.”

The others, in the meantime, had held a brief conference and agreed that it was too early for lunch.

“How about trees?” asked Biff.

“There aren’t any trees,” Chet answered, “but I can’t see that it makes any difference——”

“It does to us,” they told him in chorus. “We can’t eat unless we sit in the shade.”

Chet’s jaw dropped.

“I never—never in all my born days,” he spluttered, “heard of such a particular crowd. You don’t have trees in the dining room at home, do you?”

“That’s different,” said Joe. “We’re on a hike now.”

“And what a hike!” muttered Chet as he shouldered the pack once more.

The boys could scarcely keep their faces straight for the next hour as Chet went diving over fences and loping across fields in search of a picnic ground that would suit the fancy of his chums in every particular.

If he located trees, they found fault with the grass. If he found trees and grass ideal, they demanded a brook. Once, when he found grass, trees and brook together, Joe pretended to see a snake and they all solemnly refused to picnic on any ground infested with reptiles.

Finally, after Chet had been chased off one very promising location by a bulldog and off another by an elderly ram that emerged from behind a bush, the others took mercy on him and placidly left the road to choose a picnic-ground on a meadow above the cliffs overlooking Barmet Bay.

“You’re not going to picnic here, are you?” demanded Chet incredulously.

“Of course. What’s the matter with the place?” they asked him.

“But there aren’t any trees. And no stream.”

“Ah, but the scenery,” chuckled Frank. “Think of the scenery. Besides, we’re hungry now and that makes all the difference.”

“To think that I hunted all over creation,” spluttered Chet, “for a picnic-ground with trees, grass and a stream all thrown in, and now you park in an open field——”

Emotion overcame him; he was helpless with chagrin; then the others could restrain their mirth no longer and rolled over in the grass, doubled up in paroxysms of laughter. Chet, however, was good-natured and soon joined in the laugh against himself, particularly when the lunch-basket was opened and the food appeared.

Eventually, when the afternoon was nearly over, they decided to return home. On the way back Frank and Joe dropped a little distance behind the others and quietly discussed the Purdy house and their visitor of that morning.

“I don’t know what to make of it,” Frank said. “He hinted that there was a mystery about that house, but I failed to see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Except the open gate.”

“And a footprint and a scratch on the lock. Someone has been around the house, but that may have been only the caretaker. I wonder who owns the Purdy place now?”

“Probably the estate hasn’t been divided up yet.”

“I’d give anything to know why Mr. Dalrymple dropped us that hint.”

“Maybe the Purdy place has something to do with the case he wants Dad to handle,” suggested Joe.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. I wish he’d confide in us. It must be a real humdinger of a mystery. He thinks no one but Dad can handle it for him.”

“Well,” said Joe, “Dad is up in the Maine woods and I’m sure our telegram won’t reach him. Let’s hope Mr. Dalrymple gives us a trial, anyway.”

When the Hardy boys reached their home, they saw a handsome car parked at the curb.

“Looks as if you have a millionaire calling on you,” said Chet, admiring the big limousine. “Ask him to take us all for a ride.”

Through the minds of the Hardy boys flashed one thought; Mr. Dalrymple had returned!

In their eagerness to learn more about the mystery they hurriedly bade their chums goodbye and ran into the house. As they entered the hall they could hear Aunt Gertrude’s strident voice:

“I told Fenton when he went away on this vacation,” she was declaring. “I told him to leave word where I could reach him. ‘Now you mark my words, Fenton Hardy!’ I said, ‘something will happen. Anything might happen. The house might burn down. The boys might get lost. Young rascals, always getting into hot water.’”

“You’re sure there wasn’t any telegram from Mr. Hardy this afternoon?” asked Dalrymple, mildly.

“Positive! Although with the wretched telegraph service we have in this town, there might have been a message for us delivered somewhere else, for all I know,” returned the good lady testily. “But why are you so eager to see Mr. Hardy, sir? Now I’m in charge of this house and if there is anything I can do, you needn’t be afraid——”

“Hello, Aunt Gertrude!” said the boys. Their aunt scowled at them, evidently not relishing the interruption.

Mr. Dalrymple, on the other hand, seemed more than relieved. He shook hands with them.

“Glad to see you, boys!” he boomed heartily. “I came back to see if you were able to get in touch with your father.”

“We wired him after you left,” Frank said, “but if Aunt Gertrude says there hasn’t been any answer——”

“If I say there hasn’t been any answer,” exclaimed Aunt Gertrude, “you can depend upon it, there *hasn’t* been one. Although, as I said, you never know when a telegram will go to the wrong address.”

Mr. Dalrymple cleared his throat and looked helplessly at Aunt Gertrude, who seemed bent on remaining where she was and taking more than a full part in the conversation.

Joe sniffed.

“Seems to me I smell something burning!”

Their aunt uttered an ear-splitting shriek.

“My cake!” she screamed. “I left it in the oven and forgot about it.”

She went storming into the kitchen, and in a few moments they could hear her admonishing the cook.

“Let’s go into Dad’s office,” suggested Frank quickly.

Mr. Dalrymple followed readily enough and when they were safely in the study, with the door closed, he gave a sigh of relief.

“Your aunt has been trying to get me to tell her something about the mystery,” he said, looking at the door as if he feared that Aunt Gertrude might have her ear applied to the key-hole. “She has—um—such a persuasive way with her that I might easily have let the information slip if you hadn’t come along.”

“Well,” said Frank, “I’m afraid we can’t locate Dad. So, unless you care to take up our offer, you will have to get someone else.”

Mr. Dalrymple looked at them earnestly.

“When you suggested that you could handle the case yourselves,” he told them, “I thought the idea was absurd. I shouldn’t think of entrusting this affair to a couple of inexperienced boys.”

The lads looked gloomy.

“On the other hand,” went on Mr. Dalrymple, and they brightened up immediately, “on the other hand, I have talked about you today to several very prominent citizens of Bayport and they tell me you really have a reputation as detectives.”

The Hardy boys tried to look modest, but in reality they were bursting with pride.

“As a matter of fact,” their visitor continued, “I was told that if I failed to obtain the services of your father, I couldn’t do better than hand the case over to you boys. I confess, I doubted it. However, as there is need for haste, I have decided to tell you my secret and let you help me out.”

Frank and Joe were trembling with eagerness.

“We’ll do the very best we can, sir!” said Frank. “If we find it’s too much for us, we won’t waste your time. We’ll let you know, right away.”

“That’s all I ask.” Mr. Dalrymple settled back in his chair. “And now, if you’re to work on the case, I may as well tell you my story.”

CHAPTER IV

THE SECRET ROOM

“TODAY,” he began, “I suggested that you take a look at the old Purdy Estate. Did you go there?”

“We did,” Frank told him, “but we didn’t notice anything unusual. Except that the gate was open——”

“What’s that?” said Mr. Dalrymple sharply. “The gate was open?”

“Yes.”

“I locked it last night and I haven’t been back there since. Well—that’s just another part of the mystery.”

“There was a footprint on the driveway and the lock of the front door was scratched,” Frank added.

“Someone must have paid a visit in my absence,” observed Mr. Dalrymple thoughtfully. “Well, I have known all along—but no matter, I’m getting ahead of the story. We’ll discuss the footprint and the open gate later. I’m glad you told me about them.”

His red face was serious as he continued:

“Mr. Jason Purdy, now dead, was a wealthy and eccentric man, as you know. When his estate was settled, I bought the house and grounds.”

“You are the owner!” the boys exclaimed.

Mr. Dalrymple nodded.

“I am the owner. I bought the place as a speculation, hoping to sell it later on at a higher price than the one I paid. However, when I began an inspection of the house, I made an interesting discovery.

“It was a secret room. This room was built into the middle of the house. It’s like a bank vault, fireproof, with insulated walls and no windows. The air is provided by hidden ventilators. There is only one door, made of heavy steel, and it is closed with a time lock, just as in a bank.”

“What would Jason Purdy want with such a room?” exclaimed Joe in amazement.

“He was an eccentric man, as you know. Also, he was something of a miser. He used to keep his bonds and his money in this secret room, and according to his servant he used to shut himself up in this hidden chamber for hours at a time, gloating over his wealth, clipping coupons, hatching out new schemes for making money.”

“He certainly was eccentric,” Frank agreed.

“When I looked over the house and found this room,” proceeded Mr. Dalrymple, “I became interested in it myself. I had no intention of occupying the house but this particular room appealed to me. I am a busy man, and when I leave the bank and return to my house at Lakeside, business matters often follow me. I’m continually being called to the telephone or bothered by people who want to talk over business matters. Then, sometimes I have to handle propositions that demand a great deal of hard thinking and close figuring, propositions that demand many hours of solitary work. So as soon as I saw that secret room, I told myself that it would make an ideal office when I wanted to be alone. It would be a nice, quiet place where I could come to think out problems or catch up with my work. So I decided to move in.”

“You occupied the room?” said Frank.

“I moved in a desk, a typewriter and several files of my private papers. When I came out I would set the time lock, and then no one, not even myself, could get in until the appointed hour.”

The boys glanced at each other. Mr. Dalrymple’s story was strange enough, but they failed to see where the mystery came in.

“Yet in spite of that,” declared their visitor impressively, “several times, of late, I found that my room had been entered.”

“Yet you say there are no windows and the door has a time lock?” exclaimed Joe.

“Exactly. Still, in spite of that, the room has been entered.”

“Was the time lock broken?” asked Frank.

“It had not been operated. There was no sign that anyone had tampered with it. Someone had gained access to the vault. What was worse, there was a threat of death.”

“Death!”

Mr. Dalrymple took two papers from his pocketbook and handed them to the boys.

In silence they examined the smudgy, crumpled sheets.

On one was written in a scrawled, ill-formed handwriting:

“You must leave this house forever or death will await you.”

“That note,” said Mr. Dalrymple, “was left on the floor of my secret room. It was the first. The other note I found last night.”

The second message was as follows:

“Death while the clock ticks.”

Frank and Joe turned the strange notes over and examined them in bewilderment.

“There are two mysteries,” said Dalrymple. “What do the messages mean? And how were they placed where they were? Because each of those messages was placed *in the middle of the secret room!*”

“Also, who placed them there, and why?” queried Frank.

“You understand now why I’m so eager to put this case in capable hands,” Mr. Dalrymple said. “If this enemy, whoever he is, has been clever enough to locate my secret room and find his way inside, he is certainly clever enough and unscrupulous enough to carry out his threats.”

“Perhaps it’s only a practical joke,” Joe suggested.

“Nothing of the kind,” retorted Mr. Dalrymple sharply. “A practical joker wouldn’t go to all that trouble. It’s serious. A question of life and death.”

Frank considered the matter for a while.

“Have you any enemies?” he asked finally.

Mr. Dalrymple shook his head.

“None that I know of. That’s what makes it so difficult. There is no one I can suspect.”

“Is there a chimney in the secret room? How is it heated in winter?” Joe asked.

“It is heated by the hot water system, but there is also a fireplace.”

“Then the intruder might have come down the chimney to leave the messages.”

“That’s impossible,” said Mr. Dalrymple. “The flue is too small, and besides, there are cross-bars of iron in it. Jason Purdy built that room for his own use and he always had a fear of thieves. He was taking no chances on having anyone enter that particular room.”

The boys were mystified.

The story seemed incredible, and yet they could not doubt Mr. Dalrymple’s sincerity.

“You’re sure the time lock was set on each occasion?” Frank asked.

“Positive. When I left the room at night the time-clock was set to open at four o’clock the following afternoon. On each occasion I was at the house previous to four o’clock and had to wait a few minutes before I could enter the room. You needn’t look for obvious explanations. If there were any I’d have found them and I wouldn’t be here now. The thing is a mystery and it is utterly beyond me.”

“Who else knew about the secret room?” Joe inquired.

“Jason Purdy’s servant, who swears he has never confided in anyone, and the architect who planned the building. The architect is dead and the plans were destroyed after the house was completed.”

“How about the workmen?”

“The men who constructed the secret room were foreigners, brought from a distant point, and when the room was built they were sent away.”

There seemed to be no loophole that would afford an explanation.

“This,” said Frank, “is about the most puzzling affair we’ve ever been called upon to tackle. However, if you’d like us to work on it until Dad comes back, we’ll do our best to help.”

Mr. Dalrymple extended his hand to the Hardy boys.

“We’ll shake on that. Do what you can, and if you haven’t found the solution of the mystery by the time your father returns, we’ll turn the case over to him. Is that agreeable?”

“That suits us.”

“There’ll be a handsome fee in it for you if you solve the affair,” Mr. Dalrymple assured them. “I don’t mind telling you that these sinister

messages have upset me. It isn't pleasant to think that an enemy has designs on your life."

A few minutes later he went away. The lads were thoughtful when they sat down to supper. Aunt Gertrude was curious.

"What did he want?" she asked.

"Just a matter of business," returned Frank evasively.

"Very well. If you don't care to tell me, you don't have to. But why he should confide in a pair of boys instead of a grown woman who might be able to help, is more than I can see," the good lady sniffed.

The boys wondered what Aunt Gertrude would do if she were confronted with the mystery of a secret room unaccountably entered by an enemy leaving threatening messages, but they said nothing.

"It's always the way," their aunt went on. "A woman never gets any credit for brains. I've helped you boys on two or three mysteries already, but do I get any credit? I do not."

"This isn't really our mystery," Joe told her. "We're just going to carry on until Dad comes back. Then it will be turned over to him if we haven't cleared it up."

Aunt Gertrude laughed.

"It will be turned over to him, I have no doubt. By that time you'll have made such a mess of it, that he'll have twice as much work to do. Mr. Dalrymple would have been farther ahead if he had waited."

"You don't think much of our abilities, do you, Aunt?" asked Frank.

Her face softened, for she was really fond of her nephews and privately considered them much cleverer than any other boys.

"Oh, you're all right," she said grudgingly, "but you have had a great deal of luck."

After supper when the lads went up to their room, Frank said:

"I hope we have a lot of luck tonight. I have an idea we're going to need it."

"What's the plan?" asked Joe eagerly.

"Plan? Why, we're going out to the old Purdy place. It's up to us to have this queer a flair all straightened out before Dad gets back to Bayport."

“Do you think he’ll mind?”

“Why should he mind? Perhaps Mr. Dalrymple will turn the case over to someone else if we don’t get busy at once. Think of it! Here we’ve been waiting for a real live mystery to come our way and now one has fallen right into our laps. We’re not going to pass it up, are we?”

“I should say not,” declared Joe. “It’s a dandy case. We’ll show Aunt Gertrude that we’re not quite as dumb as she thinks we are.”

“Oh, she doesn’t think we’re dumb. It’s just her way. She thinks it’s her duty to take the wind out of our sails every once in a while in case we get too conceited.”

“I’ll say she does it. I’ll bet that if we do clear up this affair of the Purdy place she’ll take all the credit anyway.”

Frank laughed.

“We should worry about that. We were solving mysteries long before Aunt Gertrude came on the scene. She’s a good sort. The house would be mighty dull without her.”

CHAPTER V

FOLLOWED

AFTER eight o'clock that night the Hardy boys got their roadster out of the garage. Darkness had not yet fallen, and as the boys did not want to reach the Purdy Estate while it was still light they decided to drive around the city for about an hour.

They had scarcely reached the corner before they met one of the most disreputable roadsters that had ever bumped its rickety way down the streets of Bayport.

Jerry Gilroy, Tony Prito, and Phil Cohen, three of their chums, were squeezed into the battered hulk, as happy as if the car had come directly from the Automobile Show.

"Just going to call for you," yelled Jerry as the roadster limped to a halt with a squeal of brakes. "We're all going up to Chet Morton's to a party. Come along."

The Hardy boys looked dubiously at each other. The party would probably interfere with their proposed visit to the Purdy place, but they could not very well refuse Jerry.

"We—we've something else on just now," faltered Joe.

"What's more important than a party?" asked Phil Cohen. "Don't back down, now. Chet said we were to call for you."

"It wasn't Chet," reminded Tony Prito. "It was Iola Morton. She said to be sure to bring Joe Hardy with us. Didn't she?"

Joe blushed. His admiration for Iola Morton, Chet's sister, was no secret to the others.

"And here," shouted Jerry, "is Callie Shaw walking down the street. Hey, Callie! Yoo-hoo. Callie!"

Callie Shaw, a pretty, brown-eyed girl of sixteen, turned in surprise when she heard the joyous shouts. She waved to them and came over to the car.

“Hello, Frank,” she greeted. “Hello, boys! What’s all the uproar about?”

“Party!” explained Jerry. “We’re all going up to Morton’s for a party. Frank was told to bring you along but he’s too shy to ask. Climb into his car.”

Callie’s eyes danced mischievously as she looked at Frank.

“Maybe some of the other boys will ask me,” she said demurely.

“Sure!” they roared in chorus. “Climb in, Callie! We’ll take you to the party. We get all your dances, don’t we?”

Frank quickly swung the door open.

“I didn’t hear about the party until this minute, Callie,” he said. “I’d have been camping on your doorstep at six o’clock if I had known.”

“I was going on an errand for my aunt,” she explained as she got into the car amid the cheers of the boys. “Drop me off at Mrs. Nelson’s place, if you don’t mind. I really should go home and get dressed up.”

They started off. Callie’s errand was soon completed and they overtook Jerry’s brokendown roadster within a few blocks. The two cars went on down the main street of Bayport. Finally, on a street car track, Jerry’s roadster stopped dead.

“That *would* happen!” he muttered, as he got out to crank it.

Frank halted his car to render advice. An oncoming street car stopped with a loud clanging of its bell. Motorists emerging from the intersecting street honked their horns.

Constable Riley, pride of the Bayport Police Force, came over.

“Now then,” he said, “get this car off the tracks.”

“Why, officer,” chirped Phil Cohen, “we only stopped to admire the pretty buildings.”

“Come on, now, come on. You’re holdin’ up traffic,” said Riley.

“Hey!” yelled a fat man at the wheel of an expensive sedan. “Take that wreck off the street and throw it in the ash-can.”

The Hardy boys chuckled. Jerry was perspiring as he vainly tried to crank the car. It suddenly back-fired, and he went sprawling in the middle of the road.

Another street car came along. More bells clanged. The traffic jam was growing worse. Constable Riley was fuming. He leaned against the back of the car and pushed with all his might.

Suddenly the roadster shot forward like a startled jack rabbit.

Jerry scrambled out of the way. Constable Riley, taken entirely by surprise, fell flat in the middle of the road. Tony Prito tumbled over the wheel and yelled with alarm:

“I can’t drive!” he shrieked. “I can’t drive! Somebody take the wheel!”

Choking with laughter, the Hardy boys followed. The old roadster shot erratically toward the curb, and an old gentleman laden with parcels made a wild leap for safety, dropping the bundles as he went.

Tony and Phil were struggling at the wheel. The roadster shot to the other side of the street and just missed a fruit vendor who was trying to cross the road. What with the clanging of street car gongs, the honking of horns, the imprecations of Constable Riley, who stood shaking his fist at them; the lamentations of the old gentleman who was trying to pick up the parcels, and the shouts of the fruit vendor, the uproar was indescribable.

Phil Cohen finally got the car under control just as it was showing signs of an irresistible impulse to climb a telephone pole. Jerry Gilroy ran up panting and resumed his place at the wheel.

“I guess we gave the old town a bit of excitement tonight,” he remarked, as the roadster jolted noisily on its way again.

They arrived at the Morton farm on the outskirts of Bayport within a short time, and there they found that other boys and girls from Bayport High had gathered for the impromptu party.

Joe was dancing with Iola Morton when he felt a touch on his arm. Frank and Callie were just dancing by.

“Meet me on the veranda as soon as this dance is over.”

Joe nodded.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Iola. “You aren’t thinking of going, are you?”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to,” said Joe. “We have some business to attend to.”

Iola pouted.

“Can’t it wait?”

“That all depends upon Frank.”

When Joe met Frank on the veranda a few minutes later it was apparent that Frank had no intention of letting the business wait.

“We must get out of here,” Frank said. “After all, we promised to do our best for Mr. Dalrymple and if we let this evening go past it’s a whole evening lost. It’s dark now so I think we’d better slip away. Perhaps we’ll be able to come back before the party is over, if we don’t run into anything exciting.”

The boys quietly made their escape from the party, although they did not like to leave the fun. Chet Morton was clowning as usual. Garbed in a rug for a skirt and holding an umbrella over his head he was walking a chalk-line across the floor in imitation of a tight-rope walker. The Hardy boys could hear the roars of laughter that greeted Chet’s imitation as they made off into the darkness.

“Business before pleasure,” said Frank as they drove off in the car.

They passed through Bayport again and were on their way toward the Shore Road, when Joe said quietly:

“Take a look at that car behind us.”

Frank glanced back.

He saw a touring car, about a block in the rear, cruising slowly along.

“What about it?”

“I noticed that same car behind us when we left Chet’s place.”

“Do you mean you think they’re following us?”

“I don’t know. Drive right around this block and we’ll make sure.”

Frank drove slowly around the block. When they came out on the road again they once more glanced backward.

The touring car was still trailing in their wake.

“I don’t like this,” Frank said frowning. “Do you suppose Mr. Dalrymple told anyone we were working on the case?”

“It isn’t to his own interest to tell anyone. Look! I have a plan. There’s a dark stretch of road a little way ahead. We’ll park in a lane and have a look at this car.”

The roadster shot forward as Frank pressed on the accelerator. They soon lost the other car, and when they reached the lane Frank backed the roadster off the highway and switched out the lights.

There they waited!

Soon the other car appeared. It was still traveling slowly and the driver evidently had no suspicion of the roadster parked in the lane.

In the lights from the instrument board the Hardy boys had a glimpse of the occupants.

Frank nudged his brother.

“Chief Collig!” he said.

“And Detective Smuff!”

The other car passed on.

“Well, what do you know about that?”

Chief Collig was head of the Bayport Police Department. Detective Smuff, stolid, thick-headed but industrious, was his right-hand man.

“Following us!” exclaimed Frank indignantly.

“I can’t understand it. Mr. Dalrymple must have put them to work on the case, too.”

“They’re trailing along to learn what we’re doing. Then, if we have any luck, I suppose they’ll step in and grab the credit.”

“Not if we know it,” declared Joe firmly. “We don’t want it gummed up. We’ll leave the car right here and go on foot. The Purdy place isn’t far away.”

“Just a minute,” said Frank suddenly. “I think that car is coming back.”

The boys waited.

In a few seconds they caught the gleam of approaching headlights.

“Pull your cap down over your eyes,” Joe suggested.

The boys did so, and crouched in the seat of the roadster as the other car drew near.

Frank peered out from beneath the brim of his hat.

The other car was travelling very slowly. For a moment the headlights rested full on the roadster.

Then, just as the car went by, he saw Detective Smuff leaning far out and scanning them closely.

“Hope you’ll know us next time,” said Joe.

The police car went past. The boys looked back. The car had come to a stop.

“We’ll fool them,” decided Frank. “We’ll stay right where we are until they move on again.”

Once in a while they glanced back only to see the red tail-light of the police car.

“We can be just as patient as they can be,” said Joe.

After a while Chief Collig and Smuff evidently decided that there was no use in remaining on guard any longer. Their car started up and finally disappeared around the curve.

“Now!” said Frank. “They may be back any minute. It’s probably only a trick. Let’s go!”

CHAPTER VI

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

THE HARDY boys left the car, scrambled over the fence, and proceeded across the field on foot.

They were not far from the Purdy Estate, and they had no intention of travelling by road and risking discovery by Chief Collig and his assistant.

“Now, why should they be following us unless Dalrymple told them we’ve agreed to handle the case?” asked Frank. “I can’t understand it at all.”

“Maybe Dalrymple didn’t tell them. For all we know they may not have any idea of what’s in the wind. Perhaps they know something is bothering Mr. Dalrymple and that he came to see us today. Maybe they’re following us to learn what it’s all about.”

“I think you’ve hit the nail on the head, Joe,” said Frank. “I’ll bet that’s the idea.”

There were no stars in the sky and the night was dark. They crossed the field, finally coming to the high wall about the Purdy place.

“We can’t *jump* over it, that’s certain,” said Joe.

“We won’t need to. There are plenty of trees. They’ve grown higher since Jason Purdy’s time. He used to keep the trees cut and place broken bottles on top of the wall so that thieves couldn’t get over.”

“Nice man.”

There was a low rumble of thunder. Frank glanced up at the sky.

“I think we’re going to have a storm.”

“That won’t stop us. Here’s a likely-looking tree. Give me a boost.”

Frank boosted Joe up the tree. In a moment he had scrambled out along a limb and gained the top of the wall.

“All serene!” he announced. “No glass. No broken bottles. No spikes.”

Frank clambered up the trunk and soon joined his brother on the wall. They dropped down into a tangle of undergrowth at the base.

Suddenly there was a vivid flash of lightning followed by a deafening clap of thunder. A few drops of rain spattered down.

“This storm may drive Collig and Detective Smuff to cover,” chuckled Frank. “They don’t like bad weather.”

The lightning flash had revealed the dark mass of the Purdy house not far distant among the trees.

“We’ll go easy, anyway. They might be prowling around.”

They moved cautiously across the grounds. More raindrops pelted down, and soon the overhanging leaves rustled under the impact of a light shower.

“We’ll be drenched,” muttered Joe.

“We can take cover on the porch.”

They drew closer to the house. The rumble of thunder became constant. Lightning flickered about them.

Frank suddenly gripped Joe’s arm.

“What’s that?” he whispered.

They crouched motionless in the shelter of a clump of bushes.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I did. It sounded like a footstep.”

They listened.

Far off to their right they heard a distinct crackling sound. It was like the snapping of a twig beneath a human foot.

“I hear it now,” whispered Joe.

They listened. They thought they could hear someone moving across the grass.

Abruptly the lightning flashed again. It illuminated the old Purdy mansion and the weed-grown lawn in a bluish glare. In that livid light they distinctly saw a shadowy figure ascending the steps of the house.

“Dalrymple!” whispered Frank tensely.

“Are you sure?”

“It looked like him. I got only a glimpse.”

“Why should he come here at this hour?” asked Joe. “He doesn’t have to sneak up in the dark.”

As they watched they saw a brief flash of light from the veranda. It was like the gleam of a tiny searchlight. It disappeared.

The boys crept closer.

Through one of the windows of the house they saw the flashlight again, flitting about.

“That’s a queer way for a man to act in his own house,” Frank said quietly.

“Perhaps it isn’t Dalrymple at all.”

“It looked very much like him. I saw his face fairly clearly. He was dressed like Mr. Dalrymple and he was of the same build.”

The moving light vanished, then reappeared at another window. Once more it was blotted out only to shine again from a window in the upper part of the house.

“Maybe it’s the man who has been leaving the messages,” Joe whispered in excitement. “Let’s rush in and grab him.”

“We must be careful. Try to see what he’s up to first.”

They crossed the driveway, running swiftly and gained the deep shadows beside the house. There was another lightning flash and a long, low rumble of thunder.

The boys were directly beneath a large bay window. This window was suddenly brilliantly illuminated. Someone had switched on the electric lights in the room above.

The abrupt appearance of the light startled the boys. Then Frank whispered:

“It must be Mr. Dalrymple, all right. Perhaps the power was off when he came in and it has just been turned on.”

“Let’s look and see who is in the room.”

Cautiously the boys raised themselves toward the window and peered over the ledge.

Beyond the glass they could see a dining room, luxuriously furnished, with panelled walls. Lights gleamed from an ornate chandelier above the table.

There was no one in the room.

Frank and Joe were puzzled.

“Who turned on the lights, then?” muttered Joe.

Over by the door they could see a huge grandfather’s clock. Behind the glass front the pendulum swung steadily back and forth. They could even hear the ticking of the clock.

The strange message that Mr. Dalrymple had found in the secret room flashed through Frank’s mind:

“Death while the clock ticks.”

They stared at the solemnly-swinging pendulum in fascination.

Suddenly the clock and the room disappeared! Utter darkness prevailed. The light had gone out again.

In the same instant the whole building was illuminated by a vivid flash of lightning; there was a violent thunderclap that seemed to shake the old house; the heavens opened and the storm broke with torrents of rain. It poured from the black skies in a terrific downpour. Lightning stabbed the firmament again and again; thunder crashed and rolled. In the flickering light the boys could see the trees along the driveway, tossing and swaying in the wind.

Then they heard a wild scream!

It was a terrible, blood-chilling yell of fear. The boys turned white, frightened faces toward each other as the next lightning flash rendered the scene as bright as day.

“Someone hurt!” gasped Frank.

“They’ve killed him!”

The scream came from somewhere in front of the old mansion. They listened but could hear no further sound—nothing but the howling of the wind, the threshing of the trees, and the slashing of the rain.

Frank leaped to his feet and sprang toward the driveway. Joe followed. They raced forward to the front of the house.

Another lightning flash revealed a dark shape flitting across the lawn.

“After him!” Frank shouted.

The boys bounded in pursuit. Darkness again engulfed them and they could no longer see the fugitive. Frank tripped over a bush and went sprawling in the grass, but he picked himself up in an instant and ran on.

They could hear the panting gasps of the man ahead of them. Frank collided with him and grabbed the fellow’s coat.

The man twisted and struggled to break free but Frank clung to him grimly. Then Joe came up. The lightning flashed again.

The glare revealed a frightened, familiar face.

“Hurd Applegate!” exclaimed the boys.

They knew Hurd Applegate well. He was a queer old fellow, one of Bayport’s most eccentric characters, a stamp collector. The boys had once helped him to recover a very valuable stamp collection which had been stolen from him.

What was Hurd Applegate doing here on this wild night?

In spite of his eccentricities they knew him to be the soul of honesty. Whatever had brought him to the Purdy Estate at this hour, the motive at least was not a criminal one. They were sure of that.

The moment Hurd Applegate recognized them he ceased to struggle.

“The Hardy boys!” he gasped. He was evidently greatly excited. “What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?” they countered.

“Boys, get me home quick!” exclaimed Applegate. “Get me out of here. I’ve had a terrible experience.”

“What happened?”

“Can’t tell you—terrible—terrible experience,” he muttered incoherently as he hastened off across the lawn again, the boys at his heels. “Shouldn’t have come here—valuable—very valuable—stamps—dreadful——”

They could make nothing of his excited stammerings. His nerves were completely shaken, whatever had happened.

“Our car is down the road,” said Frank quickly. “We’ll take you home.”

“Good—good! Must get home at once—wish I’d never come—hurry
_____”

He broke into a run again, as if eager to put the Purdy mansion far behind him. They struck out onto the driveway and ran toward the road. The gate, they found, was open as it had been that afternoon.

“Quick!” said Hurd Applegate. “Get me home out of this.”

They hurried down the wet, streaming road and at last they came to the lane where they had parked the roadster. Hurd Applegate scrambled in and flung himself into the seat.

“Home,” he cried. “Home—at once——”

“What happened?” asked Frank.

“Can’t tell you,” gasped Applegate. “Get me home at once! It’s terrible!”

“If you’ll tell us what happened, we’ll go back and see what we can do.”

Applegate was alarmed by the very suggestion.

“No! No!” he said. “Don’t go back. Don’t go back there. Oh, my stamps. My precious stamps. I don’t know what to do. Walked right out of the house—never suspected him for a minute—and then when I ran out—got trace of him—that terrible scream—take me home, boys—don’t go back to that terrible house.”

Unwillingly Frank got into the car.

“I don’t know what to make of this,” he said. “Come on, Joe. I guess we’d better go now.”

Joe wedged himself in beside Hurd Applegate, who was still trembling and shivering. He had evidently received a bad scare. Yet he steadfastly refused to explain why he had been on the grounds of the Purdy place, or what had happened at the house.

“Guess we’ll have to wait until he calms down a bit,” thought Frank, as he turned the car about and drove back into Bayport.

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

OF all the people in Bayport, Hurd Applegate was the last man the Hardy boys would have expected to find running away from the old Purdy mansion that night.

He was an elderly man, very quiet and mild-mannered, and his eccentricities were harmless. To find him involved in the mystery of the Purdy house was a shock that left the boys bewildered.

It was plain that something dreadful had happened. But the old man could give no coherent account of what had occurred.

“Maybe someone was murdered,” said Joe, as the car skidded down the slippery road.

“I can hear that awful scream yet.”

“What happened, Mr. Applegate? What did you see?”

Hurd Applegate covered his face.

“Don’t ask me. Can’t tell you anything—get me home—terrible—wish I hadn’t—those stamps—valuable——”

They could get nothing more out of him.

“I think we’d better report this to the police in Bayport,” said Joe. “I think someone has been killed.”

“Dalrymple.”

“You’re sure you saw him going into the house?”

“Positive. And he didn’t come out.”

Rain streamed down in the glare of the headlights. The storm was at its height. The thunder rolled and crashed. Wild sheets of lightning lit up the road and the storm-tossed bay.

Frank suddenly leaned forward and peered into the mirror.

“There’s another car behind us,” he said.

“It couldn’t have come from the Purdy place. There wasn’t any car in the driveway.”

“I noticed that,” Frank remarked. “I wonder how Dalrymple reached the place.”

The headlights of the pursuing car drew closer, and when Frank turned down an avenue that would bring them to Hurd Applegate’s house, the other car swung in behind.

“Do you think we are being followed?” asked Joe.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. Nothing can surprise me tonight.”

“Home! Home at last!” said Hurd Applegate with a shuddering sigh of relief as the car to a stop in front of his house. “You’ve done me a great service, boys—I won’t soon forget it——”

“I wish you could tell us what happened at the Purdy house,” Frank suggested.

Applegate shook his head.

“No! Not now—some other time—don’t want to talk about it,” he muttered. He hurried across the pavement, up the walk, and ran into the house, slamming the door as if fiends were at his heels.

“He got a bad scare, that’s certain,” said Joe, as the boys went on their way.

Frank looked back.

The car that had been trailing them from the Shore Road had not gone by. When they stopped in front of Hurd Applegate’s house it had come to a halt about half a block behind. Now it was speeding up again, still following them.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “Why should we be followed?”

“All the more reason why we should report to the police,” declared Joe.

“We’ll go around to the house and telephone from there.”

“I hope nothing serious happened to Mr. Dalrymple. We should have gone into the house to look around.”

Frank shook his head.

“Hurd Applegate was in the house, and he got out in a hurry. We mightn’t have got out at all. We’ll tell Chief Collig and have him investigate the whole business. I’m afraid it’s serious. Mr. Dalrymple was threatened with death, we saw him go into the house, we heard that awful scream. It looks bad.”

The car shot out into High Street and sped toward the Hardy home. A moment later the other car came around the corner, following steadily in their wake.

“After we telephone,” said Frank grimly, “we’ll attend to *that* little matter. If the car is still hanging around when we come out again, we’ll ask the driver what he means by trailing us like this.”

As they approached their home they were surprised to see a large automobile parked by the curb.

“Why, that looks like Mr. Dalrymple’s car!” exclaimed Joe in astonishment.

“It is! And there’s someone just going up on the veranda.”

The roadster came to a stop. The boys scrambled out and ran up the walk. As they reached the veranda they saw a man about to ring the bell.

He turned and they saw his face.

“Mr. Dalrymple!” gasped Frank.

“Hello, boys,” said the banker. “Where have you been? I was just calling to see you.”

The boys stared at him in amazement. He was quite calm and cool. Apparently nothing unusual had happened to him that evening. His presence there mystified them.

“But—but,” stammered Joe, “we thought—how did you get here so soon?”

“How did I get here so soon?” exclaimed Mr. Dalrymple. “You weren’t expecting me, were you?”

“No,” spluttered Joe, “but—well—we didn’t expect to find you here at all.”

Mr. Dalrymple realized that something was amiss.

“What’s the trouble, boys?” he said, looking at them curiously.

“Weren’t you at the Purdy place tonight?” asked Frank.

“No. I haven’t been there. Why do you ask? You look as if you had seen a ghost.”

“We—we thought it was your ghost,” said Joe, still spluttering with confusion and excitement. “We thought you’d been murdered.”

“Murdered!” Mr. Dalrymple laughed heartily. “I’m very much alive, as you see.” Then his expression became serious. “Were you out at the house tonight? What has happened?” he demanded quickly.

“We’d better go inside,” replied Frank as he opened the door. “We’ll talk it over. I can’t understand this. I distinctly saw you going into the Purdy place tonight.”

“No,” answered Mr. Dalrymple, shaking his head, “you didn’t see *me*. I’ve been at my home in Lakeside all evening. After my talk with you some hours ago, I went back home and then I remembered some matters I had overlooked, so I decided to come back. The storm broke just as I was driving in from Lakeside.”

“You weren’t at the Purdy place?”

“Never went near it.”

“Well,” sighed Frank, “this beats anything I ever heard.”

As he closed the door after ushering Mr. Dalrymple into the hall, Frank noticed something that added to the mystery of the situation.

A car had drawn up on the other side of the street. It was, he felt certain, the car that had been following them from the Shore Road.

They heard Aunt Gertrude in the upper hall, beginning her lecture before she was even in sight.

“Now where,” demanded that lady, “have you boys been tonight? You leave me alone in this house in the middle of the worst storm that I can remember, until I’m a nervous wreck.”

They heard her slippers on the stairs.

“Aunty—,” began Frank, intending to warn her that there was a stranger with them.

“Don’t you dare talk back to me!” snapped Aunt Gertrude. “I’m coming down and I intend to give you two young rascals a piece of my mind. The very idea! Gallivanting around in a terrible storm like this and leaving me

alone to worry about you. Why, the house might have been struck by lightning! Anything might have happened. Let me tell you, young men——”

Aunt Gertrude came into view around the bend in the staircase.

Her large feet were encased in a pair of slippers that looked “like young suit-cases,” as Joe put it later, and above the slippers appeared the tops of a pair of woolen socks. She wore a voluminous nightgown over which she had thrown a faded bathrobe. Her hair was in curl-papers and she had taken out her false teeth for the night.

Aunt Gertrude was, indeed, a sight!

Mr. Dalrymple looked modestly away.

“Aunty——” began Frank again.

“I don’t want to hear a word out of you. Not a word——”

Then Aunt Gertrude saw Mr. Dalrymple.

“Merciful goodness!” she screeched. “Why didn’t you tell me? A man in the house!”

With a whoop of surprise and embarrassment, she bounded back up the stairs like a very agile mountain goat. Mr. Dalrymple reached for his hat.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have intruded at this time of night,” he said apologetically. “I seem to have taken your aunt by surprise.”

“I’ll say you did,” snickered Joe. “She’ll think twice before she comes downstairs to give as a scolding another time. Come in and sit down, Mr. Dalrymple.”

Upstairs they heard Aunt Gertrude’s door slam. Then there was a sharp click, indicating that the chagrined maiden lady, mortified beyond all measure, was locking herself in.

They brought Mr. Dalrymple into the living room and offered him a chair.

“Now,” said the banker, “I’m eager to hear what has happened. I gather that you went out to the house tonight and thought you saw me there.”

“If you say you weren’t there,” returned Joe, “then we must have been mistaken.”

“You were. But tell me about it.”

“We thought you had been murdered,” Frank explained. “We remembered the threats that have been made against you, and when we heard the scream——”

“A scream? You heard a scream?”

“There was someone in the house. We saw him go up the steps during the storm. Then the lights went on. After we heard the scream we saw Mr. Applegate running across the lawn——”

“Hold on! Hold on!” pleaded Mr. Dalrymple. “You’re going too fast for me. How did you happen to be at the house in the first place? Who is this Applegate? I never heard of him. Start at the beginning and tell me the whole story.”

“Well,” said Frank, “after you left us tonight, we decided to lose no time in getting to work, so we planned to visit the Purdy house as soon as it got dark——”

Just then they heard heavy footsteps on the veranda.

The door-bell rang.

The boys looked at each other in surprise.

“Now who can that be?” exclaimed Frank.

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER VISITOR

FRANK went to the door.

When he opened it he was surprised to find himself confronted by Chief Collig. Lurking in the background was Detective Smuff, looking as important and red-faced as ever.

“Good evening, Chief,” greeted Frank. “What can I do for you?”

Chief Collig stepped inside. His stolid assistant followed.

“We’d like a few words with you, Hardy,” said the chief. “Little matter we’d like to have you explain.”

“We’re on even terms then, Chief,” returned Frank. “There’s something Joe and I would like to have you explain, too. Come into the living room.”

Collig and Smuff exchanged glances. When they went into the living room and saw Mr. Dalrymple there, they blinked in surprise and doffed their hats respectfully.

“Good evening, officers,” said Mr. Dalrymple. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Why, no trouble at all, sir—yet,” added Chief Collig significantly. “We just dropped in to ask the boys a few questions.”

“Go ahead,” invited Joe cheerfully. “And then we’ll ask *you* some.”

“Well,” began the chief, clearing his throat, “it may be that we’re on the wrong track—but being as we always try to do our duty, and if everything *is* all right then you mustn’t mind being asked questions—in short, as I was about to say—it isn’t the sort of night one expects to see young fellows tearing around in a car—what I mean to ask——”

He stumbled helplessly.

“Exactly!” said Detective Smuff in a profound voice, looking sternly at the boys.

“I can’t make head nor tail of it,” snapped Mr. Dalrymple. “Speak up, Chief! What on earth are you trying to say?”

“I’m asking these lads,” said Collig with dignity, “what they were doing out on the Shore Road in the storm tonight?”

“That,” said Frank, “happens to be our business. We’d like to know what you meant by following us?”

“They followed you?” demanded Dalrymple, glaring at Smuff and the chief. “What did you mean by it? Speak up! What did you mean by it, eh?”

The shoe was now on the other foot. The chief coughed dubiously. “Matter of duty,” he mumbled at last.

“We were out for a drive in our car,” said Frank. “There’s no law against that, is there? We weren’t speeding. Yet you followed us out on the Shore Road and then followed us back again.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Chief Collig, hastily, “we didn’t know it was you.”

“Who did you think it was?”

“River thieves!” blurted Detective Smuff.

“You think these boys are river thieves?” snorted Mr. Dalrymple. “Ridiculous! Absurd!”

“Oh, no,” said Chief Collig. “We don’t think that at all. The fact is, we made a mistake——”

“You certainly did.”

“We were out the Shore Road and we came on a suspicious car travelling toward Bayport, so we gave chase. We lost sight of the car, but we thought we had picked up the trail again when we saw a speeding roadster ahead of us just as we passed the old Purdy place. So we followed, and then when we saw the car stop in front of Mr. Applegate’s place, we got a good look at it _____”

“And found you had been following the wrong car,” grinned Frank.

Detective Smuff scratched his head gloomily.

“I think we oughta have an explanation why you boys were out on the Shore Road tonight, anyway,” he said.

“And I think you’re entitled to no explanation at all,” said Mr. Dalrymple tartly. “If the boys were driving on the Shore Road, that’s their business. If you made a mistake and followed them instead of the river thieves, that’s your affair.”

Mr. Dalrymple’s attitude toward the police, and the fact that Chief Collig evidently had no suspicion of any unusual happenings at the Purdy mansion that night, convinced the boys that the banker had not turned the mystery over to the Bayport Police Department. They resolved to keep their own counsel and give no explanation for their presence on the Shore Road.

However, the chief did not press the matter. Cowed by Mr. Dalrymple’s brusque manner, Collig and his detective soon withdrew while they still had some vestige of dignity left.

“No offence meant,” said Smuff meekly.

“None taken,” Joe assured him.

Mr. Dalrymple was not so easily appeased.

“Use a little common sense next time,” he advised. “You’ve interrupted us for no reason at all.”

The officers of the law retired, abashed. They had not really suspected the Hardy boys of being engaged in lawless undertakings, but they were curious as to the errand that had taken the lads out on the Shore Road that night and had hoped to get the secret from them. Mr. Dalrymple, however, was in no mood to confide in the Bayport police.

“I think,” said Mr. Dalrymple, when Chief Collig and Detective Smuff had gone, “that you’d better drop the case until your father gets back.”

The boys were disappointed.

“Why, we’ve just started,” said Joe.

“I know, but this is getting a little too deep. I don’t know this man Applegate and it seems to me he owes an explanation of his presence at the house tonight. Since he didn’t offer one of his own accord, it will be a delicate matter to go and ask for one. Perhaps your father will be able to handle it.”

“Mr. Applegate isn’t crooked, I’m sure of that,” said Frank. “I think he was too excited to tell us anything. Probably he’ll come around tomorrow and explain.”

“I’d like to know what really happened at the house tonight,” said Joe. “I think we ought to go back there and find out.”

“Not tonight,” said Mr. Dalrymple with finality. “We’ll go around in the morning. I don’t feel easy in my mind asking you boys to continue the case. I’m afraid it is too dangerous.”

At that moment the door-bell rang again.

“Regular parade of visitors tonight,” said Joe, as he got up to answer the bell. “I hope Chief Collig and Smuff haven’t come back.”

When he opened the door a fresh surprise awaited him, Hurd Applegate stood on the threshold.

“Good evening, Joe,” he said hurriedly. “I’ve come to talk over this affair with you and Frank. It occurred to me that you might put a wrong construction on the matter and I wanted to straighten everything out.”

“Come in, Mr. Applegate. Frank and I have been wondering what it was all about.”

He ushered the visitor into the living room. The moment Mr. Applegate saw Mr. Dalrymple his eyes widened. He gasped, and pointed a trembling finger at the banker.

“You!” he exclaimed. “What does this mean?”

Mr. Dalrymple was astonished.

“What’s that?” he barked. “Why are you pointing at me?”

Mr. Applegate’s face was crimson with wrath.

“You are the man who stole my stamps!” he shouted.

Dalrymple sprang to his feet.

“Stole your stamps! Why—of all the infernal impudence! What do you mean, sir? What do you mean by accusing me of stealing stamps?”

Frank stepped between the angry men.

“There must be some misunderstanding here,” he said. “Mr. Applegate, will you sit down and talk this over? We can vouch for Mr. Dalrymple. He’s a banker from Lakeside. If anyone stole your stamps, it certainly wasn’t he.”

“Well, it looks mighty like him,” muttered Applegate as he sat down.

Frank had a harder time calming Mr. Dalrymple. The banker was apoplectic with rage.

“Stamps!” he snorted. “Accusing me of stealing stamps! Such impudence! I never—in all my life—never heard of such a thing—stamps _____”

Fuming, he resumed his seat.

“Now,” said Frank, “tell us your story, Mr. Applegate. When were your stamps stolen? Why do you think Mr. Dalrymple is the thief?”

“Never saw the man in my life!” declared Dalrymple angrily.

“Didn’t you come to my house tonight and tell me you wanted to buy some rare stamps?” demanded Applegate, looking suspiciously at the banker.

“I did not! I’m not interested in stamps. Wouldn’t take a car load of them as a gift. I never saw you before. Don’t know you from Adam. Don’t even know where you live.”

Mr. Applegate was mystified.

“Well, then,” he said, “I suppose I owe you an apology, sir, but believe me, the man looked very much like you. He came to my house tonight and asked to see some of my rarest stamps. I showed him some specimens, stamps worth hundreds of dollars, and he seemed interested. Then I left the room to get some more stamps from my collection upstairs. When I returned _____”

“Your visitor was gone,” said Frank.

“So were my stamps,” said Applegate sadly.

“What did you do then?”

“I ran outside and made inquiries along the street. One of the neighbors had seen the man hurrying away. I traced him as far as the old Purdy Estate and caught sight of him going up the drive. Then he went into the house. I waited a while and then the lights went on, so I went up into the house after him.”

Hurd Applegate shuddered.

“I was no sooner in the house than I heard a terrible scream. I was badly frightened, I tell you. I ran out and hurried across the grounds. Someone came running after me and I thought I was going to be murdered. It was only you boys. I was too badly shaken up to tell you what had happened.”

“You say this man looked like me?” asked Dalrymple.

“He was your living image.”

“Well this,” he said, “beats anything I ever heard. I must have a double. And hiding in the Purdy place. My own house.”

“Your house!” exclaimed Applegate. “Well if you own the Purdy place, it *must* have been you that I followed.”

Mr. Dalrymple and the Hardy boys were finally able to convince Hurd Applegate that he was mistaken. This, instead of clearing up the mystery, only served to deepen it. When Applegate departed some time later, bewailing the loss of his precious stamps, Mr. Dalrymple had given up all thought of suspending action on the case until Mr. Hardy’s return.

“We must get to the bottom of this,” he declared. “Why, my reputation will be ruined if I have a double going around stealing people’s stamps. Goodness knows what else he’s up to. And hiding in my own house! We’ll catch that rascal and send him to jail for fifty years.”

As the hour was late, Mr. Dalrymple accepted the boys’ invitation to remain at the Hardy home over night, on the understanding that they would go out to the Purdy place with him first thing in the morning.

As Frank and Joe were preparing for bed a short time later, Frank voiced the thought that was in his brother’s mind when he remarked:

“Somehow, that theory that Mr. Dalrymple has a double seems too neat to believe. I wonder if he is as innocent as he claims.”

He immediately repented of this theory when he considered the circumstances.

“Why should Mr. Dalrymple steal anybody’s stamps?” said Joe. “He’s a rich man. Then, too, he asked us to take this case over. It isn’t likely that he’d be looking for the services of a detective if he were a stamp-thief. He’d want to shy away from detectives as much as possible.”

“That’s right,” Frank agreed. “I guess he’s honest. Perhaps it’s Hurd Applegate who is mistaken. He’s such a queer old codger that he may have imagined the whole thing. Perhaps he just mislaid the stamps and thought they were stolen.”

“Maybe! But by the fuss he made, you’d think he’d come within an inch of losing every thing he owns.”

“A thief could rob Mr. Applegate right to his shoe-laces,” chuckled Frank as he jumped into bed, “and he’d still be happy as long as he had his

stamps.”

CHAPTER IX

THE LAST WARNING

HOWEVER improbable the theory of the double might seem, the boys could scarcely bring themselves to suspect their own client of lying to them. On second thought Frank recalled Mr. Dalrymple's wrath when Hurd Applegate accused him of stealing stamps, and his insistence that he had never seen Applegate before. No, Mr. Dalrymple would scarcely be engaging detectives to investigate the mystery of the Purdy place if he himself had crooked schemes on foot.

Aunt Gertrude did not show herself at the breakfast table next morning, preferring to lurk in her room until the visitor was safely out of the house.

"What!" she said later on in the day when the boys mentioned this fact. "Show myself to a man who had seen me in curl-papers? Never!"

Mr. Dalrymple and the Hardy boys, therefore, were able to discuss the case freely while they had breakfast.

"We'll go out to the house immediately," said Mr. Dalrymple. "Then we'll search the place from cellar to garret. If this double of mine was in the place last night, he must have left some clues behind."

"We'll look that secret room over," said Frank. "I'd like to see if we can't find an explanation of the messages that were placed there."

As soon as breakfast was over, they got into Mr. Dalrymple's car and drove out toward the Purdy Estate.

"Too bad it rained so heavily last night," said Frank to his brother. "There won't be any footprints left. They'll be all washed out by now."

"We'll find our clues inside the house, if we find any."

They had their first surprise when they came to the outer gate. It had been wide open the previous night, but now it was securely locked, as if it had never been disturbed.

"I thought you said the gate was open?" remarked Mr. Dalrymple.

“It was,” stammered Joe. “It was open yesterday afternoon and it was open last night. I don’t understand it.”

“It just means, I suppose, that our caller has departed,” observed Dalrymple gruffly, as he got out of his car and unlocked the iron gate again. “Very considerate of him to close the gate behind him, I’m sure.”

As they went up the driveway, Frank and Joe kept a sharp look-out for footprints or any other marks in the gravel but everything had been washed clear by the rain of the previous night.

Everything was in perfect order. There were no marks on the veranda. The front door was locked. When they went into the house and looked around, they discovered no sign of any intruders.

“Looks as if there hasn’t been a human being around here for weeks,” commented Frank, as he looked about the great, gloomy hall.

The house was well built, if somewhat old-fashioned, and the rooms were large. Mr. Dalrymple showed them around the ground floor and into the living room, where they again saw the big grandfather’s clock they had glimpsed through the windows the night before.

“The clock’s still going,” said Joe.

Mr. Dalrymple was gazing at the slowly-swinging pendulum in amazement.

“Now how did that happen?” he said.

The Hardy boys looked at him, puzzled.

“The clock!” said Dalrymple. “I haven’t wound up that clock since I bought the house. I never bothered to set it. Now it’s going.”

“I guess you can thank the mysterious visitor for that,” Frank remarked.

“The clock was going when we looked through the window last night,” Joe pointed out. “He didn’t have time to start it from the time we saw him going into the house.”

Mr. Dalrymple shook his head in open bewilderment.

“Too many strange things going on around here to suit me,” he grumbled. “Well, I think I’ll take a look at the secret room. If that clock is right, it will be only a few minutes before the time-clock will operate. You boys wait here.”

Frank and Joe looked crestfallen. They had anticipated being allowed to see the secret room. Mr. Dalrymple laughed.

“Oh, I’m not going to make you stay downstairs,” he said. “It’s just that I don’t want you to run into danger. If everything is all right, I’ll tell you to come up.”

He left them in the dining room and went back into the outer hall, then up the big staircase to the next floor. Frank and Joe could hear him tramping about upstairs.

Tick-tock-tick-tock!

The old grandfather’s clock in the dining room slowly and solemnly ticked away the seconds. They watched the heavy brass pendulum as it swung to and fro.

“That ticking gets on my nerves,” said Joe.

“Same here. It seems extra loud in this quiet house.”

“The more we learn about this case,” Joe said after a while, “the less I can figure any of it out. Now why should a person break into a house and take the trouble to set the clock?”

“Personally, I think we’re dealing with a lunatic,” observed Frank.

“Mighty smart lunatic, if you ask me.”

Just then they heard Mr. Dalrymple calling to them from upstairs.

“Come on up!” he shouted. “Everything seems to be all right.”

The boys lost no time in leaving the dining room and making their way to the next landing. There they found Mr. Dalrymple standing before a section of wall that did not differ from the rest of the hall panelling except for the time lock mechanism that had been revealed by drawing aside a small painting.

“That’s mighty clever!” exclaimed Frank admiringly. “The picture hides the time lock and no one would ever know there was any kind of an opening. Even yet, I can’t see where the door begins and the wall ends.”

“It’s clever,” said Mr. Dalrymple, “but evidently it isn’t clever enough to prevent this mysterious visitor from getting in and leaving threatening messages for me.”

They stood there in the dusty, gloomy old hall. In silence they listened to the busy ticking of the time lock. The atmosphere of the house was

oppressive. The boys imagined they could hear whisperings—the stealthy tread of unseen feet—strange noises in distant parts of the building.

“Just a moment now,” said Mr. Dalrymple quietly.

The time-clock reached the appointed hour. Mr. Dalrymple spun the dial and worked the combination.

Then part of the wall swung outward.

The secret room was revealed!

It was a strange, shadowy chamber. As the boys peered through the opening they could see a desk, a number of book-cases and filing cabinets, and a huge fireplace.

“This,” said Mr. Dalrymple, as he pressed a hidden electric switch, “is where Jason Purdy came to count his gold.”

The secret room sprang into light. In the same instant Dalrymple gave a shout of consternation.

“Another message!”

In the middle of the floor the Hardy boys could see an alarm clock, ticking steadily, to which was attached a sheet of paper.

Frank stepped forward and picked it up. On the paper were written the words:

DEATH WHILE THE CLOCK TICKS

“THIS IS THE LAST WARNING.”

Beneath the message were a number of stamps. They were so unusual in appearance that he knew they must be rare.

“Hurd Applegate’s stamps!” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER X

CHET IS CURIOUS

“THIS beats me!” declared Mr. Dalrymple. “How in the world could these things be left here? It’s a mystery, all right.”

He studied the strange message. “Death while the clock ticks, eh? Well, they can’t frighten me.”

If the Hardy boys had ever doubted Mr. Dalrymple, they were now completely convinced of his honesty and sincerity. He was quite as bewildered as they were by the message in the room and the discovery of the stamps.

“Has anything been disturbed?” asked Frank.

Mr. Dalrymple went over to his desk and looked among his private papers.

“Nothing,” he announced. “That’s the odd part of it. Someone has evidently been coming into this secret room regularly and yet I have never been robbed.”

Frank took off his coat.

“This is where Joe and I get to work,” he said with determination. “If someone is able to get into this room, we ought to be able to learn how it’s done. Not by the door, that’s certain. There must be some other entrance.”

He went over to the fireplace, got down on hands and knees, peered into the grate and then looked up the chimney.

“It’s barred,” said Dalrymple.

“More than that,” remarked Frank, turning away, “the chimney is so small that a child couldn’t get through.”

He and Joe then commenced a careful investigation of the room. They tapped the walls, listening for any indication of an opening beyond. They took measurements of the room as compared with the outer hall and the other rooms on the same floor, in the hope that they might discover some

discrepancy caused by a secret passage back of the vault. All measurements checked accurately with the width of the wall.

“I can’t understand it,” said Frank at last. “There isn’t any passage. No one could get down the chimney. The door is protected by a time lock. Yet someone left an alarm clock and that message here.”

“It’s too much for me,” confessed Mr. Dalrymple. “As far as I’m concerned, I think I’ll stay away from my secret room until this mystery is cleared up.” He looked at the message again. “Death while the clock ticks. Might have been written by a lunatic.”

“Our problem,” said Joe, “is to find the man who stole Hurd Applegate’s stamps. It looks very much as if he is the man who left the message.”

“We’re not sure,” remarked his brother, “that those are the stamps that were stolen from Mr. Applegate. We’ll find out.”

“I think we’d better let the matter rest for a few days,” decided Dalrymple. “I’m inclined to wait until your father comes back.”

They left the secret room and Dalrymple carefully set the time lock again. “Not that it seems to be of much use,” he observed. “We’ll bring those stamps to Mr. Applegate and see what he has to say about them.”

Mr. Dalrymple locked up the house and they drove on to Hurd Applegate’s residence. They found the old stamp collector in his study, ruefully inspecting a number of sheets of stamps and mourning his loss.

“Have you learned anything?” he asked hopefully. “Have you found my stamps?”

Frank gave him the stamps, which he had carefully removed from the mysterious warning.

“Are these yours?”

Hurd Applegate glanced at them and shook his head.

“No, not mine,” he replied. “They’re rare stamps, just the same. Where did you get them?”

The boys were surprised and disappointed. They had jumped to the natural conclusion that the stamps were those that had been stolen from Hurd Applegate’s collection. His denial of this presented a fresh problem. Where did the stamps come from? Why had they been attached to the message?

“They’re not yours?” exclaimed Joe.

“I’d recognize them quickly enough if they were,” returned Applegate. “I have several of these specimens in my collection. No, the stamps that were stolen from me are much more valuable than these.”

Although Hurd Applegate was curious, they did not enlighten him further, and went away.

“We’ll let the matter drop for a few days,” said Dalrymple, when they left the house. “I must get back to Lakeside. After all, no harm has been done yet.”

Thus the matter rested; but when Mr. Dalrymple dropped them off at their home a few minutes later the boys were disgruntled by their lack of progress. The mystery, instead of clearing up, had deepened.

“We simply must solve this before Dad comes back,” declared Frank. “I hate to admit that we’re beaten. If we lose out this time, it will be the first case that has ever stumped us, Joe.”

Suddenly they heard sounds of laughter from the barn back of their home. The barn had been fitted out as a gymnasium and was a favorite meeting place for the Hardy boys and their chums.

They found Biff Hooper and Jerry Gilroy engaged in a friendly sparring match with the boxing gloves, while Tony Prito and Phil Cohen were engaged in some complicated maneuvers on the parallel bars. Chet Morton, as was characteristic of him, was not risking the loss of any weight in violent exercise. He sat on the window-sill, munching an apple, and giving advice to the others.

“Well!” he shouted, as the Hardy boys came in. “Look who’s here! Gentlemen, as I live, the Hardy boys are back. Dear me! How you have changed, my lads. After all these years!”

“Yes,” said Phil Cohen, hanging by his heels and twisting around to get a better look at them, “we’ve been wondering about you two. Been on a trip around the world, or something?”

“I caught a glimpse of them at the party last night,” said Chet. “It was only a glimpse. Presto! I looked around—and lo, they had vanished.”

Biff and Jerry called a truce and came over.

“Do you know,” said Jerry, “I have a hunch that these bright chums of ours are up to their necks in another mystery. They’re holding out on us. We

had to fairly kidnap them to get them to the party at all, and they ducked out the first chance they got.”

“Holding out on us, eh?” said Chet. “That isn’t fair. After all we’ve done for them, too. Think of the time I got kidnapped just so they could solve a mystery! And now they are holding out on us.”

“Come on,” said Biff, squaring off and flicking Frank’s nose with his glove, “what’s up? Let us in on it.”

The Hardy boys refused to admit anything. They were under promise of secrecy to Mr. Dalrymple. “Just a matter of business,” they explained. Frank changed the subject by donning a pair of gloves and getting into a lively bout with Biff Hooper.

Chet Morton was not satisfied.

He sat on the window-sill, relishing the apple, and turning over various matters in his mind. He remembered the Hardy boys’ curiosity about the old Purdy Estate on the previous afternoon. Then, the fact that they had left the party at an early hour was in itself suspicious.

“They’re up to something,” he said to himself. “They’ve something up their sleeves and I mean to find out what it is!”

He watched his chance, and after a while he sauntered over to Joe.

“Made any progress yet?” he whispered.

“Progress on what?”

“You know. The mystery.”

Joe was startled. He wondered if Chet had really learned anything about the affair of the Purdy place.

“What mystery?” he said.

“Don’t look so blank about it,” continued Chet. “The mystery of the Purdy Estate, of course. What’s new?”

“Why—ah—how did you know about it?”

Chet winked mysteriously. His bluff was working. Then there *was* a mystery!

“Never mind. Perhaps I know more than you think. Maybe I can help you. What’s in the wind?”

Joe was wary. He knew Chet of old and he refused to be drawn out.

“We can’t say anything about it yet.”

“Has the Purdy place been robbed?”

“Now I know you’re fishing,” returned Joe. “You run along and peddle your papers. I’m not giving out any information.”

Chet was thoughtful. Joe had said enough to convince him that there was something in the wind and that it was concerned with the Purdy place.

“I’ll find out more about this before I’m many hours older,” he said to himself.

Joe was on his guard. He knew that Chet had been looking for information, and he knew also that Chet had an inkling of the trouble in connection with the Purdy place.

Frank came over to him later.

“What did Chet ask you?”

“Tried to pump me about the Purdy place.”

“He tried to pump me, too,” said Frank. “You didn’t tell him anything, did you?”

“Not a word.”

“Neither did I. We can’t afford to talk too much about this. Just the same, I think we’d better keep an eye on Master Chet. He’s curious.”

At that moment they had no idea of the lengths to which Chet’s curiosity would lead him.

CHAPTER XI

STOLEN GOODS

ON the afternoon of the following day Mr. Dalrymple called at the Hardy home.

“I meant to let the matter drop until your father returned,” he said, “but I can’t keep it out of my mind. If you’re not busy, I think we’ll go out to the house and make another search.”

The boys were delighted. They had suffered keen disappointment when they thought the case had been dropped.

“Maybe you’ll find another message waiting for you,” Joe suggested.

“I hope not. However, we’ll make another visit.”

When the secret room was opened, there was no evidence that anyone had entered.

“Yesterday’s message said it would be the last warning,” Frank pointed out.

“I suppose we’ll have to believe it,” Mr. Dalrymple said. “But what’s to happen next?”

He closed up the room and set the time lock again. The boys were eager to explore the house, so he took them through the dusty halls and corridors on a tour of the building. The banker explained that since his purchase of the Purdy Estate he had not taken time to put the house in order.

“In fact,” he said, “I’ve scarcely explored the house myself.”

“Have you ever thought,” remarked Frank, “that someone else might be using the mansion for some purpose? It’s been closed up for a long time, you know.”

Mr. Dalrymple said that the possibility had not occurred to him. Frank’s suggestion became of more importance a few minutes later when, in a disused wing of the building, they found two doors that would not open.

“That’s strange,” said Dalrymple, “I was in this wing the first day I came to the house and I distinctly remember that those doors were unlocked. As a matter of fact, the locks were broken.”

“What was in the rooms?” asked Joe.

“Nothing. They weren’t furnished.”

Frank was carefully examining the locks.

“Why, these locks are new!” he exclaimed. “They’re quite bright and shiny.”

The discovery excited them. At last, they felt, they were on the right track. Frank and Joe were for breaking down the doors at once but Mr. Dalrymple was more cautious.

“No,” he said, “if anyone has been using the house for some sinister purpose, we don’t want to destroy any evidence. There may be fingerprints on those locks. As owner of this house I think I’d better play safe and call the police. After that scream you boys heard the other night we might discover almost anything. Perhaps even—a dead body.”

The boys gazed at the locked doors. What secrets did they hide?

Mr. Dalrymple went to the telephone in the outer hall and called the Bayport Police Department. He returned in a few minutes with the news that Detective Smuff himself would be on the scene in short order.

“I can’t understand it,” said Dalrymple bewildered. “The rooms were quite bare, the doors wide open. Now they’re closed and new locks have been put on. I don’t like the idea.”

“I hope Detective Smuff has sense enough to bring some skeleton keys with him,” said Frank.

Surprisingly enough, Detective Smuff had not forgotten his keys. He came into the house, panting, as if he had run all the way.

“Now,” he said with an air of importance, “what’s all this about, Mr. Dalrymple? Doors locked, you say? Why don’t you open ’em?”

“Because I didn’t lock them,” retorted the banker, “and I thought it might be a matter for the police.”

“Quite right. Quite right,” Smuff assured him, “Might have been a murder—or something.”

The burly detective tried several keys before he finally found one that would open the first door. The lock clicked. The door swung open. They gazed into the room.

“Great Jehoshaphat!” yelled Detective Smuff. “The stolen goods!”

There, piled high against the walls, were cases, bales and boxes.

“Why, how did these things get here?” said Dalrymple. “They don’t belong to me.”

“I should say they don’t,” replied Smuff as he strode into the room. Quickly he examined the labels on some of the boxes. “This stuff has been hidden here by river thieves. There’s been a regular epidemic of stealing from the docks on the Willow River lately. So this is where the loot has been hidden. What a find!”

He rubbed his hands with delight.

Then the boys remembered the car that had almost run them down near the Purdy place a few days before. The motorcycle policeman had said he was chasing river thieves. Chief Collig and Smuff had chased the boys in mistake for river thieves the night they found Hurd Applegate on the grounds of the Purdy Estate.

“So that explains it!” remarked Dalrymple. “Well, it’s an outrage. To think that my house should be used as a storage vault by robbers!”

Detective Smuff did not seem to hear him.

“Just to think,” gloated the detective, “just to think that I’m the one that found the loot. What a feather in my cap. I ought to get a rise in pay for this.”

“Don’t forget you wouldn’t have found the stuff if these boys hadn’t suggested exploring the house, and if I hadn’t called you up,” Mr. Dalrymple reminded him tartly. “If it had been up to the police to find the loot, it would have been here a long time. Now I’ll thank you to get it out of here at once.”

For the next hour the old mansion was a scene of activity, as policemen, hurriedly called from Bayport headquarters, undertook the task of moving the stolen goods from the two rooms and taking the loot away in trucks.

“This was the hang-out of the river thieves, all right,” said Frank. “One of the officers tells me that there is stuff in those rooms that was stolen months ago.”

“Then where was it when I first took over the house?” demanded Mr. Dalrymple. “The two rooms were empty.”

“The loot must have been hidden somewhere else. Perhaps in the basement. They thought you wouldn’t be likely to find the stuff if it was hidden in the disused wing, after you had already looked there and found the rooms empty.”

The Hardy boys wondered if this meant that the mystery was solved.

“How could it be solved?” asked Dalrymple. “The stolen goods have nothing to do with those warnings in the secret room.”

Frank pointed out that there might easily be a connection between the warning and the fact that river thieves were using the house as a hiding-place for loot.

“After Jason Purdy’s death they had the house to themselves. When you bought the place, it interfered with their plans. Perhaps they hoped to frighten you away.”

“I never thought of it in that light,” the banker admitted.

“Just our luck, if that’s all there is to the affair,” said Joe. “Detective Smuff and the chief will take all the credit.”

The boys, however, did not let this worry them. The fact that the Purdy mansion had been a thieves’ hang-out was interesting and they wondered if they might not be able to pick up some clues around the grounds.

“It’s all very well to find the loot,” Frank said, “but the thieves haven’t been caught. For all we know, they might have a hiding-place around here, too.”

“If they haven’t been hiding right in the house,” sniffed Mr. Dalrymple. “It’s just like their impudence.”

Frank and Joe left him to superintend the activities of the police and see that they did not accidentally carry off some of his own possessions along with the river thieves’ loot. They went out into the grounds.

Although the Purdy Estate had a frontage on the Shore Road it also flanked Willow River, which emptied into Barmet Bay. It was this proximity to the river, obviously, which had made it ideal for the purposes of the river thieves. There was a small dock and a path leading up to the back of the house.

The Hardy boys inspected this path with interest and searched about the dock, but they failed to find anything of importance. The neglected grounds were overgrown with weeds and one part of the estate was a jungle of trees and thickets.

“Hello! What’s this?” exclaimed Frank, bending down.

He had discovered a depression in the earth. It was the mark of an automobile tire.

“Now, how did a car get around to this part of the grounds?” said Joe. “It isn’t anywhere near the driveway.”

“That’s just the question.” Frank went on a little distance and picked up the mark of the tire some yards away, near a heavy tangle of undergrowth. Judging by the tire-tread the car had emerged directly from the mass of bushes.

“Seems unreasonable,” he muttered, and advanced toward the undergrowth. It fell away before him, however, and then he saw that some of the leafy branches were withered.

“Camouflage!” exclaimed Joe. “Those bushes didn’t grow here. They were placed here.”

The boys soon discovered that this was indeed the case. A tangle of cut brush had been placed to conceal an opening among the trees, and when this was kicked away they found themselves at one end of a road, deeply rutted, leading off into the bush.

Frank whistled softly.

“A secret road!” he exclaimed. “Now I wonder where it leads to.”

The hidden road through the abandoned bush on the Purdy Estate led only to the Shore Road, the main highway. Part of the wall about the place had been torn down, this break in the wall being concealed by the heavy growth of trees and bushes at that point, and from there the road led out to the concrete.

“So that’s how the river thieves could get away so quickly when the police were after them,” said Frank. “I guess we’ll just keep this little discovery to ourselves. It may be useful.”

“Perhaps we’re not through with this mystery yet,” said Joe.

“I’m sure we’re not.”

“If the river thieves think the police are still in the dark about this road, they may use it again.”

“If they do, we’ll be waiting for them. At any rate, it gives us a break. We can come back and forth from the Purdy place now without being seen,” Frank pointed out.

“And we’re coming back, too,” replied Joe. “Somehow, I don’t think the river thieves had anything to do with those death threats in the secret room.”

The boys told no one about the road. If the police thought the case was cleared up, that was their own look-out. The Hardy boys were of a different opinion.

CHAPTER XII

THE STRANGER

ALTHOUGH DETECTIVE SMUFF gloated and affirmed that the gang of river thieves had been broken up by discovery of the stolen goods, and although Mr. Dalrymple was disposed to believe that the mystery had been cleared up, the Hardy boys were by no means satisfied.

The sinister messages in the secret room were still to be explained. Somehow, the boys felt that this was a matter apart from the activities of the river thieves.

“In any case,” Joe pointed out, “the thieves are still at large. We haven’t learned who placed those messages in the room. We don’t know what they mean. There’s still plenty of work to be done.”

“We’re not going to quit at this stage,” declared Frank. “We’re going back to watch that hidden road tonight.”

They waited until after dark, and then they set out on foot. If they took the car they would have to park it by the roadside and it might be recognized.

They had scarcely left the house before they met Biff Hooper and Jerry Gilroy. The lads shouted to them:

“Hi, there!”

“Hi!” shouted the Hardy boys.

“Where are you heading for?” asked Biff.

Frank and Joe were uncomfortable. They were still determined to keep their mission secret in spite of the fact that the affair at the Purdy house the previous day was now common property.

“Just out for a walk,” said Joe.

“Good. We’re going for ice cream. Come along.”

Frank hesitated.

“Can’t,” he said. “We must make a call.”

Biff poked him in the ribs.

“Callie Shaw doesn’t live out this way, my boy. You’re heading in the wrong direction.”

“And Iola Morton,” said Jerry, “doesn’t live with Callie, so why are you out calling together?”

“We’re not going to call on the girls. It—it’s a matter of business,” said Joe.

Jerry and Biff immediately sensed that the Hardy boys were trying to get away.

“Look here,” said Biff, “what’s the matter with you two lately? You go around as if you had all the troubles of the world on your shoulders. I hear you were out at the Purdy place yesterday when the police found the stuff the river thieves hid there. Is that where you’re going now?”

“Why would we be going there now when all the loot was recovered?” countered Frank.

“That’s so.” Biff thought it over. “Well, in that case, you can come along and have some ice cream.”

He grabbed Frank firmly by the arm while Jerry seized Joe, and the Hardy boys were both waltzed down the street toward the nearest ice cream parlor.

There was no sense in resisting. It would only arouse the suspicions of the boys, so Frank and Joe gave in with a good grace.

In the ice cream parlor, however, before they were able to leave, another group of their chums, including Tony Prito and Phil Cohen, came in. It developed into a party. Every time the Hardy boys suggested that they had better be on their way, they were greeted by shouts of derision.

“What’s the idea?” asked Tony. “Don’t you like our company?”

It was late before the boys made their escape and even then they were escorted to the very door of their home by the others.

They waited in the shadow of the veranda until their chums had disappeared down the street.

“Thank goodness we can give them the slip now,” said Frank. “Let’s hurry.”

They were within a few hundred yards of the Purdy place when Frank said quietly to his brother:

“Don’t look around, Joe. Do you hear footsteps?”

“I’ve heard them for the last five minutes. Someone following us?”

“I think so. I glanced back a few seconds ago and I saw someone dive into the shadow of the trees.”

The boys withdrew to the side of the road and waited. They could see no one.

“He’s wise. He knows we’re watching,” said Frank. “Let’s go on. As soon as we reach the driveway to the Purdy place we’ll go on in as if we don’t suspect anything. Then we’ll double back.”

They went out on the road again.

Frank hazarded a backward glance.

“There’s someone trailing us, all right,” he whispered. “He’s keeping well in the shadow.”

“Here’s the gate. We’ll fool him, whoever he is.”

The boys entered the driveway. The Purdy mansion loomed dark and sinister ahead. The moment they knew they were out of sight of the unknown, they left the road and hid in the bushes.

Here they waited.

After a while they heard stealthy footsteps at the entrance of the driveway.

“Here he comes,” whispered Joe.

Frank pressed his brother’s arm, cautioning silence.

A shadowy figure came into the driveway, hesitated, then came quickly forward. He passed the boys’ hiding-place without looking around. They remained where they were until the mysterious figure had gone on. Then they slipped out of the bushes and followed.

The tables were now turned.

The figure ahead went on up the driveway toward the Purdy place. They saw him hesitate in front of the house. Then he went up onto the veranda and peered through one of the windows.

“Do you think he’s one of the river thieves?” whispered Joe. The boys crouched in a thicket, watching.

“We’ll soon find out what his game is.”

After a while the figure came down from the veranda and went around toward the side of the house.

There was bright moonlight. For a moment his face was clearly revealed. The Hardy boys gave a simultaneous gasp of astonishment.

“Chet Morton!” whispered Frank.

What was Chet Morton doing here?

“Can this be one of his jokes?” whispered Joe. They watched their chum as he went around to the side of the house.

The clear moonlight showed them that they were not mistaken. Chet’s portly figure was well-defined at that distance.

“I don’t get this at all,” said Frank. “What’s he doing around here at this hour of night?”

Chet was looking into one of the side windows of the house. Suddenly they saw him leap back, as if frightened. Then he bolted off across the weed-grown lawn into the shadow of the trees.

“Now what do you know about that?” exclaimed Frank. “He seems to have got a fine scare.”

“And it serves him right, I say,” chuckled Joe. “But what made him run away?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

The boys drew closer to the house. In the distance they heard a snapping of twigs and crackling of bushes, indicating that Chet was losing no time in making his escape from the Purdy place.

Frank and Joe circled around, keeping well out of the moonlight, until they could see the rear of the house. They were just on the point of going forward when they heard the sound of footsteps in the gravel path that led from the river.

The boys crouched in the bushes, watching. In the moonlight they saw a man coming quickly up the path.

“I wonder if it’s Chet?” said Joe.

The newcomer was not Chet Morton. He was a young man whom they had never seen before. He strode briskly up to the rear door of the Purdy mansion. A moment later he disappeared and they heard the door slam.

“Let’s follow him,” suggested Joe.

Frank was cautious.

“Better wait,” he advised. “I heard Smuff say this afternoon that the police would be watching the house. Maybe that’s one of them.”

“There’s a light.”

A yellow gleam shone from one of the windows. It vanished in a few seconds, as a shade was pulled down.

Then, abruptly, they heard a scream. It was the same terrible, chilling yell they had heard on the night of their encounter with Hurd Applegate.

Frank and Joe looked at each other in horror.

What had happened?

The scream was followed by a crash, then by thudding footsteps. The back door opened suddenly. Someone rushed down the steps.

A shadowy figure fled down the path.

“After him!” snapped Frank.

The boys emerged from their hiding-place and sped across the grass. They could see the stranger racing toward the river.

They plunged in pursuit. That terrible scream still rang in their ears.

“I wonder if he killed someone,” gasped Joe excitedly.

The stranger ahead tripped and went sprawling. The boys redoubled their efforts to overtake him, but he picked himself up and ran on toward the river.

They came in sight of the little dock. In the moonlight the boys saw that a motorboat was lying in wait. The stranger sprang into the boat and cast off.

Frank and Joe ran out on the dock. The moonlight shone for a moment on the upturned face of the stranger. The boat was already edging out into the stream. The stranger was making frantic efforts to start the engine.

Frank estimated the distance to the boat, but the gap of open water was too great. The engine began to splutter.

“Hi! Police!” he yelled.

“Police!” shouted Joe.

Away in the distance they heard a shrill whistle.

The engine of the motorboat broke into a clamorous roar. The stranger sprang to the wheel. The boat backed out into midstream.

The whistle shrilled again. Someone came running down the path.

“Quick! This way!” they shouted.

By the time the officer reached the dock the motorboat was already speeding downstream.

The constable was one of Chief Collig’s men. He took one look at the escaping boat; then he raised his whistle to his lips and shrilled fiercely.

From upstream came the roar of another boat.

“What’s happened, boys?” demanded the constable sharply. “Who is that fellow?”

“We were watching the house,” said Frank. “We saw him go inside. Then there was a scream and he ran out and went down to the boat.”

Another constable came pounding down the path, night-stick in hand.

“What’s up?” he demanded.

“One of the birds came back,” said the first policeman sourly. “I told Smuff we should have someone to watch the house, instead of having us scattered up and down the river.”

In a moment there was the gleam of a headlight on the river. A motorboat came swiftly downstream and headed toward the dock.

“Come on, boys!” shouted the constable. He poised himself on the edge of the dock and leaped into the boat. Frank and Joe followed. There was a constable at the helm of the craft. Frank pointed toward the river mouth.

“That way! He went down toward the bay.”

The boat leaped forward. High waves curled from the bow. They shot past the dark masses of trees, beneath a bridge, and on toward Barmet Bay. Ahead they could hear the throbbing roar of the other boat.

“We’ve lost him now,” growled the pilot. “Once he hits the bay we’ll never catch him. What happened, anyway?”

Frank and Joe explained about the stranger who had entered the Purdy mansion, about the wild scream and the subsequent flight of the intruder.

“If we’d had a man posted at the house,” said the pilot bitterly, “we’d have grabbed that fellow.”

The motorboat swept out into Barmet Bay. There, as the constable predicted, they were soon obliged to give up the search. The fugitive had sped out across the bay. Running with lights out, he was soon lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. DALRYMPLE'S CLERK

CHET MORTON strolled into the yard back of the Hardy house next morning with the inevitable apple in his hand and an innocent expression on his cherubic face.

Frank and Joe were busily engaged exploring the inner mechanism of their roadster, which had developed one of its fits of obstinacy and had refused to go.

"Howdy, boys! Howdy!" said Chet in a breezy tone. He had been reading Western stories of late and had cultivated a drawl and a free-and-easy manner of expression that he fondly believed to be typical of his favorite cowboy hero. "Are you fixing your car?"

Frank looked up at him.

"Why, no," he replied sarcastically, "we're doing the family washing."

"Not much difference between that heap of junk and a washing machine, anyway," returned Chet, unabashed, "except that a washing machine goes sometimes."

Joe put down the monkey wrench and leaned against the hood of the car.

"Doing much walking lately?" he asked.

Chet blinked. "Walking?"

"Yes—strolling in the moonlight."

Chet munched at the apple. "I don't quite get you."

"No?" remarked Frank. "I hear you've turned detective lately."

"Not me. I leave that to you chaps."

"We understand you've taken up plain and fancy shadowing," said Joe.

"Who? Me?"

"Yes, you. What was the big idea of shadowing us last night?"

Chet looked uncomfortable.

“Oh, you mean *that*?” he said.

“Yes, we mean *that*. And we’re waiting for the explanation,” Frank said.

“Oh, I was just out for a little walk,” said Chet airily. “There’s no law against walking along the road, is there?”

“No. None at all.”

“In that case,” said Chet, moving away, “I guess I’ll try it.”

Frank took Chet by the scruff of the neck and sat him down firmly on the running-board.

“Be seated, fat one!” he ordered. “You’ll do your walking after we’ve put you under a little cross-examination.”

“My, but we’re getting legal,” said Chet meekly.

The Hardy boys confronted him.

“Now,” said Frank, “what was the idea of trailing us out toward the Purdy place last night?”

Chet gulped.

“I didn’t know you even saw me,” he replied plaintively.

“My dear boy,” Frank told him. “We not only *saw* you, but we doubled back and *followed* you up to the house.”

“I wondered why I lost you so quickly.”

“Come on. What was the idea?”

Chet shrugged.

“I followed you, all right. I dropped around here to see you and I just caught sight of you going down the street so I trailed along. Matter of fact, I guess I was a bit curious.”

“Curious about what?”

“About this mystery you’re working on.”

Frank was surprised.

“How did you know we were working on a mystery?”

“Little bird told me,” said Chet with a broad wink.

“Don’t you believe him,” said Joe. “He just guessed it. He tried to pump me but I wouldn’t tell him anything.”

“I don’t see,” observed Chet, “why you won’t let me in on it after all I’ve done for you. What’s going on at the Purdy place, anyway? You won’t catch me going back there again.”

“Why not?” asked Frank.

“After what happened last night? No, sir. I’m not following you two any more.”

“Why did you run away when you looked in the window of the house?”

“Oh, you saw that, did you?”

“We were watching you from the bushes.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly *run* away,” replied Chet defensively. “I just thought it was kind of late for me to be out and perhaps I’d better be getting home.”

“You ran,” accused Joe. “You ran as if you were half scared to death.”

“What did you see?” asked Frank.

“I didn’t see anything. But I heard something. It was a scream.”

“We didn’t hear a scream,” said Frank. “At least, not when you were looking in the window.”

“I guess you were too far away. But I heard it, believe me. It seemed to come from some distant part of the house. The minute I looked in the window I heard some wild screaming. So I thought I’d better mind my own business and go home. Listen, what *is* going on around that place? It must be a corking good mystery when you’re keeping so quiet about it.”

But Frank and Joe were not to be wheedled into telling Chet anything about the affair of the Purdy mansion.

“We promised we’d keep things to ourselves,” explained Frank. Although Chet pleaded to be allowed in on the secret, they put him off.

The mysterious visitor to the Purdy house had escaped in his motorboat and the police, as a result, were watching the place closely. Frank and Joe, therefore, did not return to the grounds that day. Next morning, however, they decided to drive over to Lakeside and call on Mr. Dalrymple.

“It’s strange we haven’t heard from him,” Frank remarked as they started out.

“He probably thinks the whole business has been cleared up.”

“We’ll tell him about our visit to the house the night before last. That will stir him up.”

Arriving at Lakeside, they went to Mr. Dalrymple’s bank and there they were readily admitted to his private office.

“Hello, boys!” greeted the banker in his loud voice. “Sit down. Glad to see you again. What’s on your minds?”

“We just thought we’d call and talk things over with you,” Frank answered. “About the Purdy place, I mean.”

Mr. Dalrymple laughed.

“I guess we won’t have to worry about that any more. I’ve come to the conclusion that the messages were placed in the secret room just because the river thieves wanted to frighten me away. Now that their loot has been discovered they won’t be back in a hurry.”

“But someone *did* come back,” replied Frank.

“What’s that?” The banker was surprised. “Someone came back? How do you know?”

The boys then related their story of the events that happened when they saw the young stranger go into the Purdy place. They told about the scream they had heard, about the stranger’s escape and his subsequent flight in the motorboat.

Mr. Dalrymple was puzzled.

“That puts a new complexion on the whole affair,” he said. “I can’t understand this mystery about the screams. Why should anyone risk going back to the house when he must have known the police would be watching the place?”

“That’s why we think this stranger couldn’t have been one of the river thieves,” said Joe.

“Odd. Do you think you’d recognize him if you saw him again?”

“The moonlight was clear,” said Frank. “We got a good look at him. He was just a young fellow, well-dressed, about five feet eight.”

“Did the police search the house afterward?” asked Dalrymple.

“Yes. They looked around. They didn’t find anything wrong.”

“And your friend Chet heard screaming, too? You boys heard a terrible scream the night Mr. Applegate visited the place. There must be some explanation. I’m glad you lads came and told me about this. It seems that the affair isn’t as simple as I thought.”

Frank said that he and Joe planned another visit to the house, at night, in spite of the fact that the police were supposed to be on guard. But Mr. Dalrymple demurred.

“After all,” he pointed out, “there has been no actual damage. And it might be dangerous. I’d prefer that you wait until your father comes back.”

At that moment there was a rap at the door of the banker’s office.

“Come in!” he shouted. Then turning to the boys, he said, “You’ll excuse me for a moment? Just one of my clerks.”

The door opened, and a young man came in with a sheaf of papers.

“Will you be good enough to look these over and sign them, sir?” he asked quietly, as he put the papers on Mr. Dalrymple’s desk.

“All right, Balpert.” Mr. Dalrymple shuffled the papers, glanced at them, made a correction here and there, then signed them. The clerk waited, respectfully.

Frank glanced at Joe, then nudged him violently, for it was apparent that Joe was about to speak. Joe’s mouth closed abruptly. The young clerk standing beside Mr. Dalrymple’s desk scarcely looked at them.

The banker reached for his fountain pen and scrawled his signature on the documents. He handed them back.

“That’s all, Balpert,” he said. “Get them out in the mail this morning.”

“Very good, sir.”

Balpert bowed and retired. The door closed behind him.

Scarcely had he disappeared than Frank sprang to his feet.

“Who is that man?” he said quickly.

Mr. Dalrymple looked surprised.

“The clerk? Why, that’s Sid Balpert. He’s been with me for several years.”

Frank turned to his brother.

“Did you recognize him, Joe?”

“I sure did.”

“What do you mean?” demanded the banker. “Have you ever seen him before?”

“We saw him at the Purdy place the night before last,” said Frank quietly. “I recognized him the moment he came into the room. Your clerk is the stranger who went into the house and who ran away after we heard the scream. He’s the man the police chased down the river in the motorboat.”

Mr. Dalrymple sat back heavily in his chair.

“Why—why—it’s impossible!” he stammered. “Are you sure you’re not making a mistake? I’d trust Sid Balpert anywhere. He’s one of my most faithful employees.”

“We haven’t made a mistake,” Joe assured him. “He’s the stranger we saw going into the Purdy place.”

The banker frowned.

“We’ll soon thresh this out,” he said grimly and pressed a button on his desk.

CHAPTER XIV

“WHILE THE CLOCK TICKS”

AN office boy appeared at the door.

“Tell Balpert I want to see him,” said Mr. Dalrymple.

“Yes, sir.”

While they were awaiting the return of the clerk Mr. Dalrymple, evidently worried, said:

“I hope you boys are wrong. I can’t believe Sid Balpert could be mixed up in any affair like this. He’s been with me for years. I’m sure he’s honest.”

“Does he know you own the Purdy Estate?” Frank suggested.

“Yes, he knows that. He knows that I’ve been going there. He has heard me speak of the strange threats I’ve been getting. But it can’t be Sid.”

“We’ll see what he has to say for himself.”

Sid Balpert came into the office a few minutes later. He was evidently surprised at the summons.

“You sent for me, Mr. Dalrymple?”

“Yes. Sit down.”

The clerk looked more surprised than ever but quietly obeyed. Mr. Dalrymple looked at him sternly.

“I’ve heard something about you, Balpert. I sincerely hope it isn’t true and I want to give you a chance to clear yourself.”

Balpert fumbled nervously at his necktie.

“Heard something about me, sir? What was it?”

“You know that I own the Purdy Estate, over in Bayport. You know I’ve been going there and that I have received threats against my life.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why were you at that house the night before last?”

Sid Balpert looked frightened.

“I didn’t mean any harm, Mr. Dalrymple,” he said. “I—I assure you I didn’t think there was anything wrong in my going there. I didn’t know anyone had seen me.”

“Then you *were* there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?” asked the banker ominously.

Sid Balpert cleared his throat. “Well, sir, as a matter of fact—I—I’ve always had an ambition to be a detective——”

“You were playing detective?”

“Well—when you mentioned the threats you had received—I thought I might be able to solve the mystery myself. It occurred to me that—well, I’ve had to work very hard for promotion—and I thought that if I solved the mystery for you, I might be given a little better position in the bank.”

Mr. Dalrymple nodded. He was obviously relieved by this simple explanation of the clerk’s presence at the Purdy place.

“So that was it? You thought that if you took matters in your own hands and cleared up the mystery, you’d win promotion here in the bank?”

“That was my reason, sir. I’m afraid I didn’t get very far. I got into the house but I was no sooner inside than I heard a terrible scream, so I quit. Then someone chased me and I ran back to the dock, where I had my motorboat moored. I got away, but another boat chased me. I was badly frightened, I don’t mind saying.”

“Do you know who chased you?”

“Well, I imagine it must have been the person who screamed.”

Mr. Dalrymple laughed.

“A case of mistaken identity all around,” he said. “These boys and the police chased you, Balpert. They thought you were a crook and you thought they were crooks.”

“I’m sorry, sir, if you thought I was mixed up in anything wrong,” said Balpert, “but I was really trying to help you.”

“I believe that. You’ve worked for me so long that I know I can depend upon you. In fact, I could scarcely believe the boys when they identified you as the man they had seen going into the house.”

He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal.

“That’ll be all, Balpert. As for that promotion, perhaps I have overlooked you of late. We’ll see what can be done about it.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the clerk gratefully. He left the office. Mr. Dalrymple chuckled and sat back in his chair.

“I guess that settles that,” he said. “I’m mighty glad to know Sid wasn’t mixed up in the affair any more seriously. He was just trying to help.”

“Well,” remarked Frank ruefully, “we’ve just got to start all over again now. We still don’t know the explanation of those screams. Let’s go, Joe.”

The boys left Mr. Dalrymple, after promising to keep in touch with him. While they were disappointed at the setback, at the very moment when they thought they had located a valuable witness, they were glad for the sake of the banker’s clerk.

“He was just doing what he could,” remarked Frank, as they drove back toward Bayport.

“The same as Chet. They didn’t realize they were putting us on false trails.”

The boys had spent some time with the banker and they suddenly realized, when they were halfway home, that lunch hour was long past.

“Now we’re out of luck,” said Joe. “You know what Aunt Gertrude is like when we’re late for lunch.”

“I know. We just don’t get anything to eat.”

“Are we to go hungry?”

“We are not. There’s a wayside restaurant. We’ll have a bite to eat there.”

The restaurant was a small place but scrupulously clean, and there were booths along one wall. Frank and Joe went into one of them and ordered sandwiches.

“That will hold us until dinner time, at any rate,” remarked Joe. “We haven’t a chance in a million of raiding the icebox when we get home.”

“I’ll say we haven’t. Not with Aunt Gertrude on guard, at any rate. I can hear her, ‘If you boys can’t get home at a proper hour for luncheon, then you deserve to go hungry.’” Frank imitated his aunt’s high-pitched voice. Joe laughed.

A waiter entered the adjoining booth. They heard him say, “Will that be all, gentlemen?”

A man’s voice answered, “That’s all. Here’s a dollar. Keep the change.”

“Thank you, sir.” The waiter withdrew.

The Hardy boys heard the men in the next booth push back their chairs. They would have paid no further attention, but just then they heard a sentence that electrified them:

“It will happen while the clock ticks.”

Frank looked at Joe, startled. “While the clock ticks.” That was the phrase in the warning found in Mr. Dalrymple’s secret room.

“I understand,” said another voice. “Well, we might as well be on our way.”

The boys waited, watching the entrance of the booth in the hope of catching some glimpse of the two men. They did not appear. Then they heard the slam of a door.

Frank sprang to his feet and looked into the adjoining booth. It was empty. There was a door leading from the booth to the courtyard of the restaurant, and when he opened this door and looked outside he caught no more than a glimpse of two men driving away in a car. He could not distinguish their features.

He went back to Joe, disappointed.

“I lost them,” he confessed. “They drove away.”

“I wonder who they were. What did they mean?”

When their waiter returned they asked him if he knew the identity of the two men who had been in the next booth. The waiter looked suspicious.

“What’s the idea?” he asked.

“We thought they might have been friends, of ours.”

“Never saw ’em before.”

Frank and Joe wasted no further time on the waiter. They paid their check and left the restaurant at once.

“We may be able to overtake them,” said Frank as he scrambled into the roadster.

They sped toward Bayport. No other car was in sight when they started. A few minutes later, however, as they rounded a curve, they caught sight of a cloud of dust and a speeding sedan about half a mile ahead.

“Step on it!” muttered Joe.

Frank pushed on the accelerator and the roadster achieved thirty miles an hour. This, for the venerable car, was a truly terrific rate. The engine roared like a racer on a speedway.

“We’re gaining on them.”

The other car was proceeding in leisurely fashion, and just as the boys reached the outskirts of Bayport the quarry was only a few hundred yards in the lead. By the time they were near the Purdy place the roadster had drawn abreast of the sedan. The boys stared eagerly at the inmates.

Then each uttered an exclamation of disgust.

In the sedan was an elderly harassed-looking gentleman wearing spectacles and a derby hat. In the back seat sat a fat, complacent woman with a small boy in her lap; beside her were three youngsters.

“The wrong car,” growled Frank.

“Look, daddy, look! They’re going to race us! Don’t let ’em beat you, daddy!” squealed one of the children, jumping up and down in excitement.

The elderly gentleman in the driver’s seat gazed fixedly at the road. He was in no mood for racing.

Neither were the Hardy boys.

“Well,” sighed Joe, as they dropped behind, to the great disappointment of the youngsters, who were urging their father to step on the gas, “that’s another setback.”

“We’re getting used to them by now,” returned Frank philosophically.

The roadster cruised slowly along. They were near Hurd Applegate’s house and they saw that he was out mowing his lawn.

He instantly saw the Hardy boys, and leaving his lawnmower, ran down to the pavement waving toward them.

“Guess he wants to speak to us,” said Frank, bringing the roadster to a stop.

Hurd Applegate came over to them.

“Good day, boys,” he said. “I’m glad you passed this way. I’ve been wanting to see you.”

“You haven’t lost any more stamps, have you?” asked Joe.

“No, sir!” said Applegate emphatically. “My stamps are under lock and key. It would take a clever thief to get at them now.” He shook his head mournfully. “But my collection will never be the same again. My most valuable stamps are gone.”

“They may turn up again,” Frank said, to console him.

“I hope so. I hope so, indeed. Do you know,” said Hurd Applegate, “I dreamed last night that a man came to the house and gave me back my stamps. I was looking at them to make sure that they were all safe—and then I woke up. I tried to go back to sleep again and dream it all over, but I couldn’t. I feel bad about those stamps.”

The boys knew that Hurd Applegate’s precious stamp collection was the greatest thing in the old man’s life, and that he felt the loss keenly.

“I’ve told the police about the theft,” continued the old collector, “and they’ve promised to do what they can, but somehow I haven’t much hope. Will you lads try to get them back for me?”

“We’ll do our best,” Frank promised.

Hurd Applegate brightened up.

“There’ll be a reward,” he said. “I’ll give a hundred dollars reward to anyone who recovers my stamps.”

“We don’t need to be tempted by any thought of a reward,” said Joe. “It isn’t a bad idea, though. Perhaps that is what the thief is waiting for. He’ll have a hard time disposing of the stamps——”

“I should say he will,” said Applegate. “I have reported the loss to the Philatelists’ Society and all the stamp collectors’ magazines. If he tries to sell them to some other collector, he’ll find himself in hot water.”

“Then, when he finds he can’t sell them, he’ll probably return them to you and collect the reward.”

“I hope so,” said Mr. Applegate. “I’d let the rascal off scot-free if he’d only return my stamps.”

“Well, we can’t promise to find them for you,” said Frank, “but we’ll certainly do the best we can.”

“That’s fine, boys,” said Applegate as he turned to go back to his lawnmower. “I have a notion that if anyone can locate my stamps, it will be you.”

As the boys drove off, Frank turned to Joe.

“Another case.”

“Gee,” said Joe, “how many mysteries can we solve at once?”

“We’d better give Chet one of them,” laughed Frank.

“I think Chet is cured. That scare he got at the Purdy place will cure him of any detective ambitions for a long time to come.”

“We’ve taken on a handful of work, at any rate,” Frank said. “I’m glad Applegate trusts us. I’d certainly like to recover the old chap’s stamps.”

When the boys returned home and told Aunt Gertrude, who was indignant because they had not got back in time for lunch, that Hurd Applegate had assigned them to the task of recovering his stamps, she openly scoffed at the idea that they would be successful.

“I’ve always thought that Hurd Applegate was more than a little crack-brained,” said the good lady, “and now I’m sure of it.”

“Why?” asked Joe innocently. “Because he left the room when a stranger was in the house looking at his stamps? Of course, it wasn’t the wisest thing to do, but after all, he thought the man looked honest.”

“You know very well I don’t mean that at all,” snapped Aunt Gertrude tartly. “I think he should have his head examined because he thinks you boys will be able to find the stamps for him.”

She laughed mirthlessly.

“Aren’t we going to get any lunch?” asked Frank.

“Luncheon!” shrieked their aunt. “You come in here at this hour of the afternoon and have the nerve—the supreme, unadulterated nerve—to ask me

for luncheon! Do you think this is a restaurant? You'll wait for dinner, so you will, and be very glad to get *that*."

The boys could not resist the temptation to tease their aunt.

"What if we're hungry?" said Joe.

"I don't care if you're starving to death, you'll get no lunch here, so make up your minds to that. Why on earth you boys can't learn to come home at a decent, respectable hour and eat your regular meals like decent, respectable people——"

"Aren't we decent?" asked Joe.

"Aren't we respectable?" Frank chimed in. "Don't forget, Aunt, that we are your nephews."

Their aunt cast about for some convenient object and found a cushion, which she hurled at them in wrath.

"Out! Out of here! I don't want any of your impudence. My nephews, indeed! I doubt if anyone in all the history of the world ever had such a pair of nephews. By the time your parents come home, I'll be in my grave with worry."

The boys fled, and Aunt Gertrude remained in victorious possession of the field. They went back to the garage and there they busied themselves repairing Joe's motorcycle.

At length, when he found it necessary to go into the house for some tools, Joe returned a moment later and called gleefully to his brother:

"Come and see what I found!"

Frank went into the kitchen.

There, on the table, was a huge jug of lemonade, flanked by several sandwiches and two large slices of chocolate cake.

"Dig in!" said Joe.

Frank needed no second urging. It was not until he was halfway through the luscious piece of cake that he began to wonder how the food happened to be so conspicuously left on the table at that hour of the day.

"So!" he said quietly. "So that's how she makes us go without our lunch."

“Her bark is worse than her bite,” said Joe as he poured out another glass of the lemonade.

CHAPTER XV

CAPTURED!

A CONSTABLE dozed on the veranda of the Purdy house. He had been on duty there since sundown. The grounds were shrouded in darkness. Nothing had happened; and from all indications, nothing would happen.

Another officer was on duty near the front gate and still another was watching the rear of the house. Anyone approaching the Purdy place would have thought the estate deserted.

Two shadowy figures stole down the hidden road that led from the highway. They crept softly through the bushes.

“Keep your eyes open for the policeman.”

“I just heard him going down toward the river,” came the whispered reply. “We can make it now.”

The two figures crouched for a moment among the bushes, then suddenly darted across the open patch of grass. They gained the shadow of the house unobserved.

“Where’s the cellar door?”

“Just a few feet away. Are you all set?”

“Let’s go.”

A quick rush, and the pair had reached the cellar entrance. A key scraped in a lock. Suddenly there was a sharp hiss of warning. The two figures crouched motionless by the door.

Heavy footsteps thudded in the gravel of the walk. One of the constables was making his round of inspection.

He came along the side of the house, humming quietly. Had he looked, he might have seen the two crouching figures, but as he sauntered past the officer was gazing thoughtfully at the sky. He disappeared around the corner of the house.

“Boy! That was close. Get inside, quick!”

The cellar door opened. The two figures disappeared within.

In the blackness of the cellar Frank sighed with relief.

“I thought we’d be caught for sure when that policeman came along.”

“Same here,” returned Joe. “He passed within a foot of us. He’d have kicked us off the property if he’d seen us. Well, now we’re in the house, what’s next?”

“We’ll explore the cellar first. Then we’ll go upstairs.”

Joe produced a powerful flashlight from his pocket.

“Don’t use that yet,” cautioned Frank. “One of the policemen may see the light from the cellar windows.”

They felt their way across the dark basement.

“Listen!”

“What is it, Joe?”

They listened in silence. Faintly they could hear a steady sound—tick, tick, tick, tick. . . .

“A clock ticking!” whispered Joe excitedly.

Perhaps they were on the verge of discovering the secret of the death threats!

“The sound seems to be coming from the back of the cellar,” said Frank finally.

“Let’s investigate.”

They moved quietly in the direction of the peculiar sound and groped their way through an open doorway into another division of the cellar. The ticking noise became louder and more distinct. Then the sound resembled the ticking of a clock no longer. Instead, it was a drip-drip-drip-drip, as of water upon cement.

“Stung again!” said Joe ruefully. “It’s only water after all.”

Disappointed, they retraced their steps in the dark, trying to find the cellar stairs. The inkiness was so intense that they must have taken the wrong turning. Frank first became aware that they had lost their way when he blundered against a pile of wood.

“That’s queer,” he said. “There wasn’t any woodpile in the other room.”

“Shall I turn on the flashlight?”

“We don’t dare take the chance. We’ll try to get our bearings first.”

The longer they tried to find their way back to the main part of the cellar, the greater their confusion became. They wandered through other doorways and into a remote part of the basement.

“Now I *do* hear something,” said Joe suddenly.

“Another false alarm?” asked his brother.

It was not a false alarm this time. Even as Frank spoke he heard a sound overhead. It was a footstep. Someone was walking stealthily about in the room above.

“Maybe it’s just one of the policemen,” Joe suggested.

“No. The house is locked. They’re not allowed inside.”

The footsteps passed across the floor of the upper room and the listening boys heard them no longer. The sounds had scarcely died away, however, when there came another sound, familiar to them by now but none the less terrible and awful. It was a scream—a ghastly, terrible cry that raised ringing echoes throughout the old mansion.

Frank and Joe were momentarily frozen with alarm. Scream after scream followed. Then came a heavy rush of footsteps above, the crash of a falling body, a muffled shout.

“The flashlight!” gasped Frank. “Turn it on. We must find the stairs.”

Joe switched on the powerful light. It illuminated the dusty old basement, and they quickly found their way out of the maze of storerooms and bins until the stairway came into view.

Above them they could still hear the thudding of feet and an occasional hoarse voice. The terrible screams had died away.

Frantically the Hardy boys raced up the stairs. Frank wrenched at the knob of the door that confronted them when they reached the landing.

The door was locked!

They heard a crash of glass.

“Outside!” cried Joe, and hurried down the stairs again. They could not hope to get into the house with the cellar door locked against them. Their

only solution was to get outside and find entry by some other means.

They hurried back toward the door by which they had entered. Joe flung it open and they scrambled out into the night.

“There they go!” shouted Frank.

Two men had just leaped out of a window near the back of the house. Joe switched on the flashlight, and the powerful beam shone on the pair as they picked themselves up from among the weeds beside the path, and ran down toward the river.

“After them!”

As the boys took up the chase they could hear the shrill clamor of a police whistle. They kept the two fugitives in sight.

Instead of running toward the dock as the boys expected, the men turned sharply when they reached the trees and raced toward a point farther up the river. Frank and Joe lost sight of them.

They could hear the snapping of branches as the fugitives plunged through the brush, and this enabled them to keep on the trail.

“Must have a boat hidden near the bank,” panted Joe.

They crashed through the bushes. The river was in sight.

Then, just as the Hardy boys reached the bank, two dark forms lunged out of the darkness.

Before Frank could utter a cry of warning, one of the men was upon him and he was thrown to the ground. Joe, at the same time, was attacked by the other man. A rough hand was clapped over his mouth so that he could not call out. In the distance the boys could hear the whistles and shouts of the police, who had lost track of the fugitives.

The boys were no match for their assailants, who were powerful, burly fellows. They were soon dragged to their feet, helpless.

“You won’t give us away,” growled one of the men.

“What’ll we do with ’em, Ben?”

“Do with ’em? If we leave ’em here, they’ll have the cops after us in two minutes. We’ll take ’em with us, that’s what we’ll do.”

“All right. Into the boat, you!”

Frank and Joe were thrust roughly toward the river bank. There, hidden by the overhanging branches, they saw a small motorboat. One of the men leaped into the craft while the other kept a tight grip on the boys. Frank seized the chance to shout for help but he was quickly shoved into the boat, and Joe followed.

“Better gag ’em!” growled one of their captors. “They’ll have all the cops in the country after us if we don’t.”

This suggestion met with the other man’s favor. With some torn strips of cloth the boys were gagged, while at the same time their wrists and ankles were effectively bound with stout cords. The men worked swiftly, evidently eager to be on their way. Frank and Joe lay helpless in the bottom of the boat.

“Quick!” snapped one of the roughs. “I can hear someone in the bushes.”

In the distance they could hear the shouts of the constables, who had not yet located the hidden motorboat; and from a point just a few yards up the bank they could hear the cautious footsteps of someone exploring the bushes.

One of the men thrust the nose of the boat out from the bank. A moment later the engine broke into a noisy roar, and the boat shot down the stream and plunged on its way, leaving a curling flurry of water in its wake.

Shouts, yells, whistles—a pandemonium of sound broke out on the bank.

Frank and Joe could see nothing, but from the uproar they knew that the police had been taken by surprise and that now they were milling about in confusion. Everyone seemed to be shouting orders that no one seemed to obey.

“Head them off!” . . . “Where’s that boat?” . . . “Shoot at them!” . . . “Go down and catch them at the bridge” . . . “Where are they?”

The man at the wheel chuckled grimly.

“We got the jump on them, all right.”

“I wish this old tub had more speed,” said the other.

“We’d go faster without these blamed kids. What’s the idea of bringing them along, anyway?”

“Couldn’t leave them behind. We’d have been caught. Throw ’em overboard now if you like, for all I care.”

The Hardy boys felt a chill of horror at these words. They knew they had fallen into the hands of desperate men who would not hesitate to get rid of them, if it would aid their flight. The other man's reply was reassuring:

"No, I don't hold with that kind of business. They'd drown sure, and that's a hangin' job."

"Well, they shouldn't a-come buttin' in."

The motorboat ploughed steadily upstream.

"We'll heave 'em out on the bank after a while. By the time they get them ropes loose, we'll be safe enough."

Frank was silently struggling in the bottom of the boat, trying to free his wrists. If he could but get his hands clear and tear loose the gag long enough to give vent to one ear-splitting yell for help, it might attract the attention of someone on the bank. He did not know where they were; the boat had been speeding upstream, evidently toward the farming country back of Barmet Bay, but how far it had travelled he could not tell.

"Look out there!" one of their captors said in a low voice.

"What's the trouble?"

"Boat ahead."

"I see it. Better slow down and then make a quick run for it if he makes trouble."

The clamor of the engine diminished. The motor boat slowed down. The two men crouched at the wheel, whispering.

They heard a cry from across the water.

"Ahoy, there!"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then the man at the wheel shouted back.

There was a muffled roar from the other boat as it came toward them.

"Who are you?"

Without delay one of the Hardy boys' captors answered:

"We're farmers from up river. Just going home. What's the matter?"

"Did you come from the old Purdy place?"

“Yep! There was a big fuss down there as we come past. They just caught a gang of crooks. All the police were out.”

“Oh!” came a disappointed voice. “They *caught* them, did they? That’s why we’re out. They telephoned us to take to the river and stop all boats comin’ this way.”

“Oh, they caught ’em all right,” lied the man boldly. “They didn’t get far.”

“I guess we’re just wastin’ our time, then, boys,” growled the man in the other boat. “May as well go home. Good night!”

“Good night!”

Frank and Joe were sick with disappointment as the motorboat picked up speed. Their captors had outwitted the police who were lying in wait upstream.

They could hear the man at the wheel chuckling softly.

“That was smart,” he said. “That was real smart, if I do say it myself. Fooled ’em right from the start.”

“They don’t come any smarter than you, Zeke,” declared his companion warmly.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DEATH YELL

JUST when it seemed that their captors were to be successful in the ruse, Joe's frantic struggles resulted satisfactorily.

By twisting his head from side to side he had managed to loosen the gag. By a tremendous effort he freed himself from it altogether. Immediately he began to shout:

“Help! Help!”

There was an angry exclamation from the man at the wheel. The other, with a growl of wrath, flung himself upon Joe and clapped his hand over the boy's mouth, but not before Joe gave vent to several more shouts.

The motorboat suddenly picked up speed. The boys heard a suspicious shout from one of the men in the other boat:

“Here! What does this mean?”

“Shut up, you young fool,” snarled the man who was trying to stifle Joe's cries. The other said nothing but opened the throttle to full speed.

“Get after 'em, boys!” yelled someone in the police boat. “They're the crooks, all right.”

The chase was on.

Frank and Joe could see nothing; yet by the sound of the pursuing boat's engine they judged that it was not far behind.

“We'd have got by scot-free if that brat hadn't shouted,” declared the steersman bitterly. “I'd like to wring his neck.”

“I got a good mind to throw him overboard,” said the other.

“Leave him alone and give me a hand. You know the river better than I do. I'm likely to run into something. Switch on that headlight. Do something.”

The men squabbled between themselves. Frank heard a shot. A bullet whistled overhead.

“They’re firing at us,” said one of the toughs.

“They’re gaining on us, too. Run the boat ashore.”

“Can’t. There’s no place to land. The banks are too steep.”

There was a muttered oath. The police boat was gaining swiftly. Another shot rang out.

“I guess we might as well give in,” whined the man at the wheel, crouching down. “I’d rather be caught alive than dead.”

“You always were yellow.”

“I’m not yellow. We haven’t a chance.”

This was evident in the next few moments when the police launch rapidly overhauled their craft. A stern voice shouted:

“Slow down there or we’ll shoot.”

The men obeyed sullenly. The motorboat glided to a stop and drifted sluggishly.

“Put up your hands!”

They surrendered. The police boat bumped alongside and a uniformed man leaped over the gunwale. A flashlight gleamed.

“So!” he said. “Indian Tom and Zeke Peters, eh? Caught you red-handed. Hello! What’s this?”

He had spied the Hardy boys lying bound in the bottom of the boat.

Within a few minutes Frank and Joe were free and had told their story. The three officers who had made the capture were indignant at the kidnapping but were gratified at having arrested Indian Tom and Zeke Peters. The two men had long been suspected as river thieves but had always managed to evade arrest.

The Hardy boys did not return to the Purdy house. The police hustled their captives ashore and brought them back to Bayport by automobile. They dropped Frank and Joe off at their own home.

The lads were curious as to why Indian Tom and Zeke Peters had been in the house, but they learned nothing that night.

“Come around to the police station in the morning,” said one of the officers after Frank and Joe explained how they came to be in the motorboat. “The chief is going to ask this pair a few questions. Maybe we’ll have some information for you then.”

With this the boys had to be content. When they trudged up the front steps of their home and saw a light gleaming in the living room, they were suddenly reminded of Aunt Gertrude.

“Good night!” said Joe. “It must be late. She’s sitting up for us.”

“We’re in for a calling-down. I can feel it in my bones.”

Under the veranda light Frank saw that his clothes were in a shocking state. The race through the bushes, their explorations in the cellar and the struggle with the two river thieves, to say nothing of their experience in lying trussed in the grease and oil at the bottom of the motorboat, all had left his garments black and torn, wet and smeared with oil and grease.

“I look like a tramp.” But then, when Frank caught sight of his brother, he took heart. “There’s one comfort. You look even worse.”

They tip-toed quietly into the house and gained the foot of the stairs.

“Maybe we can sneak up to bed without being heard,” whispered Frank.

“No, you can’t!” snapped Aunt Gertrude from the living room.

The boys straightened up guiltily. Their aunt was looking at them from the doorway. Her face was stern and forbidding.

“Come in here!” she ordered.

They obeyed.

“Now, once and for all,” began Aunt Gertrude before they had even entered the living room, “I want to tell you boys that I’m sick and tired of having you gadding about at all hours of the night. When I was a girl——”

Then she stopped short. Her eyes widened. She stared at them in horror. Finally she found voice. She shrieked:

“Your *clothes*! Merciful goodness! Your *clothes*!”

“They’re a little dirty, Aunt,” agreed Frank.

“*Dirty!*” screamed the lady. “Why, they’re absolutely filthy. Those clean clothes that you just put on yesterday. Look at them! Where have you been? I never saw such a sight—never, in all my born days.”

She sank helplessly into a chair. For a few moments Aunt Gertrude was actually at a loss for words.

This phenomenon did not last long. Aunt Gertrude soon recovered herself. When she did, the boys endured such a tongue-lashing that they could not help but admire their elderly relative's command of language.

"I do my best," she wailed. "I do my level best to keep you two looking like gentlemen, and this is the result. It's no use. Why you haven't driven your poor mother to her grave with worry is more than I can understand. Where *have* you been this night? And what *have* you been doing? Answer me this instant!"

"Catching river thieves, Aunt Gertrude," said Joe meekly.

"Catching river thieves, indeed!" she snorted. "It looks more as if river thieves had been catching you." The good lady had no idea that she had hit the nail upon the head, and the boys looked guilty. "My land! I never saw such a mess. Get along upstairs both of you, and get to bed. I'll attend to those clothes in the morning."

The boys scuttled out of the living room, very glad to be excused, and hastened upstairs before Aunt Gertrude could think of any points she might have overlooked.

"Although I'm mighty sure she didn't overlook anything," sighed Joe, as he prepared for bed. "When it comes to bawling a fellow out, Aunt Gertrude is just about the most thorough and painstaking person that ever lived. Boy, how she did sail into us!"

"A sweet evening," sniffed Frank as he crawled wearily into bed. "Clothes ruined, a calling-down from Aunt Gertrude, and nothing to show for it."

"Well, the river thieves are in jail."

"Not much credit we'll get for that. The police will probably take credit, too, for rescuing us. We've come off second best this time. We haven't learned anything more about the Purdy place, either."

Joe switched off the light.

"I wish I knew the explanation of those terrible screams we heard. I never heard such awful sounds in my life."

Frank was already half-asleep and did not answer.

Next day the explanation of the screams was forthcoming.

Immediately after breakfast, which was hastily consumed to the accompaniment of a running fire of criticism from Aunt Gertrude, the boys made their escape from the house and went downtown to Bayport Police Station. They were eager to learn if the arrest of the two river thieves had led to further developments.

Before they had time to reach the desk sergeant, however, the Hardy boys heard a deep and ponderous voice.

“Well, well! And how are we today?”

They turned and saw Detective Smuff, his thumbs in his vest pockets and a huge cigar in his mouth, standing grandly in the doorway of his office. Detective Smuff was looking unusually well pleased with himself and with the world in general.

“Hello, Mr. Smuff,” said Frank. “What’s new today?”

Smuff delicately flicked the ash from his cigar.

“Oh, everything is so-so,” he observed. “And how are you lads feeling? I bet you were glad to get home and safely into bed last night, hey?”

“Well, we were a little tired. We surely were glad we helped catch those river thieves.”

Detective Smuff grunted. “It was very lucky for you,” he said, “that we caught the river thieves and probably saved your lives.”

“I didn’t see you there, Mr. Smuff,” said Joe innocently.

“I was directing operations,” explained Smuff expansively. “A man can’t be everywhere at once. Yes, it was very lucky we rescued you boys from being kidnapped. Very lucky, indeed. It was a smart stroke of work, if I do say it myself.”

The Hardy boys writhed under Smuff’s air of complacent superiority but they could say nothing. Smuff was enjoying his little moment of triumph to the full.

“The prisoners,” continued Smuff, “have told all.”

“You mean they’ve confessed?” said Joe.

“They have told all,” insisted Smuff. He had read the phrase in a tabloid newspaper and he liked it.

“Were they the fellows who hid the loot in the Purdy place?”

“They were. They confess—they told all. I’ve had my eye on that pair for some time, as a matter of fact, but I couldn’t get enough evidence to warrant an arrest. I just gave them enough rope so they could hang themselves. The case is cleared up. Ho, hum! It’s all in the day’s work.”

Detective Smuff swayed gently on his heels and cocked the cigar at an insufferable angle.

“It seems,” he continued, “that they didn’t know anyone had bought the Purdy place. They didn’t know it was owned by Dalrymple, so they thought they could hide the stolen goods there. The reason they went back last night was to recover some stuff they had hidden in a cupboard.”

“Who screamed, then?” asked Frank. “They ran away because they heard someone scream.”

Detective Smuff smiled a slow, tantalizing smile. “Oh, *that!*” he said. “Oh, yes. I thought that would puzzle you. Of course, I had it figured out all along. But it would puzzle *you*. Indian Tom gave that scream because he saw one of my men looking in one of the windows. He tried to frighten him.”

“Indian Tom screamed!”

“Why, yes. Having Indian blood, it was easy for him to give that particular kind of a war-whoop. It seems he always yelled like that whenever he thought anyone was hanging around the house. It’s called the Indian death yell. Quite simple.”

Detective Smuff smiled sweetly and compassionately upon them.

“Yes,” he said, “the case is cleared up, screams and all. I’m mighty glad we rescued you boys. Next time you’re working on a case you’d better let me know, so we can keep you from getting into trouble.”

This was too much. The boys left the police station furious with anger.

“The big fat bluff!” snorted Joe. “If it hadn’t been for us, they’d have never caught the river thieves, and he knows it.”

“The case isn’t cleared up, either,” said Frank. “If the crooks didn’t know Dalrymple owned the house, then they weren’t responsible for the death threats. We’ve still got that to work on. We’ll show Smuff that he didn’t get halfway to the bottom of the mystery of the Purdy place.”

“You bet we will,” declared Joe warmly.

“Can you imagine it?” said Frank. “Telling us to let him know the next time we’re working on a case, so he can give us a hand when we get into

trouble!”

“It isn’t often he has a chance to put on a few airs like that. Let him enjoy himself. Pride goes before a fall.”

“He laughs best who laughs last,” quoted Frank.

“Just the same, I never thought of that explanation of the death yell. An Indian giving a war-whoop. It was blood-curdling enough, anyway.”

“The Indian didn’t put the messages in the secret room, anyway. I’m certain of that. Let Smuff pat himself on the back. When he learns the whole story of the Purdy house affair, his eyes will pop out.”

CHAPTER XVII

DALRYMPLE'S DOUBLE

“WELL,” said Frank gloomily as they went on down the street, “we’re back at the beginning of the death threat mystery.”

“We’ll solve it, never fear. By the way, it’s strange we haven’t heard from Mr. Dalrymple. It’s been two days since we saw him.”

“Perhaps he’s busy. We won’t bother him until we have some information.”

“Why, there he is right now,” exclaimed Joe in surprise.

“Where?”

“Across the street. Come on, let’s go and talk to him.”

The boys hurried across the road. A stout, red-faced man in a gray suit was strolling along the pavement. He was, as Joe put it, “the living image” of the banker.

“Hello, Mr. Dalrymple,” they said. “We were just talking about you.”

The stout man surveyed them casually.

“I’m sorry, my lads,” he said, “but I don’t know you. And my name isn’t Dalrymple.”

The Hardy boys were astounded. Then they saw that, although the stranger bore a very close resemblance to the banker he was not, as they had at first thought, Mr. Dalrymple himself.

“Case of mistaken identity,” said the stranger easily. “Sorry, boys. I must be on my way.”

Then Joe had an inspiration. He remembered Hurd Applegate’s insistence that Mr. Dalrymple had stolen his stamps, and Dalrymple’s denial that he had ever been in the old collector’s house.

“What did you do with Mr. Applegate’s stamps?” he asked suddenly.

The man looked startled.

“What’s that?” he asked in a sharp tone.

“What did you do with Mr. Applegate’s stamps?”

“Applegate? Who’s he?”

“You went to his house a few days ago and left with part of his stamp collection, didn’t you?”

The stranger hesitated, looking narrowly at Joe. Then he laughed.

“Oh, yes. Now that you mention it, I remember the incident. Why, the old man stayed out of the room so long I thought he had gone to bed. I became tired of waiting for him, so I took the stamps and went away. I sent the stamps to New York to have them examined by an expert. If they’re genuine, I’ll buy them.”

“Mr. Applegate has been worrying,” said Frank, who was suspicious of this plausible stranger. “You should have let him know.”

“It seems to me,” said the man stiffly, “that you boys are intruding in a matter that doesn’t happen to be any of your business. Don’t worry, the old man will get his money, if the deal’s on the level.”

With that Mr. Dalrymple’s double brushed past them and stepped into a car that was standing by the curb.

“But look here,” exclaimed Joe, “you’d better go to Mr. Applegate and explain——”

“He kept me waiting,” replied the stranger, as he slipped in the clutch. “Now it’s his turn to wait. His stamps are safe enough.”

The car glided away.

The boys had been taken by surprise. They did not know just what to do. The man might be telling the truth, yet they had taken an instant dislike to the fellow and they strongly doubted his story. Before they could make a move, however, the car was already in the traffic and rapidly picking up speed.

Frank snatched a pencil and a piece of paper from his pocket. Rapidly he jotted down the license number of the car before it had disappeared from view.

“Well, what do you know about that!” exclaimed Joe in astonishment. “Something queer about him, Frank.”

“I got the car number, anyway. We’ll turn it over to the police. Maybe they can trace him, then.”

“His story was fishy. We’d better tell Mr. Applegate, too.”

“We should have collared him,” said Frank regretfully. “If his conscience was clear, he wouldn’t have run away like that.”

The boys hastily retraced their steps toward the police station and there they reported their encounter with Mr. Dalrymple’s double. At first Chief Collig was inclined to be incredulous, but when Frank produced the license number of the car he agreed to make an effort to trace it down.

They then went to Hurd Applegate’s house. The old stamp collector was downhearted when he learned that the boys had let the quarry slip through their fingers.

“You should have grabbed him! You should have grabbed him and yelled for the police. He’s a thief.”

“Well,” said Frank, “we weren’t exactly sure. He may have been telling the truth.”

“He wasn’t telling the truth,” said Applegate. “I wasn’t out of the room for more than a few minutes. How could he think I had gone to bed? No, he stole those stamps—and now we’ve lost him again.”

“It’s something to know that he was in the city,” Frank pointed out. “Now that the police have his car number, they’ll probably pick him up. He won’t talk them out of it as he did us.”

Hurd Applegate had little faith in the ability of the police to lay their hands on Mr. Dalrymple’s double. The thief, he insisted, would not risk capture a second time.

“He’ll take fright and clear out of the city,” said Applegate. “We’ll never see him again.”

When the Hardy boys left Applegate they decided that Mr. Dalrymple would be interested in knowing of the existence of a double, so they decided to telephone to Lakeside.

When they called up the bank they learned that Mr. Dalrymple had not appeared at the office that day.

“Where is he, then?” asked Frank.

“Couldn’t say, I’m sure,” returned the bank official who answered the telephone. “He hasn’t been here. You might try his house.”

With growing anxiety Frank then put a call through to Mr. Dalrymple’s home. There was no answer.

The operator said:

“I’m sorry, but they don’t answer.”

Frank replaced the receiver and looked blankly at his brother.

“There’s something strange about this,” he muttered.

“I don’t like it,” replied Joe. “Especially when I think of those death threats. We’d better look into it.”

But Frank decided that they had better wait a while.

“Perhaps he’s just out on business. We don’t want to make ourselves look foolish. We’ll telephone during the afternoon, and if we can’t get in touch with him we’ll go to Lakeside and investigate.”

Although the boys called up the bank and the house several times that afternoon they failed to get in touch with Mr. Dalrymple. No one, apparently, had seen him during the day.

At about five o’clock they decided to delay no longer. “Let’s take the car and go to Lakeside,” Frank said. “Maybe he’s dead in his own house.”

They made a quick run to Lakeside and then, after making a number of inquiries, they located the banker’s house. It was a handsome brick residence on one of the fashionable streets of the little city. When the Hardy boys went up the front walk, they noticed that the blinds of the house were drawn.

“Looks as if there’s no one at home,” said Joe.

“Let’s ask that man over beyond the fence.”

An elderly gentleman who probably owned the adjoining property was strolling up and down as he inspected his flower-beds. The boys went over to him.

“Mr. Dalrymple?” he said, when they had inquired about the banker. “His family is away. They went on their vacation last week. Mr. Dalrymple is still in town.”

“That’s strange,” said Frank, “he wasn’t at the bank today.”

“I saw him out on the lawn early this morning. He’s certainly in the city.”

This was sufficient information for the Hardy boys. They thanked the man and went back to their car.

“He was in town this morning and now he has suddenly dropped out of sight without a word to anyone,” said Frank. “I think it’s time we turned this over to the police. For all we know, he may be dead.”

They went directly to the Lakeside police station but it was some time before they could convince the Chief that there was danger that Mr. Dalrymple might have been a victim of foul play. At length, somewhat dubiously, the Chief agreed to search the Dalrymple home.

Darkness was already falling when the police entered the house. The place was searched from cellar to garret.

Everything was in order.

There was no trace of the banker.

“If you boys are makin’ a fool out of me—,” said the Chief threateningly.

By this time the Hardy boys were convinced that something terrible had happened.

“He was here this morning. He hasn’t been at the bank all day. He isn’t in his home. He has received threats against his life,” declared Frank, summing it all up.

“Maybe he’s locked in that room at the Purdy house!” gasped Joe. “Maybe he has been——”

“Don’t say it!” ordered Frank. “We’ll go there and see for ourselves.”

Within a few minutes the roadster was racing out of Lakeside, through the night, back toward the Purdy mansion.

What would they find? What had happened to Mr. Dalrymple?

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE OLD HOUSE

FRANK'S face was tense as he crouched at the wheel of the roadster. Joe huddled beside him.

"Never thought the old bus had so much speed," muttered Joe.

For once Frank ignored the speed limit, and the car responded nobly. The boys raced down the highway, the headlights cutting a vivid gleam through the darkness.

"I thought it was strange that Mr. Dalrymple hadn't called us up," he said.

"We'll hope for the best."

The car shot around a curve. Glaring headlights leaped up before them. Frank held on desperately to the wheel. The approaching car was hugging the wrong side of the road.

A collision seemed imminent.

The other driver acted quickly. At the risk of a wreck Frank brought his automobile close to the ditch just as the approaching car swung across to the center of the road.

The roadster jolted heavily, the right wheels in the grass. Then the other car shot by. Frank brought the car back into the highway, scarcely slackening his speed.

"Close call!"

The car roared on.

They had covered half the distance to Bayport when there came a sharp explosion.

Bang!

A rear tire had blown out.

The car skidded wildly and shot toward a deep ditch. Frank applied the brakes, tugging frantically at the wheel.

The roadster ploughed into the ditch and canted at a steep angle. By skillful maneuvering of the wheel Frank prevented an upset. The car came to a stop.

“That’s that,” said Joe sorrowfully.

They got out, and by the aid of a flashlight inspected the damage. One tire was badly torn.

“That’ll teach us never to come out without a spare,” said Frank.

“The tires are nearly worn out, anyway. We used the spare when we had that puncture last week.”

“That doesn’t help us now. Well, there’s nothing to do but to go in on the rim and get the roadster to the nearest garage.”

Frank and Joe clambered back into the car again. The ditch was deep. The engine roared, the wheels skidded in the dirt. The roadster heaved but remained where it was.

They labored for some time, endeavoring to extricate the car, but in vain.

Another automobile came speeding down the highway, but when the boys stepped out into the road and signalled to it, the driver increased his speed and the car shot past them.

“Probably takes us for highwaymen,” said Joe bitterly.

“I guess we’d better abandon the car and walk to the nearest garage.”

“There’s one comfort—nobody can steal the roadster.”

“Let’s go, then. We’ve lost too much time as it is.”

It was a long and weary walk before the boys came in sight of a garage. When they did, they found that the place was closed, and they lost even more time in arousing the proprietor, who lived nearby, and in persuading him to listen to their story.

“My man has gone home,” he said in an aggrieved voice. “I can’t go out at this hour of night. Wait until morning.”

“We must get back to Bayport right away.”

“Couldn’t you lend us a car?” Joe suggested.

“Not on your life. I don’t know you boys. I’m lending no cars to strangers. Well, I’ll get the wrecker and bring your roadster in. I wish people would learn to have accidents in the daytime, if they must have ’em.”

Even with the assistance of the garage owner, however, it was after midnight before the roadster had been hauled out of the ditch and equipped with a new tire. It took every cent in the boys’ pockets to pay for the service, but that did not worry them as much as the thought that they were already long delayed in their effort to reach the Purdy place.

“It’s going to rain, too,” said Frank, when they were ready to start on their way again.

They heard a distant rumble of thunder—saw a flash of lightning against the black night sky.

“Let it rain,” said Joe. “Step on the gas and let’s be moving.”

Fifteen minutes later the headlights picked out the gates of the Purdy place.

“Do you think there’ll be any police around tonight?” said Joe.

“I don’t think so. They were probably called off the case when the river thieves were arrested.”

The gates were open. The roadster sped up the driveway.

The house was in utter darkness.

The boys parked the car near the front of the building and tried the door. It was locked. They decided to go around to the back.

Rain splashed against their faces as they made their way to the rear of the house. The storm was breaking. Thunder rumbled and muttered ominously overhead.

The back door was locked but Frank had a skeleton key that answered the purpose. The door opened before them.

“Where’s the flashlight?”

“I have it,” said Joe.

Quietly they entered the kitchen.

As they stepped into the room Frank had a distinct feeling that they were not alone. He heard nothing, and in the glare of the flashlight the room was apparently deserted; yet some sixth sense warned him of a human presence.

The boys crossed the kitchen floor softly.

Suddenly Frank heard a rustle.

“What’s that?” he whispered.

“I heard a noise,” returned Joe.

They waited, motionless. Joe swung the flashlight about. They could see no one.

“False alarm.”

They went on toward a door leading out of the kitchen.

Joe, carrying the flashlight, was in the lead.

He stepped across the threshold.

Suddenly the light was blotted out. Frank heard a crash as the flashlight was knocked to the floor. Joe uttered a shout of alarm.

Frank plunged forward.

An arm shot out of the darkness and encircled his throat as he stepped across the threshold. Someone lunged toward him. He struggled desperately.

Attacked in the darkness, both Frank and Joe battled against their unseen assailants. Frank twisted around, managed to get his arms free for a moment, and swung out with both fists. He heard a grunt of pain.

Then the opponent closed with him again, and rushed him back against the wall. His feet were kicked out from under him and he went down with a crash.

The room was in a confusion of thudding and banging as the boys battled to escape. Frank quickly found that he was no match for the man who had attacked him. His arms were roughly seized and twisted behind his back. A length of rope flickered about his wrists.

In spite of all his struggles he was overpowered. His wrists were tightly bound. A rope was wound about his ankles as he kicked wildly in an effort to free himself. He was hauled roughly to his feet and a gag was thrust into his mouth.

“Hold still!” gritted a voice in his ear. “Give in, or it will be the worse for you.”

A moment later he was dragged helplessly into another room and flung into a chair. By the sounds he judged that Joe had also been overpowered

and was being similarly treated.

Outside the storm had broken. There was a continuous roar of thunder. Rain streamed down onto the roof and slapped against the windows.

Bound and helpless, Frank could not help but wonder if they had fallen into the hands of Mr. Dalrymple's enemies.

Perhaps the banker was already dead!

Then, as if to mock him, he heard the steady, solemn ticking of a clock.

"Death while the clock ticks."

He could hear someone moving heavily about the room. Then the footsteps died away.

Frank tried to free himself from the gag but it was firmly bound. What had happened to Joe?

Abruptly lights were turned on in the room.

Frank saw Joe, bound and gagged, in a chair nearby.

They were in the dining room of the house. Before them they could see the grandfather's clock, its huge pendulum swinging slowly to and fro.

Then they heard a horrible, indescribable chuckle.

Through the doorway came an aged man.

He was not only old and bent, with a seamed and yellowish face, and long, stringy gray hair, but had evil little eyes. His wrinkled hands were like the long claws of a bird.

He hobbled toward them, chuckling. Frank felt a wave of horror pass over him.

It was incredible that this aged rascal could have overpowered them, but there was no other person in sight.

The old man surveyed them for a moment, and then he cackled with laughter. His face was sinister.

"You came here to solve the mystery, eh?" croaked the old man.

He chuckled sardonically.

"Well," he went on, in his high-pitched voice, "you are going to solve it. But it will be the end for you."

Then, pointing a skinny finger at the boys, he said menacingly:

“I have given my last warning!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE FATAL HOUR

THE HARDY boys stared in horror at the old man. There was a wild light in his eyes.

They had fallen into the hands of a madman, trapped in this lonely house!

“Is all in readiness?” their captor called out loudly.

He turned and faced the huge clock.

Then, to the amazement of the boys, the door of the clock opened. A man stepped out. He was a beetle-browed, sullen-featured rascal. He was followed by another who, at first glance, appeared to be Mr. Dalrymple himself.

Then the boys saw that the second man was the banker’s double, the man whom they had accosted on the street.

The door of the clock swung open, and beyond it they could see a recess in the wall.

The clock, then, was an opening to a secret room.

“Good!” chuckled the old man when the pair stepped into the room.

“They don’t look quite so lively now, Amos,” chuckled the man who looked like Dalrymple.

“That’ll teach ’em to come snooping around where they’ve no business to be,” growled the other.

The old man, who had been addressed as Amos, rubbed his hands together and leered evilly.

“You are ready?” he said to his companions. “You have the equipment and the wiring?”

“All set. Ready to connect.”

The old man chuckled again. "Our party is not yet complete," he said. "There is one more to come. But he will be here. The trap is awaiting him."

"Blow the whole place sky-high!" said Dalrymple's double.

"Yes, Jensen! Blow the whole place sky-high," said Amos eagerly. "There is enough high explosive to wipe this house off the face of the earth."

The Hardy boys felt a thrill of horror. That some diabolical plot was in preparation seemed obvious.

"You are wondering, eh?" cackled Amos. "You are wondering what fate is in store for you! Ha! Well, I'll tell you."

He came closer to them, his little eyes shining with cruelty.

"It is *death!*"

Then he broke into a fit of high, cackling laughter, hugging himself with glee.

"Death!" he repeated. "Death to those who spy on me and try to spoil my revenge! Death to those who stand in my path!"

Jensen, in the meantime, was dragging a bulky object from the recess beyond the clock. The boys gazed at it, fascinated.

The object was a black box and was apparently heavy. Jensen carried it gingerly across the room and placed it on the floor in front of the boys.

The madman gestured toward it.

"Do you know what that is, my curious lads?" he asked. "Do you know? It is a bomb!"

"Let's get busy," said Jensen gruffly. With the help of the other man he became busy with a coil of wire.

"There is time yet," said the madman. "It is not yet two o'clock. However, attach the bomb."

The purpose of the men then became apparent. The bomb was to be connected to the mechanism of the clock, so that it would be set off at a certain time.

"Clever, is it not?" said the old man. "I perfected the idea myself. Ah, the days I have spent working on that little invention. You boys should feel honored. You will be the first to experience its overwhelming power."

While his companions worked at the wiring the old man drew up a chair and sat down.

“I shall tell you my story,” he said. “I shall tell you my story *while the clock ticks!*”

Then began the strangest and most terrible ordeal the Hardy boys had ever endured. With Jensen and the other man calmly attaching the wires to the infernal machine before them, they were forced to sit helplessly by while the old madman related a rambling and incoherent story.

“As you will see,” he told them, “I am an inventor. I invented that bomb. I invented the attachment that enables me to set it off when the proper time comes.” He chuckled. “I have invented other things that have been in use in this house.”

“It was Banker Dalrymple,” he continued suddenly. “Dalrymple was the cause of my ruin. My entire fortune was lost because of him. He robbed me. Took every cent I had in the world. And he shall pay.”

The old man’s face was livid with hatred and wrath.

“All I needed was another five hundred dollars and I would have perfected the invention that would have made my fortune. But Dalrymple wouldn’t lend me the money. A wretched five hundred dollars—all that stood between me and success. He wouldn’t lend it.

“What happened? I became discouraged. I became sick. I was sick for a long, long time. When I got better I found that I had forgotten all the details of my marvelous invention. I had lost the plans. I could not go on with my work.”

He gestured abruptly to the other men, who had finished their task by this time.

“You may go now. It is not yet two o’clock. There is still time.”

“All right, Amos,” said Jensen gruffly. “I guess you can entertain those boys better than we can.”

He left the room with his evil-featured companion.

“I could not go on with my invention,” cried the old man wildly. “My work of years had been forgotten. And who was to blame? Dalrymple! All for the sake of five hundred dollars. He said he had lent me too much money without seeing any result. Bah! A mere three thousand dollars. Another five

hundred would have made a fortune for us both. He'll regret it. I mean to see that he regrets it. Already I have made him suffer. He'll suffer more!"

The boys could make little of the old fellow's ravings save that he had some real or fancied grievance against Mr. Dalrymple, but there was no mistaking the madman's earnestness. Hatred blazed from his wild eyes whenever he mentioned the banker's name.

"I'll make him pay!" he snarled. "I have warned him and he has paid no attention to my warnings. The time has come to strike."

This, reflected Frank, could mean only one thing.

Dalrymple was still alive.

Where was he? A prisoner in this house? Frank wished he could rid himself of the gag. If he could only talk he might argue the madman out of his fiendish plan. As it was, they were completely at the mercy of this lunatic.

The old man got up from his chair and paced across the room.

"For years I worked. All my work went for nothing. All because of Dalrymple. The man who ruined my life and cost me a fortune. Ah! Wait until he faces me. Wait until he knows the revenge I have in store for him. He'll beg for mercy. Mercy!" The madman laughed harshly. "He had no mercy when he refused me the money that would have meant success."

He pointed to the infernal machine in the floor.

"You see that?" he shouted. "It's a bomb. A deadly bomb. Filled with high explosive. It is attached to the clock. When the hands of the clock reach the appointed hour there will be an electric contact. The bomb will explode. You two and Dalrymple will all go up in smoke.

"You thought you were clever," he sneered. "Prowling around, snooping around this house trying to solve the mystery. You weren't clever enough to outwit me. I watched every move of the game."

Then he regarded the bomb intently.

"Might as well make a thorough job of it," he said.

The old man vanished through the aperture in the clock and went into the secret recess beyond. He returned in a few moments with a heavy can and a small bag. He placed the bag on the floor, unscrewed the stopper of the can and went about the room, slopping liquid on the floor.

Instantly Frank and Joe became aware of the pungent odor of gasoline.

“There will be no trace, you see,” chuckled the madman. “The bomb will explode, the gasoline will catch fire. The house will be destroyed. There will be nothing left. No one can ever charge me with murder because no one will know that you died here.”

The Hardy boys were frozen with horror. They watched as the old man picked up the bag and began scattering the contents about the floor.

The bag contained gunpowder.

“This will do the trick,” he chuckled. “In five minutes from the time the bomb explodes, this house will be a raging furnace.”

He tossed the empty bag aside and looked at the clock.

“Not quite two o’clock,” he said reflectively. “There is still work to be done. The best part of my revenge is yet to come. Dalrymple! We must have him here.”

Dalrymple, then, was not yet in the madman’s clutches. Frank and Joe wondered how he planned to get the banker to the house.

“Three o’clock is the fatal hour,” said the old man. “You have a little more than one hour to live. When the hands of the clock point to three you shall both die and Dalrymple shall die with you.”

Then he strode across the room.

“I shall summon him now. I shall invite him to his death.”

CHAPTER XX

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

THEN, for the first time, the boys saw that there was a telephone on a table in one corner of the room.

Their captor picked up the instrument. In a moment he was speaking to the operator, asking for a number in Lakeside.

While he was waiting for the call to be put through he turned to the Hardy boys.

“Now,” he said, “you will hear something very clever. Little does Dalrymple know what is in store for him.”

After a while the boys heard a voice from the receiver. It was so clear and distinct that they recognized it as Dalrymple’s loud voice, saying: “Hello! Hello! Who’s this?”

The madman grinned. Then he said calmly:

“Mr. Dalrymple? This is Frank Hardy speaking.”

The Hardy boys were rigid with surprise. The madman had imitated Frank’s voice perfectly!

That the deception fooled Mr. Dalrymple was evident.

They heard the banker’s reply:

“Yes? Frank Hardy? You were looking for me today, weren’t you? I was out of town. What’s the trouble?”

“No trouble at all, Mr. Dalrymple,” said the lunatic, still imitating Frank’s voice. “In fact, we’ve good news.”

Mr. Dalrymple’s answer was indistinguishable.

“Yes, good news. We have solved the mystery. We have cleared it all up.”

“Good! What have you learned?”

“We need you here,” said the old man. “We’re at the Purdy house. My brother is with me.”

“It’s late,” objected Dalrymple. “Why, it’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“We need you. Come to the Purdy house at once and you shall learn everything. This is very urgent.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then the boys clearly heard the banker’s voice again.

“All right, boys. If you want me, I’ll come. I’ll be there within half an hour.”

“Very well, Mr. Dalrymple,” said the madman triumphantly. “You’ll find a big surprise in store for you.”

He replaced the receiver and burst into a fiendish cackle of laughter.

“A surprise in store for him!” he gasped. “A surprise, indeed.”

He strode across the room again, still chuckling with glee at the success of his ruse. Dalrymple had been completely deceived by the lunatic’s clever imitation of Frank’s voice.

“He will come. He will be here within half an hour, he said. When he comes he will find that I have kept my promise. He will find a big surprise in store for him.”

Rubbing his hands together with delight the lunatic went on:

“When he comes, I shall meet him as I met you. He will be bound and gagged. We’ll put him in a chair and you shall all sit together to listen to the clock tick your doom!”

Then, with another high cackle of laughter, the old man went out. They heard him going upstairs.

Immediately the Hardy boys tried to free themselves from the ropes. The clock struck two. They had only an hour, and the old madman and his companions might return at any moment.

They were stifled by the gags. The ropes chafed their wrists and ankles.

Silently they struggled.

Frank had a knife in his pocket. If he could only reach it there was a chance that he might cut through his bonds.

His hands were bound behind his back. He extended his fingers, groping for his hip pocket. For a time he was unable to reach it.

At last, however, by dint of shifting his body, his fingers touched the top of the pocket. Then, by grasping the cloth and drawing it toward him he brought the knife nearer.

Once he actually touched it but it fell back into the pocket again.

Joe, on his part, was trying to loosen the ropes about his wrists but they had been tightly and expertly tied.

Frank patiently struggled for possession of the knife.

At length he was rewarded. He held the knife between two fingers. A quick gesture and he had it in his hand.

The problem then was to open it.

He broke his fingernails on the stubborn blade. Time and again he thought it was about to open but in his cramped position he could not get a firm grip on the knife and each time it slipped away again.

Finally he felt the blade slowly begin to give. It slipped free.

Then, to his horror, he heard that familiar cackling laugh again.

The old madman stood in the doorway.

“I have been watching this,” said the lunatic. “You seem to be struggling. Perhaps you have a knife. I should have thought of that.”

He strode across the room.

With a quick movement he reached down behind Frank’s back. He seized the knife and held it up.

“Ah!” he said quietly. “I thought so. A knife. And open. If I had not watched you I might have been cheated out of my revenge.”

He folded up the knife and slipped it into his own pocket. Then he went over to Joe and searched his pockets.

Joe, too, had a knife which he had been unable to reach, but the madman took this from him, too.

“Now,” he chuckled, “you are welcome to try to escape. I think you will find those ropes too much for you. The man who tied you up was once a sailor and it is a sailor’s business to tie knots securely.”

Chuckling to himself, the old man went away again.

Frank and Joe were discouraged. Just when success seemed imminent their captor had wrecked their hopes. Frank sank back despairingly. There seemed to be no escape.

Outside they could hear the rattle and roar of thunder. Occasionally the whole room was illuminated by a vivid flash of lightning. Rain was pouring on the roof, splattering against windows. The wind was moaning about the old house.

The clock ticked steadily.

Fascinated they watched the hands of the great clock. It was now almost fifteen minutes to three.

“*We must escape,*” said Frank to himself.

If they were still bound and helpless when Dalrymple reached the house in response to that fake summons, he would be captured and tied up to await the horrible doom that the old lunatic had prepared.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock. . . .

Every passing second brought them nearer to the end.

The heavy bomb rested grimly on the floor, almost at their feet.

Suddenly they heard a faint rustle, the noise of something tapping against glass.

Frank looked at the side window.

His heart gave a sudden leap of hope.

Pressed dimly against the streaming glass he saw a human face.

When he looked again the face had disappeared.

He looked at Joe. From his brother’s expression it was plain that he, too, had seen that ghostly face pressed against the window.

Then it returned again.

A pair of wild, haggard eyes, a white face distorted by the glass. They saw the expression of utter amazement.

It was a familiar face, but in all their wildest expectations it was the face of the last man they might have expected to see at the Purdy house at this time.

It disappeared again.

Then they heard a scraping noise at the sash. The window was slowly raised.

There was a gust of rain. The heavy drops streamed through the open window. They saw a pair of lean hands on the sill.

A man crawled into the room. He stared at them, bewildered.

“What are you doing here?” he cried. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Frank struggled desperately, trying to make him understand, but the gag muffled his words.

The hands of the clock crept on. It was now five minutes to three.

“What is it? What’s happened?” demanded the newcomer helplessly.

The man was Hurd Applegate.

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE ROOF

HURD APPLGATE, the eccentric old stamp collector, was never a quick thinking man at best and now he seemed quite helpless in the face of the strange situation he had encountered.

Frank struggled desperately.

The hands of the clock were creeping closer to the fatal hour.

“I can’t understand this,” said Applegate, coming closer. “Who tied you up? How do you come to be here?”

With a violent wrench of his head Frank suddenly slipped the gag.

“Quick, Mr. Applegate!” he said. “Cut these ropes. Set us free!”

“Why, of course,” returned the old man as he groped, with maddening slowness, for his pocket-knife. “How did this happen?”

He opened the knife and slashed the ropes that bound Frank.

Without waiting to explain, Frank plunged wildly toward the clock.

It was one minute to three.

He wrenched at the wires leading to the infernal machine.

The wires were tightly secured. For a moment they resisted his efforts. Furiously he tugged at them.

Suddenly they came loose. He tore the wires from the mechanism of the clock.

Joe was already free. He leaped forward. Frank leaned against the wall in his relief.

“No danger now,” he said weakly.

“What have you done?” demanded Applegate, blankly. “What are those wires?”

“If he hadn’t torn those wires loose,” said Joe, “we’d have been blown to pieces in another minute.”

Then solemnly the great clock struck three.

Frank sprang toward the telephone.

“Mr. Dalrymple isn’t here yet. If we’re caught, the old man may try to have his revenge yet.”

He rattled the receiver. There was no answering voice of the operator. Frank tried again and again.

Still no answer.

The telephone was dead.

In a few words Joe explained the situation to Hurd Applegate. The old stamp collector’s first impulse, after one wild and frightened glance at the bomb, was to bolt toward the window, but the boys held him back and assured him that the danger was past.

“But these men,” stammered Applegate. “They are still near the house. They will be coming back. We’d better get out of here while we can.”

“No,” objected Frank. “Capture them, if it’s possible. If they fail this time, they’ll try again. Besides, we can’t run away now. If Mr. Dalrymple comes here, they’ll kill him.”

“That’s right,” Joe agreed. “We must stay on the job.”

Hurd Applegate, it was evident, did not relish the idea of remaining in the house when he had learned of the murderous plot that had so nearly claimed the lives of the Hardy boys.

“Why, these men must be crazy!” he exclaimed.

“One of them is, at any rate,” remarked Joe. “By the way, one of his friends is the man who stole your stamps.”

Applegate’s face brightened.

“He’s here? The man who looked so much like Dalrymple?”

“The same. Only his name appears to be Jensen.”

“I knew the stamps were in this house,” said Applegate, “but I had no idea the thief would be here too. Where is he? We must catch him and turn him over to the police.”

Frank went quietly to the door and peered out into the hall.

“We’ll have to go easy,” he said. “If they know we’re free, we’ll have a fight on our hands.”

“Can you hear them?” asked Joe.

“Not a sound.”

Frank went out into the hall. Silently the others followed.

They went up the stairs. The house was so quiet that they could still hear the ticking of the big clock in the dining room.

“I wonder where they’ve gone,” whispered Frank.

“Perhaps they got frightened and cleared out,” his brother suggested.

“I don’t think so. They’re up to some mischief somewhere. Perhaps waiting for Mr. Dalrymple.”

When they reached the first landing, however, they heard a distant voice. It came from somewhere above them and it proved that the conspirators had not left the house, at any rate.

Cautiously they examined several of the rooms, but although they heard the voice again from time to time they saw no sign of the old man or his companions.

“Upstairs, perhaps,” suggested Applegate.

They made their way to the next landing.

Here they had no better luck. Once they heard a harsh cackle of laughter. Unmistakably it was the madman’s laugh.

“We’ll try the garret.”

To the upper floor of the house they went in the darkness. The attic was ghostly and bare.

“I can’t understand it,” said Frank. “We heard the old man laugh. Where is he?”

Joe ventured over to one of the garret windows. He looked out, then suddenly called to the others:

“Here! Come quick!”

They hurried to the window. When they looked out they saw a puzzling sight.

The window overlooked a flat roof that covered part of the house lower than the rest. Out on this roof, in the dim light, they could distinguish a human figure.

“What’s he doing?” whispered Frank, puzzled.

The figure was engaged in some mysterious activity near the chimney. They could see him moving about, finally reaching over the chimney top and peering inside.

There was a sudden flash of lightning.

In the vivid glare they could see the man quite clearly.

It was the old lunatic.

In that fleeting moment they saw that he was grasping one end of a long cord, with which he was lowering something down the chimney.

“Another bomb!” gasped Applegate. “He means to blow the whole house up. We’ll be killed.”

They were undecided whether to run or to stay.

Then, from far below, from somewhere among the trees back of the house, they caught a gleam of light. It appeared for only an instant, then vanished.

It was seen by the old man.

They heard him mutter something. He waited beside the chimney for a moment, listening.

In the distance the boys heard a rumble of wheels. A car was coming down the driveway.

“Mr. Dalrymple!” said Joe tensely.

The headlights of the approaching automobile shone on the wet trees and bushes. There was a squeal of brakes as the car came to a stop.

The old man suddenly tied the end of the rope around the chimney. He advanced across the roof. The boys could just see his dim figure as he approached the edge and peered over. He waited there for a while, then suddenly ran along the edge of the roof.

There was another flash of lightning.

They could see the old man distinctly as he ran along the edge. The lightning revealed a small pool of water in his path. The old man saw it—

but he was too late.

His feet slipped on the treacherous ledge. He flung up his arms and staggered.

They heard a wild cry of fear.

From below the boys heard a shout of warning.

The old man had lost his balance. He toppled over the edge and disappeared.

The Hardy boys were speechless with horror. The roof was high from the ground, two stories up. Death could be the only outcome of such a fall.

Then, from a window nearby, they saw a dark figure emerge. He dropped to the lower roof. He was followed by another. The two ran across the roof, peered over the edge. The boys could hear them talking hoarsely to each other.

The two men ran back, scrambled through an open window nearby, and disappeared.

Down below, in the house, they could hear a thudding of feet.

“Come on!” shouted Frank, wheeling about.

He raced across the garret to the head of the stairs. Joe was close at his heels. Hurd Applegate, panting, stumbled in pursuit.

They raced down the three flights to the ground floor of the house. Frank wrenched open the front door and they fled outside, then around to the back.

Thunder was still rolling ominously in the sky. Lightning still flashed. A weird gleam showed them the figures of two men picking up a limp, moaning figure.

Jensen and his companion were hunched over the form of their mad master.

“Get away from here!” snarled Jensen as they rushed up. “Can’t you see he’s nearly dead?”

“Carry him into the house,” snapped the other man. “I guess there ain’t much hope for him.”

There was a rush of running footsteps. Around the corner of the house came half a dozen men. The boys caught the glint of brass buttons on police uniforms.

“Arrest those men!” cried a voice.

It was Dalrymple, the banker.

Jensen, his double, faced him as the police crowded around.

“What’s happened here?” demanded one of the officers.

“Wait till we carry the old man in,” growled Jensen. “He’s given his last warning. He’s almost dead.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE PLOT FOR VENGEANCE

GUARDED by police, the two men were herded back into the house. They carried the old man gently, for it was obvious that he did not have long to live. He was taken into the room of the ticking clock—that same room that had so nearly seen the death of the Hardy boys.

When Mr. Dalrymple saw the boys he was openly astonished.

“You here?” he exclaimed.

“Didn’t you expect to find us here?” asked Frank. “The old man telephoned to you, imitating my voice, asking you to come.”

“I knew you weren’t speaking,” returned the banker. “The voice didn’t sound exactly like yours over the telephone. I suspected a plot, so I came here at once, picking up the police on the way. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Frank told him all that had happened, from the time he and Joe thought the banker had come to some harm and decided to search the Purdy place, to the moment they saw the old man topple from the roof.

“Why, he must be mad!” exclaimed the banker. “But why did he try to trap me here, too? I can’t understand that.”

As yet, Mr. Dalrymple had not seen the injured man closely. Now he crowded past the policemen who were trying to render first aid and gazed into the face of the lunatic.

“Amos Wandy!” he exclaimed in amazement.

The old man’s eyes flickered. He looked up at the banker.

“Ah!” he said quietly. “So you came!”

“It was you!” cried Dalrymple. “It was you who threatened my life.”

The old man nodded weakly.

“Well,” returned the banker, “you carried out your threats to try to avenge yourself on me but I tell you now, as I told you all along, that I have never wronged you.”

Amos Wandy sighed.

“I know it,” he said humbly. “My brain is clear now. I am going to die. I am sorry for what I have done. I thought you had robbed me and I wanted to pay you back.”

“I think he’d better be moved to the hospital right away, sir,” said one of the policemen. “He’s in bad shape.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the old man. “I’m going to die. It doesn’t matter where. All I want is to be at peace with the world. I have wronged you, Dalrymple, and I’m sorry for it. You know I haven’t been responsible for my actions. I’ve been a sick man. I think I must have been crazy.”

“You left the death messages?”

“Yes. And I planned to have my revenge on you tonight.”

“Say!” demanded one of the policemen. “What’s all this about death messages and revenge? I don’t understand it.”

Mr. Dalrymple did not explain at the time, however.

“It will all come out later,” he said. “Take good care of poor Wandy. He’s a distant relative of mine. An inventor. He hasn’t been quite sane for a long time.”

He called the Hardy boys to one side.

“This has been a terrible shock, boys. I never once thought of Amos Wandy. Poor fellow, I didn’t even know he was in this part of the country. I haven’t heard of him for years.”

“Why did he want to avenge himself on you?” asked Joe.

“It’s a long story. The poor fellow was a very clever inventor in his day. But he was impractical. He made a great deal of money but he didn’t know how to use it wisely. I, being a banker, was asked to look after some of his affairs.”

“He told us,” said Frank, “that you lost him a fortune because you wouldn’t lend him some money.”

Dalrymple shook his head.

“He never asked for a loan of money. There was no need. He always had plenty of money, although in late years his fortune had dwindled. He blamed me for that.”

“Why?”

“I had been handling his affairs, investing his money wisely, as I thought. But with the collapse of a big bond house in New York the greater part of Amos Wandy’s fortune was lost at one blow. It wasn’t my fault, as you see. In fact, I lost considerable money myself in that wreck.”

“He should have understood that it wasn’t your fault,” Frank said.

“It was unfortunate, but the affair happened at a time when the man’s nerves were in bad shape from overwork. He had always been high-strung and eccentric, and with the loss of his money he suffered a complete breakdown. He was committed to a sanitarium, and I did not know that he was not there now.”

“Poor old chap,” remarked Joe sympathetically.

“He used to come to me, asking for the loan of money to finish an invention he was working on. He still had some money in the bank and there was no need for the loan. Somehow he blamed me for the loss of his fortune and when I tried to explain to him that he could still draw on his account, he would become enraged and insist that he was ruined. Moreover, he claimed I had ruined him. There came a time when he even threatened my life and swore he would get even with me.”

“What did you do?” asked Frank.

“Fortunately, I did not have to do anything. Amos Wandy was put in a sanitarium. I have not heard anything of him for years. As a matter of fact, I had almost completely forgotten him. That’s why it never occurred to me that he might be at the bottom of the death threats.”

“By the way,” exclaimed Frank, “speaking of the death threats, I think I know how that was managed.”

“How?”

“Come with me.”

The police had sent to Bayport for an ambulance to take Amos Wandy to the hospital. They were waiting quietly. Jensen, the man who looked like Dalrymple, was in handcuffs, as was his companion.

Frank left the room, followed by his brother and the banker. He went upstairs until he reached a room overlooking the roof from which the mad inventor had fallen.

“I couldn’t imagine what he was doing out on this roof,” said Frank, “but I think I’ve hit on the explanation. When you said he was an inventor it flashed into my mind.”

Frank scrambled out onto the roof. The others followed, somewhat mystified.

He went directly over to the chimney where Amos Wandy had been so mysteriously engaged when they saw him from the attic window. The rope was still tied about the chimney-top.

“What room is immediately under this part of the roof, Mr. Dalrymple?”

The banker reflected for a moment. Then his face lighted up.

“Why, the secret room!” he explained.

“I thought so,” replied Frank. “This chimney leads to the fireplace in the secret room, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll see what the old man was doing with this rope. I have an idea it will explain the death threats.”

He tugged at the rope. Then he became aware of two wires running from a small object at the top of the chimney. The object was a storage battery.

“I think we’ve solved it!” declared Frank excitedly.

He drew up an object at the end of the rope.

It was a device resembling a little wagon, on wheels, with a trap-like contrivance at one end. In the mouth of this trap they saw a slip of paper.

Frank plucked the paper free. In the glow of a flashlight they read the words:

“There will be no more warnings. Your death is at hand.”

Mr. Dalrymple gasped.

He pointed to the little electric wagon.

“This was the death messenger!”

Frank was examining the wires leading from the little device to the storage battery.

“It’s small enough to be lowered down the chimney and past the bars. Once it reached the floor it could be controlled by the wires. I’m sure that’s the way it worked. Mr. Dalrymple, can you get into the secret room now?”

“Yes. The time lock was set for some time early this evening.”

“Will you go down there with Joe and see if that’s the way it worked? I’ll try it from up here.”

Mr. Dalrymple and Joe lost no time making their way into the house and down into the secret chamber. Everything in the room was as they had last seen it.

There was a rustling and scraping in the chimney. Then the little car came into view, dangling at the end of the rope. It swung to and fro, finally settling in the fireplace.

Then it began to move. With uncanny speed it rolled across the floor. In the centre of the room it stopped.

Frank had replaced the slip of paper in the jaws of the trap. The mouth of the trap opened. The message fluttered to the floor.

Then the car was drawn back toward the fireplace again. In a moment it disappeared from view as Frank hauled it back up the chimney.

“What a scheme!” breathed Joe admiringly.

“No wonder we were puzzled!” exclaimed the banker. “No one ever came into the room at all.”

In a few minutes Frank entered the chamber. When he saw the message lying in the middle of the room he beamed with gratification.

“It worked!”

“I’ll say it worked!” answered Joe. “Why, that little machine is almost human. It came scuttling across the floor, left the message, then went back up the chimney.”

“It was all controlled by the wires,” Frank explained.

“We must give the old man credit,” said Joe. “Even if he was out of his mind, he was mighty smart.”

“Smart enough to fool us, at any rate,” agreed Dalrymple.

Outside they heard the wail of a siren as a car rolled up the driveway.

“There’s the ambulance,” said Joe. “They’re going to take the old man away. Let’s go back downstairs.”

When they reached the landing they encountered a wild-eyed, anxious figure. It was Hurd Applegate, whom they had almost forgotten.

“I can’t find them!” declared Applegate. “I’ve hunted and hunted, but I can’t find them. I’m sure they’re in this house.”

“Can’t find what?” asked Mr. Dalrymple.

“My stamps. I’m sure they’re here.”

Hurd Applegate seemed greatly upset. His precious stamps meant more to him than anything else.

Then Frank remembered Jensen, Mr. Dalrymple’s double, who was in handcuffs downstairs.

“We’ll get the stamps,” he said.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MISSING STAMPS

“YOU know where they are?” cried Applegate in excitement. “Then get them for me. Don’t delay another instant. I must have my stamps!”

Frank was hurrying downstairs.

In the lower hall the policemen were carrying Amos Wandy out to the ambulance.

The old man was speaking querulously:

“It’s no use,” he said. “Leave me here. I’m dying and I know it. Leave me here to die in peace.”

One of the officers brought up the rear, with Jensen and the other man safely shackled.

“Just a minute,” said Frank, stopping the policeman. “We’d like a word with one of these men.”

“Go ahead,” said the officer.

He brought the prisoners back into the living room.

Hurd Applegate pointed a trembling finger at Jensen.

“You stole my stamps!” he accused. “Where did you hide them?”

Jensen looked sullen.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Frank stepped forward.

“When we met you on the street and asked you about those stamps you said you had sent them to an expert.”

“That’s so.”

“I don’t believe it. You hid those stamps somewhere and we want them.”

“Try to find them,” retorted Jensen impudently.

The policeman glowered at him.

“Look here, you!” snapped the officer. “If you stole any stamps from this gentleman you’d better open up and tell where you put ’em, or it’ll be the worse for you.”

“I burned them,” said Jensen.

Hurd Applegate uttered a wail of anguish.

“You destroyed my stamps!” he cried. “My precious stamps! They can never be replaced.”

Then Jensen’s companion spoke up.

“That’s a lie,” he said. “He didn’t burn them. They’re right here in this house.”

Jensen turned on him furiously.

“Shut up!” he snarled. “Don’t tell them anything!”

“The stamps are of no use to you now,” returned the other. “They might as well know where they are.”

“Where? Where?” cried Hurd Applegate eagerly. “Where did you hide them?”

Jensen’s companion pointed toward the huge grandfather’s clock.

“In there,” he told them.

Joe sprang toward the clock. He stepped through the opening into the recess in the wall beyond.

Jensen leaped at his companion in a rage but the policeman stepped between them.

“None of that!” he growled.

Joe looked quickly about the tiny room. It was littered with wires and fragments of machinery. In the corner he saw a small black box. He sprang toward it and raised the lid.

There he found the stamps!

There were not only the stamps stolen from Hurd Applegate’s collection but many others, on sheets, and in tattered envelopes.

“Have you found them?” demanded Applegate, who had rushed into the room behind him. “Are they safe?”

“Safe and sound.”

Applegate snatched them up.

“My stamps!” he exclaimed. “At last. And I thought I had lost them forever. But what are these?” he said, pointing at the other stamps in the box. “These aren’t mine.”

“He must have stolen them somewhere else.”

“Sure he did!” shouted Jensen’s companion. “He was always stealin’ stamps. Picked them up whenever he could.”

“It’s a lie!” stormed Jensen.

“I guess that boxful of stamps is evidence enough against you,” said the policeman.

Hurd Applegate’s delight was pathetic. Nothing mattered to him but the fact that his beloved stamps were again in his possession.

“That’s killing two birds with one stone,” said Frank gleefully. “Two mysteries cleared up in one night.”

“I’ll certainly rest easier after this,” confessed Mr. Dalrymple.

“And I!” declared Hurd Applegate. “I haven’t had a wink of sleep since my stamps were stolen. Tonight something came over me that seemed to tell me the stamps were in this house. I knew the man must have hidden them here the night I followed him from my own place.”

“Lucky thing for us that you obeyed the impulse and came here,” said Joe. “We’d have been blown to pieces within another five minutes.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that,” whined Jensen. “I tried to talk him out of making that bomb but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“You didn’t try to stop him,” Frank reminded the fellow.

“We didn’t dare. He might have killed us if we’d turned against him.”

“Tell it to the judge,” advised the policeman briefly. He turned to the Hardy boys. “Are you finished with him?”

“We’ve found the stamps. That’s all we wanted.”

“Good! Come along then, you two.” The officer hustled the pair out of the dining room and into the waiting patrol wagon.

Mr. Dalrymple, Hurd Applegate and the Hardy boys went outside, Applegate still babbling with delight because his stamps had been

recovered. He shook Frank and Joe by the hand repeatedly.

“I owe it all to you lads,” he assured them. “It isn’t the first time you’ve helped me. I shan’t forget this, never fear.”

“I’ll drive you all home,” volunteered Mr. Dalrymple. “I don’t think the police have anything more to do here.”

A burly sergeant assured him that the house could be locked up.

“What with river thieves and crazy men and stamp thieves, I don’t think the old joint has any more crooks hiding inside,” he said.

The lights were turned out. The patrol wagon and the ambulance had gone clanging back into town. Mr. Dalrymple locked the door of the old mansion.

“Perhaps now,” he said cheerfully, “I’ll be able to enjoy my ownership of the place in peace.”

Mr. Dalrymple’s car was parked in the driveway but the Hardy boys assured him that their own roadster was nearby and that they would drive Hurd Applegate home.

“Very well, then,” he said. “I’ll come to Bayport and see you tomorrow. I suppose the police will want explanations about poor Amos Wandy.”

It was the opinion of the Hardy boys, as they discussed the night’s thrilling adventures after they left Hurd Applegate at his home, that there would be no need of police action in the case of the mad inventor.

“He won’t live until morning,” said Frank.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOME-COMING

WHEN MR. and Mrs. Fenton Hardy returned to Bayport unexpectedly a week later, it did not take them long to learn that their boys had been involved in another mystery.

The taxi-driver they engaged to drive them from the depot grinned as he touched his cap.

“Good day, Mrs. Hardy. How are you, Mr. Hardy? Been away on a vacation? You’re lookin’ well.”

“Yes, we’ve been up in the woods,” returned the detective. “Drive us up to the house. How are things in Bayport?”

“Quiet, as usual,” said the man as he stowed away the baggage. “Your lads provided the most excitement.”

Mr. and Mrs. Hardy exchanged glances.

“What have they been up to now?” asked Mrs. Hardy apprehensively.

“Oh, makin’ a name for theirselves,” the driver assured them as the car started off. “Solved another big mystery, I understand. There’s been plenty about it in the papers.”

Fenton Hardy chuckled.

“It seems I can’t leave town for a week or so but they must set up in business on their own account.”

When the car halted in front of the Hardy home they saw Frank and Joe sitting on the veranda with Aunt Gertrude and a stranger.

“Dad!” yelled Frank.

“Mother!” shouted Joe.

The boys raced down the steps.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” they demanded after the first greetings.

“Just wanted to surprise you,” laughed Fenton Hardy.

They went up to the house. Aunt Gertrude was bustling about.

“My land!” she exclaimed. “This is a nice howdy-do! The very first day I haven’t done all the dusting *would* be the day you’d pick to walk in and surprise me. Yet something seemed to tell me you’d be home today. I mentioned it at breakfast. I said to the boys, I said, ‘I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if they came home today.’ Didn’t I?”

She appealed to the boys for corroboration of this remarkable prophecy.

“You said that every morning,” returned Joe.

“Joe Hardy, I never did!”

“Never mind,” said Mr. Hardy. “The point is—we’re back. And now I’d like to be introduced to this gentleman, if you don’t mind.”

He indicated the plump, red-faced man who had been with the others on the veranda.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Frank. “Dad, this is Mr. Dalrymple.”

“Very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hardy,” said the banker, as he shook hands. “I’ve heard a great deal about you. As a matter of fact, I called around to see you some days ago. I wanted you to handle a case for me.”

“Well,” replied Mr. Hardy, “I’m back from my vacation and ready to go to work again. Suppose you step inside and tell me about it.”

Mr. Dalrymple laughed heartily.

“There’s nothing to tell now,” he declared. “The case is all cleared up.”

Fenton Hardy looked at his sons.

“Taking my cases, eh?” he said.

“I don’t think you could have done better yourself, Mr. Hardy,” said Mr. Dalrymple.

Aunt Gertrude sniffed.

“Stuff and nonsense! They bungled it from start to finish. Just sheer luck that they got out of the mess alive. If they had even come to me once—just once—I could have given them a word of advice——”

“I have no doubt of that, Madam,” said Mr. Dalrymple. Aunt Gertrude looked at him suspiciously, thinking she detected a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

“I could have given them advice,” she continued, “and the case would have been cleared up in half the time.”

Frank and Joe were open-mouthed at this remark.

“But from the first,” Aunt Gertrude went on, “they simply would not come to me for a word of advice. Not they. They had to go their own gait and blunder along in their own way. Blunder they did until they blundered into a fix where they might have been blown sky-high. Why, if it hadn’t been for old Mr. Applegate, who really solved the whole mystery, you’d have been coming back here to a double funeral.”

“Whoa!” said Dalrymple. “I’m afraid that’s not quite correct——”

“What’s that?” said Aunt Gertrude sharply. “Do you mean to insinuate, sir, that I’m not telling the truth? Now just let me tell *you* a few things——”

“Hold on!” cautioned Fenton Hardy. “We don’t even know the story yet. I gather that there has been a mystery and that the boys solved it, with the help of Aunt Gertrude. Now, if you’ll just wait until Mrs. Hardy and I wash up and change our clothes after the journey, we’ll hear the whole yarn.”

Some time later Mr. and Mrs. Hardy heard the story of the strange events that had disturbed the peace of the old Purdy mansion.

Frank told the story, but it was not related entirely without interruption.

Occasionally Aunt Gertrude would break in with:

“And *there* is where they should have come to me and asked me what I thought of the situation. But did they do that? No! They preferred to beat about the bush and blunder along and make mistakes, where I could have set them right.”

At other points in the story Mr. Dalrymple would insist that Frank was entirely too modest.

“You’re not telling the half of it,” he would contend. “You’re making it out that it was all accidental, but it wasn’t. You boys thought hard and worked hard and acted quickly.”

However, when the tale was finished, Mr. Hardy smiled proudly at his sons.

“You seem to have acquitted yourselves very creditably,” he said.

“They certainly did!” declared Mr. Dalrymple warmly. “I’m here to tell you that if they hadn’t cleared up the affair, it’s ten chances to one that I shouldn’t be sitting here now. That mad inventor would have blown me up.”

“And the boys with him,” sniffed Aunt Gertrude. “Thanks to Mr. Applegate, who hasn’t had *half* the credit he deserves, you are all alive today.”

“Applegate doesn’t need any credit,” replied the banker. “He has his stamps. That’s quite enough for him.”

“He gave us a reward, Dad!” exclaimed Joe. “Fifty dollars apiece for recovering his stamps.”

“And besides,” added Frank, “Mr. Dalrymple gave us a fee of two hundred dollars for clearing up the case.”

“Too much!” snapped Aunt Gertrude.

The boys smiled, knowing their relative did not mean this. In her heart she was proud of their work, always wanting to share in the solution of the mysteries.

In their next case, “Footprints Under the Window,” she was to play an amusing part.

“What happened to Amos Wandy?” asked Mrs. Hardy.

Dalrymple’s face softened.

“Dead.”

“Poor old fellow,” said Fenton Hardy sympathetically.

“He died quietly in the hospital,” said Dalrymple. “He sent for me. I was at his bedside before he passed away. His brain was quite clear. He asked me to forgive him for all he had done and said he couldn’t explain why he had sent the death messages, except that he wanted to make me suffer mentally as he did.”

“He realized that you were not to blame for his misfortunes.”

“Yes. He realized that.”

“And your double? What happened to him?”

“He and his friend are in jail. It seems Jensen was wanted in other cities for stamp robberies. He’ll probably get a long term in prison.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Hardy, “I’m glad it has all been cleared up, but I don’t think I would have enjoyed my vacation very much if I had known my sons were running such risks.”

Frank and Joe scoffed at the idea.

“Risks!” said Frank. “Why, it was fun!”

“Except,” added Aunt Gertrude pointedly, “when the bomb was at your feet and the clock ticked.”

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 *While the Clock Ticked* by Franklin W. Dixon (Stratemeyer pseudonym)]