

Hardy Boys Mysteries - 16

A Figure in Hiding

**By
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(This is the original 1937 text.)

The Hardy Boys foil the fake eye surgery "Eye Syndicate" of quack Dr. Grafton.

CHAPTER I The Hold Up

Three boys clattered down the front steps of a handsome stone residence in the city of Bayport.

"Get a move on, Chet!" said Frank Hardy, a tall, dark boy who was in his senior year at the local High School. "We'll be late."

"If there's anything I dislike," said his brother Joe, "it's coming into a movie and finding I've missed about two reels of the picture."

"All right, all right," drawled the other member of the trio, a fat, slow-moving youth with a good-natured face. "If there's anything I hate it's arriving anywhere and having to spend the first ten minutes getting my breath."

"You'll be late for your own hanging, Chet Morton," said Frank.

"Then they'll just have to wait. I'd like to see them hold it without me!" grinned the stout lad.

The boys hustled down the street. Under the corner light they encountered a tall, neatly-dressed man with shrewd features.

"What's all the hurry?" he asked.

"Hello, Dad!" Frank said. "We're in a hurry. We're going down to the Rialto to see a mystery film. The fellows say it's a wow."

"It's called 'A Figure in Hiding' - a real thriller," contributed Joe.

Fenton Hardy, father of the boys and one of the most famous detectives in the country, laughed derisively.

"That stuff! I wonder that you fellows haven't more sense."

"It's a great picture, Mr. Hardy," said Chet.

"I saw the stage play," returned the detective. "It's a preposterous piece of rot. Well, run

along, but I can't see where you can get any kick out of that kind of a mystery. I'm working on a case right now that has your 'Figure in Hiding' looking like a primary grade lesson."

"Wish you'd tell us about it," Chet remarked, knowing perfectly well that the great detective seldom discussed any problem on which he was working.

"Maybe some day," smiled Fenton Hardy.

At that moment a lad of about sixteen, a stranger to the Hardy boys, rushed out of the shadows and ran up to their father.

"Say, Mr. Hardy!" he gasped, grabbing the detective by the sleeve. "The scoundrels are in town. I saw them. I hurried to tell you."

His face was pale and his eyes shone with excitement.

"That so?" asked Fenton Hardy, suddenly alert. "Where are they?"

"Staying at the Bayport Hotel," panted the boy.

"That's fine, Fred. Let's get going. I'm glad you found me. Come on!"

Fenton Hardy wheeled away, waving to his sons. "So long, boys. Don't let that movie give you heart failure," he called. Then he vanished into the darkness with the strange boy.

Chet, Frank and Joe stared after the pair.

"I wonder what's up?" queried the younger Hardy boy.

"Let's follow them and find out," suggested his brother.

"Aw, shucks," said Chet, "the minute you fellows smell a mystery you forget all about everything else. Just a while ago you were hopping all over me because you were afraid we'd be late for the movies. Now you want to miss the show altogether. Come on. I want to see that picture."

Reluctantly the Hardy boys gave up the idea of following their father, although they were overwhelmed with curiosity.

"All very well to follow in your dad's footsteps." Chet grinned as they resumed their walk toward the theatre, "but you don't have to do it all the time."

This was a dig at the Hardy boys' talent for detective work, a gift they had inherited from Fenton Hardy. They were indeed following in their father's footsteps, as a host of solved mysteries testified.

The motion picture, "A Figure in Hiding," had drawn a big crowd to the neighborhood movie house that evening, but the boys reached the theatre just before the feature film was to be presented. They were fortunate in finding good seats - doubly fortunate, in Frank's opinion at least, since they found themselves next to Callie Shaw and Iola Morton, the latter Chet's sister.

"Gosh," growled the fat boy in disgust, "can't a fellow go anywhere without finding you parked beside him?"

His sister wrinkled her nose at him. The girls shifted seats so that Callie, a brown-eyed, brown-haired girl who was especially admired by Frank, was sitting between the Hardy boys, with Iola beside Joe, and Chet on the outside. Joe was no ladies' man, but he always admitted that Iola was all right "as a girl," which was no small tribute, coming from him. "The Rialto is doing a big business tonight," Frank remarked to Callie. "This picture has been running for three days and still draws a full house."

Although Fenton Hardy had termed the movie "preposterous," his sons and their friends found it absorbing and thrilling. The acting was good, and there was plenty of suspense throughout. The plot concerned the dastardly deeds of a mysterious "figure," and the audience was left in doubt as to the identity of the criminal, who eventually was certain to

be one of the leading characters of the film. Callie Shaw, Iola and the boys made many guesses as to the solution, but when the "figure in hiding" was finally brought to justice and his identity revealed, they found their deductions all wrong. Even the Hardy boys had guessed far wide of the mark.

"Some detectives!" jeered Chet, conveniently forgetting that he had made the most ridiculous conjecture of the lot. "You wouldn't have been so hot if you had been turned loose on that case."

"I suppose not," Frank agreed. "Are you going now?" he asked Callie.

"Not just yet. Iola and I want to see the newsreel and comedy."

As the boys had seen the mystery film which had been their only reason for attending, they prepared to leave. The other patrons of the Rialto, however, were evidently determined to get their money's worth, so the three boys were the only ones who emerged into the lobby at the conclusion of the feature.

"Even if Dad didn't get much kick out of it, I thought it was a good picture," declared Joe.

"Me, too," said Frank. "I couldn't guess the solution."

"I'm beginning to think that half the mysteries you two have solved have been just sheer dumb luck," observed Chet Morton.

"As long as we figure 'em out, who cares?" Joe chuckled. "Results count, mister."

"What say we drift around to the Bayport Hotel?" inquired Frank innocently.

"Still got that on your mind, eh?" Chet said. "Want to poke your nose into your Dad's latest case, I see."

"I'd certainly like to know what's going on. He said it would make 'A Figure in Hiding' look like a primary grade lesson, so it must be a humdinger."

"No harm in going around by the hotel," Joe said. "If we run into Dad he may ask us to help him."

"And he may ask you to run along home and mind your own business," declared Chet Morton. "However, it's still early, so if there's any excitement in sight I don't mind seeing what it is."

The boys were just passing the box office of the theatre. Joe cast a casual glance over his shoulder at the window. Suddenly he halted and grabbed Frank by the arm.

"Fellows-look!" he gasped.

"What's the matter?"

"There! In the little back room," replied Joe, trembling with excitement.

The box office itself was in darkness, with the window closed for the night. Beyond this room a dim light was shining in the private office of the theatre manager. In there the boys could see the Rialto cashier standing with his back to the wall, his arms raised above his head.

Motionless, the boys stood in the lobby, staring. No one was around. Even the doorman had departed from his customary place by the ticket chopper.

"It's a hold-up!" said Frank tensely.

As the boys watched, fascinated, they saw a dark figure emerge into the light. The face was hidden from them, but they knew it was that of a man. His coat collar was turned up and his hat was pulled low over his forehead. In one hand he gripped a revolver which was pointed directly at the frightened cashier. Under the other arm he carried a black tin box.

"We must do something!" snapped Frank, lunging forward.

As he did so, the hold-up man dashed out of sight.

The cashier remained motionless, his arms still in the air.

"After him!" yelled Joe.

The Hardy boys and Chet Morton darted back up the lobby, through the swing doors, and into the theatre again. Frank, leading the way, headed for the entrance to the manager's office.

CHAPTER II

Nine Hundred Dollars

Frank yanked open the door.

A startled usher saw him and called out, "Hey! You can't go in there."

"Can't I?" Frank rushed inside, with Joe and Chet at his heels.

There was a loud slam just as they entered the office. The cashier, white-faced, was lowering his arms. He pointed a trembling finger at a closed door.

"He went out-that way!" stammered the man.

Frank flung himself against the door, but it would not budge. It had locked automatically as it closed.

In the meantime the usher was hurrying indignantly into the office.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "This room is private. You're not allowed-"

"A hold-up man has just stuck up your cashier and stolen all the money," Chet shouted at him. "You'd better get busy and call the police."

The usher's mouth flew open. The cashier grabbed the telephone feverishly. "He got every cent," he gasped. "'Two days' takings. Operator! Quick! Get me police headquarters!"

"Where does that door lead!" Frank demanded of the excited fellow.

"Out to a side alley. Good gosh, this is awful ! Where did the thief go!_

Chet and Joe were already tumbling out of the office, with Frank close behind. Chet would have left by way of the lobby and thence around to the side of the building, but Joe was more quick-witted. He raced toward one of the side exits.

"Come on! Maybe we'll catch him yet!"

The three boys dashed outside, to the wonder and astonishment of some of the theatre patrons in the side seats. Joe was in the lead, and emerged into the alley in time to see a dark figure fleeing toward a lane at the rear of the building.

"I see him!" whooped the lad. He plunged forward but tripped over a box that lay hidden in the darkness of the narrow alley. He went sprawling, and Frank pitched over the top of him. They picked themselves up and resumed the chase, with Chet Morton puffing along behind.

The dark figure had vanished!

The boys rushed out into the lane that ran behind the theatre, in time to see a man dart through a patch of light that fell from the kitchen windows of a restaurant next to the Rialto. As the fellow cast a glance back over his shoulder, they had a brief glimpse of him. He was tall and dark. In one hand he clutched a thick roll of currency.

The man disappeared into the darkness of the lane. The Hardy boys and Chet rushed in pursuit of him, but beyond the light from the restaurant windows they found themselves at a standstill. The thief had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened up and swallowed him. They stopped and listened, but could hear no sound of retreating footsteps. When they struck matches and explored the lane, they found a dozen places where the fugitive might have escaped.

In the distance a police siren set up a wailing scream as a headquarters car sped toward the theatre in response to the cashier's report of the hold-up. A few moments later a uniformed officer appeared at the end of the lane and came pounding toward the boys, his nightstick in his hand.

"What's going on here?" he demanded gruffly.

"Hold-up!" Frank told him briefly. "A fellow held up the Rialto cashier. We chased him down this way and lost him. He may have gone in between some of the buildings."

The policeman removed a flashlight from his hip pocket and took up the search. A few minutes later two more constables came down the alley. Together the group combed the neighborhood, but without success. At the end of half an hour they were forced to admit that the thief had made a clean getaway.

The Hardy boys and Chet returned to the theatre office. A big crowd had gathered, and there was considerable excitement, for a daring crime of this nature was an uncommon thing in the quiet city of Bayport. Chief of Police Collig himself had arrived to take charge of the investigation with his trusted right-hand man, Detective Smuff. They were taking numerous notes.

"Nine hundred dollars the villain got away with," Chief Collig told the boys. He did not seem any too well pleased to find that the Hardy lads had been on the scene of the affair before he could learn of it. "We'll get him, never fear. Too bad you didn't act a little more smartly when the hold-up was right under your noses, so to speak."

"Lots of people would have been scared even to have gone into the office," declared Chet Morton.

"No doubt," agreed Collig. "However, the fellow got clear away so now we'll have to get busy."

His tone implied that the Bayport police force would have no trouble at all in succeeding where the Hardy boys had failed.

"Away you go now, lads," ordered Detective Smuff ponderously. "We've work to do."

Thus the boys were ignominiously shooed out of the theatre. Detective Smuff had no great regard for the Hardys. As true sons of a famous detective who had made a reputation for himself with the New York police force and had later gone into private practice, Frank and Joe had inherited a talent for solving mysteries. Their first success, as recounted in "The Tower Treasure," had occurred when they located some valuable loot which a dying criminal confessed to them had been hidden "in the tower."

The successful outcome of this case encouraged the Hardy boys to tackle additional problems, including the one about a sinister sign post, when Frank and Joe undertook to solve the mystery surrounding the disappearance of a valuable race horse.

In the course of time the boys had earned enviable reputations for themselves as amateur detectives. They had encountered many thrilling adventures, and had incidentally earned substantial sums of money in the form of rewards for their good work.

Mrs. Hardy often became alarmed by her boys' passion for tackling every mystery that presented itself in Bayport. Their father was not inclined to discourage them, providing they did not let these outside interests interfere with their school work.

Aunt Gertrude, on the other hand, was continually predicting death and destruction as the final outcome of these adventures. She was a sharp-tongued spinster who made lengthy visits at the Hardy home. The boys, however, had long since learned that her bark was a good deal worse than her bite, and they knew that she really had a great affection for her nephews, though it was hidden by a forbidding manner. Somehow or other her dire prophecies had never come to pass, and the boys were well aware that Aunt Gertrude was proud of them.

At one time Mr. and Mrs. Hardy had hoped that their sons would attend the university and become professional men, but their devotion to detective work and their pronounced talent for solving mysteries left little doubt that Frank and Joe would some day follow in the footsteps of their father and adopt detection as their life work. "With this plan Fenton Hardy was well content, for he regarded the solving of crimes as one of the most absorbing and fascinating of all pursuits and could thoroughly understand the spell it had cast over his sons.

The boys left the Rialto theatre a little crestfallen by the manner in which Chief Collig and Detective Smuff had shunted them out of the hold-up investigation; but they took their dismissal like good sports.

"I wonder," said Frank, "if there is any connection between that hold-up and the case Dad is working on just now? That strange boy told him 'the scoundrels are in town.' "

"Let's go on to the Bayport Hotel and see if we can locate Dad there," Joe suggested.

"Maybe he'll be interested in hearing about the hold-up."

"Count me out," said Chet promptly. " I 've had enough of crime for one evening. I'm going home to bed."

Chet lived on the outskirts of Bayport, and had a long walk ahead of him, so the Hardy boys said good night and parted from him at the next corner.

When they reached the Bayport Hotel and inquired for their parent at the desk, the clerk told them that Fenton Hardy had been there during the evening but had just departed.

"Went out not five minutes ago, boys," he said. "He can't be far away. Maybe if you hurry you'll catch up with him down the street."

Frank and Joe dashed out of the lobby. They had scarcely stepped from the doorway before Frank spied the familiar tall figure of their father in the shadows of a store entrance about two doors away.

"There's Dad now!" he exclaimed.

Then they saw that Fenton Hardy was not alone. "With him was the strange boy who had spoken to him earlier in the evening.

CHAPTER III

Room 412

"Hello, Dad!" said Frank.

Fenton Hardy turned around. As he did so, the strange boy hastily stuffed some money into his pocket, saying, "Thanks, Mr. Hardy. I'll see you again soon," and then moved on. He hurried down the street and disappeared around a corner.

"Where did you fellows come from?" the boys' father inquired genially.

"We've just been trying to catch a hold-up man," Joe said.

"A hold-up man!" exclaimed Fenton Hardy in surprise. "When did all this happen?"

"At the Rialto. We were just coming out after the show when we saw someone holding up the cashier in the manager's office. He got away with nine hundred dollars."

"We chased him," Frank explained, "but he was too quick for us. We lost him in the lane behind the theatre."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Not very, but I think we'd be able to identify him if we were to see him again. Chief Collig and Smuff are working on the case now."

Fenton Hardy whistled softly.

"It isn't often we have a hold-up in Bayport, especially not one as daring as that. Nine hundred dollars, too! That's a real haul."

Just then a taxi slithered to a stop in front of the hotel. Fenton Hardy turned about slightly and watched the car with narrowed eyes.

The driver descended, opened the door, and two men got out. They were well-dressed but sleek and sinister in appearance. One of them, stout and thick-set, with heavy features, paid the cabman. As he did so the light from the hotel entrance fell upon his face.

"Rip Sinder!" exclaimed Mr. Hardy with suppressed excitement. "And Spotty Lemuel!" he added as the second man, thin, sharp-featured and with a curiously mottled face moved away from the taxi.

The two men had not seen the detective, who drew back a little into the shadows.

"Who are they, Dad?" asked Frank quietly. "What's up?"

"Not a word!" whispered Fenton Hardy. "I've been looking for that pair. I was hoping they would come here."

Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel strode swiftly across the pavement and went into the hotel.

"What luck!" the detective exclaimed. "I was beginning to give up hope. And now I've found them." He turned quickly to his sons. "It's fortunate you came just now. I want you to help me."

"How, Dad?" they asked eagerly.

"There's no time to tell you what it's all about. I'm going to take a room here at the hotel, and I want you boys to take another. We'll wait a few minutes until Sinder and Lemuel have time to register."

He moved out away from the store and stepped toward the hotel entrance. He peered

through the revolving door for a moment but drew back swiftly.

"They're just signing the register," he said. "I hope we're lucky enough to get the rooms I want."

The Hardy boys waited with hearts beating fast. They had not dared hope for such a piece of good fortune. They had been shunted out of one case, only to land right in the middle of one of their father's mysteries.

Who was the boy to whom Fenton Hardy had been speaking in the shadows? Who were Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel? Why was their father watching the movements of the pair? In what way did he want his sons to help him? These thoughts raced through their minds. Fenton Hardy suddenly turned and beckoned to his sons. "Come on," he said. "They've gone up in the elevator."

The boys followed their father into the hotel and crossed the lobby. Fenton Hardy stepped up to the clerk, whom he knew well.

"Two men just registered here, Cal," he said. "What room did they take?"

"410," returned the clerk wonderingly. "Anything wrong with them, Mr. Hardy!"

"Are rooms 408 and 412 occupied?"

The clerk consulted his rack. He shook his head.

"Both vacant, Mr. Hardy," was the reply.

"I'd like to engage them for the night, if you don't mind. My boys will take Room 412 and I'll take the other."

The clerk cast the detective a significant glance, but he knew the man well enough to ask no questions as to his motives. Cal, on the desk at night at the Bayport Hotel, was the soul of discretion and could be relied upon to say nothing.

"Very well, Mr. Hardy. Register here, please."

The father and his boys signed their names. Cal was just about to summon a bellhop when the detective checked him.

"We'll go up alone. Just let us have the keys," he said.

His purpose was to avoid any noise that might be occasioned by anyone showing them to their rooms. Besides, the bellhops might talk among themselves if they should learn of the affair.

"I can depend on you, Cal?"

The clerk put a finger to his lips.

The three Hardys went across the lobby and waited for an elevator. In a few moments they were whisked toward the fourth floor. As they walked down the carpeted corridor Fenton Hardy said to his sons:

"Very likely there will be a connecting door between your room and the one Rip and Spotty have taken. Now I wish you to listen in on that pair. I want to know why they have come here and what they are up to. Think you can manage it?"

"Sure!" they declared in one voice.

"How about Mother?" asked Frank. "Won't she worry if we fail to show up at home tonight?"

"I'll fix that," said their father, stopping at the entrance to Room 408. Quietly he unlocked the door and they stepped inside. Fenton Hardy went to the telephone, and in a low voice gave the number of the Hardy home. A few moments later he was talking to his wife.

"The boys are with me, Laura," he told her in a voice that could scarcely be heard across the room. "We're at the Bayport Hotel and may stay here over night.- Yes.- Yes, I'm on a

case.- Frank and Joe are helping me.- All right. Good night, dear."

He hung up the receiver.

"That's settled," he said, giving his sons the key to Room 412. "Off you go now. Keep your ears open."

Frank and Joe quickly slipped out and made their way past the doorway of Number 410 to their own room beyond. They let themselves in quietly and switched on the light. When they had satisfied themselves that there was a connecting door to the adjoining chamber they turned the light out again. Frank crouched down in front of the door.

When he put his eye to the key-hole he could get a slight glimpse of part of the room beyond. He saw the man known as Rip Sinder sitting at the telephone desk beside the bed. Sinder was evidently talking to the clerk downstairs.

"There isn't any writing stationery here," he was complaining in a loud, harsh voice. "Send some up right away. Yes-plenty of paper and envelopes."

Frank could not see the other man but he heard Spotty Lemuel growl, "Tell him to make it snappy, too. We've got plenty of work to do."

In a short time there was a knock at the door. Sinder answered it and came back to the writing table with a quantity of stationery.

"O.K.," he said to his companion. "We're all set now. Get busy."

The man with the mottled face sat down at the opposite side of the table and picked up a pen. He drew a sheet of paper toward him.

"What's the first address?" he asked.

Rip Sinder reached into his coat pocket and took out a notebook. He flipped the pages and then said something which Frank failed to catch. Spotty Lemuel dipped his pen into the ink-well and began to write. Rip Sinder, after a further glance at the notebook, did likewise.

Their letters were not long, for after scrawling a few lines on the page they would blot what they had written and Sinder would refer again to the notebook. Each man then would take a fresh sheet of paper and begin to write. They seldom spoke but worked busily and hastily, scribbling letter after letter. Occasionally Sinder would ruffle the pages of his book and mumble a fresh address.

"We're not learning much," whispered Joe Hardy after a while.

The boys alternated at the key-hole and watched the pair in the next room for about fifteen minutes. The letter-writing continued without interruption. The Hardys, who had expected something more exciting, were disappointed

Suddenly there was a knock at the door of Room 410. The two men looked up guiltily.

Sinder began to sweep the letters and envelopes into a drawer.

"I'll answer it," he said and arose, passing out of Frank's range of vision.

The boys could hear him open the door. Then came an astonished exclamation:

"How did you get here?" demanded Sinder.

Through the key-hole Frank saw a girl rush into the room.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "You must come home!"

CHAPTER IV

Startling News

"Virginia!" exclaimed Sinder, apparently stunned by the arrival of the girl. Through the key-hole Frank got a glimpse of a pretty young woman about seventeen years of age. Sinder was staring at her incredulously.

"How did you know where to find me? What do you want?" he demanded.

"I want you to come home," the girl cried angrily.

"You've no business crashing in here like this," declared Spotty Lemuel in a rough tone.

"What's the idea of butting in when your father and I are putting through a deal?"

"Deal!" exclaimed the girl scornfully. "I can imagine what sort of deal it is. I've never liked you, Spotty Lemuel, and I think my father would be better off if he stayed away from you."

"Now look here, Virginia - " began Rip Sinder weakly.

"You keep out of our affairs, do you hear?" Lemuel stormed at the girl. "We took this hotel room so we could work quietly and without any interference. So take yourself off and leave us alone. I don't understand how you knew where to find us. Spying around, I suppose."

"You can't frighten me," the girl answered with spirit.

"No need of scolding her, Spotty," ventured Sinder.

"A fine partner you are!" sneered the other. "If we're going to have this girl interrupting us every time we get down to work I'll find somebody else. Why don't you make her stay at home? She's got no business here. Tell her to get out and stay out."

"Virginia, I think you should not have come here," Sinder said mildly.

"Why not?"

"Well-after all-it's a business affair - "

"Oh, you make me sick!" exploded Lemuel. "You talk to her as if she really was your daughter!"

"Spotty-stop - "

"Why don't you tell her the truth?" the other man continued remorselessly. "She ain't your daughter anyway and you know it. Tell her that and see if she'll be so smart about following you around and telling you what to do."

"Father!" cried the girl in a despairing voice. "It isn't true, is it? Tell me it isn't true."

"You shouldn't have said that, Spotty," muttered Rip Sinder.

"Why not? It's a fact, ain't it? Why shouldn't she know? Serves her right for bustin' in here the way she did. She brought it on herself."

Virginia grasped Rip Sinder's arm imploringly.

"What does he mean by it?" she asked. "What does he mean by saying I'm not your daughter?"

"Just what I say!" declared Lemuel with a coarse laugh. "He ain't your father, no matter what you think. Tell her the truth, Sinder."

In a low voice the other man began an explanation.

"I - I guess I might as well. It's the truth, Virginia. I'm not your real father."

"But-I always thought - nobody ever told me - " stammered the girl.

"You were an orphan, Virginia, when my wife and I adopted you. When she was dying she asked me to look after you just as if you were my own daughter."

There was a long silence. Then Spotty Lemuel laughed harshly.

"I guess you won't be so smart about butting into Rip's affairs from now on, young lady," he gloated. "Since you know the truth, get out of here and stay out!"

"An orphan!" exclaimed the girl blankly, as if she had not heard him. "An adopted orphan!"

"Now Virginia," Sinder said coaxingly, "if you'll just run along home and let Spotty and me go on with our business - "

"Business!" the girl cried. Suddenly she darted toward the desk and began looking at the notes the two men had been writing.

"Here, you!" growled Lemuel. "Leave those letters alone. Leave 'em alone!"

" You cheats!" snapped the girl.

"Put down those letters!" Lemuel reached out and tore one of them from her hand. He gave the girl a push and she staggered back. "Now you get out of this room or I'll throw you out."

"Go easy!" said Sinder.

"You're schemers, both of you!" Virginia cried passionately. "This business you're in is not honest." She covered her face with her hands and broke into a sob. "I'm glad you're not my real father, Rip Sinder. I always thought you were honest, at least. This is horrible."

"Now listen here, Virginia - "

"Don't talk to me," she wailed. "If you were my father I'd be so ashamed - oh, I don't want to live under such a disgrace."

Suddenly she twisted around, rushed across the room, flung open the door, and darted into the corridor before either man could make a move to stop her.

The door slammed violently. Rip Sinder jumped forward.

"Virginia!" he shouted. "Come back here! Virginia!"

He reached the door at a bound and was just about to open it, when Spotty Lemuel sprang across the room and pushed him aside.

"Let her go, you fool!" growled Lemuel. "Let her go. Do you want to start a row that'll have us kicked out of the hotel?"

"I can't let her go away like that!" the other man protested. He struggled to reach the doorknob. "Let me go after her, Lem. She's likely to do something desperate."

"Let her," rejoined the other coolly.

There were sounds of a scuffle. Apparently Spotty Lemuel was blocking successfully his companion's attempts to get the door open. The Hardy boys heard him say:

"If you go out after her there'll be a rumpus, and we don't want any sort of fuss right now. Show some sense! You'll have the whole hotel roused up. It's a good thing she's gone, anyhow. Stay where you are."

At this moment the boys heard a quick, quiet knock on the door of their own room. Joe sprang up to answer it. Fenton Hardy was standing in the corridor. He slipped hastily inside.

"Come quickly," he ordered tersely, "and follow that girl. You ought to be able to catch

sight of her before she gets very far from the hotel."

The detective spoke in a low voice so that he would not be heard in the next room.

"I'm afraid she may harm herself," he went on, as his sons hastened to obey. "Don't speak to her or let her know she's being followed. But keep her in sight if you can. I'll hold the fort here while you're gone. Quickly, now."

Frank and Joe slipped out of the room as quietly as their father had entered it. As they passed the door of Room 410 they could hear Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel still arguing. From what they had seen of the pair they thought it was pretty certain Spotty Lemuel would win out and Rip Sinder would do as he was told.

The boys fled down the corridor. From their father's urgent voice and anxious face they knew that he was genuinely afraid that the girl, in her grief and despair, might do something rash. There was every need for haste.

Frank, a little in the lead, bolted around a corner of the hallway on their way to the elevator. Unfortunately, at that same moment a Waiter was bound for one of the rooms on the floor, carrying a tray of sandwiches and bottles of ginger ale. The boy crashed full-tilt into the man.

Sandwiches, plates, glasses, and bottles went tumbling to the carpet. The waiter stumbled backward and fell. Frank tripped over the fellow's legs and sprawled out. Joe pitched across both of them, and in an instant all three lay on the floor.

The waiter sat up, spluttering. Fortunately there had been no breakage. By a miracle, not even the glasses were broken, although the sandwiches were scattered all over the carpet.

"Sorry!" gasped Frank, scrambling to his feet. "We're in a hurry."

"So it seems," grunted the waiter wrathfully.

The Hardy boys helped the man to rise. Then they aided him in picking up the dishes and ginger ale bottles, chafing at the delay. The waiter decided they were guests of the hotel and did not say what he thought; yet his resentful expression betrayed only too plainly his opinion of people who go racing through hotel corridors at such hours.

The moment some semblance of order was restored, Frank said: "We can't wait. If you have to get fresh sandwiches see Mr. Hardy in 412 and he'll pay you. Come on, Joe."

They tore down the corridor again. The delay, brief though it was, caused them to miss a descending elevator, for its light blinked off just as they reached the turn at the end of the hallway. Frantically Joe pressed the button again and again. It seemed a long time before the car hummed back to the fourth story and its door clashed open.

"Did a girl go down to the ground floor a few minutes ago?" Frank asked the attendant.

"Yep. Seemed in a big hurry, too. She ran across the lobby and went out to the street."

The elevator plunged downward. When it reached the ground floor the Hardy boys dashed from it, raced across the lobby, and rushed out onto the pavement.

They looked up and down the street. There was no sign of the girl. Which direction had Virginia Sinder taken?

"You go one way and I'll go the other," said Frank. "Maybe we'll catch a glimpse of her then. If you see her, whistle for me."

He ran to a corner and looked up and down the cross thoroughfare, but the street was empty. Crestfallen, Frank turned and retraced his steps to the hotel entrance. Joe returned at the same moment and it was obvious that he, too, had failed to catch sight of their quarry.

"We must find her!" declared Frank.

"There's a taxi parked across the road," Joe said. " That's our best bet."
He whistled shrilly and signalled to the driver. The man sat up and waved acknowledgment of the signal. The engine roared. The cab lurched forward, then swung around and drew up to the curb.

CHAPTER V

Heading for Destruction

"Where to, boys?" asked the taxi driver.
Frank had an idea. "You've been parked across the street," he said. "Did you see a girl run out of the hotel during the past few minutes?"
The driver glanced at them curiously.
"Sure," he said. "She wasn't wasting any time, either. Jumped into her car and roared out of here as if there were a hundred cops after her."
"Which way did she go?"
The man gestured. "Straight ahead," he said.
"Would you know the car if you should see it again?"
"I think so. Want me to try?"
"Yes. And if you spot it, drive up behind and keep it in sight."
"O.K.!" The taxi-driver released his clutch and the cab jumped forward. At the first corner he swerved sharply to the right; at the second one he slowed down and glanced sharply both to left and to right; then made a left-hand turn and sped away in pursuit of a bobbing tail-light far ahead.
"I think that's the car," he said.
"Step on the gas!" cried Joe.
The fellow obeyed. There was very little traffic on Bayport's downtown streets at that time of night and he had a clear thoroughfare ahead of him. The machine roared along in pursuit. Suddenly the red tail-light ahead veered to the left and disappeared.
"Turned down River Street," grunted the driver. "Looks to me like she's heading for the bridge."
He swung the taxi into River Street, a dark thoroughfare extending through the outskirts of Bayport and leading to a country road. Beyond the city was the Willow River, which was spanned by a bridge just past the Bayport limits.
The car ahead was traveling at a fast clip, but the cab driver kept it in sight until it reached the edge of the city. Then the road grew winding, and as it was flanked by avenues of trees the pursuers soon lost sight of the fleeing car altogether. There were few side roads, however, and the man at the wheel was satisfied that the other automobile was heading

toward the Willow River.

The fugitive car had been out of sight for some time when the taxi finally swung around a bend and came in sight of the stream, with the bridge rising like a dark hulk in the gloom. Beside the road there was a ruby gleam, the tail-light of a parked car.

"Slow up!" cried Frank quickly.

The driver obeyed. Thus far, the boy believed, no harm had come to the girl. He realized that it would be poor policy to stir up any gossip and on that account decided that it would be best to dismiss the chauffeur.

"Better stop and turn around," Frank said. "We'll get out right here."

The man showed no surprise. "O.K. with me, boys." He knew they were the Hardys, and was aware that their detective adventures often took them on strange missions. He brought the taxi to a stop and asked no questions. Frank paid him for the trip and the two lads got out of the car.

"Good luck," grinned the cabby, as he swung his machine around. A few moments later he was speeding on his way back to Bayport.

The Hardy boys eyed the tail-light of the automobile parked near the bridge.

"Maybe the girl isn't in the car," Joe suggested.

"We had better make sure," responded his brother.

As they hurried down the road, it occurred to them then that they might be too late after all. However, when they drew near the parked auto they were relieved to see a dark figure at the wheel.

As they came closer their relief changed to bewilderment. The figure was quite motionless. Moreover, it seemed to be huddled over the wheel in a strange fashion.

"Something sinister about this," remarked Frank in a low voice.

Cautiously they came up to the side of the automobile.

"Why, it isn't Virginia at all! It's a man!" Joe exclaimed.

"Unconscious!" cried Frank.

The driver was slumped across the wheel, bent forward in a limp huddle. The window was down, and when Frank turned the handle that opened the car door the man's body shifted and almost fell out onto the running board. The boys caught him.

"Is he dead?" asked Joe.

Frank thrust the figure back in the seat. Then he took a flashlight from his pocket and switched it on. The brilliant gleam fell on the face of the still form.

The man was not dead. He was breathing regularly, but his face was badly marked and bruised as if he had received a hard blow.

"Knocked unconscious," said Frank, as he noticed an ugly bump on the victim's forehead. There seemed to be something vaguely familiar about the fellow's face. He was tall, with thin features and black hair.

"Seems to me," Frank said slowly, "that I've seen this man before, but I can't just remember where it was."

"Frank!" exclaimed Joe excitedly.

"What?"

"I remember. We've seen him before, all right. This very evening."

"Where?"

"In the alley behind the theatre. This is the man who held up the Rialto cashier!"

"Golly, I believe you're right!" cried his brother, again studying the face of the unconscious

man in the car.

"It's the same person, I'm sure. I caught a glimpse of his face when he turned in the lane. I'd remember him anywhere."

"Then let's look and see if he has the theatre money on him. Boy, won't we put Chief Collig's nose out of joint if we find that money!"

They searched the man's pockets, and found an automobile license in the name of Nick Cordoza, together with a bunch of keys, but they discovered not one cent of money.

The Hardy boys carried their search to the automobile itself. They explored the back seat, looked beneath the upholstery, felt in the side-pockets. Their hunt was in vain.

"No luck," declared Frank finally. "There's not much doubt as to what happened.

Someone slugged this man Cordoza and stole the stolen money from him."

"What shall we do? Drive the car back to Bayport and hand him over to the police?"

"If we turn him over to anyone it should be to a doctor. I'd like to know who took the money, though."

The boys were undecided as to the best course of action. For all they knew, Cordoza might be seriously injured. They wished heartily that they had not been in such a hurry to dismiss their cab driver.

Frank got out of the machine, and with the flashlight he began exploring the roadway and the ditch near by.

"We might find some kind of clue," he said.

Just then, from out of a side road about fifty yards away, an automobile's headlights cut through the darkness. A car skidded out onto the road that led toward the bridge. Without slackening speed it rushed toward the boys.

Frank switched out the flashlight. The brothers crouched in the shadow of Cordoza's car. Perhaps the man's assailants were returning to the scene.

The machine, a small coupe, sped on. It had almost reached them when the driver swung the wheel suddenly and drove the car into a rutted lane that cut off from the main road and descended across a field toward the river bank.

Frank switched on the flashlight. Its beam fell directly upon the driver. Then both boys uttered a yell of surprise.

"Virginia!" they cried.

The auto was lurching down the uneven lane, bound straight for the river. Apparently the girl at the wheel had no intention of stopping.

"She'll be killed!" shouted Joe.

Owing to the roughness of the lane the coupe had slowed down a little. Both boys leaped across the ditch and tried to intercept the moving car. They were just in time to leap onto the running board.

"Stop!" Frank shouted. "You'll drive straight into the river."

"Whether or not the girl made an attempt to apply the brakes the Hardys did not know. By this time the coupe was beginning to slither down the slope. Lurching and swaying, it picked up speed. The girl's hands seemed frozen to the wheel. Joe leaned through the window and tried to reach the emergency brake.

The car was completely out of control. As it shot down the incline, the black waters of the Willow River seemed to be rushing up to meet it. Virginia Sinder screamed.

Again Joe tried to grab the emergency brake but he could not reach it. The girl seemed paralyzed by the tragedy that lay ahead.

Bouncing and jouncing wildly, the coupe plunged down the embankment!

CHAPTER VI

The Rescue

There was no hope of bringing Virginia Sinder's car to a stop now. Both the Hardy boys realized that. They could easily have jumped to safety and left the girl to her fate, but they remained clinging to the coupe, Joe still making desperate efforts to get the door open in the hope that he might pull on the brake before it was too late.

In another second, however, the machine pitched headlong over the embankment.

Virginia's wild scream of terror rang through the night as the car plunged into the water with a tremendous splash. It struck, nose down, then turned over.

Frank was flung clear by the impact. He rose to the surface and looked about for the coupe. It had landed in about five feet of water, and he could see the rear wheels looming above the river.

Then he heard Joe's voice. "Frank!"

"I'm all right," his brother shouted. "Quick. We must get that girl out of there."

Dimly Frank could see Joe on the other side of the car. He splashed through the water, swam a few strokes, and reached the wreckage.

Then he dived and found an open window. Reaching in, he grabbed blindly. His hand encountered an arm of the girl who was struggling frantically.

Virginia seized the boy's coat in a grip so desperate that Frank was afraid they might both be drowned. He managed, however, to pull her from behind the steering wheel and halfway through the open window. Then he was able to break her hold on him.

He had to rise to the surface, and gasp for air. In a moment he was down again. At the second attempt he dragged the girl out of the car. By this time Joe was at his side and together the two boys brought the semi-conscious Virginia to shore.

"I hope she hasn't drowned," gasped Joe.

"Another minute or so and she certainly would have," his brother replied.

They carried Virginia Sinder up the river bank. Her purse, which had been looped around her wrist, fell free and dropped into the mud. She began to cough and choke as she revived. Then, huddled on the grass of the embankment, she started to cry fitfully and hysterically.

"Why did you save me?" she exclaimed. "I don't want to live. I don't want to live."

Her body was shaken by sobs. Suddenly she burst into a fit of wild laughter, covered her face with her hands, and wept again.

"I wanted to end everything! Life isn't worth living. Why didn't you leave me alone?" she demanded.

"You mustn't talk like that, Virginia," Frank said.

"How do you know my name! Who are you?" the girl asked.

"I'm Frank Hardy, and this is my brother Joe. We followed you out here to make sure that no harm would come to you. I guess it's a lucky thing we did, too."

"It isn't. I wanted to die."

"You're just a bit hysterical. We want to be your friends."

"I haven't any friends," she wailed. "I haven't a friend in the world. That's why life doesn't seem worth living."

"What nonsense. You have more friends than you realize."

The girl sat up, shivering, and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief rescued from her dripping dress.

"I didn't know anyone cared enough even to stop me from driving into the river," she said.

"Well, we cared," said Joe, "and got ourselves good and wet doing it," he adding ruefully.

"How did you know what I was going to do?" she asked. "You have never seen me before."

"We have been looking for you ever since you left the Bayport Hotel," Frank told her.

The girl seemed puzzled.

"But why? I can't understand. And how do you know my name?"

The Hardy boys did not enlighten her, however, as they did not want her to know they had overheard her argument with her foster father in the room at the hotel.

"We haven't time to tell you now," Frank said, "but we're your friends and we're determined to help you."

"I believe that now," the girl answered gratefully. She looked at the river and shuddered.

"I might be dead now if it hadn't been for you. I must have been crazy to have done such a thing."

"We'd better see about taking you home," remarked Joe. "You'll catch cold."

Just then they heard a weird, wild sound from far up the road. It was an unearthly wailing that rose and fell.

"What's that?" cried Virginia, springing to her feet.

A pair of gleaming headlights swung around a bend in the road. The haunting sound rose to a shriek.

"Police siren!" exclaimed Frank.

The machine sped toward the river.

"Cordoza!" Frank guessed.

The siren was shut off. The headlights of the approaching police car were now shining directly on the one in the ditch.

"Police, did you say?" exclaimed Virginia, frightened.

"Don't worry. It isn't you they're after," Frank assured her. "There was a robbery in town tonight and detectives have been working on the case. Wait here until we speak to them.

We'll come back for you in a few minutes."

The Hardy boys left Virginia on the river bank and ran toward the road. They reached the parked car in which Cordoza was still lying unconscious just as the police automobile approached.

Joe ran into the road and waved his arme. The machine came to a stop with a squeal of brakes. Detective Smuff advanced into the glare of the headlights, peering closely at the boys.

"How did you fellows get here?" he demanded without enthusiasm. "What's going on? Is

that your machine!"

The Hardy boys shook their heads.

"It isn't ours," Frank told the detective, "but you'll be interested in the man who drove it here."

"Where is he?"

"Still at the wheel. Come along and have a look at him."

They led Smuff over to the automobile. Chief Collig climbed out of the police car and came up puffing.

"What's going on, Smuff? What's the trouble?" he asked. "Oh-the Hardy boys! Man can't turn around without running into you fellows. Who owns that machine? Who is in it?"

Frank switched on his flashlight and directed the beam toward the huddled figure.

"Who's that?" grunted Smuff.

"A dead man!" Collig gasped.

"I think his name is Nick Cordoza," remarked Frank. "We found him here a few minutes ago. He's the fellow who held up the Rialto Theatre cashier tonight, but somebody else must have held him up because we can't find a cent of the money in the car."

Chief Collig and Smuff were stunned. They had driven out toward the river on the strength of a tip that a car, the license number of which was the same as that of a machine parked near the Rialto that evening, had been seen on the river road. But to find the Hardy boys ahead of them, ready to identify the unconscious driver as the robber they were seeking-this took all the joy out of the capture.

"How do you know his name?" demanded the Chief gruffly.

"We found his driver's license."

Smuff and Collig examined the unconscious Cordoza.

"Guess we'd better get this guy to a hospital right away, Chief," said Smuff. "He looks to be in bad shape."

"We'll take him back at once. Are you fellows sure he is the man who held up the Rialto cashier?"

"Looks mighty like him," Joe said.

Detective Smuff and Chief Collig were not prepared to take the boys' word for it that the stolen money was gone. They searched the car thoroughly and made a further hunt through Cordoza's pockets, but were finally forced to admit that if he had taken the cash he had either hidden it or else been robbed of it.

With the help of the Hardy boys the two police officers took Cordoza out of the machine and lugged him over to their own automobile where he was placed in the rear seat. Frank and Joe, seeing a way of getting Virginia back to Bayport, volunteered to drive Cordoza's car into the city. Chief Collig graciously accepted their offer.

"Follow us in," he ordered with a wave of his fat hand, and clambered back into the police car. Smuff, sitting at the wheel, swung the automobile around and in a few moments the worthy pair were heading toward Bayport with their still unconscious prisoner.

Frank and Joe ran back to the river bank where they had left Virginia. She was not in sight.

"Virginia!" Frank called out.

There was no answer.

"Gosh! I hope she didn't jump into the water," declared Joe.

Frank took out his flashlight again. He found the prints of a pair of high-heeled shoes in the

soft earth leading away from the embankment.

"She must have been frightened when she saw the police car stop," he said.

They searched for about five minutes, calling Virginia's name, but they did not find her nor did she answer their shouts. Joe discovered the purse that had slipped from the girl's wrist lying in the mud close to the water's edge, and in it they found a card upon which Virginia's name and address had been scribbled.

"We can't afford to stay around here any longer," Frank decided. "Chief Collig and Smuff will be getting suspicious. I guess the girl must have decided to go across the fields and find her way home by herself."

"At least we won't lose track of her, now that we have her address."

Accordingly the boys gave up their search for Virginia Sinder and climbed into Cor-doza's car. It was in good running order and they had no trouble driving it. Then they turned and started back toward the city.

They arrived at the police station just in time to meet Chief Collig and Detective Smuff returning from the hospital. In answer to the Hardy boys' inquiry Collig wagged his head.

"He got a bad beating. He was still unconscious when we left him. The doctor says he'll live, though."

"And when he's able to talk," declared Detective Smuff, "we'll have plenty of questions for him to answer."

The Hardy boys went back to the Bayport Hotel. They would have preferred going home where they could get into dry pajamas, but they knew that there might be further work for them to do. Accordingly, before they went back to their own room they rapped at their father's door. There was no answer to their knock.

"That's odd," Joe said. "I thought he intended to stay here and watch Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel."

"Maybe they went out and he followed them," was Frank's suggestion.

The brothers walked on to their own room and let themselves in quietly. Frank tiptoed to the door connecting with the one taken by the suspicious men. He knelt and listened for a moment at the key-hole. There was no light in the chamber beyond but sounds of measured snoring could be heard.

"They're asleep," he said quietly.

"We may as well get some rest too. I'm all in."

"I'm tired, too," Frank confessed as he began to unlace his shoes. "It has been a big evening."

"A bigger one than we thought it was going to be when we set out for the movies."

The boys removed their wet clothing, rang for a bellhop, and sent their suits down to be dried and pressed. Then they crawled into bed. Less than a minute after Frank switched out the light they were both fast asleep.

It seemed scarcely a minute after that when a sharp knock at the door aroused them. They awakened to discover that it was broad daylight.

"Golly, what time is it?" cried Joe, rubbing his eyes. "It seems as if I just got into bed."

The knock was repeated. Frank snatched up a blanket, wrapped it around himself, and went to the door. The caller was Fenton Hardy.

"Good morning," said their father as he stepped into the room. But his usual genial smile was lacking. "I have news for you," he continued. "Serious news."

CHAPTER VII

Chet in Trouble

"What has happened?" asked the boys.

"Chet Morton has been arrested."

The lads were dumbfounded. After a few seconds Frank found his voice.

"Arrested!"

"What for?" demanded Joe.

"For stealing the Rialto Theatre receipts last night," Fenton Hardy declared.

This piece of news was so absurd that for a moment the boys thought their father was joking.

"You don't mean it, Dad," said Frank.

"I do. It's serious. Chet was arrested early this morning."

"But it's ridiculous. Why, we were with him when the hold-up happened. We can prove he had nothing to do with it. If the authorities had to arrest anyone they couldn't have picked on a person with a better alibi."

Fenton Hardy's face was grave.

"Maybe it's not so ridiculous as it seems," he said gravely. "The police have arrested Chet on the strength of certain statements made by a man named Nick Cordoza in Bayport General Hospital during the night. I understand Cordoza has been identified as the man who committed the actual hold-up."

"Yes. We found him in a stalled car at the Willow River bridge," Frank replied. "We ran across him when we went to look for Virginia Sinder."

Mr. Hardy was interested.

"I haven't heard about your adventures yet. And if you had anything to do with the capture of Nick Cordoza, the Bayport police haven't said much about it."

"They wouldn't," grunted Joe.

The boys then told their father everything that had happened from the time they left their hotel room the previous night, including their discovery of Cordoza slumped unconscious in the car; their plunge into the river when trying to save Virginia; the arrival of Collig and Smuff, and the girl's subsequent disappearance.

"It is ridiculous, of course," said Fenton Hardy, "to think that Chet is a thief, but I'm afraid he is in a bad jam."

"We can prove he had nothing to do with the hold-up!" Frank declared. "It won't take us two minutes to clear him."

"That isn't the point. Can you prove that he didn't attack Nick Cordoza and take the stolen

money after knocking him senseless?"

This threw another light on the matter entirely. The boys were nonplussed.

"That's different," Joe admitted.

"Chet didn't do that, of course," added Frank. "If the police have any sense they should realize that our pal, of all people - "

"We know Chet a good deal better than the police do," Fenton Hardy pointed out. "There has certainly been some terrible mistake. According to what I hear, though, Nick Cordoza came out of his trance for a while early this morning and gave a description that fitted Chet mighty closely. So the police have held him for questioning."

"Cordoza couldn't have given the police Chet's name. They can't hold our chum on evidence as flimsy as that."

Fenton Hardy shook his head.

"As a matter of fact, that's the very worst part of the whole business. Cordoza insisted on mumbling that the fellow's name was Chet."

Frank collapsed in a chair.

"Well, I'm flabbergasted!" he murmured.

"Me too," said Joe. "We'd better get busy and see if we can't do something about this." Hastily the boys began to scramble into their clothes. Just then there was a knock at the door. Mr. Hardy opened it to admit one of the hotel waiters.

"I've been keeping an eye on those men you pointed out to me, Mr. Hardy," he said.

"They're getting ready to go out. I hurried upstairs to tell you."

"Thank you, Alphonse. They haven't left the hotel yet, have they?"

"Not yet, sir, but they'll be leaving at any moment."

"Good work, Alphonse." Fenton Hardy put on his hat. "It's your friends from next door. They've been having breakfast in the dining room and I asked Alphonse to watch them while I came up here."

"Sinder and Lemuel?" said Joe.

His father nodded.

"I don't want to lose sight of them this morning if I can help it. No need for you chaps to hang around here any longer. You go home now if you like. I've paid the hotel bill at the desk," he added, vanishing hurriedly on the heels of Alphonse.

The Hardy boys felt a little ashamed of themselves when they realized that had it not been for the alertness of their more experienced father, Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel could have given them the slip easily. However, there was more work ahead if they hoped to help the unhappy Chet out of the jam he was in, so they lost no time in making themselves presentable. A phone call to the valet service brought a bellhop to the room with their clothes, and soon they were ready to leave.

"I guess we had better go home first," Joe decided. "Mother may be worrying."

Mrs. Hardy, they discovered when they reached their house, was not worrying about them, but their peppery Aunt Gertrude was in a state of great anxiety. That lady had been trying her best to convince Mrs. Hardy that the boys had certainly come to grief during the night and that their lifeless bodies would be delivered to the front entrance by one of the Bayport morticians at some hour during the morning. It was difficult to tell whether she was relieved or disappointed when they appeared in the dining room just in time for breakfast.

"What in the world has been going on?" demanded Aunt Gertrude. "This detective nonsense is bad enough, what with allowing lads of your age to stay out all night without

getting other boys mixed up in it too. That telephone has been ringing since seven o'clock this morning."

"For us?" asked Frank, helping himself to ham and eggs.

"What is wrong at the Morton place!

They have been phoning here every ten minutes asking for you boys. I have questioned them, very politely and civilly, if there is anything wrong and whether there is anything I can do to help them. But no, not a word will they tell me. You'd think I was just being inquisitive, they've been so short with me."

The boys knew all about their aunt's consuming curiosity and had a pretty fair idea of the dozens of questions with which she must have plied the Mortons in her efforts to learn what was afoot.

"Whatever possessed you to stay at the hotel all night when you have a perfectly good bed at home?" she demanded.

"Fenton wanted them to help him on a case," explained Mrs. Hardy mildly.

"Case!" snorted Aunt Gertrude. "Had it anything to do with Chet Morton? Is he in trouble?"

The spinster had a way of guessing uncomfortably close to the mark at times. The boys were saved from making explanations by the telephone. Frank answered the call.

Chet Morton's father was on the line. "Frank," he said, "can you tell me anything about this terrible mix-up? Chet was with you fellows last night, wasn't he?"

"Of course. It's all a bad mistake. Joe and I just got in. We're coming right up."

"That's fine, Frank. Mrs. Morton and I are worried and we'd like to know what's behind all this. We know Chet is innocent, of course, but we can't understand how he came to be mixed up in the affair at all."

"We'll be right over."

When Frank turned away from the telephone Aunt Gertrude said:

"Who was that? Mr. Morton?"

"Correct the first tune, Aunt Gertrude."

"What does he want?"

"Oh, he just wants to have a little chat with us," returned Frank airily. "Hurry up, Joe."

"You'll get indigestion if you bolt your food," observed their aunt with a sniff, as the boys hurried through the remainder of their breakfast.

When Frank and Joe drove up to the Morton farmhouse on the outskirts of Bayport that morning they found the boy's parents in a state of great distress and anxiety over their son's plight. The police had called for Chet early that morning, had made him get out of bed, dress and go with them to the station for questioning. Mr. and Mrs. Morton had been granted very little information.

"We know our son was at the movies with you boys last night for he told us so. He came in late, but-well, Chet didn't have anything to do with any robbery!" declared Mr. Morton.

"That sure goes without saying," laughed Frank.

The boys gave Chet's parents a fairly complete account of the events of the preceding evening although they did not relate their own adventures encountered in the Bayport Hotel.

"It's a case of mistaken identity, I'm sure," Joe said. "Perhaps the fellow who really hit Cordoza actually looked like Chet."

"The trouble is that our boy really hasn't much of an alibi," Mrs. Morton pointed out.

"After he left you he walked home alone. It's a half hour's hike and he didn't meet anyone."

"Chet shouldn't need an alibi. Everybody knows he wouldn't commit a robbery. I'm going to call up Chief Collig and see what he has to say about it."

Frank went to the telephone and called Bayport Police Headquarters. In a few moments he was talking to the man he wanted.

"What's the idea of holding Chet there, Chief??" he asked. "He had no more to do with taking that money than we did."

"I don't think he took it, Frank," returned Collig, readily enough. "But when Cordoza gave us his name we had to question him. Chet is at home now."

"At home!"

"Well, he started for home at any rate," said the Chief. "He told us his story and I didn't think there was any need of our keeping him here. He promised to be on hand if we decide to make any more inquiries."

"And you say he left for his own place?"

"About an hour ago. He wasn't wasting any time, either. Said he was late for breakfast."

"Thanks, Chief." Frank replaced the receiver. "That's strange," he mused. "Collig says Chet left for home an hour ago."

Joe sprang to the window and looked out. But there was no sign of their chum anywhere on the road from the town.

"I hope this isn't going to be another mystery," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

The Stolen Car

"I hope he isn't afraid to come home," said Mrs. Morton anxiously. "He knows that we believe him innocent."

"It isn't like Chet to do such a thing," Frank declared. "I should think he'd return as quickly as possible, so that you wouldn't be worrying about him. At least he might have telephoned."

"We'd better get busy and look for him," Joe said.

The boys were greatly upset by the news but not half as perturbed as were Chet's parents. Frank tried to allay their fears.

"Probably he went to find a lawyer. Or he may have gone looking for us," he said. "I shouldn't worry about it. If we find him we'll telephone to you right away."

The Hardys left the house and climbed into their roadster.

"I don't like the looks of this at all," Frank muttered, obviously worried. "If Chet Morton

left the police station an hour ago he should be here by this time."

"What could have happened to him?"

"I don't know. It seems to me that we became involved with more than one rogue when we got into that hold-up affair last night."

The Hardy boys drove back toward Bayport. They kept a careful look-out for Chet but the familiar figure of their fat chum was nowhere to be seen. They drove to the police station and there had a talk with Chief Collig, who refused to attach any importance to the failure of the Morton lad to return home directly.

"He said he was going straight to his house when he left here," announced Collig, "but that doesn't mean anything. Do you fellows always go directly home when you say you will?"

"We aren't carted off to the police station very often," grinned Joe.

"He'll show up," said Chief Collig comfortably. "Don't worry."

"But we are worrying," insisted Frank, as he and his brother went out to resume their search.

First they went home, but found that Chet had not called there. They saw Callie Shaw on the street. She had not seen the stout lad. They met Tony Prito, Phil Cohen and Biff Hooper. Still no news of Chet. They patrolled the main streets of downtown Bayport and visited all Chet's favorite ice cream, candy and fruit stores. Their chum, who had more than an average fondness for food, had not been seen at any of these places.

"Perhaps he has reached home by now," Joe suggested.

Frank telephoned the Morton house from a convenient pay station.

"No, he isn't here yet," declared Chet's father. "Do you mean to say you haven't found any trace of him?"

"Hasn't he called up?" asked Frank.

"No. Have you tried the hospitals? Maybe he got knocked down by a hit-and-run driver."

Mr. Morton's voice was trembling with anxiety now.

Frank and Joe called up Bayport General Hospital, where Chet was well known to the staff. The boys hardly knew whether they were relieved or sorry when they learned that Chet had not been brought in as an accident victim.

"Do you think he could have gone up to the Willow River bridge?" Frank suggested.

"Why in the world would Chet go there?" demanded Joe.

"That's where we found Cordoza, isn't it? That's where Cordoza is supposed to have been beaten and robbed. Perhaps Chet thought he might do a little detective work on his own and hunt for evidence to clear himself."

"That's a real thought!" Joe declared admiringly. "It wouldn't have occurred to me in a dozen years."

"It's a gift," returned his brother with mock modesty.

"Well, shall we drive out to the bridge? It's worth trying."

"Let's take the boat."

Joe needed no further urging. The most prized possession of the Hardy boys was their high-speed motorboat, The Sleuth, which they had purchased with the reward money they had received for solving one of their first big mysteries. If it was to be a choice between going to the Willow River bridge by car or by motorboat the Sleuth would win the verdict hands down. It would be an easy run on Barmet Bay from their boat-house to the mouth of the river and thence upstream to the bridge.

The boys drove their car past their own home to the boat-house at the foot of High Street

and there unlocked the door. In a few minutes the trim, smoothly-running motorboat was purring gently as it nosed its way among the craft in the harbor.

When they were in open water Joe put on full speed, and the Sleuth slid swiftly forward, the purr of the engine changing to a roar as the powerful boat raced down the bay. It drummed through the water and made a speedy run to the river-mouth. The boys noticed that it was low tide.

"Maybe we'll be able to get Virginia's car out of the river," Frank remarked. "It should be high and dry now."

"We'll see what we can do about it when we get there."

The Willow was a pleasant stream with high banks and bluffs thickly overgrown with the trees that gave the river its name. At low water, however, it was not so inviting nor as easy to navigate as at other times. Joe, at the wheel of the Sleuth, had to run the boat at slow speed and watch the channel carefully.

Eventually the boys rounded a bend and came in sight of the bridge that had been the scene of their adventure the previous night. The small coupe that Virginia Binder had driven so recklessly over the river bank lay in the mud by the water's edge.

"Don't see any signs of Chet," remarked Joe.

The bridge was deserted. There was no one near the place where Nick Cordoza's car had "been driven into the ditch the night before."

The boys ran the Sleuth up beside a pier and flung a rope around one of the timbers. Then they went ashore.

If Chet had been at the Willow River bridge that morning he had left no indications of his visit. Frank and Joe hunted around, paying special attention to the place where they had found Nick Cordoza's car, but could see nothing in the way of a clue that might help them solve either the mystery of the Morton boy's disappearance or the puzzle of the stolen theatre funds.

"Guess we better give up," said Joe. "I'd like to try moving Virginia's car before we go."

They found that the coupe was not badly damaged. The water and the soft mud of the river bottom had broken the force of its crash. Beyond a bent mudguard and fender they could see little wrong with the car.

"If we can get it back on shore and clean it up a bit it will be as good as ever," remarked Joe.

"Let's see if we can manage it."

The boys had a good supply of tools in their motorboat, including a coil of stout rope and some hooks and pulleys. After considerable figuring on the basis of what they had learned at school about the law of physics they rigged up a pulley arrangement to a telephone post by the roadside. Then, with a hook attached to the car and another to the rear of the Sleuth, they began the task of hauling the coupe up onto higher ground.

Joe worked in the motorboat while Frank supervised operations on land. When the hook-up was considered satisfactory Joe threw in the clutch of the Sleuth. The engine roared, then slowly the boat edged its way out into the river.

The pulleys creaked, the ropes moved, and finally the car lurched over on its four wheels. It rolled slowly backward through the mud, and at last was dragged up the bank.

There was a cheer from Joe when he saw that the salvage feat had been a success. "Smart pair of engineers, us!" he shouted.

Frank unhooked the rope. "Let's see how smart we are as car-cleaners," he suggested.

They took down the rigging and inspected the coupe. The upholstery was badly water-soaked, of course, and the car was smeared with mud, but the damage was for the most part superficial. Joe liked nothing better than a mechanical problem of this kind. Soon he had the hood up and was tinkering with the engine, while Frank got busy with a rag from the Sleuth and a pail of water from the river and washed the mud off the body of the automobile.

It took some time before the car was drained and dried. Once having set themselves to the task they were determined that the car should be in running order before they were finished. Fortunately it was a hot, sunny morning. Nature helped with the drying-out process. Finally, with the car scrubbed until it shone, Joe slipped in behind the steering wheel and pressed his foot on the starter.

At first there was no response. The boy tried again and again. Finally, deciding water had become mixed with the gas, he emptied the tank, and refilled it with some from an extra supply in the Sleuth. The engine showed signs of returning life. Another attempt, and the motor began to throb. Joe released the clutch and backed the car slowly over to the road. "Success!" cried Frank.

"I don't know why we should be doing this when we ought to be looking for Chet," said Joe, "but maybe Virginia will appreciate it when she comes back for her car."

"We can't leave it here," Frank pointed out. "Someone will steal it. We had better drive it to that address we found in the girl's purse. I'll take the Sleuth back to the boat-house. You drive the coupe around and pick me up there."

"O.K." Joe jumped out. "We had better put these tools back in the boat before we forget them," he added.

They gathered up the rope, hooks, pulleys, and all the paraphernalia they had used on the salvage job. After a few trips they had them all back to the Sleuth and were stowing them neatly away when they heard a sound.

"What's that?" Joe looked up.

"Just another car coming."

Joe uttered a howl. He had spied a figure seated behind the wheel of Virginia Sinder's coupe. The engine was roaring. At the same instant the car backed up and turned.

"Hey! Stop!" yelled Joe.

The boyish form at the wheel did not obey. The car lurched ahead and shot down the road. The Hardys leaped out of the Sleuth and ran up on the bank. They were too late to do anything. Already the coupe was disappearing around a bend.

CHAPTER IX

The Meeting Place

"Of all the dirty tricks!" stormed Joe. "Who was it? Did you get a good look at him? He must have been watching us all the time we were fixing up the car."

"I just caught a glimpse of him. He wasn't a man, though. Just a boy."

"I've a hunch it was a girl wearing boy's clothes," said Joe. "Maybe Virginia herself."

"Why should she steal her own car?"

"Maybe she came back here to find out if the coupe was badly damaged. Then, when she saw us taking it out of the river, she decided to wait. When she got her chance she jumped into the car and drove off."

"She might have stopped long enough to thank us," grunted Frank.

"Maybe she didn't want to talk to us. Afraid we'd ask a lot of questions she wouldn't care to answer."

"There may be something in that," agreed Frank, "though I think you're on the wrong track. Perhaps the person was Chet."

"Chet?"

"Sure. You know what a hand he is for playing practical jokes. He may have been out here at the bridge after all, and when he saw us working so hard he couldn't resist the temptation to make us look foolish."

"Perhaps," said Joe dubiously. "Somehow I think it was not Chet, though. I believe Virginia took her own car."

"What was that address you found in her purse?"

"I wrote it down somewhere." The boy searched through his pockets and produced an old envelope on the back of which he had scribbled Virginia Binder's address. "Care of Mrs. Baker, Brockton," it read.

"Brockton. Why, that's the little village up the river, about three miles from here. Perhaps that was where Virginia was going in the car last night. Maybe she didn't run the coupe into the river on purpose at all."

"What do you say to our going up there? Maybe we'll find her and the car too," Joe suggested.

"There are a lot of questions I'd like to ask that girl," mused Frank. "Let's go. It won't take long."

The Hardy boys scrambled into the motorboat and cast off. The Sleuth chugged slowly beneath the bridge and then roared into higher speed as it entered a broader reach of the river.

The journey did not take them very long. Brockton was a picturesque little place that extended for about half a mile along the river bank. The boys tied up the Sleuth at the village wharf and approached a sleepy-looking youngster who was fishing from one of the docks.

"Can you tell us where Mrs. Baker lives!" asked Frank.

"Right up at the top of the hill, the white building with the green shutters. She runs a boardin' house," replied the boy.

The lads easily discerned the white structure with the green shutters from where they stood. They thanked the youngster, who merely wriggled his bare toes, shifted himself into a more comfortable position, gave his fishing rod a twitch, and settled down again.

A pleasant-faced, middle-aged lady answered the door when the Hardy boys rang the bell at the Baker place.

"Does Miss Sinder live here?" asked Frank politely.

"Virginia? She did live here, but you're about an hour too late."

"Too late?"

"Virginia has gone away. She left this morning."

"For good?" asked Joe.

"She took her belongings. I think she never plans to come back to Brockton."

"Did she leave any forwarding address?"

Mrs. Baker shook her head. "No. I asked her where she was going but she said she couldn't tell me. She might write later on, though. No, I haven't any idea where she went."

"Did she drive away in a car?"

"No. She walked."

Mrs. Baker did not volunteer any further information about the girl and the Hardy boys did not want to arouse her curiosity by asking her too many questions. Sufficient it was for them to know that Virginia had vanished, as it were, without leaving a trace of any kind behind her.

The boys thanked the woman and turned to go down the walk. To their surprise, striding quickly toward them was Rip Sinder.

The boys were startled by this encounter but the man paid no attention to them. He brushed past, a scowl on his face, and hurried up the walk as the Hardys directed their steps toward the street.

"I wonder what he's doing here?" said Frank, puzzled.

"Maybe he came to look for Virginia. Perhaps he doesn't know she has left the boarding house."

Then it was that the boys had their second surprise. From around a corner there came a familiar figure-the boy who had accosted their father on the street the previous night, and who later had been talking with Fenton Hardy in the shadows of a shop opposite the Bayport Hotel after the theatre hold-up. The fellow was sauntering along in an aimless way, as if he hadn't a care in the world and was going nowhere in particular.

"Now what is he doing here? Following Sinder?" muttered Frank.

The boy idled to a stop.

"Nice day," he remarked conversationally.

"Fine," agreed Frank.

"You fellows are from Bayport, aren't you?"

"Yes. Hardy is the name," Joe returned.

The lad nodded. "I know," he answered. "My name is Ware. Fred Ware."

While he was speaking he did not look at the boys before him. His eyes were on Rip Sinder, now on the veranda of the boarding house talking to Mrs. Baker.

"Do you live in Brockton?" asked Joe.

"No. Just happened out this way this morning. Poky little place, isn't it?"

"Maybe it's more exciting than it looks," Frank remarked.

"That wouldn't have to be much," said Fred Ware with a yawn. "What do you think of the American League this season?"

"The Yankees ought to win the pennant in a walk."

Ware nodded. "That's what I think," he said. "And they'll go on and win the World Series, too, just you wait and see. No matter who wins the National League, the Yankees will lick 'em."

He continued to gossip about baseball for a while. Suddenly Rip Sinder came down the steps, hurried along the walk and dashed up the street. Fred Ware lounged away.

"So long," he drawled. "Maybe I'll see you again some time."

Thus he drifted away, apparently as aimless as ever, yet the Hardy boys noticed that when Rip Sinder turned to the left at the next corner, Fred Ware turned to the left too.

"He's shadowing Sinder, all right," Frank remarked. "I wonder if he is working for Dad." Joe was a little put out by this idea.

"Why didn't Dad ask us to do it if he wanted anyone shadowed?"

"Maybe he couldn't find us."

Joe agreed that this might be the reason.

Both boys were quite convinced that Fred Ware was watching Sinder at the instigation of Fenton Hardy, and for a moment Joe was tempted to suggest that they trail along and follow Fred Ware also. However, he decided finally that their father might not appreciate any such interference on their part.

"I guess we better go back to Bayport," was his remark.

At that moment a colored girl came out of the Baker house. She glanced from side to side in an anxious manner, then hurried down the walk. She crossed the road and proceeded quickly along the street in the direction of the river.

"She seems nervous," remarked Frank. "Maybe we'll learn something if we shadow her instead of watching Fred Ware."

"It's worth trying," returned his brother.

The two boys kept the girl in sight. They surmised that she was employed as a maid in the Baker household, and suspected by her actions that this hurried journey was very likely the result of Sinder's visit to the house.

The girl went down a street that led to the outskirts of the village. The boys, following at a discreet distance, saw her leave the sidewalk and enter a path that led on through the shrubbery toward the river. They lost sight of her for a while as the trail turned and twisted through the trees. As they came cautiously around a heavy clump of bushes they saw her again—this time standing on the river bank. She kept glancing impatiently at her wrist-watch, as if she were waiting for someone who had failed to keep an appointment with her.

The Hardy boys stayed where they were, for they could watch the girl unobserved from their hiding place. They did not have long to wait for further developments. A motorboat came chugging slowly up the river, and for a moment they thought it might be the Sleuth. Had someone stolen their craft? When it appeared in full view they saw that it was a slow, cumbersome looking boat, vastly different from their own sleek launch. The craft nosed in toward the bank, and a man leaped out.

"Rip Sinder!" whispered Frank.

The man flung a rope around a nearby stump, tied up the launch, and then walked toward the colored girl.

"Where did Virginia go?" he asked her roughly.

"You-all promised you'd give me some money ef Ah told you, Mistah Sinder," the girl answered.

"Oh, all right," he said, and dug a hand into his pocket. "Here's ten dollars. Now talk."

The girl cast a frightened look around, then leaned toward Sinder and whispered something to him.

"So!" growled the man. "You're not lying to me, are you?"

"No suh. Ah'm not tellin' you no lie," she assured him.

Sinder turned away from her and walked to the boat. He untied the rope, leaped into the craft, and pushed off from the bank. After he had tinkered with the engine a few moments it burst into a roar. The man sat down at the wheel and headed the boat up the river.

"Come on!" said Joe to his brother. "We'll go back and get the Sleuth and follow him. We haven't any time to lose."

The colored girl, in the meantime, had thrust the ten-dollar bill into her purse and fled down another path that led away from the clearing.

"I'm ready," said Frank. "Let's make it snappy."

The boys turned to leave. As they did so, each of them received a resounding slap on the back which made them yelp with surprise!

CHAPTER X

The Eye Syndicate

Frank and Joe wheeled around. A single thought had flashed through the mind of each of them-that Rip Sinder's companion, Spotty Lemuel, had caught them eavesdropping. But it was not Spotty Lemuel who stood behind them, smiling at their astonishment. It was Fenton Hardy.

"Gosh, Dad!" gasped Frank, as soon as he could get his breath. "You gave me a start!"

"I nearly jumped out of my shoes," confessed Joe. "My heart is still in my mouth." He gulped, as if to swallow that organ back into its proper place again. "How did you get here?"

"How did you get here?" countered their father, smiling.

"We were shadowing someone who met Rip Sinder," Frank confessed.

"Seems to me that Sinder had plenty of shadows this morning," said Joe. "How about Fred Ware?"

"Instead of standing here talking," Mr. Hardy remarked, "we had better be on our way before Sinder gets too far up the river. Did I hear you say you came to Brockton in your boat?"

"It's tied up at the town wharf," replied Joe. "Come on, Dad."

The Hardys lost no time reaching the Sleuth. Very soon they were speeding up the river past the place where they had watched Sinder's meeting with the colored maid from the boarding house. From then on they watched the shores closely for the man's boat.

The three saw it finally, about two miles upstream, chugging steadily ahead. Joe cut down the Sleuth's speed and followed at a respectful distance for another half mile or so until

Sinder could be seen heading his craft in toward the river bank at a place where a small farm lay beside the stream.

Fortunately a bend in the river protected them from view, and Joe was able to run the craft up without being seen. He headed the boat into a sheltered cove among the trees that overhung the water's edge, and all got out.

Fenton Hardy led the way as they scrambled up the bank and took a trail leading through thick shrubbery to the farm clearing. They reached a fence and hid among a clump of bushes just in time to see Sinder walk across the field and speak to a boy who was weeding a potato patch.

"Where is Virginia?" the man asked.

The lad straightened up and stared at his interrogator blankly.

"Who?"

"Virginia," said the man impatiently. "Virginia Sinder. She came here, didn't she? Where is she now? I want to talk to her."

At that moment a door of the farmhouse opened and a woman came out.

"What do you want?" she demanded shrilly.

"I want to talk to Virginia Sinder. She came here this morning."

"You get out of here!" snapped the housewife. "I don't know anything about any Virginias. There's no girl at this place."

"But I understand she came here just a short while ago."

"She did nothing of the sort. I never heard of the girl in my life. She ain't here. Now you clear out of this place or I'll set the dog on you."

Sinder was plainly nonplussed. "I'm sure she's here!" he declared.

"And I'm sure she's not," retorted the woman. "What's more, I don't like the looks of you. You're up to no good and I'll thank you to take yourself away from my farm. Now get out!"

Muttering to himself, Sinder retreated. A vicious-looking dog chained to a corner of the house began creating a tremendous racket, barking furiously as he strained at his leash in his effort to get at the intruder.

Sinder had no choice but to return to his boat. Before he cast off, however, he shook his fist at the angry woman.

"You're lying!" he shouted. "That girl is here and I know it. You're hiding her."

"I'm not lying about this dog," the woman shouted back at him. "He'll tear you to pieces if I let him loose. So you'd better get goin'."

Sinder apparently took this warning to heart, for he started the motor of his boat which drew away from shore and swung around in midstream, heading back in the direction of Brockton.

"I wonder what he'll do now?" mused Frank.

"That's just what we're going to find out," his father replied. "It ought to be easy enough to keep sight of him."

The three Hardys headed down the trail to the cove, being careful to keep themselves well hidden until Sinder should go by. Then they got into the Sleuth and resumed their pursuit of the man.

Sinder, however, evidently had decided to give up the search for the time being because he did not stop at Brockton again. Instead, he proceeded downstream toward Barmet Bay and from there on in the direction of Bayport.

Frank and Joe had long since learned that it was unwise to question their father about any case on which he might be working. If he deemed it wise to give them any information he would do so in his own good time. They were very curious about the Sinder affair, however, and were consumed with eagerness to ply him with questions. Their curiosity was somewhat appeased when their father began to talk.

"How does it happen that you are trailing Sinder?" Fenton Hardy asked his sons.

"We were looking for Virginia," Frank explained.

The boys then told of the search for Chet that morning, and explained how they had happened to hunt for the Sinder girl instead.

"Were you seeking Virginia, Dad?" asked Joe.

"No," replied Mr. Hardy, "as a matter of fact, I was shadowing only her father. I had no idea where he was going, nor why. He and this fellow Lemuel are a pair of rascals. I suppose you wonder why I asked you to watch them at the hotel last night."

"We've been trying to figure out what they're up to," Joe admitted.

"They are operating a very cruel and heartless racket which I call the 'Eye Syndicate.' When I get the evidence I need I'm going to see that their activities are stopped."

"What do they do?" Frank asked, interested at once.

"They hunt up people who are suffering from eye troubles. To some they write, while others they contact personally. They promise a cure, no matter how bad the case may be. As a matter of fact, I understand they even promise to effect cures in people who are totally blind—all for a handsome sum of money, of course."

"And isn't there anything to their method of healing?" asked Joe.

"Of course not. Sinder and Lemuel are merely the scouts who hunt up patients. The real head of the syndicate is a crook who calls himself Doctor Grafton. He is a distinguished looking gentleman but a heartless fellow. The patients interview him, whereupon he performs some sort of hocus-pocus with a promise to cure them. When the money has been collected he either moves to a new locality or else denies that he ever did promise a cure."

"So that's why Sinder and Lemuel were writing all those letters last night!" Frank exclaimed.

"Yes. They secure lists of persons with eye trouble and write to them, asking them if they would be interested in Doctor Grafton's great new cure. If any poor victim is foolish enough or desperate enough to reply, the inquiry is followed up, and before long the self-styled physician has another patient."

Fenton Hardy removed a crumpled envelope from his pocket. "The chambermaid who cleaned up the hotel room after Sinder and Lemuel went out this morning found this in the wastebasket," he continued, unfolding the paper, upon which was written a name and address.

"Mr. Henry Zatta, 42 Pine Street, Bayport," read Joe. "Who is Mr. Zatta?"

"I don't know," returned his father, "but I intend to find out. It looks like a very good lead. I'm pretty sure it is the name of one of the Eye Syndicate's prospective victims. You'll notice that the ink has been smeared. Sinder and Lemuel must have thrown the envelope into the wastebasket because of the blot and addressed another one in its stead. If this Mr. Zatta will cooperate with me I think I can get evidence against Grafton and his gang."

"How?"

"You'll see."

"Wish you could tell us now."

The Sleuth was slowly approaching the boat-house. Sinder had reached shore, but Fenton Hardy said there would be no purpose in following the man farther, now that he knew the reason for the crook's visit to Brockton.

"We'll go and look up Mr. Zatta," the detective decided.

CHAPTER XI

A Strange Message

Henby Zatta's dwelling on Pine Street was a humble frame building in considerable need of repair. The owner was a feeble, white-haired old man who wore dark spectacles.

"Why yes," he admitted, when Fenton Hardy asked him if he had received a letter inquiring if he might be interested in a cure for his failing sight. "I got a letter this morning. Here it is."

"Do you intend to answer it?"

"I certainly do," declared the old man. "It must be a wonderful cure, just what I've been looking for because I've had a lot of trouble with my eyes in the past few years. I'm half-blind now and I'm afraid of losing my sight entirely. If this Doctor Grafton can do all this letter says he can, I don't care how much it costs me."

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint you, Mr. Zatta," said the detective gently, "but you must be prepared for a shock. I have every reason to believe that Doctor Grafton cannot effect a cure. In short, my contention is that he is nothing but a swindler who makes money victimizing unfortunate people like yourself."

"Then there is no cure for me!" exclaimed the old man, appalled.

"Something might be done for you if a good doctor should take up your case; I can't say for sure," returned Mr. Hardy. "But I know you cannot expect a cure from Doctor Grafton. All he wants is your money, without helping you."

"Then I won't answer the letter and I'm grateful to you for warning me," was the reply.

"I'd like you to answer the letter, nevertheless," said Mr. Hardy.

"Why should I?" asked the old man, aghast.

"You won't lose a cent. I'm a detective," explained Mr. Hardy. "A medical association has asked me to bring Doctor Grafton and his gang to justice. That's why I'm here. I want you to answer the letter and ask the so-called specialist to call on you. If we can get him here and prove that his alleged cure is nothing but a fake I'll have enough evidence to take him into court."

"I see," said Mr. Zatta. "A man like that should be sent to prison, of course."

He readily agreed to write the letter. The one he had received that morning had stated that Doctor Grafton's fee would be five hundred dollars. Mr. Zatta said that this amount would

consume every cent he had in the world; yet he had been fully prepared to pay such a sum if it would restore his eyesight to him.

"Offer him the money," instructed Mr. Hardy. "The entire sum. That should bring him." Under the guidance of the boys' father the old man got out pen, ink, and paper. He promptly sat down to write a reply to the letter from the Eye Syndicate. When it was completed to the detective's satisfaction, Mr. Hardy took it, promising to drop it into the nearest mail-box.

"If we can trap those rascals," he said grimly, "it may be a means of preventing a lot of people from losing their hard-earned savings."

The next two days the Hardy boys heard nothing further from their father concerning the Eye Syndicate; nor did they make any progress with the mystery of Chet Morton's disappearance. There had been no word from their chum and not the slightest clue as to his whereabouts. The Bayport police had failed to find any trace of him, and Mr. and Mrs. Morton were almost frantic with anxiety.

At the Bayport High School the disappearance of Chet was the main topic of conversation. No one could be found who recalled having seen the boy after he had left the police station. Mr. Morton, who at first had held the opinion that his son had been kidnaped, gave up this idea when no demand for ransom arrived, and came to the more gloomy conclusion that Chet was dead—that he had either been drowned or struck by an automobile. He refused to believe that his son had run away because he feared disgrace on account of his arrest. It was the third morning after the visit to old Mr. Zatta, as the Hardy boys were eating breakfast, when a messenger boy arrived with a telegram addressed to Frank. The lad tore open the envelope, glanced at the message, and uttered a whoop of joy.

"It's from Chet!" he shouted.

"From Chet!" cried Joe. "Then he's alive after all! Where is he? Let me see it."

He leaned over his brother's shoulder and read the message, which had been sent from the Pioneer Hotel in Boston.

"Still waiting here but have used up all the money stop When are you coming? Chet."

The Hardy boys stared at each other blankly.

"Used up all the money!" exclaimed Joe. "What money? What does he mean?"

"And he says he is still waiting, as if we know all about it."

"And he wants to find out when we're coming. How can we when we don't know where he is?"

The lads were completely mystified by Chet's strange message. Frank's first move was to dash for the phone and call the stout lad's home. In as few words as possible he told Mr. Morton about the telegram.

"At least we know your son is alive and well," said Frank in relief. "That's the main thing. I'll call him on a long distance wire at once and get to the bottom of this business."

"Call me back as soon as you hear from him," said Mr. Morton in excitement. "How in the world did he get to Boston? And why? And what prevented him from writing to us?"

"We'll soon find out," promised Frank.

It did not take very long to put through the call to Boston. The boys had a dreadful suspicion, for a while, that the message might be a hoax. It would be a terrible disappointment to them if they were to find Chet was not at the hotel after all. There was no hoax, however. Frank readily recognized his chum's voice on the wire.

'«Hello, Chet!" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing in Boston? Why haven't you let anyone know where you've been staying? And what does your telegram mean?"

"You should know," said his friend in an aggrieved tone. "I've a few questions of my own. What was your idea in sending me here in the first place? Why didn't you get in touch with me? I've been hanging around here expecting to get word from you and now my money is gone and I'm in a fine jam."

"We didn't send you up there!" Frank declared. "I don't know what you're talking about. We've been hunting high and low for you, and didn't know where you were until your telegram arrived this morning. We can't make head nor tail of it, either."

"What's this?" shouted Chet, puzzled. "Do you mean to tell me you didn't send me some money and a note instructing me to go to the Pioneer Hotel in Boston and wait here until you arrived?"

Frank was flabbergasted. "You must be dreaming!" was all he could say.

"I'm not dreaming," returned Chet, who was not in a very good humor. "I have the note right here in my pocket. A messenger gave it to me on the street just after I left the police station in Bayport the other morning. It was signed with your names. What's more, it said I wasn't to tell anyone I was going and that I was to get out of town as quietly as I could."

"You certainly did that!"

"Of course I did. The messenger gave me fifty dollars with the note, which said that I wasn't even to say good-bye to my folks at home - that you would tell Dad and Mother where I had gone. I've put in a couple of the loneliest days of my life up here," concluded Chet plaintively. "The message said you would meet me at this place as soon as you could."

"We've done everything but drag the river for your body," Frank explained, "We had nothing to do with the note."

"Don't tell me all this has been a joke!" exploded Chet wrathfully.

"Not much of a joke. Somebody must have wanted you out of the way pretty badly. Your father and mother have been nearly crazy with worry."

"Good night!" exclaimed Chet. You'll tell them, won't you? But how am I going to get out of here? I haven't enough money left to take me two blocks on a street car."

"We'll see that you get some. Stay right at the hotel until you hear from us."

"Don't worry. I can't move far," was Chet's sad rejoinder. "The hotel clerk has a nasty look in his eye as it is. He thinks I'm going to try to skip out without paying for the breakfast I had this morning."

The Hardy boys hurriedly left the house and got into their roadster, greatly relieved to know that Chet was safe and well, but angered and puzzled by his revelation that their names had been used on the fake note which had sent Chet all the way to Boston. They hurriedly drove out to the Morton place, where they explained the circumstances to their chum's parents.

"Well, of all the crazy things!" Mr. Morton ejaculated. "He went to Boston and hung around a hotel for three days just because he thought he got a message from you asking him to do it."

"He believed we were giving him a chance to help us with some detective work," Joe explained. "Yet we can't understand why the trick should have been played on him. It's plain enough that someone wanted him to get out of town-and wanted it badly enough to spend fifty dollars."

"Well, I want him back, and I want him back enough to spend some money too," declared

Mr. Morton.

He went to the phone, called the telegraph office, and gave instructions for wiring Chet sufficient money to pay his fare back to Bayport and clear up the balance of his hotel bill.

"There," said Mr. Morton, returning from the phone, "Chet ought to be in Bayport on tonight's train."

"We'll be down at the station to meet him," Frank promised.

The Hardy boys met with a surprise when they reached the station platform that evening. Hardly had they stepped from their roadster when they saw two familiar figures emerging from the waiting room.

"Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel!" exclaimed Joe. "Whatever brings them here?"

CHAPTER XII

The Faker

The Hardy boys had very little time in which to speculate on the errand which had brought Sinder and Spotty Lemuel to the station, for the train roared in just a few minutes later.

One of the first passengers to leap down onto the platform was Chet Morton, a broad grin on his face that left no doubt whatsoever as to his relief at being back in Bayport.

"Chet!" shouted Frank and Joe, each pumping one of their fat chum's hands. "It's great to see you again."

"And it's great to be back!" Chet declared. "What a time I've had hanging around that hotel, wondering why in the world you sent me to Boston and when you'd show up!"

"Well, get into the car and we'll drive you home," said Joe. "We can hear all about your adventures on the way."

"Just a minute," said Frank, who was watching Sinder and Lemuel.

"Don't tell me it's more detective work," Chet said. "I don't want to get mixed up in any more of that sort of thing as long as I live."

A pompous, dignified-looking man was greeting the two suspicious individuals. He wore a cutaway coat, a stiff-bosomed shirt and wing collar. A black ribbon dangled from his eyeglasses. He carried a gold-headed cane.

"I wonder if he is Doctor Grafton," said Frank.

"He looks like an actor in the role of a physician," Joe remarked.

The man shook hands with Sinder and Spotty Lemuel. Then they escorted him to a taxi and the three got in.

"Come on," said Chet, "I want to get home. After eating nothing but hotel food I can hardly wait to dig into one of Ma's good old-fashioned meals. I'm starving."

"You'll live," retorted Frank unsympathetically. "I'll bet that hotel in Boston didn't make

much profit out of your visit."

"Well, there wasn't anything else to do but eat," his chum confessed.

The boys climbed into the roadster, with Frank at the wheel. He swung the car around; as he did so, the taxi which had just been engaged by Sinder backed up sharply.

There was a loud crash followed by the tinkle of broken glass as the rear of the cab jammed hard against the bumper of the roadster. Frank brought his car to a stop. Joe flung open the door and jumped out. The cab driver and his three passengers began piling hastily from the other auto.

A window in the taxi had been broken, but other than that there had been no damage. Rip Sinder and his companions were frightened and excited, however.

"Doctor Grafton, are you hurt?" asked Spotty Lemuel anxiously.

"I might have been killed!" came the reply. "Stupidity! Clumsiness!"

He turned on the Hardy boys. "You rascals!" he shrieked. "I might have injured my hands. I'm a famous surgeon, and my hands are worth thousands and thousands of dollars. I should have you arrested."

"It was your driver's fault," said Frank. "He should have looked around before backing Up his car."

"Rowdies!" snarled the man.

"Come on," said the taxi driver, who knew he was to blame and had no intention of making trouble over the shattered glass. "Nobody is hurt. Let's get going."

Doctor Grafton darted a malicious glare at the Hardy boys and got into the cab again, followed by Rip Sinder and Lemuel. The car jolted away.

"So that," said Joe, "is the great eye specialist. I don't like him."

"Neither do I. Famous surgeon!" Frank scoffed. "Famous bluff!"

"What's it all about?" asked Chet.

Frank and Joe, in deference to their father, put off Chet with an evasive answer and managed to change the subject. They drove him home, where his parents were so relieved at seeing him safe and sound that they forgot to scold him for all the worry he had caused them.

The Mortons gave a party that evening in celebration of Chet's return. At the height of the fun, however, the gaiety was spoiled by the arrival of a constable from Bayport police headquarters.

"Chet Morton?" he queried.

"Bosh!" groaned the fat boy. "Don't tell me I'm in trouble again."

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with me. One of the detectives wants to see you at headquarters," said the officer.

"We'll go along with you, Chet," volunteered Frank. "This time, when they let you go we'll see that you don't end up in Boston."

At the police station the stout lad was taken into a private room where a sharp-eyed detective was waiting for him. The man glanced at a photograph and a typewritten letter he had in his hand, then scrutinized the Morton boy carefully.

"What's the trouble this time?" asked Chet meekly.

The detective shook his head and put the photograph back in a drawer.

"No trouble," he said. "You don't fit this description. You may go now."

"To think that I had to leave a perfectly good party just so you could have a look at me!" said Chet indignantly.

"Lucky for you that you can go back there," was the indifferent reply.

As it was late, the Hardy boys went home as soon as they had driven their friend to his house. The party had been broken up by Chet's abrupt and mystifying summons to police headquarters. It was not until next morning at the breakfast table that Frank and Joe were able to tell their father about the incident. Mr. Hardy, although puzzled, had no suggestion to offer by way of explanation.

"I have something more important on my mind than the troubles of your friend Chet," he said. "I've been in touch with old Mr. Zatta."

"Oh-we forgot to tell you," said Frank, "that Doctor Grafton is in town. We saw him with Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel yesterday."

"That's why I want to speak to you," explained Mr. Hardy. "He is here in response to Mr. Zatta's letter. Grafton thinks Zatta is going to be foolish enough to pay him five hundred dollars for his fake eye cure."

"How are you going to prove that the doctor is a crook, Dad?" asked Frank.

"That's where you and Joe come in. I need your help."

"Good!" exclaimed Joe.

The boys listened eagerly as Fenton Hardy outlined the plan in which they were to be a part.

"I want you both to go out to Mr. Zatta's house this morning so that you'll have time in which to get acquainted with the surroundings. Frank, wear your shabbiest clothes- a pair of overalls, too. You're to play the part of a chore boy in the household. As for Joe, I want him to hide somewhere in Mr. Zatta's room so he can be a witness to anything that happens during Grafton's visit."

Mr. Hardy went into his office and opened a desk drawer. He unlocked a cash box and took out a thick roll of paper money.

"This is marked. I have taken the numbers of the bills and have also marked them with indelible ink. This is the five hundred dollars Mr. Zatta is to pay over to Grafton. When we can prove that the faker promised a cure and actually took money for a treatment, which is not one at all, I'll have enough evidence to break up that gang and put the so-called physician and his crowd where they belong."

"Behind the bars," said Frank.

"Exactly."

The boys lost no time getting ready. By ten o'clock that morning they reported to old Mr. Zatta.

"Yes," chuckled the man, peering at them, "this is the day Doctor Grafton is supposed to give my eyesight back to me. The swindler! At least, your father says he's a criminal. I wish he wasn't, though. It would be worth five hundred dollars to me to get my sight back, the way it used to be."

"I'm afraid Grafton can't do that for you, despite all his promises," said Joe. "If he should be prosecuted and sent to jail a lot of poor people will be saved from being robbed of their money."

"That's true," agreed Zatta. "I can't understand how anyone can be as heartless and crooked as he is." The old man's face became sad. "Dishonesty never pays in the long run. Once I had a son. I gave him the best education I could afford; yet in spite of everything I told him he got the idea that it was smart to be crooked. He always said that no one could make money by being honest. Well-he has found out different."

"Did he get into trouble?" asked Joe sympathetically.

"Of course. He wasn't as smart as he thought he was, and failed to realize that it's only the stupid people who are crooked. He was arrested and sent to prison and after a few years escaped. I don't know where he is now and I don't suppose I'll ever see him again."

"A figure in hiding," murmured Frank.

"I was so ashamed," confided Mr. Zatta in a tremulous voice, "that I moved away from the town where I had always lived. I even changed my name. The disgrace of having a son who was an escaped convict was more than I could bear."

The Hardy boys felt sorry for the old gentleman, facing alone the tragedy of failing eyesight, and smiting under the disgrace brought on him by his worthless son. They did their best to cheer him up, and Frank explained how they planned to trap Doctor Grafton. Mr. Zatta was given the marked bills and a hiding place was prepared for Joe in a clothes closet in the afflicted man's bedroom.

"Now, Mr. Zatta," said Frank, "if you'll go to bed we'll pull down the window shade and darken the room. We want to give the doctor the impression that you are a pretty sick man."

These preparations had just been concluded when a taxi drew up in front of the house. The door opened and the fake eye specialist, looking very impressive in his frock coat and white waistcoat, stepped out onto the pavement.

"The trap is set and baited, Doctor Grafton," said Joe, peering out of the window, before he scurried back to his hiding place.

CHAPTER XIII

A Change of Heart

Frank, a pair of overalls covering his shabby clothes, answered Grafton's knock at the front door.

"Is this where Mr. Zatta lives?" asked the man in a brusque voice as he eyed the boy sharply.

"Yes. You're the doc, ain't you?" returned Frank. "Mr. Zatta's expecting you. He's pretty sick."

Grafton entered the house. He looked keenly at Frank again, and scowled.

"I've seen you before," he said. "Ah- now I remember. You're one of the young rowdies who ran his car into my taxi at the station yesterday. Don't deny it. I recognize you."

Frank shrugged. "I was ridin' in a car that your taxi ran into, if that's what you mean," he replied.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Grafton roughly. "Are you a relative of Mr.

Zatta?"

"Nope. Just helpin' 'round the house. Well, do you want me to show you to his room? He's waitin' for you." Frank wasted no courtesy on the visitor.

"All in good time. All in good time," said Grafton. "There's no hurry, boy. And I hope Mr. Zatta understands that I won't operate unless I'm paid in advance."

"Gosh! How much?"

"The entire amount. Five hundred dollars. He is prepared, I hope."

"Well, I know he's got some money. But what if the operation don't cure him? Will you give him his money back?"

"Of course not!" snapped Grafton. "I never return anybody his fee for the simple reason that my operations are always successful."

"Why don't you take half now and get the rest later?"

"If I were to do that, the moment I'd cured a patient I would be left to whistle for the rest of my fee! You don't know much about human nature, boy. Well, show me to the patient and don't have so much to say."

Frank led the way to Mr. Zatta's room. The window shades were drawn and the place was in such deep shadow that the old man could scarcely be seen.

"Here's the doctor, Mr. Zatta," said Frank. "He says he won't operate on your eyes unless he gets the money first."

"Every cent of it," declared Grafton firmly. "Five hundred dollars in cash."

"I have the money," replied the old man in a quavering voice. He reached beneath his pillow and withdrew the packet of marked bills. "I think you'll find the count correct, doctor. Give him the money, Frank."

The lad took the bills from Mr. Zatta and handed them to Grafton. In his excitement, however, he let them drop on the floor just as the man reached for them.

"Clumsy!" snapped the quack.

He and Frank bent to pick up the money simultaneously, with the result that the latter jostled against Grafton and knocked him down. The irate fellow sprang to his feet, stuttering with anger.

"You - you fool!" he shouted at Frank. "Why can't you be more careful?"

In his rage he drew back his hand and gave the boy a violent slap on the side of his head.

"I'm sorry," muttered Frank humbly, suppressing an impulse to return the blow.

When he tried to pick up the bills again he scattered some of them on the floor. This made Grafton more angry than before. With a muttered imprecation he shoved the lad aside and snatched up the money himself. Then he took the greenbacks over to the window and counted them carefully, bill by bill.

"Five hundred dollars!" he exclaimed at last in a tone of satisfaction. "That's correct. It's all here."

He swung around toward Frank.

"Get me a kettle of hot water and some towels, boy!" he ordered sharply. "Be quick about it."

He put his instrument case on the table and opened it. Frank hastily left the room and went to the kitchen for hot water and towels. When he returned, however, he stumbled as he was pouring the boiling liquid into a jug on the wash-stand and Doctor Grafton impatiently snatched the kettle away from him.

"I never saw such a stupid, clumsy young rowdy before in all my life!" he snarled. "Get out

of here. Get out of this room."

"But don't you want me to help you while you're operatin'?" asked Frank.

"A lot of help you would be!" declared Grafton sarcastically. "No, I don't want you.

Besides, I never allow anyone to watch me work. Go away!" He stamped his foot. "Get out of here and don't come back until I call you."

Reluctantly Frank left the room. "If that fellow is a great surgeon, I'm the Emperor of Timbuctoo," he muttered to himself.

Frank was very curious about the "operation" which the man was to perform in return for the five hundred dollars, but the fake physician had closed the door of the bedroom.

However, Joe, safely hidden in a closet, was in a good position to view the subsequent proceedings. He was quaking with apprehension lest Grafton should search the room and discover his hiding place. But the supposed surgeon was evidently satisfied with the thought that in getting rid of Frank he had driven away the only possible eyewitness.

"Well, Mr. Zatta," he said, as he approached the man's bedside, "you'll never regret spending five hundred dollars on this operation, I assure you."

"If I get my eyesight back I don't care how much it costs," replied the victim.

Joe, who was watching from the shelter of the closet, saw Doctor Grafton straighten up suddenly. Then the bogus surgeon strode quickly to the window and raised the shade a trifle to admit more light into the room. Returning to the bedside, he stared down at Mr. Zatta's face. An exclamation of surprise broke from his lips.

"What did you say, doctor?" asked the patient.

"Nothing. Nothing," returned Grafton hastily. He swung around and went back to the window, drawing the shade down again. Then Joe heard him mutter:

"Yes. It is he. No mistake about it."

Grafton snatched up a towel and quickly placed it over the old man's eyes. He looked down uncertainly at his array of surgical instruments. Suddenly he shook his head and began to pack the paraphernalia back in the case.

Joe was puzzled. Evidently Grafton was not going to operate after all. This suspicion became a certainty when he saw the man lock the instrument case and reach for his hat and coat.

"What is the matter, doctor?" asked Mr. Zatta presently. "Aren't you going to begin the operation?"

"Not today. Not today. You're in no shape for it," muttered Grafton. Joe noticed that the man purposely altered his voice. "I don't care to risk it. Some other time."

He hurriedly flung open the door and rushed out of the room.

Frank, who was standing in the hall, was astonished when Grafton blundered hastily out of the bedroom.

"You ain't finished already, are you?" he demanded.

"Out of my way, boy!" ordered the man in a harsh voice. He tried to push the lad aside but Frank stood his ground and barred the path.

"Not so fast, doctor," he snapped. "You been paid for an operation. Ain't you going to go through with it?"

"The patient is too sick. I can't work on him today. I'll have to come back later."

"Well, how about returning the five hundred dollars? How does Mr. Zatta know you'll ever come back?"

Grafton's only reply was an ugly laugh. His arm swung out and he knocked Frank back

against the wall.

"I told you to get out of my way!" he stormed, then hurried down the hall toward the front door.

The boy was after him at a bound. He tried to hold Grafton back but the man was strong and powerful. The moment Frank grabbed him he turned and smashed the lad over the head with his instrument case. The boy clung grimly to the man's arm but he knew that the fellow was too strong for him to handle alone.

Then help came. There was a rush of footsteps in the hall as Joe, hearing the sounds of struggle, ran out of the bedroom and raced to his brother's aid. Doctor Grafton was just wrenching open the front door as the younger Hardy hurtled through the air in a flying tackle that brought the impostor to the floor.

"That's the stuff, Joe!" whooped Frank. "Hang onto him."

"Get that money!" shouted Joe.

Kicking and struggling, Grafton began fighting his way toward the open door. He lashed out with the instrument case, bringing it down on Frank's head. A clenched fist smacked Joe on the chin.

CHAPTER XIV

A Journey by Air

The battle was short and fierce. Grafton was a big, well-built man, but the Hardys were young and strong. The bogus doctor fought his way across the threshold and onto the walk; but Frank grabbed him by the waist and flung him to the ground. The two boys would have overwhelmed the man, had not Grafton suddenly wrenched a shiny object from his pocket.

"Look out, Frank!" yelled Joe. "He's pulling a gun!"

Joe lunged at the weapon, but missed. At the same instant Grafton snapped the trigger. But there was no spurt of flame, no loud report! Instead, a thin stream of pungent liquid shot from the nozzle of the weapon. The next moment Joe was gasping and choking for breath. His nostrils tingled and tears filled his smarting eyes. A strong odor of ammonia filled the air.

Frank got a whiff of the vapor, and he, too, began to cough and gag. The boys, struggling for breath, fell back, almost blinded by the irritating gas.

Grafton scrambled to his feet. Frank made a grab for the man's leg but could scarcely see what he was doing. The next moment the doctor was running down the street.

Some time elapsed before Frank and Joe recovered from the effects of the ammonia. When they did so, Grafton was out of sight. Moreover, neither of the boys had noticed a slim lad

dart out from between two houses and fall into step behind the man as he rounded the corner.

"A fine pair of detectives we are!" grumbled Frank, dabbing at his reddened eyes with a handkerchief. "We let that scoundrel get clear away."

"I was prepared for almost anything but a gas attack," coughed Joe. "I couldn't see at all when that ammonia got in my eyes."

"And Grafton has escaped with the five hundred dollars!"

"He won't get far," Joe said confidently. "Dad will make sure that he is picked up."

The boys returned to the house and hurried to Mr. Zatta's room. The old man was getting dressed. He seemed disappointed that Fenton Hardy had been right in branding Grafton a crook.

"I was hoping that your father might have been wrong, and that the man could do something for my eyes after all," he quavered, "but he didn't even try to operate. He's a crook, all right."

"Just as well he didn't touch you," said Frank. "He might have destroyed what little eyesight you have."

The Hardy boys told Mr. Zatta about their struggle with Grafton in the doorway and of the fake doctor's escape after he had used the ammonia gun. While they were talking they heard a sharp knock at the door. Joe hastened to answer it.

Fenton Hardy stepped into the house. "What happened?" he asked quickly of his sons.

"He got away," Joe confessed regretfully. "He didn't try to operate at all, though he insisted on being paid before he saw Mr. Zatta. We had a fight with him but he pulled out an ammonia gun - "

"Did he get away with the money?"

"Yes."

Fenton Hardy did not seem greatly disturbed by the news of Grafton's escape.

"Good!" he said. "If he is caught with those marked bills he'll go to jail."

"We don't know where he went."

Mr. Hardy smiled. "I took care of that," he replied. "I was afraid Grafton might be too sly for you so I arranged to have Fred Ware wait down the street. He is shadowing the man now."

The Hardy boys were relieved to hear this piece of news; yet they felt that they had not distinguished themselves in the affair.

"Grafton will probably meet Sinder and Lemuel at the hotel," continued Mr. Hardy. "I'm going down there now, and as soon as I get a report from Fred Ware I'll take action." He hurried away.

The boys, a little crestfallen by the knowledge that Grafton would have made a clear getaway had it not been for their father's foresight, prepared to leave. Frank discarded his overalls and the brothers said good-bye to the old man.

"I could not see the doctor very well," said Zatta, "but there was something familiar about his speech - very familiar."

He shook his head sadly, wrinkling his brow as if trying to recall where he had once heard a voice similar to that of the crook. The moment the boys were outside the door Joe said:

"I think I know why Grafton's voice sounded familiar to him."

"Why?"

"I may be wrong, but the thought struck me as I was watching Grafton in the bedroom. He

seemed surprised when he saw Mr. Zatta's face and appeared anxious to get out of there as quickly as he could. Do you know, Frank, I've a hunch that Grafton is Mr. Zatta's son!" Frank stared at his brother.

"You're not serious!" he cried. "You don't mean the escaped convict!"

"I'm only going by the way Grafton acted the moment he saw the old man's face. He went over to the window and I heard him mutter, ' Yes, it is he. No mistake about it.' Then he packed up his instruments and left. He recognized Mr. Zatta, I'm sure of that."

"You may be right, Joe. I thought there was something mighty queer about it when he didn't even make an attempt to operate - what's this?"

Frank bent down, and his hand darted toward something that lay on the ground by the sidewalk. It was a thick roll of bills, held securely by a rubber band.

"Money!" exclaimed Joe.

"Grafton's five hundred dollars!"

"Are you sure?"

Frank flipped off the elastic and examined a few of the bills. They were marked. He counted the money in the roll, which came to five hundred dollars.

"It must have fallen from Grafton's pocket while we were fighting. Aren't we lucky?" he added.

"Yes. But do you realize what it means? If Dad has Grafton arrested and the man hasn't the marked money on him, then Dad's whole case will blow up. It will make him look foolish. Why, Grafton might even have the law on him for false arrest!" cried Joe in excitement. "We must tell Dad about this before he steps into a lot of trouble."

"Golly! I didn't think of that. We'd better hustle down to the Bayport Hotel as fast as we can and warn him."

"We're off!"

Frank stuffed the money into his pocket, and the two boys dashed down the street. At the corner they caught a bus. They were almost beside themselves with impatience as the conveyance stopped at corner after corner on its way. Their discovery of the money was an extraordinary piece of good luck, for they realized that a serious situation might develop should Fenton Hardy go ahead with his plans for Grafton's arrest in the absence of the only evidence that could convict the bogus doctor.

The bus finally came to a stop in front of the hotel. Frank and Joe scrambled off and dashed across the pavement. In the lobby the former spied his father standing by the elevator. He was just about to get into it when Frank called out:

"Dad!"

The detective turned around, but stepped back from the lift when he saw his sons.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Grafton hasn't the money!" panted Frank as they hurried up. "Look! We found it. Every cent. It must have fallen out of his pocket when we were trying to stop him from leaving Zatta's house."

He thrust the thick roll of bills into his father's hand. An expression of keen disappointment swept over Fenton Hardy's face when he saw the money.

"It's a lucky thing that you reached me when you did. I was just going up to accuse Grafton, and then I'd have been in a bad fix. It looks as if our whole plan has fallen to pieces."

"There must be something we can do," added Joe, unwilling to be defeated.

The detective thought for a moment, then said:

"Grafton is meeting Sinder and Lemuel in the room you kept watch over the other evening. Go upstairs and listen to the meeting if you can."

Glad to be of help, Frank and Joe stepped into the elevator and were promptly whisked aloft to the floor where they had spied on Sinder and Lemuel the night of the Rialto hold-up. The task their father had given them was more difficult this time because they did not care to risk being caught eavesdropping in the hotel corridor. Joe, however, stood at one end of the hall while Frank tiptoed cautiously toward the door of the room in which the scoundrels were staying.

"Well, I'm going out to Doeville right away," he heard Doctor Grafton say. "Make hay while the sun shines-that's my motto."

"Doeville?" said Sinder's voice. "That's the Lunberry case, isn't it?"

"Yes. An old woman wants the doc to fix up her eyes so she'll have the sight of a sixteen-year-old girl," laughed Lemuel.

"Old Mrs. Lunberry has promised to raise two hundred bucks for that job, don't forget," Grafton declared. "I'm not going to pass up that kind of easy money. Well, I'm on my way now and I'll call in and see you fellows as soon as I get back."

Grafton stepped to the door so quickly that Joe was caught by surprise. He swerved aside and looked around him wildly for some way of escape. Seeing the door of a nearby room half open, he dodged quickly into it. He was just in time, for a moment later the wily doctor strode into the corridor.

Had the room been occupied, Joe would have had some explaining to do. Fortunately it was deserted at the moment. He heard Grafton walk past and hoped that Frank would be able to escape before the bogus physician should see him. In a little while he heard the clash of the elevator door and the low hum as it descended.

Joe slipped out of the room and hurried down the corridor. The door of a linen closet near the lift stood open. Inside someone was bending over a great heap of sheets and pillowcases. The figure glanced up cautiously, and grinned. It was Frank.

"That was pretty close," said the lad as he stepped out of the cupboard. "I just ducked in here in the nick of time or he surely would have seen me."

"And we must get out of here pretty quick," said Joe, ringing for the elevator.

"What's up?"

"Plenty. Grafton's on his way to perform another of those fake operations and collect some more money."

When Fenton Hardy heard that the doctor was on his way to Doeville to perpetrate an additional swindle he said determinedly, "We'll have to protect this Lunberry woman if we can. Unfortunately I have an important engagement in half an hour. Maybe you boys can handle it. Get out to Doeville in time to warn this Mrs. Lunberry before Grafton arrives there."

"We'll have to travel fast," said Frank doubtfully. "We haven't much time."

"Grab a taxi and get out to the airport," said his father. "In the meantime I'll do some phoning so a plane will be ready for you. You should get out to Doeville at least fifteen or twenty minutes before Grafton!"

CHAPTER XV

The Red Notebook

Doeville was a small town about fifty miles from Bayport by road. The aerial route, however, was considerably less. When the Hardy boys reached the airport on the outskirts of the city they found that Mr. Hardy's telephone message had preceded them and that a small plane was already warming up in readiness for the short flight.

"Climb in, boys!" invited the pilot. "I'll have you in Doeville before you can find time to catch your breaths."

Frank and Joe settled into their seats, a mechanic gave the propeller a twirl, and the motor roared. The plane started trundling across the level field, gained speed, then slipped away from the ground. It soared higher rapidly, banked, circled, and then struck out to the north.

Airplanes were no strangers to the Hardy boys, yet they never failed to be thrilled by a flight. Far below and behind them they could see the city of Bayport and the blue waters of the bay where boats flitted over the surface like so many swans. Far to the east lay the misty Atlantic; beneath them was the winding Willow River, with fields and farms looking like a gigantic checkerboard in green and yellow.

The plane drummed along smoothly at an increasing rate of speed. It seemed only a matter of a few minutes before the nose of the machine dipped and it began to descend. Lower and lower it swooped in great circles, pointing toward a flat field on the outskirts of a little town. The earth seemed to rush up swiftly to meet them. Then the aircraft straightened out, skimmed above the field, settled down with a bump and a lurch, rushed across the ground, and slowly came to a stop.

"Here you are, boys," grinned the pilot. "Your dad said I was to wait for you. Will you be gone long?"

"I don't think so," returned Frank. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

A car was standing in the road beside the field. A man climbed the fence and came over to them.

"I got a phone message from Bayport to meet this plane," he said. "I'm to drive you fellows into Doeville."

"Fine," said Frank. "That's service. Dad certainly knows how to smooth the way for us."

"Do you know where a Mrs. Lunberry lives?" asked Joe.

The driver nodded. "I'll have you there in five minutes," he said.

He kept his word. The boys alighted in front of a modest little cottage in the heart of the town. Their knock was answered by Mrs. Lunberry, an old lady wearing dark spectacles, to whom the Hardys explained their errand.

"Are you expecting a man named Doctor Grafton today?" asked Frank.

The lady in question smiled. "Indeed I am. He's going to operate on one of my eyes. I can't

see out of the right one. Luckily I heard of this wonderful man and he has promised to help me."

"Mrs. Lunberry," said Frank, "we're sorry to have to disappoint you, but we have come here to warn you against this doctor. He can't aid you. He's a fake."

"I don't believe you," snapped the old woman.

"But it's true. All he wants is your money. He can't help your eye."

"What right have you to say that he can't?" demanded the old lady. "He has performed some wonderful cures. If that's all you have come to tell me you might as well clear out of here right now."

"But Mrs. Lunberry, we've gone to a lot of trouble to reach here and warn you against this man," objected Joe. "We're trying to keep you from spending your money foolishly.

Doctor Grafton is a crook."

"Don't you come here calling him a crook!" exclaimed the woman. "I won't have it. He is going to save my eyesight and nobody can say a word against him while I'm around. Now you two boys get out of here." She stamped her foot.

"He can't cure you!" insisted Frank.

"He will!" declared Mrs. Lunberry, and slammed the door.

The boys were crestfallen. "That's what we get for helping," said Frank morosely as they went down the walk. "She believes what she wants to believe."

"All that trip for nothing. I'll bet Grafton would laugh if he knew."

They got into the car and told the driver to park halfway up the block. There they waited, watching Mrs. Lunberry's house. In about fifteen minutes they were rewarded when a big car swung around the corner and pulled up at the curb. Grafton, his instrument case in his hand, alighted, strode up the walk, and disappeared into the Lunberry house.

"We may as well wait. If he doesn't cure her and should take her money just the same she may feel different about him after a while. Maybe Dad will be able to use her as a witness," Frank suggested.

Half an hour later the man emerged from the Lunberry house. As soon as he had driven away the boys went back and knocked at the door. The woman, a bandage over her right eye, scowled when she saw them.

"Well, what do you want now?" she demanded ungraciously.

"Was the operation successful, Mrs. Lunberry?" asked Frank.

"Of course it was," snapped the woman. "There was a growth over my eye as big as a twenty-five cent piece. He took it off. Look here."

She held out her hand and on her palm they saw a thin white scrap of membrane or transparent skin.

"See!" continued the old lady triumphantly. "That's why my right eye was bad. He took that away and now everything will be all right again. It was worth every cent of the two hundred dollars it cost me. And you boys had the nerve to come here and say mean things about Doctor Grafton behind his back."

"Can you see out of the eye now?" asked Joe.

"Not now I can't. It's too soon after the operation. But my right eye will be as good as ever in a week from now, the doctor tells me."

In triumph the old lady closed the door on them. Joe was puzzled as the boys retraced their steps to the car.

"Golly, maybe Grafton does know something about eye surgery after all," he said.

"Don't tell me he fooled you too," returned Frank. "That's an old trick."

"But the scrap of membrane-----"

"It's taken from the inside of an eggshell. Grafton had it in his hand all the time. After pretending to perform the operation he showed it to Mrs. Lunberry and said he removed it from her eye. Naturally she thinks her trouble is over. He has told her to keep the eye bandaged for a week. When she takes off the gauze she will find that she has been fooled, but Grafton will be far away by that time."

When they arrived at Bayport they found a message awaiting them at the airport to the effect that Fenton Hardy had been called out of town unexpectedly.

"Take a room at the hotel, as you did previously," ran their father's written instructions, "and keep close watch on the gang. It would be a big help if you could get a list of their victims."

"That's easier said than done," remarked Joe. "Those fellows don't leave much evidence in writing."

The boys went back to the Bayport Hotel, where they made discreet inquiries of the clerk regarding a room adjacent to the one occupied by Sinder and Lemuel. To their disappointment they learned that both adjoining rooms already were engaged. The clerk, however, realized that something was on foot because he winked confidentially and said in a low voice:

"How about their friend on the second floor? The doctor? Maybe you'd like to have a room next to his."

"Can you fix it up?" they asked eagerly.

"Easily." He took a key from the rack and slid it across the desk. "Doctor Grafton is out just now so you'll have a good chance of getting settled before he returns."

The boys went up to the room on the second floor. They would gain just as much, they thought, by watching the fake doctor as they would by keeping check on Sinder and Lemuel, perhaps more.

An hour elapsed before Grafton entered his room. The Hardy boys were watching at the door of the connecting room, and saw that the bogus physician was accompanied by Sinder and Lemuel. The three were quarreling bitterly.

"You can't get away with a trick like that!" they heard Sinder say. "Spotty and I do our share of the work and we expect to get paid our share of the money."

"But I lost it, I tell you," declared Grafton.

"Lost it!" sneered Lemuel. "You pocketed it. You're holding out on us, that's what you're doing. People don't lose five hundred dollars so easily."

"I didn't know I had lost it until just a few minutes ago," Grafton insisted. "I got paid two hundred dollars by that woman at Doeville, and here it is. The five hundred I received from Zatta is gone."

"I'll bet it hasn't gone very far," Sinder growled.

"I don't want any of your slurs!" shouted Grafton. "If you insinuate that I stole that money I'll wash my hands of the pair of you and go on alone."

"You'll be the loser," replied Lemuel. "How much money will you make without someone to dig up cases for you?" He drew a small red notebook from his pocket and waved it in front of Grafton's face. "That little list is worth thousands of dollars to us. It contains the names and addresses of the people who want eye treatments from you and are willing to pay for them. Rip and I have done a lot of hard work to persuade them. Until we give you

their names you won't know where to go. So play fair with us, Grafton, or we'll get ourselves a new eye doctor."

He put the notebook back into his pocket.

"Boys," said Grafton in a gentler tone, "I assure you that I am playing fair with you. I have never taken a dollar that hasn't been honestly split up among the three of us."

"We'll take your word for it," grunted Rip Sinder.

CHAPTER XVI

The Crash

"We must get that notebook!"

It was late that night. The Hardy boys had telephoned home to inform their mother that they would probably remain at the hotel until morning. Now, from the room adjacent to their own came the sound of loud snores. Sinder and Lemuel, who had been asked by Grafton to stay in his quarters all night, were fast asleep. The fake doctor had departed.

"Yes," repeated Joe. "We must get that notebook."

"We could prevent a lot of people from being swindled if we could lay our hands on that list of names and addresses," said Frank. "But how are we going to do it?"

Joe went to the window, opened it, and looked out.

"I've been thinking," he said, "that it might not be very difficult to get into the next room. Come and take a look."

Frank joined him, and Joe pointed out a ledge that ran along the side of the building immediately beneath their own window.

"If I could work my way along that edge," he suggested, "it would bring me to the window of the next room. Then I could crawl inside, take the notebook out of the desk, and leave by the door. It wouldn't take me five minutes."

Frank did not like the idea, however.

"If you should ever slip from that height you would surely break your neck."

"I won't slip," replied Joe confidently. "I'm going to try to reach it."

Before Frank could raise any further objections Joe had flung one leg over the sill and crawled out. Carefully he lowered himself onto the ledge, which was narrow, but he was able to hold onto the window sill. The difficult part now would be to negotiate the brief distance between one window sill and the next.

With bated breath Frank watched his brother work his way slowly and cautiously along the ledge. When he got beyond the window sill, Joe kept his hands pressed flat against the brick wall for support.

"Be careful," breathed Frank anxiously.

Inch by inch Joe edged his way along, until finally he was almost within reach of the other window sill. His hand groped for it.

He clutched it, but the concrete was old and weatherbeaten. The edge broke in his grasp. The boy lurched, made another frantic grab, missed his hold, and lost his balance. He teetered precariously on the ledge, then suddenly toppled backwards.

Frank uttered a shout of horror as Joe tumbled into the darkness. There was a loud crash and the shatter of broken glass. A glass canopy extended over the restaurant entrance to the hotel, one floor below. Upon this Joe had fallen.

Had it not been there he would have shot straight down to the pavement beneath. As it was, he lay sprawled across one of the supports for a moment, then tumbled over and fell to the pavement in a heap of glass fragments.

The terrific crash aroused the entire hotel. There was a roar of excited voices from the lobby. Lights began to flash in several rooms. Somebody opened a window on an upper floor and looked out. Frank, utterly aghast, was relieved to see Joe crawl to his feet.

A moment later, before anyone had time to emerge from the hotel, the younger Hardy had darted into the dark shadows. Fortunately he had not been stunned by his fall. Had that been the case he would have been identified by the hotel officials who promptly rushed out to investigate the affair. Then the Hardy boys would have found themselves involved in a great deal of embarrassing explanation.

Although Joe was badly cut by broken glass he was able to get to his feet and stumble around to an alley beside the hotel just in the nick of time. There he found an open door, ran inside, saw a stairway before him, and hastily ascended to the next floor. Less than two minutes after the crash he was back in his own room.

The lad was bleeding profusely from a cut across his cheek, a nasty gash below the right knee, as well as from a number of smaller wounds. The next half hour Frank was so busy tearing up pillow cases and bandaging his brother that he paid but little attention to the uproar the breaking of the canopy had created in the hotel.

"I certainly made a mess of that attempt," muttered Joe.

"Lucky you weren't killed. I hope the hotel people don't come up here asking a lot of awkward questions," said Frank. "I'm glad Sinder and Lemuel didn't find out. And we can reimburse the owners for the damage after the affair of Doctor Grafton is settled."

The management did not bother them, and eventually the uproar died down. Then the Hardy boys went to bed.

In the morning Frank called the office and asked for a newspaper. On the front page of the Bayport daily there was a full account of the mysterious affair at the hotel under the caption:

HOTEL THIEF ESCAPES AFTER FALL FROM LEDGE

The authorities had jumped to the conclusion that a prowler, seeking to rob hotel guests, had been responsible. The account went on to say that Chief Collig and Detective Smuff had investigated the affair and were following up clues that would soon result in the arrest of the culprit.

"Whew!" exclaimed Frank. ««If Collig ever finds out we'll be in trouble up to our necks."

There was no sound from the next room. The Hardy boys decided that they had better check out before any of the clues upon which Collig and Smuff were working should lead to their room. Joe stayed out of sight while Frank went down to the desk.

The hotel clerk grinned. "Well, did the big crash wake you up last night?"

"I was scared out of my wits," said Frank truthfully.

"The thief certainly frightened those men you are interested in clear out of the hotel."

"Is that so ? " said Frank alertly.

"Sure. They checked out early this morning."

Frank turned away thoughtfully. Sinder and Spotty Lemuel had evidently become frightened by the public attention that had been turned on the hotel and had promptly decamped. The problem of tracing the activities of the gang was now greater than ever. The Hardy boys had a difficult time at breakfast that morning in their own home parrying the inquisitive remarks of Aunt Gertrude, who had read all about the "hotel thief" in the newspaper. She had a definite idea that her nephews were concerned in some way and became very peevish when they declined to volunteer any information. Immediately after they had eaten the boys escaped from the house.

"Do you know what I think we'd better do?" said Frank. "I'd like to go back to that farmhouse up the river beyond Brockton."

"The place where Rip Sinder came looking for Virginia? Why?"

"Because I have a notion that his daughter is hiding there. Sinder wasn't satisfied with what the farm woman told him. He'll be back."

"It won't do any harm to make sure. We seem to be at sort of a standstill here. Let's go." On their way to the boat-house they met Chet Morton, who begged for permission to go along.

"After all," pleaded the stout lad, "I hung around that hotel in Boston on your account, even if you didn't know anything about it. Have a heart and let me in on the fun."

"It isn't likely that there'll be any fun,"- returned Frank. "We're just going on a trip up the river. You're mighty welcome to come along, though, Chet."

When they reached the farm above Brockton late that morning the boys moored the Sleuth in the little cove where they had hidden the boat on the occasion of their previous trip. Then they made their way up through the shrubbery and finally reached the fence surrounding the potato patch.

The same boy who had been there on their first visit was still at his task of weeding. Another overalled figure was in the field as well. From the shelter of the bushes beyond the fence Frank watched the pair narrowly.

"I wonder-----" he mused.

"I'm not wondering," said Joe, tense with excitement. "That isn't a boy. It's Virginia Sinder!"

CHAPTER XVII

A Cry for Help

"Gosh, why don't you call her over and speak to her?" asked Chet.

"It might cause trouble," Frank answered. "She's hiding here."

At that moment Virginia Sinder, looking oddly like a boy in her shapeless overalls, her hair hidden by a boy's cap, straightened up from the weeding and rubbed her back. She said something to her companion, then sauntered through the potato rows toward an apple tree that grew by the fence where the boys were hiding.

"I was just figuring on picking one of those apples for myself," whispered Chet hungrily.

"They look good."

When the girl arrived beneath the tree she reached up and picked a ripe red bit of fruit.

Just as she was about to turn away, Frank said in a low voice.

"Virginia!"

The girl started. She swung around, her eyes wide with fear and surprise. When she saw the three boys crouching behind the fence she put her hand to her mouth as if to stifle a scream.

"Don't be afraid," said Frank reassuringly. "We want to help you."

"But you'll tell my father where I am," the girl quavered.

"No, we won't. Why are you hiding here? Why did you leave Brockton?"

Frank spoke very quietly, and the boys kept themselves hidden so as not to attract the attention of the youngster in the potato field.

Virginia began to cry. "I left Brockton because I didn't want Rip Sinder to find me," she sobbed. "I'm afraid of him. He isn't my real father anyhow. I - I've changed my name, even. I call myself Mary Ford now."

"Did you drive away in the car after we took it out of the river?"

Virginia hung her head.

"It was a mean trick," she admitted. "But - I had gone back there - to see if I could recover the coupe - I was hiding in the bushes near the bridge when you came along -"

"You might have spoken to us," said Joe. "We weren't trying to keep your car."

"Don't be cross with me, please," said the girl imploringly as she began to weep again. "I was afraid you would stop me and ask a lot of questions, and perhaps tell my father about me."

"That's all right," Frank assured her. "We're not angry, but relieved to know someone else didn't steal your car."

"Why are you so afraid of Rip Sinder?" asked Joe.

"I'm not afraid of him," the girl retorted, "but I never want to see him again. He pretended to be my father, but he isn't. He's just a crook. Oh, I wish I could find my real parents! I don't even know my right name."

"I'm sorry," said Frank.

"Listen!" said Chet suddenly.

They were silent. Through the still air came the quick throbbing of a motor. A boat was coming up the river.

"Joe! Hurry down to the cove and take a look at that boat," said Frank quickly. "Sinder may be coming here again."

"Sinder!" exclaimed the girl, turning pale. "Oh, he mustn't find me! He mustn't find me. I won't go back home with him."

"It probably isn't Sinder at all," said Frank as Joe darted away. "Yet there's no harm in

making sure."

Joe returned in a few minutes, scrambling up the path to the fence.

"Sinder and Lemuel!" he gasped. "They're in a motorboat, heading toward the farm."

The girl became white-faced and terror-stricken.

"He mustn't find me!" she wailed. "He mustn't."

"Look here, Virginia," said Frank. "We'll handle Rip Sinder and see that he doesn't take you back."

But the girl had whirled about and was streaking across the field.

"I won't let him take me back!" she cried desperately.

The boys did not follow her, as they did not want to reveal themselves to the farm lad, who straightened up from his weeding and stared after the fleeing girl with an expression of great astonishment. Virginia reached the other side of the field and ran into the woods.

"I'll never come back!" she cried. "Never!" Then she vanished among the trees.

"I think she's goofy!" remarked Chet. "Nice-looking girl, but a bit soft in the head."

Just then the nose of the motorboat appeared around the bend, as the craft headed toward shore. The roar of the engine died away. The boy in the field watched the boat for a moment, then ran to the house.

He returned, accompanied by the woman whom the boys had seen on their former visit.

She strode across the potato patch as Rip Sinder and Lemuel climbed out of the boat and stepped on shore. Her eyes filled with fire.

"So you're back again!" she cried shrilly. "Well, it's not going to do you any good."

"We're looking for Virginia Sinder," declared Rip. "We're sure she's here and we want her."

"Well, I'm certain there's no one by that name on this farm."

"We'll see about that," growled the girl's foster father.

"Search if you like," invited the owner of the farm. "You won't find her here."

Sinder and his companion went into the house, then hunted around the stable and the nearby fields, but finally were forced to admit that their search had been in vain. The woman cackled triumphantly.

"Didn't I tell you? Now, will you believe me?"

"No," growled Sinder peevishly. "That girl down at Brockton told me she was here. You've got her hidden somewhere."

"Find her, then!"

"We will!" declared Spotty Lemuel. "We'll come by here some time when you're least expecting us."

"Just try coming onto this farm without my permission and I'll have you arrested for trespassing."

"Oh, come on, Spotty," growled Sinder in disgust. "There's no use wasting time talking to this woman."

The two men returned to their boat in bad humor while the woman stood with her hands on her hips and watched them. The clatter of the engine finally drowned out her parting remarks, as the boat backed into the river. The farm owner then returned to the house.

"I never heard such a lot of fuss about a mere girl!" remarked Chet.

"There's going to be even more fuss," Frank assured him. "Now we must find her."

He struck off around the fence and plunged into the woods at the place where they had last seen Virginia. A trail led through the bushes. Here and there in the soft earth Frank found

imprints of the girl's shoes. Joe and Chet followed him, the latter grumbling that he wouldn't have come on the expedition at all had he known there was going to be so much exercise attached to it.

"Do you good," returned Joe unsympathetically. "It will take a little of that extra weight off you."

"Sinder didn't have much luck on this trip," chuckled Frank. "It was mighty fortunate we saw him coming in time to warn Virginia, or he'd have found her this trip."

The trail through the woods finally petered out as the shrubbery became deep and heavy. Chet suddenly distinguished himself by finding a torn scrap of overall cloth on a thorn branch.

"Good work," praised Frank. "We'll keep on in this direction."

A little farther along the boys reached a swampy clearing where the footmarks again were distinct. They crossed the spot, then circled around, trying to pick up the trail.

Suddenly they heard a scream. It was the frightened cry of a girl, clear and terrifying. The boys looked at one another.

"Virginia!" exclaimed Joe.

"She's in trouble."

"This way!" clamored Chet, plunging into the woods.

The boys blundered through the heavy undergrowth in the direction of the cry. After five minutes of hard going they wondered if they were on the right track, for they heard nothing more. Finally they came to a stop and listened intently.

Then sharply, from over to the left of the place where the three boys were standing, the scream of terror rang out again and again. This time it sounded very near, and from the fear that quavered in every note the boys realized that Virginia must be in very real danger or distress.

Suddenly the cries were cut off. Deep silence descended over the woods once more.

"Come on!" snapped Frank.

The boys plunged through the matted growth. Suddenly, in the depth of the forest, they came upon a small clearing in which stood a two-story homestead.

CHAPTER XVIII

Signalling

A door of the house slammed. From around a corner of the building there came the odd, misshapen figure of a man. He was very short, with huge shoulders and very long arms. When he saw the boys he ran toward them threateningly. The lads stood their ground, whereupon the fellow picked up a heavy club from the gravel. As he advanced toward them

they saw that his mouth was working strangely, as if he were trying to speak to them; yet only a horrible moaning sound came from his lips. He gestured menacingly with the heavy stick for them to go away.

Chet turned and fled into some bushes. After a moment's hesitation the Hardy boys backed away. The dumb man came across the clearing swinging the club. From his manner the boys did not doubt but that he would use the weapon if he could get close enough to them. Slowly the lads retreated from the clearing, for their assailant looked ugly. Furthermore, they could hear sounds from the house; sounds indicating that there was another man in the building. Then they heard someone call out.

Frank and Joe ducked back into the woods. As they did so a man emerged from the house, shouting angrily:

"Zeb, you fool! Come back here. What's the matter with you?"

The servant paid no attention to what was being said, so the other hurried across the clearing. The Hardy boys, who were watching from the shelter of the trees, recognized the newcomer.

Doctor Grafton!

The impostor apparently had not seen them. He ran over to the dwarf and grabbed him by the arm.

"You idiot!" he growled angrily. "Go back to the house!"

The dumb man pointed toward the woods, trying to make himself understood. Grafton, however, was impatient. He bundled Zeb back across the clearing.

"Your job is to stay here and watch that girl. See that she doesn't escape. I don't care what you saw. Get back into the house."

He tore the weapon from Zeb's hand and flung it halfway across the open space. Then he gave the man a push that almost sent him sprawling. In a moment the pair disappeared into the house.

As the door closed behind him there came the sound of breaking glass. One of the upper windows was shattered into a thousand pieces. This was followed by a wild scream. Then for a split second the boys saw the face of Virginia Sinder framed in the open space.

"Help!" she shrieked. "Help!" Her cries rang through the forest.

Suddenly the burly form of Doctor Grafton appeared behind her. He clapped his hand over her mouth and silenced her cries. Then he dragged her struggling from the window.

Joe whistled solemnly. "Gosh!" he said, "now we have stumbled into a situation. We must do something about it pretty quick, too."

"I know what we'd better do," said Chet with a gulp. "Let's gallop right back home and tell the police. I don't want to get mixed up with that pair if I can help it."

"Police nothing!" sniffed Frank. "If we can't get that girl out of here ourselves we're not much good."

"We won't be much good if we get clubbed over the head trying it," objected Chet. "I didn't like the looks of that deaf-mute a bit. He seemed like a whole lot of bad news to me." Just then the boys heard voices.

"Someone coming," whispered Joe, peering out from behind a clump of bushes.

Among the trees on the other side of the clearing were two figures pushing their way through the undergrowth. A moment later the faces of the pair became visible to the watching boys. Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel were paying a visit to Doctor Grafton's hideout!

"This is the place," the lads heard the former say. "He's as safe here as if he were hiding in Alaska."

"The police will hunt a long time before they ever find this house," Spotty Lemuel replied admiringly. He raised his voice and called out, "Doc! Hey, Doc!"

The door opened. The fake physician appeared looking a trifle dishevelled, his shirt torn and his collar awry.

"Hello!" he panted. "We 've a visitor here. This will be a big surprise to you, Sinder."

"Visitor? Who is it?"

"That girl of yours. Virginia." Grafton laughed harshly. "She came here a little while ago, knocked on the door and asked Zeb to let her hide here. Said some men were chasing her. Can you beat that for luck?"

"Then she was at that farm!" shouted Rip Sinder. "The woman lied. Virginia must have run away when she saw us coming."

"Well, she blundered right from the frying pan into the fire when she came here," said Graf ton. "She won't get out of this place in a hurry. Come in."

The men went up the steps and entered the house. Then the door banged behind them. The Hardy boys and Chet held a council of war. The latter, never noted for his bravery, was in favor of getting as far away as possible from the sinister hideout in the woods in as short a time as they could. Frank and Joe, however, did not like the idea of running away from danger.

"If we're sensible we'll go back to Bayport and tell the police," insisted Chet. "Let them handle it."

"The Bayport police haven't any power outside of Bayport," returned Frank. "Besides, I don't like to quit, now that we're beginning to get somewhere."

"Beginning to get ourselves up to our necks in more trouble," derided Chet.

"We must figure out some method of getting Virginia away from that house," Joe stated firmly. "I don't know how it's to be managed but it must be done. If we fail, then we can call in the police, but we ought to be able to manage it ourselves."

Frank studied the hideout intently. After a while he said:

"Virginia is in that room on the second floor, the one with the broken pane in the window. I can see her moving back and forth. Now, if one of us could climb up that big tree near the side of the house he could reach a branch on a level with the window and signal to Virginia. Then she would know we're here trying to rescue her."

"Who'll climb the tree?" asked Chet without enthusiasm.

"I will. And I'll do it right now," replied Frank.

"I'll stand guard at the bottom in case anyone comes out," volunteered Joe. "Chet can stay here."

"That suits me," their chum declared heartily.

Frank and Joe made their way through the undergrowth until they reached the big tree. It was about twenty feet from the house. Frank shinned up the trunk and pulled himself from branch to branch until he was on a level with the broken window.

From his lofty perch he could look into the room. Virginia was still there, sitting beside the window sobbing. Frank had been resourceful enough to put some pebbles into his pocket. Now he tossed one of them. It fell short.

He threw another. This one struck the glass sharply and Virginia looked up, startled. As she peered out the window she saw Frank. He pressed a finger to his lips as a signal for

silence lest she call out in her surprise.

The girl understood. By signaling to her the Hardy boy tried to assure her that he and his companions would stand by and look for a chance to rescue her. The opportunity came sooner than they expected.

While Frank was still in the tree, the door of the house opened and Zeb, the deaf-mute, emerged. To the surprise of the watchers he headed straight across the clearing to the place where Chet was hiding. Evidently he had caught sight of the stout lad for the odd man was waving his arms and seemed to be in a state of wild excitement.

This was too much for Chet. He appeared from behind a bush, uttered a cry of terror, and fled. Zeb wheeled, ran back to the house, and banged at the door. Doctor Grafton opened it.

"What's the matter with you?" the latter demanded testily. "What's all the noisy fuss about?"

Zeb fairly danced in his efforts to make the man understand him. Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel crowded across the threshold. Suddenly the former let out a shout.

"Someone's running through the woods!" he cried. "Look! I see him. That's what Zeb is trying to tell us."

"After him!" roared Grafton.

Chet was bolting through the tangled brush like a scared rabbit. The four men rushed across the clearing. Then they tore into the shrubbery with a great crashing of twigs and undergrowth.

"Now is our chance!" cried Frank as he descended the tree. "We'll get Virginia out of that house before they come back."

He dropped to the ground. As the two Hardys dashed across the clearing, they could hear shouts from the men chasing Chet.

"Virginia! Hurry!" called Joe as he and his brother plunged through the open doorway into the house.

CHAPTER XIX

A Disappearance

Virginia did not appear on the stairs. Instead, the boys heard sounds of banging and thudding in the upper part of the house.

"She's locked in!" exclaimed Frank.

He raced up the steps. At the top of the landing he was confronted by a closed door. Fortunately its key had not been removed from the lock, so Frank quickly released the imprisoned girl.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she gasped gratefully, as she flung herself through the doorway and hurried downstairs with the boys. "Where did the men go?" she murmured. "They're in-the woods. "We'll have to hurry, because they'll be back any minute," Joe told her.

The three dashed out the front door. Fortunately none of the men had returned as yet. The commotion going on in the woods led the boys to believe the chase was still on and that Chet was evading capture still.

The boys were tingling with apprehension lest Zeb or one of the other men might return and catch sight of them before they should have time to gain the shelter of the woods. However, they hastened across the clearing in safety and ran into the thick underbrush without being seen.

"What of Chet!" asked Joe.

"They won't catch him. For all his weight, Chet can run like a deer when he has to. Right now he's so frightened that he is probably sprouting wings to help him along."

Virginia was pathetically grateful for the boys' help. Crying and laughing by turns, she told them how she had found the house in the woods and had sought refuge there, only to discover to her horror that Doctor Grafton was the owner; how she had been made prisoner and then locked in an upstairs room; of her tremendous relief when she had caught sight of Frank signaling to her from among the branches of the big tree.

"We'd better get back to the river. Chet will make his way toward the Sleuth, I'm sure," said Frank.

Joe, however, felt that they had better wait for a while in case their chum might have been caught, in which event the Hardy boys would face the problem of making a second rescue. His brother agreed, so the three young people hid themselves in the woods. The boys went back to reconnoitre. They came in sight of the clearing again just in time to see Grafton and his companions emerge from the shrubs.

"Well, he got away, whoever he was," they heard the doctor say.

The Hardys waited to hear no more, for they knew that the disturbance occasioned by the pursuit of Chet would be as nothing compared to the uproar that would follow the discovery of the Sinder girl's flight. They hastened to the place where they had left her.

Virginia was gone!

Frank's sharp eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of her, far away among the trees. He dared not call out lest he be heard by Grafton and his companions. Virginia glanced back and saw the boys but did not stop. Instead, she darted to one side and disappeared beyond a dense thicket.

"What's wrong with that girl, anyway?" demanded Joe wrathfully. "We saved her from drowning in the river and she ran away; we fished her car out of the water and she stole it and ran away; now we rescue her from that house and she leaves us the first chance she gets."

"Let her go," said Frank, who was also angered by Virginia's apparent ingratitude. "If she doesn't appreciate what we've done for her, we're foolish to bother. She ought to know by this time that we have only been trying to help her."

The Hardy boys were indeed indignant. Virginia Sinder had put them to a great deal of trouble ever since the night of the theatre hold-up and it provoked them to feel that their efforts had been appreciated so little.

The boys found a trail which appeared to lead in the general direction of the river. They

followed the winding path until they caught sight of the blue gleam of water beyond the trees, then hurried down the river bank and on past the farm. Finally they headed directly toward the cove where they had left the Sleuth. To their relief they found the boat safe and sound, exactly as they had left it.

"Now," said Frank, "if Chet will only show up we can get back to Bayport."

A tarpaulin in the bottom of the craft moved suddenly and a head appeared from underneath the covering. Frank and Joe burst into laughter when they saw the familiar round ruddy face of Chet Morton.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," grumbled their fat chum, crawling out from beneath the tarpaulin.

"You're not standing where we are," Joe chuckled.

"You'd have hidden, too," said Chet warmly.

"if you'd been chased by three cut-throats and a crazy man. I'm lucky to be alive. I never before ran so fast in my life. As far as this detective business of yours is concerned, I'm through - washed up-finished. It's the silliest kind of work I ever heard of."

"But it's exciting," grinned Frank.

"You're welcome to all the excitement," Chet returned warmly. "I've had as much of it as I can stand. Any more of it would be downright unhealthy. Let's get this boat started before that gang comes along."

The boy had been scared within an inch of his life. The Hardys were shaking with laughter as their fat friend described his flight through the woods; yet Chet could see no humor at all in the situation.

"This detective nonsense has brought me nothing but trouble," he declared. "I try to help you out on that theatre hold-up case and I get thrown in jail. Then I find myself stranded in Boston. Now, when I try to lend a hand in this affair, I'm chased through a forest until I'm half dead. No more of it for me."

Frank and Joe told him how they had taken advantage of the opportunity of rescuing Virginia Sinder from the house. Chet snorted when he heard about it.

"Using me for a decoy, eh? I see it all now."

When the boys told him how Virginia had fled into the woods Chet said it served them right. "I'll bet she's laughing herself sick right now. She's made fools of you a second time. I'd lay off trying to help that girl if I were you."

Frank and Joe were disposed to feel the same way about it. Their efforts to aid Virginia Sinder had been rewarded with nothing but trouble. They sped back to Bayport in the Sleuth, and then headed for home.

"It is bad enough," said Mrs. Hardy when the boys entered the house, "to have your father away from home all the time, but you boys seem to be just as busy as he is. Where have you been all morning?"

"We've been up the river, Mother, working on a case."

"And out all night, too. I do wish you would stay at home for a change. There's a message here for you telling you to go down to Police Headquarters as soon as you come in."

The boys looked at each other in surprise.

"What can that mean?" asked Joe.

"We'll have to find out," replied his brother.

Mrs. Hardy sighed. "I suppose it means I won't see anything of you two the rest of the day. Well, run along."

"Very likely the police want to arrest them for some mischief they've gotten into," sniffed Aunt Gertrude, entering the room at that moment.

The boys escaped before the good lady could get into her best form in commenting on their prolonged absences from home. They backed the roadster out of the garage and drove to Police Headquarters, where they stated their errand. They were sent forthwith to Detective Smuff's office.

"Well, boys," said that officious individual, rubbing his fat hands together complacently, "I just thought you'd be interested to know that I have solved the Rialto Theatre hold-up affair."

Smuff seemed to be immensely pleased with himself-

"That's fine," said Frank. "Did you get the evidence on Nick Cordoza?"

Smuff shook his head. "You were wrong, lads. You were wrong. Nick Cordoza didn't get that money."

"But we saw him," declared Joe.

"Maybe you did. Nick Cordoza was well enough to talk this morning, and he talked. He told us aU about it. After I have arrested a certain person the case will be all cleared up."

"I hope you're not going to arrest Chet Morton again," said Frank. "That wasn't such a clever move on your part."

Smuff reddened. "Never mind that. Nick Cordoza decided to talk. He tells me that it was a girl who really got the money."

"A girl!" they exclaimed.

"Yep, a girl named Virginia Sinder. She got the nine hundred dollars stolen from the theatre. Cordoza didn't get it after all."

The boys were astounded.

Had they been helping a criminal all this time?

CHAPTER XX

A Figure in Hiding

"What did Cordoza say?" asked Frank.

"Well, it's a long story," Detective Smuff answered comfortably. "He admits he stole the cash, of course."

"Then he's the thief," Joe replied.

"Well, yes. He committed the actual hold-up, but he hasn't the money. The girl got away with that."

"She stole it from Cordoza?"

"That's what he says. Accordin' to his story, he made a getaway and jumped into his car,

which was parked on a side street. Then he drove out toward the Willow River bridge."

"That's where we found him," said Frank.

"He ran into a ditch trying to avoid a collision with a parked auto. It belonged to this girl-Virginia Sinder."

"Well?"

"She was stranded. Didn't have any gas. So Cordoza offered to go back to the nearest service station and get some. He did so."

"But how could the girl get the money?"

"I'm comin' to that. Don't hurry me," rebuffed Smuff. "He got the gasoline and poured it in the tank, but still she could not start her car, so he got into her machine beside her to assist."

"What happened then?"

"Well, he started the motor, and then she offered him money for the new gas. But I guess he wanted to show off and flaunted his big roll of bills before her."

"Yes," said Frank, intent on the story.

"Cordoza's a bit hazy about what happened in the next few minutes, but I believe the girl grabbed the money, pushed him out of her coupe, and drove off."

"I see," nodded Joe. "From his condition later he must have had a bad fall."

"He did. He picked himself up from the road, barely conscious, and staggered to his own car. Then he fainted at the wheel. A while later you fellows came along and found him."

"Maybe Cordoza made all that up, hid the bills somewhere, and invented the story so he wouldn't have to hand over the money," concluded Frank thoughtfully.

"Say, what's the idea?" demanded Smuff indignantly. "Are you fellows trying to make out that I don't know what I'm talking about? Even the doctors at the hospital told me Cordoza kept raving about a girl who had stolen all his money. That's how I knew what questions to ask him."

"How did he learn her name?"

"He asked her when he offered to go back to get the gas." Detective Smuff glanced shrewdly at the Hardy boys. "Now," he said, "I wonder if either of you knows a girl by the name of Virginia Sinder."

"What makes you think we might?" Joe asked innocently.

"Well, you've met lots of people. I'm going to arrest her for stealing the funds and I thought you'd be glad to help me."

"Sorry," replied Frank evasively, "I'm afraid we can't do that, Mr. Smuff."

"Well, if you should happen to hear of a girl by that name, come and let me know."

When the Hardy boys left the police station they scarcely knew what to think. They agreed, however, that they had been right in volunteering no information to Detective Smuff.

"The girl may be a thief, as he says," Frank remarked, "but I doubt it. If we tell Smuff everything we know he'll just go out and arrest Virginia. If she isn't guilty it will mean terrible trouble for her. If she is, Smuff will take every bit of credit for clearing up the Rialto Theatre mystery."

"After we have done all the hard work."

"Right. I think we had better wait until Dad comes home. Then we can ask his advice."

"Do you think the girl really stole that money, Frank?"

"The evidence seems to be against her. She's a strange person. We've found that out. Maybe it's because of the money that she is in hiding."

"A figure in hiding-like Chet," said Joe.

"Just the same, I'm glad we didn't tell Smuff anything about her. I think he had a notion we would be able to lend him a hand."

"If he only knew how much we do know about Virginia Sinder! Still, we can't say where she is now."

The boys drove home and put their roadster back in the garage. They were just going into the house when a taxi pulled up at the front door. Fenton Hardy, carrying a heavy suitcase, stepped out of the cab.

"Why, it's Dad!" yelled Joe. The brothers rushed down the walk to meet their father.

"Well, you're still safe and sound, I see," remarked the detective as he went toward the house with his sons. "Have you rounded up the Grafton gang in my absence!"

"Not yet, Dad, but we have plenty to tell you."

Joe grabbed his father's suitcase.

"I'll carry this," he said, leading the way.

"Where have you been, Dad?" inquired Frank.

"Oh, checking up on our friend Grafton. I had a tip that he once served time in a penitentiary about a hundred miles from here so I went over there to have a look at the records. After I take a shower and change my clothes I'll tell you all about it."

"We've been busy, too. Joe fell off a ledge at the Bayport Hotel and nearly broke his neck. He crashed right through a glass canopy. You could hear the noise for blocks."

"Hurt?" asked Mr. Hardy quickly.

"Just a few cuts," said Joe.

"How on earth did you come to fall through the canopy? What were you doing on the ledge?"

"We'll tell you all about that after you've told us about Grafton," promised Joe.

He carried the suitcases into the house and started up the stairs.

"Be careful with that grip," warned Mr. Hardy. "My revolver is in it-still loaded."

At that moment Aunt Gertrude appeared on the upper landing and began to descend the stairs.

"What's that about a revolver?" she demanded sharply. "Where is the revolver?"

"In this suitcase, Aunty," said Joe.

He edged to one side to give the lady room in which to pass. Unfortunately Aunt Gertrude stumbled, brushed against the suitcase, and knocked it out of Joe's hand.

The grip fell heavily on the stairs. Instantly there was a shot.

"Oh, help!" shrieked Aunt Gertrude.

She toppled, lost her balance, and tumbled down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI

The Lost Grandchild

Joe was almost paralyzed with horror.

"Oh, golly!" he cried. "I've shot Aunt Gertrude!"

The lady in question lay in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

"I'm shot!" she moaned. "I'm wounded. Get a doctor. I'm dying. Oh, you wicked boy!"

Mr. Hardy and Frank rushed to her aid. Mrs. Hardy came running from the kitchen, as Aunt Gertrude screamed that she had been shot through the heart. Next she insisted that the bullet was embedded in her shoulder. When a careful search failed to reveal any evidence of a wound she switched the locality to her right leg.

Mrs. Hardy could find no indication of any trouble, whereupon Aunt Gertrude looked disappointed and announced that her back had been broken by the fall downstairs. Greatly to the relief of everyone, however, this possibility was ruled out when the good lady was - able to get to her feet.

A few minutes later she gave Joe a tongue-lashing for being "a careless, clumsy, irresponsible boy." The family now felt sure that Aunt Gertrude would live, that the bullet had missed her, and that she was suffering mainly from shock. However, she resented the fact that she had escaped a revolver bullet and a fall downstairs without apparent injury, and decided to take to her bed for the rest of the day. She was assisted tenderly back to her room, from which she issued so many orders and instructions in her role of invalid that the house was thrown into a turmoil.

As soon as things had settled down somewhat Fenton Hardy and the boys adjourned to the study. There Frank and Joe gave their father an account of the adventures they had experienced during his absence.

"So Grafton is in hiding now?" said Mr. Hardy slowly after he had heard their story.

"Something must have frightened him. Perhaps one of his victims complained to the police. I've learned a good deal about that fellow in the past twenty-four hours."

"What did you find out, Dad?"

"He has spent a number of years in one of the Western states. According to his record he flunked in medical school-that is, he has no right to call himself a doctor, although he did start out to become one. However, the fact that he failed to pass his examinations and get his diploma did not bother the fellow. He started a sanitarium for the treatment of nervous ailments. This was just a fake institution.

"Several of his wealthy patients died under mysterious circumstances, until finally the police got sufficient evidence to send Grafton to prison for a long term. He served about two years and then managed to escape by impersonating one of the institution's physicians."

"Are you sure he is that Grafton?" asked Frank, surprised by this formidable record.

"I strongly suspect that he is the man. He is badly wanted by the police and there is a big reward out for his arrest."

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Joe. "Maybe we can cash in on this."

"Don't forget," Fenton Hardy reminded the boys with a smile, "that this is my case. We may be on the wrong track after all. Still, it's mighty interesting to know about the hideout in the woods. I think we'll all go out there tomorrow and do a little investigating."

"Why not today?" asked Frank.

"I have another job for you," remarked his father, glancing at his watch. "I'd like to have you go to Doeville again and look up old Mrs. Lunberry."

"Fine. What shall we ask her?"

"I want to know if Grafton has been back to see her. Then, of course, I'd like to find out if this cure of his has worked or not. Mrs. Lunberry may be a valuable witness if she has been swindled out of two hundred dollars by this gang of rascals."

"We'll go right away," said Frank. "She will probably snap our heads off when we ask her about Grafton, though. She was firmly convinced that he is a miracle man."

"Perhaps she's not so sure about it now," Fenton Hardy remarked.

The boys left the house, ran the roadster out of the garage, filled it up with gas at the corner service-station, and then set out for Doeville.

"Not quite as fast as traveling by plane," remarked Joe as the car skimmed over the highway.

"And not as expensive, either," Frank pointed out.

Their fears that Mrs. Lunberry's confidence in Grafton might cause her to resent their visit were groundless. They found the old lady in a pitiful state of anxiety and bewilderment. Her eyesight was as bad as ever; there had been no improvement as the result of Grafton's "operation." By this time she realized that she had been the victim of a callous swindle.

"Oh, if only I had listened to you boys!" she wept. "But that man and his proposition sounded so plausible, and I want so much to have my eyesight back again, just as good as ever. I know now that he was only after my money. The operation didn't do me a bit of good."

"You're not the first person Grafton has swindled," Frank told her. "We thought that if we could warn you in time you wouldn't lose your savings."

"I suppose I deserve to lose them for being so stupid and stubborn. A man like he is should be sent to prison."

"That's exactly where we hope to send him. Can we count on you, Mrs. Lunberry, to give evidence against Grafton if he should be arrested?"

"You certainly can!" that lady assured them warmly. "If it will prevent other people from being robbed by that scoundrel I'll give you all the help in my power. I can't see how a man can be so heartless. He knew that I have less than a thousand dollars left in the world. I've spent practically all my money searching for my granddaughter. I lost her when she was just a little girl and I've put out hundreds of dollars trying to locate her." The boys were interested in the old lady's story. She had been left a comfortable little income upon the death of her husband years before. She had undertaken the care of her orphaned granddaughter, who had mysteriously disappeared. Now, in the later years of her life she missed the company of the girl who might have been a help to her in her old age. With failing eyesight and her little store of money dwindling rapidly, she was an object of compassion.

Her story aroused the sympathy of the Hardy boys, whose resentment against the rascally Grafton grew fiercer. It seemed almost unbelievable that he should have victimized one deserving of sympathy rather than ill-treatment.

"We can't help you find your granddaughter, I'm afraid, Mrs. Lunberry," said Frank, "but we'll do the best we can to get your money back from Grafton. It will not be long before he is behind bars."

At that moment Joe, who was sitting by a window, saw an automobile pull up in front of

the cottage.

"Someone to see you, Mrs. Lunberry," he announced cheerfully. Then, with a gasp, he pressed closer to the pane and peered out. "Frank!" he said. "It's Spotty Lemuel!"

Frank leaped to his feet. He too saw Rip Sinder's partner getting out of the car.

"He mustn't find us here," said Frank quickly. "Mrs. Lunberry, if you don't mind, we'll leave by the back way. Come on, Joe."

Without further explanation to the astonished woman the boys hustled out of the room and rushed down the hall. They had just reached the kitchen when Lemuel rang the doorbell.

"Let's wait and hear what he has to say," suggested Frank quickly. "Maybe the crook is actually going to try to persuade the woman to pay for a second operation."

Hidden in the kitchen, the boys heard Lemuel introduce himself to Mrs. Lunberry. His first words amazed them.

"Mrs. Lunberry," he said, "I understand that you have spent a great deal of time and money searching for your lost granddaughter."

"Well-yes," admitted the old lady hesitantly. "How did you know ? Who told you?"

"Wasn't there a doctor here? A Doctor Grafton who operated on your eyes? Didn't you tell him about your search?"

"Indeed I did. Please come in and sit down. Why do you visit me?" asked Mrs. Lunberry in a voice that quavered with anxiety. "Do you know something about my granddaughter? Is that why you're here?"

"I can't be positive until I have a little more information," Lemuel said coolly. "From what the doctor told me, I think that I may be able to help you find this girl. Now I have some photographs here. One of them is a picture of her when she was very young. The other shows her as she is now. Perhaps you may be able to identify the first one."

The Hardy boys, listening, heard a cry of amazement and joy from the old lady.

"Where did you get this photograph?" she cried. "It's a picture of my granddaughter. I remember it well. Oh, please - please tell me where she is now. Where can I find her? There's no doubt of it. This is her picture."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it," answered Lemuel. "I'm more than delighted to tell you that I know where the girl can be found. This is a picture of a girl known as Virginia Sinder!"

Frank and Joe could hardly believe their ears. Was this a hoax? Or was Virginia really the missing granddaughter?

"But that isn't her real name!" cried Mrs. Lunberry. "I can identify her by that photograph, if you're sure it's one of the same person."

"This girl has been brought up by a family named Sinder," said Lemuel. "They knew nothing of her early history. I'm quite sure there has been no mistake."

"Where is she ? When can I see her?" asked Mrs. Lunberry, her voice trembling with eagerness.

Lemuel coughed politely.

"I am afraid there is going to be a certain amount of expense attached to it," he said.

"Expense? What do you mean? Why should it cost me money to have my granddaughter returned to me?"

"The Sinder family is not wealthy. They have spent a good deal of money bringing up the girl, and will expect to be paid something before Virginia can be turned over to you."

"I'll pay it gladly!" cried Mrs. Lunberry. "How much do they want?"

"Five hundred dollars," replied Spotty Lemuel flatly.

Mrs. Lunberry seemed taken aback.

"Five hundred dollars!" she echoed faintly. "That's a lot of money."

"It's the amount they ask. Of course, if you're not interested - "

"But I am interested. I want my granddaughter back. But five hundred dollars would take nearly every cent I have, and if it shouldn't be the right girl - "

"Tell you what I'll do," said Lemuel briskly. "If you want the girl back, give me half the money now and the rest later. Give me a check for two hundred and fifty dollars now and I'll guarantee that you granddaughter will be here with you inside of twenty-four hours."

Between the kitchen and the living room of Mrs. Lunberry's home there was a small room with bookcases and a writing desk. Frank, peering from the kitchen doorway, spied a checkbook on the desk.

"Very well," he heard Mrs. Lunberry say. "I'll write you half the amount."

Frank acted quickly. He dodged out of the kitchen and into the other room. With one rapid motion he snatched the check-book from the desk and thrust it into his pocket. Then he slid into the kitchen again.

The situation was saved for the moment. Mrs. Lunberry came out and looked for her check-book, searching the desk thoroughly. Puzzled, she went over to Lemuel.

"You'll have to come back tonight," the lady told him. "I've lost my check-book."

The man was plainly disappointed, but said that he would return later that evening for the money. Frank was delighted his ruse had saved Mrs. Lunberry from parting with the sum the rascal had demanded. As soon as the front door banged behind the departing Lemuel he and Joe started out of the kitchen to tell the woman all they knew about her unscrupulous visitor.

Suddenly the back door opened. The boys whirled around, to find a stout, bewhiskered man in overalls standing on the threshold.

"You steal - a da book!" he thundered, pointing an accusing finger at Frank.

At that moment the woman herself appeared in the hall.

"What's this? What has happened?" she demanded.

"Dis-a boy, he steal-a from your desk! I looka through da window!" shouted the man.

CHAPTER XXII

The Search Ended

"Look here!" cried Frank angrily. "You've made a mistake. I was only trying to help Mrs. Lunberry."

"You steal-a da book!" cried the man. "I work-a here on da garden for dis-a lady. Nobody can-a steal from her. Geev-a him back."

He advanced on Frank and seized him. The boy wrenched himself free, whereupon the gardener knocked him down with a heavy blow.

"Let him alone!" shouted Joe, and jumped into the fight.

As he pulled the fellow away, Mrs. Lunberry screamed, for through the open door dashed a huge, snarling police dog. The animal hurled itself on Joe. The kitchen was in a turmoil as the boy tried to fight off the brute while the man at the same time pounced on Frank and snatched the check-book from the lad's pocket.

"See!" he shouted triumphantly. "He steal-a it. I see him."

He held up the article. Suddenly the dog leaped at it, turning from Joe as he did so, and snapped the book from the gardener's hand. Then the animal bolted from the room.

Mrs. Lunberry was greatly upset. The excitable man honestly believed he had captured a couple of dangerous thieves and was creating an uproar that could be heard a block away. Frank and Joe, at the same time, were vainly trying to explain things.

"Pietro!" cried Mrs. Lunberry to the gardener. "Be quiet! Give these boys a chance to tell their story."

"We took your check-book, Mrs. Lunberry," panted Frank, getting up from the floor.

"That's true enough. But we did it so you wouldn't be able to write out for Lemuel the amount he wanted."

"And why not?" demanded Mrs. Lunberry stiffly. "Surely it's my own business if I wish to give the man a check."

"But he's a crook, as big a one as Doctor Grafton. He's a member of the same gang. He doesn't know where to find Virginia. If you give him the money you'll never see him again."

"We can find her for you and it won't cost you a cent," declared Joe.

Mrs. Lunberry was incredulous. "Do you know my granddaughter?" she questioned.

"We know Virginia Sinder but we didn't know she was your granddaughter."

"Where is she? When can you bring her here?"

The Hardy boys looked crestfallen.

"Well," admitted Frank, "we don't know where she is right now - "

"Ha!" snorted the gardener. "These boys bluff-a you, Mrs. Lunberry. They steal-a da book. They not know where to find-a da girl."

Mrs. Lunberry looked suspicious. It was obvious that she was wondering if Frank had invented the story so he could explain his action in taking the check-book.

"Mrs. Lunberry," pleaded Frank desperately, "don't give Lemuel any money until we have a chance to find Virginia ourselves. We don't know where she is just at the moment but we do know where she was. We have talked with her. We'll get busy right away and try to find her for you."

"I'll give you until tomorrow," said Mrs. Lunberry reluctantly. "If you haven't found her by that time I'll accept Mr. Lemuel's proposition. After all, I have only your word that he is dishonest. I'm not to pay him the other half of the money until my granddaughter is returned."

"You won't have to pay us anything," Frank told her. "We'll find her for you."

The boys were glad to escape from Doevoile, realizing that if Pietro the gardener should be allowed to have his own way they would be turned over to the police on a theft charge.

Even yet, they realized, Mrs. Lunberry was not entirely convinced of their good intentions. Their only way of proving their sincerity would be to carry out their promise to locate

Virginia Sinder and take her to her grandmother.

"And that," declared Joe, "is easier said than done."

"But it has to be done," returned his brother.

Worst of all, they discovered on their arrival home that Fenton Hardy would be unable to carry out his plan of visiting the Grafton hideout the next day. An important client of the great detective had wired a message to the effect that he would be in Bayport for a conference which could not be postponed. When the boys explained their predicament, however, their father made a suggestion.

"Call up Mrs. Lunberry and see if you can get her to ask Lemuel where he is staying. If he does know where to locate Virginia you may be able to shadow him."

The idea bore fruit. Over the telephone the woman said that Lemuel had returned and gone away again, greatly disappointed because she had not given him the promised check. He had told her, however, that he would await a telephone call from her at the Westside Hotel in Bayport the following day.

This clue proved to be valuable. The boys made a point of watching the hotel, a shabby little place of unsavory reputation. Early the next morning they were rewarded by seeing Spotty Lemuel emerge from the hotel. The Hardys shadowed him for several blocks.

Finally he loitered on a street corner, glancing at his watch occasionally as if waiting for someone. The two lads, pretending to be interested in a shop window display a few yards away, kept their sharp eyes on him. Presently a second familiar figure came hurrying down the street. Frank could see his reflection in the plate glass window.

"Rip Sinder!" said the lad quietly.

The two men began talking about something, but the boys could catch only snatches of their conversation. They did not wish to risk discovery by venturing closer. They perked up their ears, however, when they heard Lemuel say:

"By the way, Rip, I don't suppose you've found Virginia yet?"

"No, I haven't," growled Sinder. "But if she thinks she's going to stay clear of me she's mistaken. I'll get her."

"How?"

"I've found out where she left her car. It's at the Highway Garage in Brockton. Why are you so interested in Virginia all of a sudden?"

Lemuel gave an evasive answer. Then the pair moved off down the street. The Hardy boys did not follow, for they had obtained the exact information they wanted.

"Evidently Lemuel hasn't told Rip Sinder anything about his little scheme for collecting five hundred dollars from Mrs. Lunberry," remarked Joe as the brothers hurried away.

"He plans to find Virginia himself, take her to Doeville, and get the money. Well, maybe we can thwart that. If the girl's car is at the Highway Garage we'll watch that place until she shows up."

The faithful Sleuth brought the boys across Barmet Bay and up the Willow River to Brockton in record time. There they found the place they sought without any trouble. It was the larger of the two garages in the village.

There were half a dozen cars in the place as the boys entered. They recognized Virginia's coupe the moment they saw it. The proprietor, clad in overalls, crawled out from beneath a battered sedan.

"Looking for a job?" he asked the Hardys. "My man quit this morning and I'm up against it. Can you wash a car?"

Frank nudged Joe sharply.

"You bet we can," he said. "How much do you pay?"

"Two dollars each for the rest of the day, and there's enough work to keep you going until midnight. You can start in right this minute. I've a couple of spare overalls in the office."

Joe was inclined to grumble a little at the state of things. However, he and his brother were provided with work clothes and started washing a car that looked as if it had travelled five thousand miles through swamps and marshes.

"This isn't my idea of detective work," Joe said. "We came out here to find that girl, not to spend the rest of the day scrubbing cars."

"If Virginia comes in here for her coupe we'll be right on hand to meet her, that's the point," remarked Frank. "Get busy and earn that two dollars."

The boys toiled all afternoon, but Virginia Sinder did not show up. From the garage-man they learned that the coupe had been left in his care a few days before. He said the owner might be in to claim it any time. Joe was distinctly gloomy over the prospect of washing cars until such a time as the girl should choose to put in her appearance.

"We may be here for a week," he groaned.

Frank was more optimistic.

"I have a feeling we won't have to wait very long," he said.

His hunch was right. The two Hardys were completing their last job at eleven o'clock that night when the slight figure of a girl slipped into the garage.

She was Virginia!

"I've come for my coupe," she told the proprietor. "How much do I owe you?"

The boys peered from behind the car they were washing and saw her pay the man. Then she asked him for a road map, which she studied for a few moments.

"How far is it," she inquired, "from here to Miami, Florida?"

This was the last straw as far as Frank and Joe were concerned. Virginia Sinder had eluded them for the last time. She wasn't going to leave for Florida if they could prevent it!

"Before you go, Virginia," said Frank, stepping before her, "how about telling us of the nine hundred dollars Nick Cordoza says you stole from him?"

CHAPTER XXIII

The Mysterious Cellar

Virginia started back with a cry. Then "without replying she darted quickly toward her coupe. Wrenching open the door, she leaped inside before the boys could prevent her. The garage-owner stood open-mouthed.

"Stop her!" yelled Frank.

He leaped onto a running board just as Virginia pressed the starter. The motor roared, then back-fired. There were half a dozen sharp reports that sounded like pistol shots. Joe plunged forward and hurled himself into the seat beside the girl.

The car lurched forward across the garage floor and out into the road. The motor backfired a second time. From across the street a belated villager mistook the sounds for those of a pistol.

"It's a hold-up! "he yelled. "Police! Help! Police!"

Virginia pressed down on the accelerator pedal. Along the highway raced the coupe, its back-firing and the shouts of the passers-by arousing the village. A highway policeman who was having a sandwich and a cup of coffee in a lunch room across the street rushed out, saw the speeding car, and jumped onto his motorcycle. Brockton's chief of police, who was just leaving the station house made a standing broad jump for his automobile. Two men ran from the adjacent fire house, yelling:

"Wait for us, Chief!"

Virginia took the next corner on two wheels. The coupe rattled onto a dirt road that led north of Brockton along the river.

"Have you gone crazy?" shouted Frank, trying to reach the wheel. "Stop the car before you have us all killed."

The girl did not answer, for she was in too much of a panic over the theft of which she had been accused. She clung to the wheel more grimly than ever. Frank and Joe saw that any attempt to interfere with her would result in a terrible accident. The speedometer showed that the car was traveling at more than fifty miles an hour, pitching and bouncing precariously on the rutted road.

From behind them they could hear the clatter of the pursuing motorcycle. The boys glanced back and saw the headlight of the speeding machine.

Bang! Bang!

The officer was firing his revolver. Bullets whistled through the air, one of them shattering the rear window of the coupe. Even then the girl made no move to stop. Instead, she increased the speed until the needle of the speedometer crept above sixty.

A few seconds later the car skidded dangerously on a curve, but Virginia was a good driver and pulled the machine out of it, then shot around a bend. A fork in the road loomed immediately ahead. The girl juggled the wheel, and without a moment's hesitation turned to the left. Then she bore down on the wheel again and raced around another sharp curve. The move had the effect of throwing the pursuing posse off the track for the moment. The boys could hear the motorcycle and the police car roar down the right-hand fork.

The motorcycle officer, however, knew what he was doing. With the choice of two roads before him he had chosen the right-hand turn, knowing that it would join with the other farther on. His purpose was to meet the fleeing coupe at the next fork.

Joe had made several attempts to knock Virginia's foot off the accelerator; each effort had only caused the girl to jam down harder toward the floor. This caused a lurching of the car that nearly sent it crashing into the ditch. Wishing heartily that they had never tried to find the desperate girl, the Hardy boys hung on, hoping for the best while anticipating the worst.

At the next curve the expected happened. Just as the car swung around the bend there came an explosive report. A rear tire had blown out!

The coupe swung crazily and went into a fearful skid. Frantically Virginia clung to the

wheel and tried to regain control of the machine, but it shot across the road at terrific speed. The boys saw trees, rocks and bushes rise swiftly into the glare of the headlights. Then there was a blinding crash. The car pitched over and hurtled down an embankment. The Hardys had an impression of deafening noise and dazzling lights. They were knocked senseless as the coupe bounced and careened down the slope. It landed against a tree and came to a stop, nothing now but a twisted heap of wreckage.

Virginia and Frank had been thrown clear and lay on the ground in the darkness, motionless: Joe was pinned under the debris.

For a long time there was not a sound. Finally a harsh voice came from the inky blackness. "Over this way, Zeb. Wait-I'll switch on the flashlight."

A brilliant beam stabbed the dark night. Two men crept closer to the wreck.

"A bad business," grumbled one of them. "I don't want the police coming around here investigating."

The voice was that of Grafton!

He was carrying a flashlight. Its beam playing on the wreck picked out the still form of Virginia lying beside the mangled car.

The other man sprang into the radiance of the electric torch and crouched beside the girl. He was Zeb, the deaf-mute. His contorted face looked inhuman and ghastly in the glare as his mouth twisted and his writhing hands made strange motions in the air.

"Why, it's that girl!" exclaimed Grafton. "Dead!"

His queer servant caught sight of Frank. He leaped forward and dragged Frank's limp body beside that of Virginia.

"What? Another?" exclaimed Grafton. When he turned the light on the Hardy boy's face he shouted, "Ha! It's one of those kids! One of the young rowdies!"

Silently, gesturing weirdly, Zeb capered over to the car. He had to lift up the machine to reach Joe, but the deaf-mute was inhumanly strong. Soon the three motionless figures were lying side by side on the rough ground.

"Dead, eh?" snapped Grafton. "Well, I'm not going to get mixed up in any police investigation if I can help it. We'll have to get rid of these bodies, Zeb."

He swung around. The powerful beam of his flashlight revealed his hideout in the woods.

The sinister retreat where Virginia had been held prisoner stood about twenty yards away.

"Carry the bodies to the house!" ordered Grafton, illustrating his command by a gesture to the deaf-mute. "Into the cellar!"

One by one the servant bore the three inert forms down a flight of steps into the basement of the building.

"Hurry!" ordered Grafton. "There's going to be a storm!"

The air was hot and oppressive. Lightning flared in the sky. The wind began to rise, howling mournfully. Drops of rain splattered against the windows.

"Hurry!" urged Grafton again.

He rushed into the house, to return a moment later with two battered automobile license plates which he took to the wreck. "Working swiftly, he removed the originals from the smashed coupe and substituted the old ones.

"There!" he snarled finally. "If the police come nosing around here I'll tell them that wreck has been lying in the bushes for weeks. They'll never know it was the girl's car."

The wind moaned. A livid flash of lightning threw a blinding glare on the scene, which was followed by a crashing roar of thunder. Then came the rain. The skies seemed to open as

the storm broke and torrents poured from the heavens.

The scene in the cellar of Grafton's sinister hideout was even weirder than that out-of-doors. By the light of a flickering, guttering candle the deaf-mute toiled with a spade. He was digging a wide grave in the damp earth. The spade rose and fell. From somewhere upstairs in the house there sounded the deep notes of a clock striking the hour of twelve, the ominous strokes rising above the clamor of the storm.

"Shovel faster!" shouted Grafton.

The candlelight shone on his cruel face as he motioned excitedly to the deaf-mute.

CHAPTER XXIV

The House of Peril

Frank's hand moved slightly. He had not yet regained his senses, but consciousness was slowly asserting itself.

Zeb, the deaf-mute, saw the movement. He looked nervously over toward Grafton. The bogus doctor, who had not even troubled to make sure that the victims of the car smash were really dead, gestured impatiently.

"Hurry!" he shouted.

Zeb resumed his task. The black earth flew from his spade as the crude grave became wider and wider.

"We'll bury 'em here," chuckled the doctor. "We'll bury 'em here and their bodies will never be seen again."

The servant panted as he dug furiously at the earth. He thought he saw signs of returning consciousness in Joe as well. His nervousness increased, but he was so thoroughly under the domination of Grafton that he dared not disobey his master's orders.

Finally the grave was finished. With an abrupt gesture Grafton signalled for the man to stop work.

"Bury them, Zeb!" he shouted with a maniacal laugh. "Bury them and cover them up with earth. The police can hunt until Doomsday, but they'll never find them."

The deaf-mute dragged the three bodies over to the shallow hole and toppled them, one by one, into the grave. As he did so, the man was more certain than ever that the young people were being buried alive. When he tried by signs to explain his fear to Grafton, the bogus doctor curtly ordered him to hurry with the work of covering the three victims from view.

"What are you gibbering about?" he demanded angrily. "Get busy with that spade."

The storm was at its height. There was an almost continuous roll and rumble of crashing thunder, an incessant play of flickering lightning. Zeb seized the spade again and flung earth into the grave. It fell across the body of Frank as he sprawled inertly in the trench.

"That's it!" shouted Grafton, waving his arms in the guttering candlelight, his voice rising above the roar and crash of the storm.

As he spoke there came a terrific, deafening crash. A bolt of lightning had struck the chimney! It followed the chimney to the cellar. Suddenly the gloomy cavern was illuminated by a dazzling, livid flash.

Doctor Grafton uttered a cry, flung his arm in front of his face as if trying to defend himself from this terror, and then toppled forward. The lightning bolt had knocked him senseless.

Zeb, the deaf-mute, was shaking with fear, and with good reason; two of the figures in the grave were beginning to move. Frank and Joe, strangely revived by the shock of the electric current that had passed through the cellar, sat up slowly.

Zeb stared at them, appalled. Then he dug frantically into the heap of dirt with his spade and began to hurl earth at the two boys.

Frank, dizzy and weak, struggled to his feet. He did not know where he was nor what had happened, but the sight of the open grave, the unconscious figure of Grafton, and the eerie form of the deaf-mute told him that he and his brother were facing some hideous danger.

"Joe!" he said hoarsely.

"I'm all right, Frank," gasped his brother. He began to scramble out of the pit.

Zeb was in a veritable frenzy. The Hardys realized that they would have to overpower the deaf-mute before they could hope to escape from this sinister place. Armed with a spade the man was a formidable opponent.

The boys started to close in on him. Zeb backed away, holding the spade in a threatening manner. Frank darted in suddenly and made a move as if to grab the deaf-mute, who swung viciously with the heavy tool. The weapon passed harmlessly, whereupon Frank and Joe rushed in simultaneously from each side.

They hurled themselves on Zeb before he could raise the spade again. The fellow was very strong and struggled desperately, but the Hardy boys were fighting for their lives. They overpowered him finally, and bundled him toward the open door of a closet built into the cellar wall.

The man fought like a wildcat when he realized their intentions, but was helpless in their grasp. They thrust him into the closet and slammed the door on him. The boys braced their bodies against it as Zeb hurled himself time and again in vain efforts to escape. Then Frank snapped the padlock and the deaf-mute was a prisoner.

"Where are we?" asked Joe, peering around the dimly-lit room.

"I think we must be in the cellar of Grafton's hideout, but I don't know how we got here," said Frank. He had recognized the bogus doctor lying on the floor beside the grave.

"Probably we were carried here from the wreck."

"Look! There's Virginia!" cried Joe, seeing the girl's body lying in the open grave.

"Grafton must have intended burying us alive!" exclaimed Frank. A chill of horror passed through him as he realized the awful fate they had escaped so narrowly.

Frank jumped into the trench. Virginia was still alive, but unconscious. As far as he could judge, she had suffered no broken limbs in the automobile crash, yet obviously was in need of medical care.

"We must get her out of here."

Joe helped his brother lift up the limp form. Then the boys turned their attention to the problem of escaping from this underground prison. Zeb was battering and banging at the

door of the closet in which he was locked. The ominous roll of thunder continued throughout it all.

Frank saw a door at the far side of the cellar and ran toward it. Just as he did so the candle guttered out. The boys groped in their pockets for matches. They had none.

Joe recalled seeing a flashlight in Grafton's hand. He blundered across the cellar in the darkness, almost falling into the grave in his efforts to find the unconscious doctor. At last he located the electric torch. Its bright beam cut the darkness. Joe ran back to his brother's side.

Frank opened the door, which did not lead to the upper part of the house as they had hoped it would. Instead, it opened into a cupboard, from the interior of which the boys experienced a shock that would have unsettled the nerves of most boys.

Inside the enclosure were two skeletons!

The grinning skulls and empty eye-sockets were horrible in the white beam of light. Frank quickly slammed the door.

"Whew!" gasped Joe. "That gave me a scare."

"Didn't make me feel any too good, either," admitted Frank. "Grafton must use them for some of his fake medical experiments."

With the aid of the flashlight they made a further search of the cellar. In a few minutes they found a door that opened on a flight of steps leading into the upper part of the building.

"We'll have to carry Virginia," said Frank. "We can't leave her here. Grafton might come to his senses suddenly."

They returned to the place where they had left the unconscious girl. Neither of the Hardy boys was feeling any too kindly toward Virginia just then, although they were concerned about the extent of her injuries. Her own recklessness and folly had led them into all this trouble, and it was only by the sheerest good fortune that any of them had survived the automobile smash-up.

The beam of the flashlight revealed the young woman lying where they had left her. Just then Frank saw a faint movement outside the range of light. He turned the beam in that direction.

It shone full on the figure of Grafton, who was struggling to his feet. There was an expression of wolfish defiance on his face. His lips were drawn back, his teeth bared in a snarl. His eyes glittered. With a harsh cry he lunged to one side and vanished in the darkness.

"Get Virginia, quick!" shouted Frank. "Make for the door!"

Together the brothers raised the limp body of the girl. They blundered across the floor of the cellar, dragging her to the foot of the stairs.

"You'll never get out of here alive!" Grafton screeched from somewhere in the darkness.

Frank swung the flashlight around. He saw the man crouching at a shelf that ran the length of the cellar wall. It was lined with bottles and vials of all shapes and sizes. The doctor snatched one of the glass receptacles from the shelf.

"The deadliest acid in my collection!" he screamed. "I'll teach you fellows to interfere with me. One drop of this will kill any man it touches."

The Hardys lunged in front of Virginia to protect her in case Grafton should carry out his mad threat. There was a maniacal screech of laughter, as the fake physician drew back his arm.

Then he hurled the bottle of acid directly at the boys!

CHAPTER XXV

Success

Had it not been for the sudden and unexpected interference on the part of Zeb, the deadly acid would have found its mark. As the bottle flew through the air, the door of the closet in which the deaf-mute had been locked opened violently.

The man tumbled out onto the floor, and the door intercepted the course of the container, which smashed into a thousand pieces.

The cellar was immediately filled with the pungent fumes of the acid. Zeb sprang fearfully away, clawing at his clothes, on which some of the poison had spattered.

"Quick!" urged Frank.

The boys, carrying Virginia, hastily ran up the steps. Grafton and Zeb were blundering about in the darkness of the gas-filled cellar, trying to find their way to the foot of the stairs.

The Hardys succeeded in reaching the upper floor in safety and slammed the door shut. Joe turned the key in the lock.

Frank switched on the flashlight and examined the room in which they found themselves. It was a kitchen. On a table stood a lamp which he lit. Unconcerned by the rising uproar in the cellar, the boys turned their attention to Virginia. They rubbed her hands and wrists, dashed cold water in her face, and made every effort to revive her. Joe rummaged about in a cupboard and found it filled with medicines and chemicals. A bottle of ammonia caught his eye.

"The very thing!" he exclaimed.

The sharp, pungent smell revived the unconscious girl. Color returned to her cheeks, and she stirred restlessly. Then her eyes opened. She gasped and choked as the fumes cleared her head.

At that moment a heavy, clamorous pounding could be heard at the back door, and a deep voice shouted:

"Open up! Open up there!"

One thought flashed through the minds of the Hardy boys: Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel!

"Open in the name of the law!" called a loud voice.

"The police!" cried Frank, relieved.

He sprang up and rushed to the kitchen door. It was the work of but a moment to throw back the bolt. Across the threshold there strode a State trooper, rain dripping from his oilskins.

Half a dozen men crowded behind him. The posse from Brockton had discovered the wreckage of the coupe.

"What's going on here?" demanded the trooper. "We've been looking for you three. A fine chase we had after you! Anyone hurt?"

Footsteps thudded on the stairs leading up from the cellar.

"Let me out! Let me out of here!" shouted Grafton, banging at the door with his fists.

The policemen crowded into the room.

"Who's that?" demanded the trooper. "'Who's locked in the cellar?"

"A man who calls himself Doctor Grafton," returned Frank. "He is an escaped convict. There's a reward offered for his capture and we're claiming it. He's a fake eye surgeon and swindler. Besides, he just tried to bury the three of us alive."

The trooper drew his gun.

"All right, men," he said to the others. "I'll cover him when he comes out. If he tries any nonsense, you know what to do."

He unlocked the door. Grafton plunged out, his face contorted with rage. When he saw the officer and all the drawn guns leveled at him, his rage gave way to fear. He threw up his arms.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I surrender."

"You're wise," growled the man of the law, as he stepped forward. Metal flashed in the lamplight as a pair of handcuffs snapped about Grafton's wrists.

The policemen found Zeb lying unconscious at the foot of the stairs. He had been overcome from the fumes of the acid hurled by his master.

Thus ended one phase of the mystery in which the Hardy boys had been engaged since the fateful night when they witnessed the theatre hold-up in Bayport. With the arrest of Grafton, the eye syndicate was broken up. The swindler was lodged in jail that night. By morning his two associates, Rip Sinder and Spotty Lemuel, had also been picked up by the police on information furnished by the boys. The two men were arrested in the second-rate hotel where Frank and Joe had located Lemuel the previous day.

With the apprehension of the trio and publication of the fact in the newspapers, dozens of victims of the eye syndicate began to come forward, offering to give evidence against the swindlers and tell about the cruel tactics the men had used. In its editorial column the leading Bayport newspaper stated that the Hardy boys had performed a public service by their clever work in rounding up this unscrupulous gang.

The brothers planned to take Virginia to her grandmother at Doeville the following afternoon. She had been put to bed in the Hardy home under the care of Aunt Gertrude, to recover from the shock of the unnerving events of the night. She had told the story of that evening when Cordoza had found her stranded. Her version coincided with his in every detail except that she had not taken the money he had shown her; and that she was amazed he had been injured badly when she had shoved him from the running board because he was becoming too friendly.

During the morning the boys decided to return to the scene of the thrilling events of the previous night. They eagerly examined the wreckage of Virginia's car, which they found to be smashed beyond all hope of repair.

"Couldn't sell it even for junk," said Frank, peering through one of the shattered doors.

"I'll never know how we got out of that disaster without breaking our necks. No wonder Grafton thought we were killed." With a note of excitement in his voice he cried, "Joe!"

"What's wrong?"

"I see something. Over there. It's money." Frank lunged into the wreckage at imminent risk of tearing his clothes. "Why, it's a wad of bills big enough to choke a cow!"

Frank emerged with a thick roll of money.

"The cash from the Rialto Theatre hold-up!" shouted Joe.

They counted it, nine hundred dollars in all. Thus was another phase of the double mystery solved by the Hardy boys. Yet its solution presented a new problem. Had Virginia really stolen the money from Nick Cordoza?

When the boys returned home they found the girl up and dressed, in spite of Aunt Gertrude's protests. Virginia's unbounded astonishment when they told her of the discovery of the money convinced them that she had no knowledge of it being in her car.

"Why, it must have fallen out of the man's hand," she exclaimed.

"But where it was hidden in the car will always remain a mystery," said Frank, not doubting any longer the girl's truthfulness.

Joe grinned. "To think of us getting the machine out of the river and cleaning it up without discovering the money makes me feel pretty small."

"Perhaps it's just as well it happened as it did," said Virginia, "for otherwise you wouldn't have helped me," she added gratefully.

The bills were returned to the Rialto Theatre management that afternoon, greatly to the resentment of Detective Smuff, who felt that it should have been entrusted to the authorities.

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In that way the Bayport Police Department might have received the credit for restoring the sum to the owner.

Nick Cordoza was still under arrest and would be charged with the hold-up. Collig and Smuff were quite eclipsed by the glory that had come to the Hardys as the result of the arrest of the eye syndicate members and the knowledge that the boys should collect a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of Grafton. Incidentally part of that was given by the brothers to the hotel as payment for the broken glass canopy.

That afternoon Virginia, scarcely able to believe her good fortune, was restored to her grandmother, Mrs. Lunberry. The old lady wept tears of joy. The girl was pathetically happy at finding a home of her own at last after the many years she had spent in the unpleasant atmosphere of Rip Sinder's custody.

The boys drove back home after leaving Virginia at Doeville. The girl promised them that she would be "a figure in hiding" no longer. The lads were met by Fenton Hardy, who told his sons the full story of the investigation he had conducted into the activities of the eye syndicate with the help of his youthful-looking assistant, Fred Ware.

"Grafton's real name," he told them, "is Paul Zane, and Mr. Zatta's real name, of course, is Zane, too. Sinder and Lemuel were merely tools. They scouted for prospects and wrote letters. Grafton performed the fake operations and collected the money. In time I might have been able to round up the gang, but I think it would not have been accomplished nearly so quickly if you two hadn't stepped into the case."

"I'm glad it's all over," sighed Mrs. Hardy. "Maybe we'll be able to have our meals on time again."

"Meals on time! In this house?" snorted Aunt Gertrude scornfully. "You mark my words, this affair may be all cleared up, but just as sure as eggs is eggs - "

"Are eggs, Aunty," chuckled Joe.

"Just as sure as you're an impudent boy, another mystery will pop up and there'll be no peace around here until it's solved."

She was right. Excitement awaited her nephews in "The Secret Warning."

"Chet Morton called up this morning," said Mrs. Hardy. "He said he thought you boys ought to try and find out who played that trick on him and sent him to Boston."

"One of Cordoza's pals, more than likely," said Fenton Hardy. "They didn't want Chet on hand to give evidence and identify him as the hold-up man."

"Maybe," sniffed Aunt Gertrude, "but I doubt it. I think Chet Morton sneaked off to Boston all by himself because he was afraid he would be taken back to jail. He preferred to be a figure in hiding, the same as everybody else in this mystery."

The contemptuous snort with which Aunt Gertrude terminated her statement expressed more vividly than words could her opinion of boys in general and Chet Morton in particular.

The End.