

CHAPTER I

A STORMY NIGHT

"THIS is going to be a terrible night on the open sea," said Joe Hardy.

"I wish the captain would speed up," responded his fat chum, Chet Morton, with anxiety. "The ocean is getting rough, and the sooner we reach Bayport the better it will suit me."

"Just the kind of a setting for a mystery," returned Frank Hardy. "Now that we have the handwriting specimens in the Pennyweather case with us, I'm about ready for something new."

The three boys were seated at a table in the restaurant of the Resolute, a small coast liner. Frank Hardy, a tall, dark lad of about sixteen was the oldest of the trio. His brother Joe, a fair, curly-haired youth with a pleasant face was a year his junior, as was also Chet Morton, a fat, red-cheeked lad with a great appetite for fun and food.

"It is getting rough," agreed Frank, looking around the large room. "Not many passengers eating dinner tonight."

The vessel pitched and rolled continuously as it battled its way through the heavy sea. The three boys were good sailors, however, and had spent most of their lives within sight of the ocean. They were now returning from Larchmont, which was down the coast in one of the Southern states, to their home city of Bayport on Barmet Bay.

Fenton Hardy, a famous detective, the father of the Hardy boys, had sent his sons to Larchmont to procure some handwriting specimens from a client of his, a Miss Pennyweather. They were essential for use in the case upon which he was working. Greatly to the delight of Frank and Joe, their chum Chet had succeeded in obtaining permission from his parents to accompany them on the journey.

"Nearly all the passengers are in their staterooms tonight," grinned Chet. "Boy, I'm glad the ship's motion doesn't bother me. If there is anything worse than a real hearty dose of seasickness, I don't know what it is."

"It doesn't seem to be bothering that fellow over there," remarked Joe quietly.

The only passenger in the dining saloon besides themselves was a tall, sad-looking man about forty-five, who was sitting morosely at a table over in a corner, eating his dinner in gloomy silence. His face was flushed, his eyes were dull, and every now and then he would hiccough loudly.

"He's had too much to drink," muttered Chet.

"Have you noticed him watching us ever since we came on board?" asked Joe.

Frank looked at his brother in surprise. "Then it wasn't just my imagination," he said. "I had the same idea as yourself about him, but J didn't want to

mention it for fear you might think I was trying to stir up a scare."

"Ever see him before?" asked Chet, now greatly interested in the situation.

The Hardy boys shook their heads. They were unable to even guess what it was all about.

"Then why should he be watching you?" Frank shrugged, plainly puzzled. "Maybe he is following us. After all, those handwriting specimens are mighty valuable."

Chet whistled.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. "By the way, I suppose you've put them in a safe place?"

"They're locked up with our luggage in the stateroom," Joe told him.

While the boys were talking, the melancholy man pushed back his chair, arose, steadied himself for a moment against the table, and then made his way across the room. As he walked he staggered a little, and finally lurched out into the passage.

"He's been drinking, all right," said Frank. He beckoned to the waiter, who came over.

"Do you know the name of the passenger who just went out?" he asked.

"That is Mr. Rand, sir, replied the waiter. "Mr. Ruel Rand."

"Pretty tipsy, isn't he?" queried Chet.

To everyone's surprise, the waiter shook his head.

"I can't understand it myself," he told the boys. "Anyone would think Mr. Rand was intoxicated, but he has been drinking nothing but fruit juices."

"Perhaps he isn't well," Joe suggested as the only solution to the man's behavior.

The boys dismissed Mr. Rand from their thoughts for the time being, finished their meal, and went up on deck. It was a wild night. Out of the stormy darkness great waves crashed against the ship as it labored northward. A dense, yellow fog hung over everything, and the lads could scarcely see the bridge above. Every few moments the deep, throaty voice of the fog-horn would boom its mournful warning into the night.

The boys were not nervous ordinarily, but they realized that the present condition was cause for grave concern. A ship's officer suddenly passed by them, his face tense and serious.

"Stay away from the rail, boys!" he advised them tersely, then hurried on to his duties.

It was a night that portended disaster. Everyone was in an expectant mood, as if he felt that a catastrophe of some kind was impending.

"If the ship should lose its way in this atmosphere we'd be in a fine mess," observed Chet. "I hope the captain knows what he's doing."

"This fog is a regular old pea-souper," said Joe. "I shouldn't want the responsibility of bringing this boat safe into port."

The vessel lurched suddenly, and heeled without warning. Great sheets of spray swept the decks. The boys huddled together in a sheltered spot, stunned by the violence of the storm and awed by the impenetrable mystery of the fog.

Suddenly, as if from out of nowhere, a tremulous voice close by asked: "Do you think there is any danger?"

With one accord the trio swung around, startled, for they had heard no one approach. Like a ghost a tall figure had materialized out of the darkness. In the dim light they recognized it as that of Samuel Blackstone, an old, white-bearded gentleman who had sat at their table at luncheon that day. He was evidently greatly wrought up and extremely nervous.

"I couldn't stay in my stateroom," he told them. "It's a dreadful night, isn't it? Do you think we'll get through safe?"

"I think there's no cause for alarm, Mr. Blackstone," Frank replied kindly, trying to allay the old man's fears, although he was none too confident himself. "It's a bad storm, and the fog makes it worse. Yet it would take a mighty forceful blow to drive a ship as sturdy as this one off her course."

"I wish morning would come," said Mr. Blackstone. "This is my first trip North. Believe me, if the weather is always like this here it will be my last visit."

"You were just unlucky to run into such a furious tempest," Joe assured him. "Where are you headed for, Mr. Black stone?"

"Boston," he said. "I must meet a man there in order to complete a business deal."

The old gentleman seemed considerably calmer, now that he had someone with whom to talk. He asked the boys about their destination, recalling several friends of his who lived in Bayport. He did not discuss his own affairs, but frankly admitted that much of his concern was due to the fact that he was carrying with him a large sum of money.

If he would confide in them so willingly, Frank reflected, the elderly man might tell others, also. A person of his age, traveling by himself, and with valuables in his possession, would be a likely target for a swindle. From their father the Hardy boys had heard numerous stories of guileless ocean voyagers who had been relieved of every cent they possessed by crooks who were ever on the lookout for just such victims.

"If I were you, Mr. Blackstone," Frank suggested, "I shouldn't carry so much money around with me. If you have a big sum, you should have it locked up in the ship's safe."

"I'm not accustomed to traveling," said Mr. Blackstone, "and didn't know about a place for safekeeping. Dear me, it would have saved me a lot of worry. Where do I go--Whom do I ask--"

"If you like, we'll show you to the purser's office," offered Joe.

"He'll put the funds away for you and give you a receipt. Then, when the ship reaches Boston, you can get your money back again." Chet explained. "It's a lot better than keeping it in your stateroom."

Mr. Blackstone seemed very much relieved at this information. He gratefully accepted the boys' offer, then the four went inside the cabin. By the light the boys saw that he was a man of about seventy, neatly and expensively dressed. He was frail, thin, and very tall.

"It's mighty good of you lads to go to so much trouble for an old man," he said, as they walked down a corridor between staterooms. "Most boys wouldn't bother."

"No trouble at all," Frank assured him. "We're glad to be of service to you."

As the boys approached Cabin 19, which was their stateroom, Joe suddenly halted and grasped Frank by the arm.

"That's queer," he said, and pointed to the sill of the door.

A thin shaft of light was shining from beneath the entrance.

"I was the last one in there," Joe said, "and I distinctly recall turning out the lights."

As he spoke, the beam vanished.

"There's someone in our stateroom !" whispered Chet, excited.

"We'll soon find out who it is," Frank said in a low voice.

Quietly he stole forward and grasped the knob. It turned beneath his hand, and the door yielded to his pressure. It was unlocked. This was enough for Frank. He flung it wide open.

From out of the darkness there loomed the figure of a man.

"Get out of here!" ordered a deep voice.

CHAPTER II

THE SHIPWRECK

"WHAT'S the idea?" chirped Chet flippantly.

"What are you doing in our stateroom?" Frank demanded as he advanced into the darkness.

"Careful," urged Joe, for it flashed across his mind that the intruder might be armed.

Frank was in no mood to be cautioned. His first thought had been for the valuable handwriting specimens hidden in their luggage, and he strode forward. He caught a glimpse of the intruder lunging toward him. Then a fist shot out of the darkness and caught the boy a glancing blow on the side of the face.

Frank, strong and wiry, instantly began to grapple with his attacker, but he was no match for the grown man, who flung him aside so violently that the lad went crashing against the stateroom wall. At the same time Chet and Joe tackled the fellow. Old man Blackstone, in the corridor, was calling out in alarm:

"What's the matter? What's going on here?"

There was a brief tussle of Chet and Joe with the stranger, but he was too strong for them and plunged out into the corridor with a boy clinging to each arm. He shook off Chet, but Joe was not so easy to handle. The two were struggling desperately as Frank recovered himself and came charging from the stateroom to get into the fight again.

At that moment there was a startling interruption. A blinding flash of lightning, which illuminated everything, was followed by a terrific crash of thunder. The ship seemed to come to an abrupt standstill with a jar that sent the boys, Mr. Blackstone, and the unknown intruder tumbling to the floor.

Above the roar of the storm they could hear a grinding, splintering uproar. The ship canted sideways. Then, in the distance, a bell began to ring wildly, mingled with hoarse shouts and wild screams. The lights went out, and the corridor was in total darkness.

"We're wrecked!" shouted Frank, scrambling to his feet.

He forgot the intruder, his chief concern now being for the suitcase which contained the handwriting specimens. He did not know what had happened, but surmised that the Resolute had been driven upon a reef in the fog. Through the darkness could be heard a ship's officer, shouting:

"On deck, everybody! Get your life-preservers! To the lifeboats!"

The corridor was suddenly thronged with passengers who rushed about, frantic with fear. An officer stumbled into the passage with a lantern, and by its stabbing rays Chet caught a fleeting glimpse of old Mr. Blackstone lying on the floor, while a sinister looking figure crouched at his side. Then the scene was blotted out as someone knocked against the feeble light, extinguishing it.

"Give me a hand with the luggage, fellows!" Frank cried out.

Chet and Joe found their way into the stateroom, but in the darkness could locate nothing. The whole ship was now in an uproar, with bells ringing, the crew shouting, and passengers shrieking and screaming.

"The ship is sinking!" snapped Frank. "We must have run smack onto a reef in that fog."

"Let's get out of here and find a lifeboat," returned Joe.

They hurried, with Frank in the lead. The moment he reached the corridor he stumbled heavily over an object lying on the floor.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. Then he cried out, "Why, it's a man!"

"It's Mr. Blackstone!" exclaimed Chet. "I saw him lying there. I think he's hurt. Someone must have knocked him down when all those passengers were trying to get out on deck."

He lit a match and knelt beside the inert form on the floor. The old gentleman was evidently badly injured. He was unconscious, and breathing with difficulty. Across his forehead was a smear of blood.

"We can't leave him here," Frank declared quickly. "We'll have to get him out on deck somehow."

The Hardy boys lifted up the injured man. He was not very heavy, but it was a dark and awkward journey to the end of the corridor and out onto the deck. Eventually they managed it, and stumbled into the open.

A scene of the wildest confusion met them there. Passengers were milling about in a state of panic. Members of the crew were vainly trying to restore order. Two of the lifeboats had jammed and could not be lowered. The ship was already settling down by the head and waves were sweeping over the side. Two or three of the voyagers, maddened with fear, had leaped over the side of the ship into the stormy waters below.

"We'll have to keep cool," said Frank. "Looks as if there isn't much chance of our getting into a boat on this side. We'd better look for life-belts in case we have to swim."

"I'll stay here and watch Mr. Blackstone," volunteered Chet. "You two see if you can rustle the preservers."

Frank and Joe hurried off into the gloom, having Chet beside the unconscious form on the deck. The stout lad, thinking that he might be living the last hours of his life, began to reminisce about these chums of his.

Frank and Joe Hardy were the sons of Fenton Hardy, who had at one time been connected with the New York Police Department, but had resigned to go into private practice. Mr. Hardy moved to the city of Bayport, which was on the Atlantic coast, and there soon built up an enviable record as one of the cleverest private detectives on the continent.

Mr. Hardy had never intended that his sons should follow in his footsteps, but they had inherited so much of his ability that they took matters into their own hands. On their own initiative they had managed to solve a number of baffling mysteries. In the first volume of this series, "The Tower Treasure," the lads cleared up a puzzling case and recovered a rich treasure from its hiding place. In "The House on the Cliff," "The Secret of the Caves," "The Great Airport Mystery," "What Happened at Midnight" and other books are recounted additional adventures of the boys as they gained more experience in detective work and pitted themselves against dangerous crooks and lawbreakers in solving mysteries that were as difficult as they were exciting.

In "The Mark on the Door," which immediately precedes the present volume, the boys went far afield, becoming involved in an oil fraud scandal that took them to the deserts of Mexico. There they were captured by bandits, and endured many hardships and perils before bringing the case to a successful conclusion.

Just now it looked as if the promising careers of Frank and Joe were to be cut off. The boys had not gone far before they encountered a ship's officer with an armful of life-belts which he was passing around. They grabbed four of them and hurried back.

In the meantime, a great sheet of flame had suddenly belched from a companionway, precipitating further chaos. A rush of panic-stricken passengers toward the stern of the ship had caught up Chet and borne him

struggling for some distance down the deck.

The stout lad fought his way back to the spot where Mr. Blackstone had been left lying, and in the lurid glare of the fire saw that the old gentleman was not alone. Bending over him was the same sinister figure of which Chet had caught a glimpse in the corridor shortly after the ship had crashed.

This time he could see the man's face clearly, and recognized him as Ruel Rand, the apparently intoxicated man whom the boys had noticed in the dining room that evening.

Rand straightened up as Chet approached. His face was dark with anger as he pointed to the stricken figure on the deck.

"Don't waste your strength saving that old scoundrel!" he shouted harshly.

"Aren't you the fellow who hit him?" Chet demanded.

"He deserved it !" snapped Rand contemptuously. Then, without another word, he brushed past Chet and ran down the deck. The boy scarcely had time to fathom the import of the man's words when Frank and Joe came hurrying up to him. Frank thrust a life-belt into Chet's hands.

"The ship is on fire! Everyone is ordered off!" he cried.

The vessel was settling swiftly. The deck was now dangerously near the water-line. One useless lifeboat dangled over the side.

"We can't leave this old man here to die!" said Frank, kneeling down and doing his best to restore Mr. Blackstone to consciousness by shaking him and dashing cold water into his face. His efforts were successful in that the injured man opened his eyes, muttering inaudibly.

Between them, Frank and Joe managed to get a life-belt around the victim's waist. They lifted him to his feet, but the man was so weak that he could not stand up without assistance.

The forward part of the ship was now a mass of flames reaching higher and higher into the sky. The heat was becoming unbearable. The boys knew that it would be only a matter of minutes before the vessel would sink.

"We must chance it!" cried Frank. "A steward told me that we're only a few miles from shore. You fellows go ahead. I'll take care of Blackstone."

The Hardy boy's face was white. Alone, he might have a fair chance of reaching shore. But by adding the burden of this frail old man, who scarcely realized his peril as yet, the risks were doubled.

"We're not leaving you," declared Joe doggedly. "At least, I'm not. Chet can do as he likes."

"What do you take me for?" demanded the stout lad hotly. "I'm with you to the last ditch."

The Resolute gave a sickening lurch. From the distance there came a stentorian cry:

"Abandon ship!"

The boys rushed to the rail, hurrying the old man with them.

"Over you go, Chet!" yelled Frank. "We must get away from here before the boat sinks or we'll be dragged under."

Chet leaped to the sagging rail, stood poised for a moment, then plunged down into the black waters below.

"All right, Joe. I'll look after Mr. Black-stone."

Joe needed no second urging. As it was, they had waited long enough. The ship could not last but a few minutes more. Joe clambered over the rail and leaped into the stormy sea.

Mr. Blackstone, still half dazed, was a problem. He struggled as Frank lifted him across the rail, but there was no time for explanations. The boy simply tossed the old man from the deck, then sprang up, and dived into the angry waters below.

CHAPTER III

MISSING

WHEN Joe Hardy dived into the chilly, heaving sea he looked around immediately for Chet. In the light from the burning ship he soon distinguished his chum swimming steadily only a few yards away. He forged his way over to the stout lad until the two were side by side. They kept looking around in search of Frank, but there was no sign of the older Hardy boy.

"We can't hang around here very long," Chet called out. "We must get away from the ship before it goes under."

They swam steadily into the darkness and away from the ruddy aura of light, getting farther and farther from the boat. Far in the distance they could hear the cries of other swimmers, mingled with the chug of a life-boat's motor. Once away from that part of the sea which was illuminated by the flames, they were left in inky darkness.

"Frank! Frank I Where are you?" shouted Joe.

He thought he heard a faint reply, but in the rush of wind and waves he could not be sure. Then, from behind them, there came a muffled roar. Joe turned his head in time to see the whole ship break into a million pieces, as the boilers exploded and shattered the vessel from bow to stern. A great sheet of flame rose high in the air, followed by a stunning concussion. Then the Resolute plunged to her doom in a hissing cloud of steam. The ruddy glare vanished, and an impenetrable blackness settled over the ocean.

Joe and Chet were clear of the vessel's suction, having been carried shoreward by the huge waves. They called out to Frank, but there was no reply. Joe would have turned back, but Chet argued that such a course would be of no use.

"Frank has escaped from tighter spots than this," he said. "He has a

life-belt. Even if we were to find him, we would be powerless. All we can do now is try to reach shore, and that's going to be hard enough."

Nevertheless, Joe's heart was heavy as he swam on. He realized that Chet's advice was sensible, but that did not put hope into him. The two swimmers saw no other passengers, and were unable to make out the few lifeboats that had been launched.

It seemed hours before they finally came within sight of land. They could glimpse it vaguely as a dim dark mass against the distant sky, and could hear the roar of breakers against the rocks. Both boys were chilled to the bone by this time, and were hardly able to swim another stroke.

Suddenly they found themselves in the grip of a current, so that instead of being borne toward the shore they were carried down the coast. There was no use trying to fight against the strong tide, which fortunately did not project them away from land. This was what probably saved their lives, for otherwise they might have been battered to death in the breakers. As it was, the current carried them around a great dark cape that loomed grim and ugly before them in the night, but brought them eventually abreast a sloping, sandy beach.

"Here's our chance to make a landing, Chet!" urged Joe, exerting all his strength to fight clear of the heavy sea. Slowly the boys felt the drag of the water relax, struggled free, and could feel the lighter waves sweeping them toward shore and shallow water. Their feet touched bottom, and they struggled up onto the land, where they stumbled and fell, completely exhausted. The two boys lay there for a long time until gradually their strength returned.

"We pretty nearly went to Davey Jones's locker that time," muttered Chet weakly. "Boy, I'm all in!"

"Closest call I ever had," returned Joe. He sat up and gazed out into the storm-tossed darkness. "Chet, do you think there's a chance that Frank might have escaped?"

"Well, we escaped, didn't we? If he hadn't stayed behind to look after that old man he'd have been with us now."

When Joe looked into the gloom and saw the huge waves rolling up onto the beach and heard the boom and thunder of the surf, his heart sank. It seemed impossible that anyone could live in such a sea. The fact that he and Chet had done so did not lessen his anxiety about Frank.

It began to rain. First it was merely a gentle downpour. Then it increased until soon it was a drenching, torrential storm. A vivid flash of lightning revealed the ocean as clearly as if it were daylight. Then came an ear-splitting crash of thunder.

"Come on, Joe. Let's try to find shelter."

"Where?"

"I saw a house. In that lightning flash. It's down the beach a little way," shouted Chet excitedly. "Come on!"

Joe got up and wearily followed his companion through the rain. Chet's sharp eyes had caught sight of a small shack about a hundred yards distant. Another flash of lightning revealed it again and the boys broke into a stumbling run. They reached the building, found the door open, and rushed inside. The rain drummed heavily on the roof.

Joe groped in his pockets for the waterproof match-box he invariably carried with him, and was glad he had it now. While in Bayport the Hardy boys had made several excursions out into Barmet Bay and down the coast in their fast motorboat, the Sleuth, and with an eye to the probability of accident or wreck always carried matches in water-tight containers. Joe extracted one of them now and struck it against the wall.

They found themselves in a small hut, evidently built for the use of a fisherman. It was empty save for a small stove, beneath which lay a pile of firewood.

"We won't freeze, anyway," said Chet, when he saw the stove and the wood. "This was made to order, Joe."

In a few minutes the boys had a fire going, and stripped off their soggy clothing to dry. They were so cold by this time that their teeth were chattering, but it was not long before the cheerful fire restored warmth to their bodies. Then, completely exhausted by the grueling ordeal which they had undergone, they sprawled on the floor and fell fast asleep, the roar of wind, rain and sea pounding in their ears.

When they awakened it was broad daylight and a warm shaft of sunshine was streaming in the solitary window of the little hut. Joe flung open the door. The weather had cleared and the wind had died down. The ocean lay before them in the clear sunlight, so blue and calm that it seemed as if their terrifying ad-venture of the previous night had been but a dream.

The boys dressed themselves and went outside. A short distance up the beach they saw a road that led inland through the rocks and scrub timber.

"Am I stiff and sore this morning!" groaned Chet. "What's more," he added plaintively, "it doesn't look as if we stand much chance of finding any breakfast around here. I'm so hungry I could eat a rubber boot."

"We'll have to forget about food for a while, I'm afraid," said Joe. "That road must lead somewhere. Let's find out where."

"Maybe you can forget about breakfast," said Chet, "but I can't. I hope the nearest town isn't more than fifty miles away."

He made a few half-hearted attempts to joke about their plight but finally gave up, as they struck down the road. In the back of their minds was the fear that Frank Hardy had perished.

"I still think he's safe," insisted Joe trying to keep up his courage. "My brother's a better swimmer than either of us. If we could make it, then he could, too."

"I wish we had never met that old Blackstone," said Chet in an effort to change the subject. "That was a queer thing, Joe. I'm sure Ruel Rand was the man who was in our stateroom. And it was he who knocked the old fellow over the head. I'm positive of that, for I saw him kneeling beside Mr. Blackstone just after the ship crashed."

"Ruel Rand, eh!" exclaimed Joe in surprise, for in the excitement of the shipwreck the boys had not had time to discuss the events that had taken place just before the catastrophe.

"He practically admitted that he hit Mr. Blackstone. At first I thought the

old man might have been thrown off his feet when the ship struck and in that way bumped his head on the wall. There was something queer about that Rand fellow."

Their speculations were soon forgotten in what next met their glance. The road led over a little hill, and there, right before their eyes, they saw a clearing and a cabin, in front of which stood a battered old automobile. The boys uttered a whoop of joy, and raced down the road toward the building.

A dog started to bark, as it rushed out to meet them. A moment later the door of the shack opened and a lanky, black-haired man appeared, gazing at them curiously.

"How far away is the nearest town!" blurted out Chet.

"How are the chances of renting your car!" demanded Joe.

The owner scratched his head.

"Where do you fellows come from!" he asked. "You don't live hereabouts."

They told him briefly of the shipwreck and explained their plight. The settler was deeply interested, and quickly volunteered to drive them to the nearest village where they might perhaps hear some news about other survivors.

"Good!" exclaimed Joe, scrambling into the man's car with Chet close at his heels. "How far away is the town?"

'Bout three miles. It won't take long if my tires hold out."

Luckily the tires did hold out and it was not long before the car rattled into a tiny hamlet that consisted of half a dozen weather-beaten houses. No one in the place had heard anything of the wreck. As was to be expected, the arrival of the boys created a local sensation. Joe lost no time getting in touch with the nearest city by telephone, and called the office of the leading newspaper.

"Most of the survivors of the Resolute disaster have been brought here," he was told. "We're hard at work trying to make up a list of them now but it isn't an easy matter to check up. Some of them are in the hospital, while others have gone to their homes."

"Is the name of Frank Hardy on your list!" inquired Joe anxiously.

"Just a moment, please."

Joe waited, trembling with suspense. Then came the answer:

"I'm sorry, but we have no such name. Yet that doesn't necessarily mean that the person you are asking for didn't escape. Our list isn't at all complete."

"Thanks," said Joe dully, and hung up the receiver. His discouraged expression told Chet the bad news more plainly than words could.

"I guess we'd better go into the city," he said. "There's just a chance that Frank may be in one of the hospitals."

"I'll drive you in, lads," offered the sympathetic settler. "It ain't far. Only seven miles. My tires ought to hold out that long."

The boys thanked him gratefully, and started out. Joe, however, had little

confidence in the outcome of their search. Whenever he thought of the raging sea through which they had fought their way to shore the previous night, he knew that the chance of finding Frank alive was indeed scant.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE

JOE HARDY and Chet Morton spent the rest of the day in the city on a fruitless search for Frank. They made the rounds of the hospitals, the police stations, and the newspaper offices. They interviewed many survivors of the Resolute disaster, but their efforts proved futile. More than thirty members of the ship's passenger list and crew were among the missing. This included Frank Hardy and old Mr. Blackstone.

Late that afternoon the grief-stricken lads boarded a train for Bayport. They had spoken to Fenton Hardy by telephone, and had been urged by him to return.

"You have done all you can, Joe," he said. "I'm not giving up hope yet. We want you to come home."

Chet went to his chum's house when they returned to Bayport. There they found Mr. and Mrs. Hardy bearing up courageously and fighting for self-control. They listened eagerly to the account of the wreck.

Mrs. Hardy's face was colorless as Joe related how Frank had insisted upon trying to save Mr. Blackstone in spite of the extra risk he had incurred himself, and pressed a handkerchief to her eyes when the boys told of their desperate swim to shore. From time to time Chet would supplement his chum's story with details of his own.

"It was lucky for us that the current carried us away from the rocks," declared Joe. "If we had been borne up there we might have been battered to pieces."

The telephone rang, interrupting him. Mr. Hardy answered the call.

"Fenton Hardy speaking," he said, as he listened for a moment. Suddenly his face was transformed by an expression of unalloyed relief and gladness. "Good! Good!" he exclaimed. "The steamer Bluebird. Fine! That takes a big load off my mind, I can tell you. Thank you. Good-bye."

"Is it about Frank?" demanded Mrs. Hardy anxiously, as her husband replaced the receiver. "He's alive! You've had some news!"

Fenton Hardy nodded.

"Frank is safe!" he exclaimed. "The telegraph office just called to say that Frank and Mr. Blackstone were picked up by a lumber steamer on its way to Croston. They'll arrive there tomorrow morning."

"Hurrah!" yelled Chet. "Boy, that's great! I knew he'd come through all right."

"What a relief !" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy. "Did they say anything else, Fenton? Was he hurt?"

"Frank is all right, but evidently the old man is in pretty bad shape. Joe, I think you and I had better fly down to Croston first thing tomorrow morning to meet that ship when it arrives in port."

"May I come too, Mr. Hardy?" asked Chet eagerly.

"Of course. Glad to have you."

"Swell. I'll run along home now or my people will be sending searching parties out after me. I'll meet you at the airport in the morning.

At dawn the next day the trio boarded a passenger plane on the coastal run. Mr. Hardy had been so relieved to learn that his sons had escaped with their lives that the matter of the missing handwriting specimens was of small concern. He admitted to Joe, however, that their loss was a serious blow to his hopes of clearing up the case on which he was working.

"Never mind, Dad," said Joe. "Perhaps we can get some more specimens for you."

"And we'll travel by train next time," said Chet.

The boys told Mr. Hardy the entire story of the fight in the stateroom, and the detective was keenly interested.

"Perhaps this man Ruel Rand was after the handwriting specimens," he suggested.

"We thought of that," Joe admitted. "If he was, I'm sure he didn't get them. I'd like to meet him again just the same, and only hope he's alive. His name wasn't on any of the lists of survivors yesterday."

When the plane set them down at Croston, a busy little seaport town, Mr. Hardy and the boys drove to the docks at once and discovered that the Bluebird was just coming into the harbor. They did not have to wait very long before the lumber steamer reached its wharf.

Among the first passengers to disembark was Frank. He was amazed when he saw the little reception committee waiting for him, for it had not dawned upon him that word of his rescue had reached Bayport. He uttered a cry of delight when he saw the familiar faces and in a moment all four were shaking hands and hurling a dozen questions. Chet and Joe wanted to know how Frank had escaped. Frank in turn was equally curious to hear how the other two had reached safety.

"Mr. Blackstone and I got over the side all right," Frank explained, "but he couldn't swim a stroke and I couldn't leave him. We had our life-belts on, of course, so we just drifted. Then along came this lumber steamer. It had already picked up one of the lifeboats, and had turned a big searchlight on the water to locate other survivors. Luckily for us we were seen and taken on board. Oh, here is Mr. Blackstone now. The poor old fellow must be badly hurt."

Down the gangplank came two sailors carrying stretcher on which lay the aged man, wrapped in blankets. Fenton Hardy immediately took charge of the situation.

"He'll have to be taken to the hospital," said the detective, going in search of a telephone to make arrangements for the ambulance.

The three boys went over to the injured man. He was conscious, but when they asked if he were comfortable he did not answer them.

"He has been acting very strangely," said Frank. "That crack on the head didn't do him any good, and he hasn't spoken to me since the Bluebird picked him up. He talked to the captain for a few minutes, but that was all."

When the ambulance arrived they accompanied the injured man to the hospital, where Mr. Hardy took full responsibility for his care and saw that he was given a comfortable room. The head physician, a brisk, middle-aged man who introduced himself as Dr. Forester, made an examination of the patient.

"It's a good thing you brought him here," he said gravely. "He has a serious skull injury. I'll have to operate at once."

"Is it that bad?" gasped Frank.

"Bad enough," admitted the doctor. "The man has been weakened by exposure, too. If he can stand the shock of the operation he will pull through all right, but it is going to be mighty close."

Swiftly Dr. Forester gave orders to an intern and a nurse, and preparations for the operation were soon under way. Mr. Hardy and the boys withdrew from the room and went downstairs.

"It's up to us to locate Ruel Rand," said Joe. "He's responsible for Mr. Blackstone's condition. Of course, Rand may not have escaped from the wreck, but if he's alive I'd like to get my hands on him. Why, if that old man dies it will be just plain murder."

A policeman was standing at the desk in the hospital rotunda. As Mr. Hardy and the boys approached, the officer stepped forward.

"Mr. Hardy?" he asked.

"Yes," acknowledged the detective. "What can I do for you?"

"These are your sons?"

"Two of them. This young man is Chet Morton."

The policeman nodded. "I'll have to ask you boys to come along with me to the station," he said.

The boys looked at one another in bewilderment.

"What's up now?" demanded Frank.

"I'm sorry, but you're under arrest!"

CHAPTER V

OUT ON BAIL

JOE, Frank and Chet were stunned by this announcement. Fenton Hardy's face flushed with anger.

"Under arrest!" he exclaimed. "These boys? Why, that's perfectly ridiculous. What is the charge?"

"I'm only obeying orders," replied the policeman. "I was told to pick up Frank and Joseph Hardy and Chester Morton. That's all I know about it. I daresay you'll get the whole story from the chief."

"I-I never committed a crime in my life!" blustered Chet. "I stole an apple from an orchard once about five years ago, but surely I'm not going to be run in for that."

The others laughed in spite of the fact that they were upset and puzzled by this strange turn of events.

"When were you ordered to arrest these boys?" demanded Mr. Hardy.

"Just a few minutes ago. I was told I'd find them here. There's no use arguing. I must do my duty."

"I'm not going to argue," returned Fenton Hardy. "But I can't understand it. There must be some mistake. Come along, boys. We'll get this matter cleared up at once."

Frank and Joe were completely in the dark. They shared their father's opinion that there had been some ridiculous mistake.

"Perhaps the steamship company is rounding up witnesses and trying to obtain information about the wreck," Frank suggested. "Probably we're merely wanted for questioning, and this policeman thinks it's for something else."

Mr. Hardy, greatly worried, hailed a cab. They then drove to the station house, a small brick building located in the center of the town. Here they were ushered into the presence of the Chief of Police, a stout, red-faced man with a heavy black mustache.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hardy," he said, shaking hands with the great detective. "I've often heard of you, of course."

"Under the circumstances," replied Frank and Joe's father, smiling, "I can't say that I'm very glad to make your acquaintance. What is it all about, Chief? Your man tells me these boys are under arrest. It's a mistake, isn't it?"

The officer shook his head regretfully "No mistake at all, Mr. Hardy, I'm sorry to say. I don't know much about the case myself, but a charge has been placed so I have to act accordingly."

"What's the charge? And who is behind it?" asked Frank.

"You're accused of robbery, the whole three of you, by Mr. Samuel Blackstone," was the astounding reply.

For a moment the boys were speechless.

"Robbery!" squeaked Chet finally.

"Mr. Blackstone charges us with robbery!" exclaimed Joe.

"I never heard of anything so absurd," Mr. Hardy snapped. "'Why, my boy Frank saved Mr. Blackstone's life. We have just taken the man to the hospital."

"The ungrateful old reprobate!" muttered Chet.

"Can't help that," returned the Chief. "It seems that Mr. Blackstone was talking to the captain of the Bluebird and told him that as soon as the boat docked he wanted to have Frank Hardy arrested and warrants issued for the other boys. You were all on the Resolute with Mr. Blackstone, weren't you?"

"That's true," admitted Frank.

"Well, he told the captain that he had been robbed of six thousand dollars in cold cash just before the shipwreck, and blames you boys for his loss. He claims you lured him down a dark passage and that you then staged a fake fight in a stateroom, which ended with his getting a terrible crack over the head. Then he says you stole his money."

The boys were beginning to realize now that they were in a serious predicament. The news that Blackstone had lost his funds surprised them, and they could plainly see that a very damaging case might be built up against them.

"If anyone has robbed him," declared Chet hotly, "it is Ruel Rand. I'm sure he was the man in our stateroom who knocked Mr. Blackstone down."

The officer shrugged.

"I don't know anything about it,,,' he said. "The case can't be tried until Mr. Blackstone is well enough to come to court and testify."

"Do you mean to say we'll have to stay in jail until then?" demanded Frank. "Why, it may be weeks before the man is on his feet again."

"I can take you over to see the judge," suggested the chief. "Maybe he'll let you out on bail."

"We'll get it settled as soon as possible," said Mr. Hardy.

Across the street was the office of the judge, where the circumstances were explained.

"It's a serious charge," said the justice, a mild-mannered old gentleman with white chin-whiskers. "I don't want to keep the boys in jail, of course, but there will have to be bail"

"I understand," said Mr. Hardy. The formalities were soon completed, greatly to the relief of the boys, and they were officially remanded for hearing on the theft charge at a later date. They were glad Mr. Hardy's presence had

saved them from being placed behind bars, even temporarily, but it was not pleasant to think that they would be under a cloud of suspicion until the time of the trial.

"Now we must find Ruel Rand if he is alive!" Joe insisted.

Chet beckoned to a newsboy and bought a noon edition of the local paper.

"They ought to have the survivors of the wreck pretty well checked by now," he said. "Let's see if there is any news of Rand."

On the front page, several columns of which were given over to the Resolute disaster, the boys found a complete list of the passengers who had escaped.

"He's alive! Look!" exclaimed Chet. "Ruel Rand, slightly injured, suffering from exposure, picked up by coast guard and taken to life-saving station at Rocky Inlet."

"For your own sakes," advised Mr. Hardy, "I think you had better get in touch with this fellow at once, and size him up. If he denies having been in the stateroom and protests any knowledge of Mr. Blackstone's money, you will have to do a little detective work and try to get at the truth of the story."

"I have some business to attend to this afternoon and won't be able to help you. The loss of those handwriting specimens means that I must try to get others to replace them. Why not see if you can get to that life-saving station? It may not be far away."

The boys made inquiries and learned that Rocky Inlet was only five miles from Croston, and could be reached by road.

"Let's get a car and go there," decided Frank. "Maybe a little talk with Ruel Rand will clear up a lot of things."

"Somehow he didn't give me the impression that he was a crook," Chet admitted. "But you never can tell."

"I wonder what he meant by saying that old Mr. Blackstone was a scoundrel?" queried Joe.

"And I should like to know what he was doing in our stateroom," Frank remarked.

Mr. Hardy told them that he would return to Bayport by express late in the afternoon. If the boys should not get back from Rocky Inlet in time to catch the same train they could come later that evening. He bade them goodbye and hastened down the street.

The lads lost no time in calling a taxi and ordering the driver to take them to the life-saving station. On the way to Rocky Inlet they discussed every angle of the strange case in which they had become involved so unexpectedly.

"If we can't prove this Rand fellow guilty," Frank pointed out, "it may be mighty serious for us. If we're brought into court and old Mr. Blackstone swears we robbed him we won't have an easy time clearing ourselves. Naturally it will be his word against ours, and he can make it look pretty bad. Even if we are acquitted there will always be a certain amount of suspicion directed against us."

"We're going to locate that money and find out who stole it!" Joe declared

grimly.

"Maybe there wasn't any six thousand dollars in the first place," suggested Chet. "We had only Blackstone's word for that."

Frank whistled at this new suggestion.

"That's an idea. But why should Blackstone tell us he had a big sum of money in his possession if he didn't?"

"It might have been a frame-up in the hope that our parents would put up the funds rather than have us arrested. I've heard of that trick before."

"Sounds a little bit far-fetched," observed Frank. "It isn't improbable, though."

They soon reached the beach, where a lonely little building stood on the rocky and desolate shore. A few boats were drawn up on the beach, and on one of the upturned craft sat an old fisherman mending a net.

The boys told the driver to wait for them, and walked up to the life-saving station. At first their knocks went unanswered, and the boys began to wonder if the place were deserted. After a lengthy delay, however, they heard sounds of activity within, and the door was opened slowly by a thick-set, red-faced man who peered at them through the opening.

"What do you want?" he asked roughly.

"We should like to see Mr. Rand," replied Frank. "Is he well enough to have visitors?"

The man frowned.

"I don't know who you're talking about," he said in a surly voice.

"We saw in the paper that Mr. Ruel Rand, one of the survivors of the Resolute wreck, had been brought here," explained Joe. "We'd like to see him."

"Don't know anything about him," grunted the attendant. "Beat it!"

"Was he taken to Croston?" asked Frank.

"I don't know. What do you think this is anyhow? An information bureau?"

With these words the red-faced man slammed the door rudely in their faces, while the boys exchanged glances of consternation.

"Mighty queer, this," said Frank. "That fellow was hiding something. I'll bet he had orders to keep still if anyone should come here looking for Ruel Rand."

"What shall we do about it?" asked Chet. Joe shrugged. "'What can we do? We may as well go back to Croston."

"All right," agreed Frank. "But we're coming back. If Mr. Ruel Rand thinks he can fool us that easily, he is mistaken," he added with determination.

About nine o'clock that evening a car made its way down the Rocky Inlet road, the headlights cutting a bright swath through the darkness. While it was yet out of sight of the life-saving station the machine was brought to a stop, the lights were switched off, and three figures scrambled out.

CHAPTER VI

RAND'S ESCAPE

"BRRR! It's cold!" muttered Chet, shivering, for a chill wind was sweeping in from the ocean. "I wish we hadn't come to this life-saving station."

"You've always wanted to be along on our adventures," Frank reminded him. "Don't start grouching now."

"Oh, I'm not grouching," replied the fat boy hastily. "I'm having a grand time. No harm in making a remark about the weather, is there?"

"Not so much chatter," cautioned Joe. "That watchman may be banging around and we'll get chased out of here if he should catch us."

Quietly the three lads walked down the road toward the life-saving station, and in a few minutes came in sight of the building, vague and shadowy in the night. With the exception of one dimly-lighted window, the place was in darkness. The whine of the wind, mingled with the steady crash and roar of the waves on the beach, accentuated the desolate and sinister atmosphere of the lonely spot.

"I hardly think Rand is here," said Chet. "Why should anyone want to stay in such a forsaken place?"

"It's because of the watchman's attitude this afternoon that I think the fellow is here," answered Frank. "That guard was too secretive to suit me. If Rand wasn't there we would have been told so outright."

"Something in that, I guess," Chet agreed. The boys crept closer to the building, trying to peer through the single lighted window, but the shade was tightly drawn. It was useless to attempt listening for sounds of movements or voices within the house, because the howl of the wind and the roar of the surf drowned everything.

With surprising suddenness a beam of light swept out of the darkness, shone for a moment on the house, then vanished. Startled, the boys wheeled about, for the illumination had come from the direction of the winding road. Presently they heard the noise of an automobile engine, and through the gloom could dimly see a car pull up to a stop. The driver had cut off the headlights as soon as the machine had come around the curve.

Breathlessly the lads crouched at the side of the building. Someone was getting out of the car. Then a dark figure came down the slope, picking its way carefully along the path. It drew closer, passed within a few yards of the boys, ascended the steps, and went up to the door.

Frank peered around the side of the house, and saw the visitor knock sharply.

A moment later the door opened and the newcomer was clearly revealed in the light that streamed out. Frank uttered a gasp of surprise.

The mysterious caller was a woman! She stepped into the building, and the door closed behind her.

"Looks as if we've stumbled on to something mighty strange," said Frank quietly, as he stepped back to the others. "Why should a woman be calling here at this hour of night?'"

"A woman!" exclaimed Joe and Chet. In the darkness they had been unable to see the stranger other than as a vague, dark form.

"Yes, a woman."

The boys did not have to speculate long as to the reason for the lady's visit. Almost immediately the entrance to the place opened again and she stepped out, followed by a tall man. He wore a long overcoat, with the collar turned up around his neck and a hat drawn low over his eyes. His face was in the light for a moment, so Frank could see him clearly.

The man was Ruel Rand!

He said something in a low voice to the watchman of the life-saving station, bade him goodbye, and turned away. The door closed again.

Frank drew back quickly and pressed himself against the side of the building as the woman and her companion came down the steps.

"I parked the car up at the top of the slope," she was saying. Let's hurry !"

"I can't get out of this infernal place too soon to suit me," grumbled Rand. He took the woman's arm to help her along the path.

Frank turned to Chet and Joe.

"We'll follow them, but be careful. Don't get too close. Try to take the license number of that car if you can."

The boys set out in pursuit, keeping at a safe distance behind the pair hurrying up the slope toward the parked machine. The automobile had been turned around so that it was now facing in the direction of Croston.

As soon as Ruel Rand and his companion stepped into it Frank broke into a run. The lights were switched on, the engine roared. Frank was within a few yards of the car as it pulled away-close enough to get the license number and to discern that it was from a Southern state. The machine lurched off up the slope, gathering speed.

"Come on !" Frank called to the others "We'll follow them!"

By the time they reached their own automobile, which they had rented for the evening, their quarry had gained a substantial lead. Frank flung himself behind the wheel, and as Joe and Chet scrambled into the front seat beside him, he swiftly turned the car around and swung it onto the road. Then he put on speed.

Within a few minutes they caught sight of the bobbing tail-light ahead, having dashed down the narrow, rocky road at breakneck speed. But Ruel Rand's auto was not loafing. Try as he might, Frank found it impossible to overhaul the

car ahead.

The road cut into a main highway, where traffic was comparatively heavy. The big sedan in which Rand and the woman were driving fairly flew along. The gap between their car and that of the Hardys widened swiftly. A truck, swinging out from a gas station, partially blocked the road, so that Frank was obliged to apply the brakes and pull over to the side to avoid a collision. By the time the vehicle had straightened out and given him clearance the tail4ight of the Rand machine had vanished altogether.

"No use!" sighed Frank. "We'll never catch that man now."

"He certainly showed his heels to us," said Chet. "I wonder if he knew he was being followed."

"Maybe. He didn't lose any time putting distance between himself and that life-saving station. However, I got the license number. What do you think? It's down in that Southern state where we just came from!"

"Wow-ee," said Joe. "That's interesting. Well, I guess there's nothing left for us to do now but take the next train back to Bayport."

Frank drove back to Croston. The boys were disappointed over their failure to confront Ruel Rand, but hopeful that the license number of the mystery car might be a clue that would help them to trace their quarry. They returned the hired automobile to the garage and took advantage of the few minutes that remained before train time to put in a telephone call to the hospital, and inquire about the condition of Mr. Blackstone.

"The operation was successful," they were informed. "The patient is resting easier this evening, but it will be several days before he will be able to leave the hospital."

"That's good," said Chet, when Frank repeated this information to the others. "Maybe the man will be a little more sensible now that his head is fixed up. If he is able to think straight he may conclude that he was pretty foolish to have us arrested."

When the Hardy boys returned to Bayport that night and reached their home they found a surprise awaiting them. Their father had been called away, and there was a guest in the person of their Aunt Gertrude, a sharp-tongued, peppery maiden lady who spent most of her time paying lengthy visits to her relatives. In the opinion of her nephews she was "a terror," and although they had a genuine fondness for her and knew that she secretly regarded them as her favorite kin, both lads had good cause to respect her tongue and her temper.

"So," the good lady snapped at the breakfast table the following morning, glaring at them over her spectacles. "A fine state of affairs I find here. I come for a quiet little visit and what do I hear? My nephews are in jail. In jail! For beating up an old man and robbing him! Disgraceful! For the first time in the history of the family--a Hardy in jail! What have you to say for yourselves?"

"Nothing much, Aunty," said Joe with becoming meekness, "except that we didn't do it."

"Then why were you arrested?" demanded their aunt triumphantly. "The police don't go around arresting people for nothing. There must be something behind it."

"It was all a mistake, Aunt Gertrude," Frank explained. "We were trying to help the old man, and someone else robbed him, but he thought we were to blame."

The lady sniffed.

"Time and time again," she declared, looking at Mrs. Hardy, "I have warned you, Laura, that no good would come of letting these boys go gallivanting around the country playing at being detectives. If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times, that it would surely end in trouble. And now look what happens. They get shipwrecked, they come within an inch of drowning, and then they get thrown in jail."

She darted a fierce glance at the culprits again.

"I'm going to cut you out of my will!" she snapped. "You have disgraced the family name. Never did I think I'd live to see the day--"

"But we're innocent!" protested Frank. "You surely don't believe we would rob an old man, do you, Aunt Gertrude?"

In her heart their relative did not believe it, but the opportunity for delivering a lecture was too good to be missed.

"Isn't it enough that you've been arrested?" she demanded. "That's the disgraceful part. Oh, dear, I don't know what the younger generation is coming to, I'm sure."

She broke into a stormy monologue on the iniquities of modern youth, under cover of which the boys finished their meal and excused themselves.

"We'd better clear out of here," grinned Frank, "or Aunt Gertrude will make things hot for us around this house. I'm going to get busy and write to the state license bureau this morning and see if I can't trace that car of Rand." Accordingly he sent off a letter at once.

The boys wisely stayed out of Aunt Gertrude's way, venturing home only at lunch time. However, this gave the good lady a solid hour in which to express her decided opinions of errant nephews who got themselves arrested.

The next afternoon, when the postman arrived, Frank hurried out into the hall. Eagerly he looked into the mail-box and thumbed over the letters which had just been delivered.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed. "An answer from the license bureau."

Joe peered over his brother's shoulder as Frank tore open the missive that had come in reply to his inquiry.

CHAPTER VII

THE WARNING

THE letter was brief and to the point, but it gave the Hardy boys the data they wanted. It read as follows:

"In reply to your communication of September 12th, we beg to inform you that the license number noted in your letter is issued in the name of Ruel Rand of Hidden Harbor."

That was all, but it was quite enough. It gave two vital pieces of information—that the car had belonged to Ruel Rand, and that his address was Hidden Harbor.

"That mysterious place again!" exclaimed Joe. "The one outside of Larchmont. We heard about it when we were down getting the handwriting specimens."

"That's right," agreed Frank. "The spot where slaves used to be smuggled in over a hundred years ago."

"You recall we were told that was how Hidden Harbor got its name," added Joe. "It is just the kind of a cove where a boat could sail in without being seen and unload something it wasn't supposed to."

"Sure. And I'll bet there were lots of secret doings that didn't get in the history books!"

"That may be the case today, too," suggested Joe. "Someone in Larchmont said there was a mystery mansion down there. Maybe it's Ruel Rand's home!"

"What's all this?" broke in the voice of Aunt Gertrude. "What's this about a mystery mansion? Whom is your letter from? Is there any mail for me?"

"No letters for you, I'm sorry to say," returned Frank. "But we've just had some very good news. We've been trying to trace the man whom we believe to be the real robber, and now we have his address."

Aunt Gertrude seemed to be in a better frame of mind this afternoon.

"You have his address !" she said, interested. "Then get busy and have him arrested at once."

"That's easier said than done," Joe told her. "We haven't any evidence against him."

"Humph! Just let me get my hands on the rascal for a minute and I'll get the evidence. I'll make him tell the truth. What's his name? Where does he live?"

Aunt Gertrude was as changeable as a weather-vane and no one could ever predict what she was going to do next. She seemed to have forgotten her conviction of the previous evening that the boys were guilty. Now she was equally firm in her belief that they were victims of injustice and that Ruel Rand was the one at fault.

Frank and Joe told her that evening the story of the voyage on the Resolute; about their encounter with Mr. Blackstone; of the discovery of the intruder in

the stateroom; and of the subsequent fight and the wreck. The good lady was quite indignant.

"Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face!" she declared. "That scoundrel Rand is the thief. I know what I'd do if I were in your shoes. I'd go and tell the police about the rascal and have him thrown into jail."

At this moment there came a knock at the door and Chet Morton walked in, munching an apple.

"Good evening! Good evening! Good evening!" he chirped blithely. Then, when he recognized Aunt Gertrude, he swallowed hastily and turned pale. Chet had known the bitterness of the lady's tongue on several occasions.

"Young man," she said, "when I last saw you three months ago you were eating an apple, and now you're still eating an apple. Is it the same apple or does your father buy them for you by the barrel? Never in all my born days have I seen such a perpetual apple-eater. And if it isn't an apple, it's pie. And that reminds me, you stole an apple pie that I left on the kitchen table one afternoon on my last visit."

Chet gulped and blushed.

"I didn't really steal it," he said. "It looked lonesome, and it was such a good pie that it seemed a shame not to take a little bite. And when I had taken a little bite I knew it was the best pie I had ever tasted and before I knew it, why, the whole pie was gone."

Aunt Gertrude looked pleased.

"I do know how to make a good pie," she said, "even if I say so myself. It's all in being able to roll the crust properly."

"Will you make me a pie all for myself?" asked Chet, pursuing his advantage. "I don't know of anyone who can bake better pie than you can. Ever since you went away I've been hoping you'd come back soon so I could ask you to make me one of your special kind."

"Well, I'll see," replied Aunt Gertrude, immensely flattered. "Tomorrow afternoon, if I'm not too busy. But what's all this about Ruel Rand and the house at Hidden Harbor?"

The group went into the living room and the Hardy boys told Chet about the letter they had received from the license bureau. The stout lad also recalled some of the stories the boys had heard about the strange old mansion at the secluded spot.

"It seems," observed Frank, "that the original owner was pretty much of a rascal and that he ended up by being lynched for his misdeeds. Down in Larchmont I heard that the place had fallen into ruins, but that a half-witted son of the original owner still lives there. The story goes that he is haunted by his father's ghost."

"That can't be Ruel Rand," said Chet, who was making himself comfortable in a flimsy antique chair beside Aunt Gertrude. "Whatever we may think about him, I hardly believe he's half-witted."

"Perhaps the queer person is some other member of the household and not a relative," suggested Joe.

"That may be," agreed Frank. "Nevertheless, I can't see what connection there can be between old Mr. Blackstone, Ruel Rand, and this mysterious mansion said to be haunted by the ghost of a man who was lynched many years ago."

"Lynching," declared Aunt Gertrude suddenly, "is a disgrace and an abomination. I can well remember a story your Great-grandfather Abner used to tell. It seems there was a lynching in a little town near the place where he lived. The mob took a prisoner from the jail and strung him up to an elm tree. Dreadful affair. Well, that night your Great-grandfather Abner was coming home. He hadn't been one of the lynching party but he had seen the whole affair and was feeling pretty nervous and shaken up about it, I can tell you. He was going along this lonesome lane in the dead of night, when all of a sudden there was a crackling of bushes

Chet's eyes were bulging.

"What was it?" he gasped.

"There was a crackling of bushes, and out into the road jumped a man with a pistol in his hand. 'Revenge!' he cried. 'You were one of those men who lynched my brother! Revenge!' And with that he pressed the pistol to your Great-grandfather Abner's forehead

Suddenly there was a splintering crash. It came with such abruptness that both Frank and Joe leaped out of their chairs. Interrupting as it did this thrilling part of the gruesome story, when everyone was hanging spellbound onto the words, it had the effect of a sensation. There was a thud, then a squawk of anguish.

Aunt Gertrude fainted.

Chet Morton lay sprawling on the floor in the ruins of the antique chair that had collapsed beneath the weight of his plump form just at the most exciting moment of the tale about Great-grandfather Abner.

Frank and Joe suppressed an impulse to laugh. They rushed over to their relative, who lay limp in her armchair. As for Chet, he picked himself up, greatly embarrassed.

"Get a glass of water!"

"Rub her hands!"

"Open the window!"

The Hardys busied themselves trying to revive Aunt Gertrude, and when she began to moan and show signs of returning consciousness, Frank said:

"You had better get out of here, Chet. I shouldn't want to be in your position for anything."

"Right you are," agreed the fat boy. "I don't care to be around when she comes to and finds out that I'm to blame for having scared her half to death."

Leaving Joe to continue his merciful ministrations by way of rubbing Aunt Gertrude's hands and holding a bottle of ammonia under her nose at intervals, Frank escorted his sheepish looking chum to the front entrance.

He opened the door, then leaped back with a yell of astonishment. A black, snakelike object writhed into the hall across the floor. It resembled a

poisonous snake so closely that Chet uttered a whoop of terror and leaped for the staircase, where he clung to the banister.

The object made no further movement. On closer examination Frank saw that it was not a reptile but a thick length of black rope that been attached to the bottom of the door.

"What's the idea of that?" he exclaimed. Then, at the end of the coil, Frank spied a torn scrap of paper, which he picked up. On it, in crude lettering, was written:

"Keep out of the Rand-Blackstone Feud if you want to save your neck."

Frank took a deep breath.

"What does this mean?" he asked. Chet, relieved to find that he had to face nothing more dangerous than a rope, jumped from the banister. He took the note from Frank, read it, and whistled solemnly.

"Looks as if we've stepped into something big," remarked the fat boy.

There came a shout from Joe back in the living room.

"Hey, fellows! What's up! Someone just ran past the window."

His brother and Chet rushed out of the hall. "After him !" shouted Frank. "He must be the fellow who left that note."

Joe did not understand what was meant, but nevertheless he bolted for the kitchen.

"I just saw a figure dash by the living room window," he called out, as he wrenched open the kitchen door and rushed into the back yard. "There it goes! Into the barn !"

In his excitement Joe slammed the door behind him, thus delaying Frank and Chet for a moment. By the time they had opened it and raced outside Joe was disappearing into the barn. As the two behind ran toward the structure, an old building which the boys used as a gymnasium, they could hear clattering footsteps.

They were within a few feet of the doorway when suddenly there came a crash of glass from above. Instantly the two boys were caught in a shower of broken fragments that came tumbling from a shattered window overhead.

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE DERELICT

FORTUNATELY neither boy was cut by the falling glass, nor injured by a heavy

piece of wood that came hurtling through the window and went spinning to the ground.

"Come on, Chet!" shouted Frank, rushing into the barn.

He and Chet then heard the thud of running footsteps in the upper part of the building, which was reached by a ladder attached to the wall.

Frank scrambled up, with Chet puffing and panting close behind him. When they emerged into what had once been the haymow they saw Joe at the far end, leaning out of a window. The lad was disheveled looking. His clothes were torn, and he was covered with dust.

"The fellow got away," he said, turning around. "He climbed out here, jumped onto the roof of the shed, and ran down the driveway. We 'll never catch him now. Tried to brain me with a stick of wood, too. It just missed my head and went through the windowpane."

"Did you get a good look at him?" asked Frank.

I shouldn't swear to it, but I think he was colored," returned Joe. "I just caught a glimpse of him when I climbed up the ladder and he let fly with the block of wood. By the time I saw him again he was going through the window. What's it all about, anyhow? What did he do?"

"He scared Chet into convulsions and left a note for us."

"He didn't frighten me!" protested Chet indignantly. "But gosh, when you see a snake writhing into the house

Frank chuckled.

"A snake !" Joe exclaimed.

His brother told him about the rope that had been attached to the door. "It did look like the real thing for a minute," he admitted. "But I can't understand this note-'Keep out of the Rand-Blackstone Feud.' It's a warning to us."

Joe was impressed.

"It looks as if we're mixed up in something big," he said. "It's clear now why Rand called old Mr. Blackstone a scoundrel. Probably there has been a real old-time southern feud between their families."

"But why should this colored fellow warn us to stay out of it? We're not attempting to interfere in their business, anyway," said Chet.

"It may be only a bluff," Frank observed. "Rand might have sent the man here to try to frighten us out of investigating him too closely on account of the robbery."

"Well, I've had enough excitement for one day," said Chet. "I'm going home."

"Better come back in the house and have a little chat with Aunt Gertrude before you go," suggested Joe with a grin. "You might get her to tell you some more stories about lynching."

"Not on your life! She'll blame me for making her faint. But how did I know the chair was going to fall to pieces? You should have stronger furniture."

A week passed in which the Hardy boys heard no more about Ruel Rand or Mr. Blackstone. They were awaiting their father's return before taking any further action in regard to either man. Now that they had the former's address they could afford to be patient. Besides, they wanted advice as to the proper course to take.

While scanning the newspaper early one morning, Frank came upon an item that excited and interested him. It read as follows:

"Croston, September 20: The steamer Resolute, wrecked on a reef off the coast near here ten days ago, broke from its towlines yesterday when an attempt was being made to bring the salvaged vessel to Croston, and is now adrift. Coastal shipping has been warned of the presence of the derelict. The Resolute had been floated and taken off the reef by salvage tugs."

Frank called Joe at once and showed him the newspaper paragraph.

"Why, this means that we still have a chance of getting those handwriting specimens for Dad!" exclaimed Joe.

"We can take the Sleuth and run down the coast until we find the derelict. According to this item the ship is still afloat. If we can get aboard her we should have no trouble finding our luggage. It will be water-soaked, of course, but the specimens were well protected."

The adventure appealed to Joe. He was all for starting without further delay. Frank suggested that they ask Chet to go along with them.

"After all, he has been in this affair since the beginning, and will be hopping mad if we go on a jaunt and leave him at home."

They telephoned their fat friend and outlined the plan to him. The boy was highly enthusiastic.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed. "Will I go? Just try to get away without me. I'll be ready in an hour."

Mrs. Hardy readily gave her consent to the jaunt, for she knew by now that the boys were well able to take care of themselves. Aunt Gertrude, however, expressed her opposition to the scheme with her characteristic vigor and forcefulness.

"Hare-brained notion!" she declared. "I never heard the like. Going out to sea in a motorboat to look for a sinking ship! You boys have gone off on a lot of silly trips but this one beats them all. Mark my words, it's the last we'll see of you, for you'll all be drowned. I feel it in my bones."

Aunt Gertrude's bones apparently were continually giving her warnings of dreadful catastrophes that never happened.

"I know we're not meant to be drowned, Aunt Gertrude," said Joe with a wink at his brother. "We escaped the Resolute disaster, didn't we?"

"More by good luck than good judgment, I'll be bound," sniffed the irate lady. "You'll tempt Fate once too often."

The lads were forced to endure a great deal more of their relative's opinions and prophecies while they were preparing for their trip. Moreover, when Chet appeared he received a lecture as well. All three finally managed to escape,

their ears ringing with Aunt Gertrude's solemn prediction that she would never see them alive again.

Having made many outings in the Sleuth, the boys packed sufficient provisions to last them for several days, as well as blankets, cooking utensils, and a small tent. These they carried to the boathouse at the foot of High Street.

The Sleuth was in excellent trim—a neat, fast, handsome motorboat that could show its wake to nearly every other craft on Barmet Bay. It was the most prized possession of the Hardy boys and they had enjoyed many happy hours in it. While Frank checked the engine and filled up the gas tanks, Joe and Chet stowed away the tent and supplies.

"All set!" said the older Hardy at last, and took his position behind the wheel. He eased in the clutch and the Sleuth purred smoothly out into tile bay, gathering speed until at last, with motor roaring, it raced swiftly toward the Atlantic.

It was a clear, sunny day. The water was calm, and when the three lads reached the open sea an hour later and swung southward along the coast the ocean was as smooth as glass. Chet dug into the supplies until he located a box of crackers he had thoughtfully stowed away so that it could be found with little trouble. He popped one into his mouth, sprawled lazily with his feet up on the side of the boat, stretched himself luxuriously, and said:

"This, my hearties, is the life A life on the bounding main. It can't be beat."

"You weren't doing so much raving about a life on the bounding main the night the Resolute was wrecked," Joe reminded him.

"Why bring that up?" mumbled Chet, his mouth full of crackers.

All day the Sleuth drummed through the calm waters off the coast. Occasionally Joe scanned the horizon with a pair of powerful marine glasses. Finally he caught sight of a dark object against the sky.

"I think we're within sight of it," he said. "A steamer, low in the water, with no smoke coming from the funnels."

Half an hour later they knew definitely that they had located the derelict. The Resolute was in plain sight, drifting about four miles from shore.

The battered hulk they were now approaching bore scant resemblance to the smart liner of a short time ago. It drifted low in the water, its decks only a few feet above the sea. The forepart of the vessel was a mass of wreckage, charred wood, twisted wire and steel. It seemed a miracle that the ship 'lad been in any kind of condition to be floated.

The boys were thrilled as the swift little motorboat sped closer to the derelict. They had scarcely expected that they would be lucky enough to locate the Resolute on their first day.

"That old hulk looks as if it would sink if a fellow were to step on board," remarked Chet.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe slyly. "Getting nervous?"

"Try me. I'll go anywhere you wish," said the fat boy promptly.

The motorboat drew alongside and Frank cut off the engine. Joe scrambled up onto the sloping deck, seized the rope his brother tossed to him, and looped it around the rail.

"I guess the Resolute will be able to stand your weight, Chet," called out Joe. "Come aboard."

With the Hardy boys assisting, their corpulent chum was pushed and dragged over the rail. He promptly managed to slip on the wet deck, executing a wild war dance that nearly precipitated him overboard again. Chet flung his arms around a stanchion and clung there grimly.

"Careful!" laughed Frank, climbing over the side. "This old boat is pretty shaky as it is."

"Do you mean to say," demanded Chet in a quavering voice, "that you're going to go down into that stateroom we had?"

"Sure. That's why we're here."

"But what if the boat should start to sink?"

"Then we'd gallop back up on deck as fast as possible. One of us will have to act as look-out. If anything should happen he could then give warning to the others. It wouldn't be so good, though, if we were all down below and the ship should begin to settle."

"I'll be the lookout," volunteered Chet with an air of relief. Now that he was actually on board the derelict and realized that the ship was obviously unsafe he had lost most of his relish for the adventure. "But make it snappy," he begged. "I know this old hulk can't last much longer."

Joe snickered as he made his way down the precariously canting deck until he found the doorway that opened on the stairs leading to some of the staterooms. The floor of the corridor was covered with water and the door had jammed, but Frank and Joe managed to force it open. The corridor was swimming with rubbish, papers, wearing apparel, and life-preservers.

Carefully the two boys splashed their way toward cabin 19. The door hung loosely open, and swayed with every motion of the ship. They looked inside.

The stateroom was a scene of confusion. The walls were charred, and it was evident that the fire had reached this section before the Resolute went under. Everything was in wildest disorder. Clothes, luggage and papers were scattered about everywhere.

Gingerly Frank stepped inside and looked about in search of the grip that had contained the handwriting specimens. Then suddenly he plunged forward. His foot had broken through the burnt flooring. Even as he lurched, Joe reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back to safety.

"Gosh, I guess I'd better be more careful!" Frank exclaimed. "That floor isn't safe."

Joe shuddered as he thought of the consequences, had his brother plunged through. It would have been almost impossible to have saved him.

"I'm not going to give up now that we've come this far-" he began.

At that moment a terrible tremor passed through the crippled vessel, followed

by a wild yell.

"Frank! Joe!"

"Chet's voice !" snapped Frank. "There's something wrong !"

CHAPTER IX

SUMMONED TO CROSTON

AGAIN they heard Chet's wild cry. There was a distant splash.

The first thought that flashed through the minds of the two boys was that the ship had sprung another leak and was on the point of sinking. Frantically they scrambled out of the stateroom and into the corridor, their search for the specimens forgotten.

Frank splashed his way toward the stairway and stumbled up the steps, with Joe close behind him.

"Chet! What's the matter?" loudly shouted Frank.

There was no answer. More worried than ever, Frank wrenched open the door at the top of the stairs and leaped out onto the slippery deck.

Joe, hurrying at his heels, failed to notice a projecting piece of timber that jutted out from the wall of the staircase. As he stumbled on one of the slippery steps and flung out an arm to save himself from falling, he hit his head full against the beam.

Almost stunned by the blow, the boy fell back, lost his footing, and pitched backward down the flight to the corridor below. Frank, hearing the crash, wheeled about, and saw his brother lying motionless at the foot of the stairs.

"Chet!" he shouted. "Joe's hurt!"

But the fat boy did not answer. Frank ran down all the steps, to find his brother already trying to sit up. In spite of the tumble and the blow on the head he was conscious, although stunned. Frank helped him to his feet. As he did so Joe swayed, and blinked in a stupefied manner.

"What hit me?" he muttered.

The older boy got the victim up the stairs, and the lad slowly began to regain his senses.

"Lucky I didn't break my neck," he said, pressing his hand to his throbbing head. "I ran full tilt into that piece of timber."

Meanwhile Frank began looking anxiously round in search of the missing Chet.

"I can't imagine what's happened to him!" he exclaimed.

Suddenly he heard the stout boy's voice again.

"Help! Help!"

The Hardy boys ran down the deck toward the place where they had moored the Sleuth. Then they caught sight of the motorboat, which was no longer beside the derelict, but drifting in the sea about two hundred yards away.

In the water near it was their chum. It was immediately apparent that Chet was in difficulty. As he was a good swimmer, the boys could not understand why he was struggling. He was looking back frantically toward the ship, waving his arms.

"Stay here, Joe!" snapped Frank. "You're ill no shape to go after him." He tore off his coat, kicked off his shoes, and scrambled up on the rail. "Here goes!" he cried.

He dived. His body shot through the air and hit the water with a splash. A moment later he came to the surface and commenced swimming with long, steady strokes in the direction of their chum, who had just disappeared beneath the water.

Would he reach Chet in time?

Joe watched in an agony of suspense. It was clear that in some manner the Sleuth had broken from its moorings and gone adrift. Chet had rashly undertaken to swim after it, but had over-estimated his ability to catch up with the craft.

Frank was a powerful swimmer. Stroke by stroke he came closer to the struggling boy in the water. Chet had appeared again, but when Frank was only a few yards away from him, he went down once more.

As he came up a moment later, Frank grabbed him. Now three lives hung on this Hardy boy's ability to battle his way toward the motorboat. He must have a place to work over Chet, and he must not leave Joe marooned on the sinking derelict.

He was still many yards from the Sleuth, and as Chet was a dead weight, Frank's progress was very slow. Inch by inch he forged his way ahead. The motorboat was still drifting. To Joe, watching from the deck of the Resolute, it appeared that the pair in the water were making no headway whatsoever.

Gradually, bit by bit, the gap diminished. At last Frank and Chet were within a few feet of the boat. A couple of despairing strokes, and the Hardy boy was able to grab a trailing rope. He used it to pull himself and his burden to the craft, and slowly crawled over the side, keeping a firm grip on the other boy. Then he hauled young Morton into the motorboat, where he promptly used first aid on his chum.

In a few minutes the stout lad opened his eyes, and gradually, as his normal breathing was restored, he regained his strength.

"Rope-got untied-tried to swim-after the boat," he said weakly. "Got a cramp-I'd have drowned-if you hadn't come."

"Forget it," retorted Frank. "I think you'd have floated anyhow. You're too

fat to drown."

Chet managed a wan smile.

"Maybe so," he gasped. "But you-saved my life just the same."

Frank was tired out, but he stumbled toward the engine and started it. The motorboat was swung around and nosed its way back toward the derelict. As it sped along Frank suddenly became aware of a dark shape bearing down on them from the direction of the shore. He heard the rapid throb of powerful engines as a coast guard cutter split its way through the waves.

"I guess you stirred up some excitement," he told Chet. "Looks as if the officials spotted you from shore and are coming out to rescue you. That beats all the speed records I ever heard of."

At the same time Frank was puzzled. Only a few minutes had elapsed since Chet had taken to the water to recover the drifting motorboat-not more than a quarter of an hour at most-and it seemed impossible that a cutter could have covered the distance from shore in that time.

The newcomer was heading directly for the Resolute. By the time Frank brought the Sleuth back alongside the derelict and took Joe on board the cutter was within hailing distance. The boys could see two uniformed men standing in the bow, peering at them through marine glasses. A bell rang, and the speed of the vessel slackened. It came up close to the motorboat and stopped.

"What's going on here?" demanded a square-jawed officer. "Where's the boat that's in charge here?"

He leaned over the rail, glaring down at the boys in a manner that was distinctly hostile.

"There's been no guard around here," replied Frank. "We tied up to come aboard but our motorboat went adrift," explained Frank.

"And what business have you in this place?" demanded the man on the cutter. "What's your idea? Trying to steal stuff from that ship?"

"Trying to recover our own property!" retorted Frank.

"I've a good mind to take you on board and clap you in the brig. Don't you know that you've no business going on board that ship? Who gave you permission?"

"We didn't know we needed any permission," spoke up Joe. "We were passengers on the ship when it was wrecked. We thought we'd be able to recover some valuable property we left in our stateroom."

The officer was slightly mollified.

"You can't do that!" he said. "You must get the proper credentials. Don't you realize the risk you're running? That old hulk is liable to take a dive to the bottom any minute."

"We've come all the way from Bayport," pleaded Frank.

"I can't help that." The officer's eye fell on Chet, who lay sprawling on the bottom of the motorboat. "What's the matter with that fellow?"

"He went overboard. We haven't had a chance to go through our stateroom yet. How about it?" begged Frank.

"Nothing doing. I'm giving my orders. Nobody steps on that boat without proper credentials. If he does so, it's at his own risk."

"We won't be more than five minutes."

"No !" roared the captain of the cutter. "No and a Double No! If you so much as set foot on that deck I'll have you arrested."

"I guess he means it,, ' sighed Chet mournfully. "Gosh, don't let's get arrested all over again. We're in enough trouble as it is."

The Hardy boys saw that nothing could be gained by argument.

"Where can we get permission?" asked Joe of the captain.

"You'll have to go to the chief officer of the steamship company in Croston. Maybe they'll let you go aboard at your own risk, and maybe not. Get away from here now, though."

Reluctantly, the boys obeyed, and headed the Sleuth toward shore.

"How about it?" asked Joe disconsolately. "Shall we go on to Croston?"

"Too far. We might as well return home," said Chet. "More than likely the company wouldn't give us permission to go aboard any way, even if we went to Croston."

The coast guard craft circled around until its captain was satisfied that the boys were obeying orders. Then it turned its nose back toward shore.

The chums were greatly disappointed, especially in view of the fact that they had been able to reach the stateroom without having had time for a thorough search. Chet blamed him self for the failure of the expedition, insisting that if he had kept a sharp eye on the Sleuth there would have been no need for the discouraging termination to the trip.

"That cutter would have come along in any case and perhaps we'd have been in a worse jam if they had caught us actually on board the ship," said Frank. "Home for us !"

Darkness overtook them before they had gone far up the coast, so they pulled into a secluded little cove where they pitched their tent and camped overnight. In the morning, after a hearty breakfast, they took off again, with calm sunny weather still favoring them.

They reached Bayport in good time. If Aunt Gertrude was surprised that they were still alive in spite of her direful predictions she did not say so, but merely sniffed and said:

"Bad pennies always turn up!"

"Are we late for a meal?" inquired Chet anxiously. "I'm starving."

"I daresay we can find something for you," observed Aunt Gertrude ungraciously.

"There's a letter for you, Frank," called Mrs. Hardy from the kitchen. "You'll

find it on the hall table. It's postmarked Croston."

"Croston, eh?" said Frank. "Thanks, Mother." He went into the hall and returned with a long, important looking envelope. "Maybe it's from Mr. Blackstone."

"And maybe it's just some more trouble," said Aunt Gertrude. "Well, open it. Open it, boy. Don't stand there gaping at it. You'll never know what's in a letter by staring at the envelope."

"It's from the Chief of Police in Croston," he said, tearing open the envelope.

"More trouble. I told you so," declared Aunt Gertrude triumphantly.

Frank read the letter and looked up glumly. "We must go to Croston tomorrow, fellows. The chief says we shall have to appear for questioning on the charge of robbery of Mr. Blackstone's money."

CHAPTER X

AT BLACKSTONE'S BEDSIDE

AUNT GERTRUDE had plenty to say about the Blackstone affair before the boys left for Croston the next morning. Mr. Hardy was still away on business, unfortunately, so the trio faced the prospect of undergoing the ordeal without the benefit of his advice and experience. It was only natural that they were nervous and apprehensive of the outcome, a state which Aunt Gertrude mistook for a sure sign of guilt. Once more she had veered in her opinion.

"There is only one thing to do," she said. "Of course, I don't expect you to take advice from me, but I give it for what it's worth. Tell the truth. You'll never regret telling the truth."

"But Aunt Gertrude," exclaimed Frank, "we have told the truth."

"An honest confession is good for the soul," continued the good lady, as if she hadn't heard him. "If I were in your shoes I'd make a full confession, no matter what the consequences might be. It would wring my heart to hear it, but I would rather have you tell the truth than take refuge behind a lie."

"But we have nothing to confess!" declared Joe desperately.

"It may seem hard," Aunt Gertrude went on, "but in the long run you will thank me for this advice. You wouldn't have been arrested unless you had done something. I won't say you struck that old man on purpose. I'd bury my head in shame if I thought any nephew of mine would be guilty of such a deed. But if you did so by accident, tell the police the whole story and you'll feel much better for it."

Mrs. Hardy, in contrast, was very sympathetic, kissing her sons tenderly, and telling them that of course she believed them innocent. Furthermore, she advised them not to worry.

The boys set out for the railroad station, where they met Chet and boarded a train for Croston. The stout lad was gloomy and pessimistic as they took their seats. He had slept late and had been unable to spend more than fifteen minutes at the breakfast table. Therefore, his first move was to purchase six oranges, a bottle of pop, three chocolate bars, and a bag of peanuts from the train vendor. With these provisions he thought he could manage to fight off famine until lunch time.

"May as well enjoy the good things of life while I can," he said disconsolately, as he peeled an orange. "I've never been in jail, but I have it on very good authority that jailers don't believe in over-feeding their prisoners. They believe in wholesome food in small quantities, which means porridge, prunes, cabbage soup, dry bread and water. Ugh !"

The prospect was so dreadful to contemplate, that Chet closed his eyes and groaned. At this moment a burly, thick-set negro, very loudly dressed and with a swaggering, arrogant manner, came along the aisle. He sat down, and propped his feet up on the unoccupied seat opposite. Frank nudged his brother.

"Seems to me I've seen that fellow before," he said quietly.

"Same here," returned Joe, "but I can't place him."

The conductor came through the car presently and took up the tickets. As he punched the one handed him by the negro he said quietly:

"It's against the rules to put your feet on the seat."

"What rules?" demanded the passenger in an insolent tone.

"The rules of the company."

"Ain 't nobody sittin' in that seat," came the retort

"That doesn't matter," answered the conductor, restraining his temper with difficulty. "I'm just asking you to obey the rules."

"Fool rules!" grunted the negro disdainfully.

Nevertheless, he removed his feet, but as soon as the conductor had disappeared, he put them back onto the seat again.

"Luke Jones don't stand for no nonsense from white folks!" he said audibly. "Ah pays mah fare, an' Ah puts mah shoes where Ah please."

Despite all this bravado, he hastily restored his feet to their proper place on the floor whenever the conductor came through the car.

When they arrived at Croston the boys set out for the station house, none too cheerful as they thought of the ordeal which lay before them.

"We should have a lawyer," moaned Chet. "We won't stand a chance as it is."

"We've only one story to tell," returned Frank, "and that's the true one. If we're sent up for trial we'll start thinking about lawyers. But I wish Dad were here. He's better than any lawyer I know."

They reported at police headquarters, and were taken to the chief's office, where they were informed that Mr. Blackstone had suffered a sudden relapse. The purpose of the inquiry was to get evidence into the record in case the old man should fail to recover.

A sharp-featured individual who introduced himself as the district attorney bade the boys sit down. With the chief and two detectives interrupting from time to time, Chet and the Hardy boys were subjected to a barrage of questions.

"Did you know that Mr. Blackstone was carrying six thousand dollars in his pocket?" snapped the district attorney.

"We were aware that he had a large sum of money on his person, but we didn't know the amount," Frank answered.

"How did you find it out?"

"He told us."

"So you generously offered to help him get a safe place for it?" asked the man sarcastically.

"We thought his money would be safer if he should turn it over to the purser."

"But he never got to the Resolute's office."

"No. The ship was wrecked."

"Mr. Blackstone claims you boys lured him down a dark corridor and then pretended to be involved in a fight."

"There was a fight. We found a man in our stateroom."

"Very convenient," sneered the official.

"It's the truth."

"Isn't it a fact that when you boys learned that Mr. Blackstone was in possession of a large sum of money you immediately laid plans to attack and rob him?"

"No !" retorted Frank firmly.

"Isn't it true that there was no man in your stateroom? That you used that story as an excuse to start a rumpus in the course of which the lights went out and Mr. Blackstone was knocked down?"

"No!"

"Did any of the other passengers know that Mr. Blackstone had that money?"

"I can't say."

"Isn't it a fact that most of the passengers were so ill that they were unable to go to the dining room that evening?"

"Yes," admitted Frank.

"You three boys, then, were the only passengers who talked to Mr. Blackstone after dinner?"

"As far as we know."

The man next directed his questions toward Chet, and finally turned to Joe. The boys were grilled unmercifully, and were taken over each step of their story. The detectives and the district attorney tried to trap them into contradicting themselves, but they stuck stubbornly to the facts they knew to be right.

The telephone rang, and the district attorney took up the receiver. He listened for a moment, then said:

"A sinking spell? That's too bad. Very well, we can hold a conference in his room. We'll be right over."

He turned to the chief of police.

"Mr. Blackstone has had a sinking spell. I think we had better bring these boys over to the hospital so he may identify them and get his evidence on the record."

No time was lost in bundling the lads out of headquarters and into a police automobile at the door. They were immediately hustled off to the institution where the elderly man lay.

"If he should die insisting that we're the guilty ones," whispered Joe to his brother, "we'll be in trouble for sure."

"No talking !" cautioned one of the detectives gruffly.

The car came to a stop in front of the hospital and the boys were taken to Mr. Blackstone's room. At the door they were met by Dr. Forester.

"You mustn't stay long," said the physician. "He is feeling a little stronger now but has had several bad spells today."

"Will he live, Doctor ?" asked Frank. The man of medicine shrugged. "Mr. Blackstone has a good constitution, but after all, he isn't a young man."

The boys were taken to the bedside of the patient, who was very white and thin. He opened his eyes and looked at the visitors. There was no friendliness in his gaze.

"Mr. Blackstone," said the district attorney quietly, "I want you to identify these boys. Who are they?"

"I don't know their names," said the sick man in a feeble voice. "I met them on board the Resolute just before it was wrecked. They attacked me and stole my money."

"But you're mistaken, Mr. Blackstone!" Frank cried out in consternation. "We were trying to save you from being robbed!"

"Silence!" barked the district attorney. He turned to the patient again. "Can you identify them, Mr. Blackstone?"

"Yes," whispered the sick man.

"Did they know you had money?"

"I-I told them. It was very foolish of me, but they looked honest, and I trusted them," he faltered.

Suddenly the patient clutched at his throat. The color drained from his face and he sank back, overcome by another spell. Dr. Forester was summoned immediately. When he arrived he administered a stimulant that had the effect of restoring to some extent the old man's strength.

"I'm afraid I can't let you question him any longer," said the physician. "He isn't in condition to stand it."

"As far as I'm concerned," said the district attorney, "there is nothing else he needs to say. He has identified the prisoners. That's all I wanted to know."

Joe had been thinking of the mysterious note referring to the Rand-Blackstone Feud. That Ruel Rand had had something to do with the robbery he was certain. But would Mr. Blackstone recognize the other's name? He stepped forward, and before anyone could silence him, leaned over the patient's bed.

"How about Ruel Rand?" he demanded. "How about the feud? And the lynching? Didn't he have a reason for attacking you?"

Mr. Blackstone was gasping for breath. Would he die before the answer could come?

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE ANNOUNCEMENT

"RUEL RAND!" whispered the old man finally. An expression of fierce hatred flashed into his eyes. "Who told you about him? Who told you about the feud?"

"Never mind. But there is no love lost between you, isn't that right? Wouldn't Ruel Rand attack you if he had a chance?" urged Joe quietly.

"He would," answered Blackstone hoarsely. "He would--if he had the chance. But he didn't have the chance--that night."

"Why not?"

"Because he wasn't on the boat."

"But he was!" chorused the boys. "He was the man in the stateroom."

"And I saw him bending over you when you were lying in the corridor," declared Chet.

Mr. Blackstone struggled in an effort to sit up.

"Was Rand on that ship?" he cried. "Why wasn't I warned? I didn't see him. He must have followed me--"

With these words he collapsed, muttering inaudibly to himself. Dr. Forester intervened at that moment.

"No more questioning," the physician demanded sternly. "This has gone far enough. Mr. Blackstone mustn't be excited any further."

Dr. Forester's emphatic order terminated the interview. As the boys walked back down the corridor under the escort of the detectives they overheard the district attorney remark to the chief:

"I don't know what to make of this. The old man seemed to recognize Rand's name quickly enough."

"Maybe these boys are working in cahoots with Rand," suggested the chief, suspiciously.

Accomplices, eh?" said the other man. "Well, that's possible. But I'm inclined to think we're on the wrong track after all."

"You can't get away from the fact that somebody took six thousand dollars," the chief reminded him. "Where is the money?"

"I wish I knew," sighed the official.

When the boys returned to headquarters there was little further questioning. It was evident now that the district attorney was inclined to believe they were innocent. He announced his intention of making further investigations.

"Your bail will still stand," he told them. "In the meantime, we can't go on with the case. You will hear from us when we need you," he told them.

Chet breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"I hope we never hear from you!" he exclaimed.

When the boys left police headquarters Frank suggested they might as well go to the office of the steamship company and seek permission to go on board the Resolute again to search for the handwriting specimens.

Chet groaned. "I thought we were going to eat now," he said dolefully.

"It won't hurt you to wait a little longer," remarked Joe.

"But it's nearly five o'clock!" protested Chet. "I'll probably faint from sheer weakness."

"You'll live," rejoined Frank unsympathetically. "The steamship office will be closed if we don't hurry."

They made inquiries, and learned that the place they were seeking was near the waterfront. It was exactly five o'clock when they reached there. A boy informed them that the manager had left for the day.

"Come around tomorrow morning," he advised them. "Too late to see anyone now."

Reluctantly the callers turned away.

"That means we'll have to stay in Croston all night," said Joe.

"It looks to me as if we've come all the way down to this office for nothing when we might as well have been looking for a good restaurant," said Chet gloomily.

"We'll find a good hotel instead," Frank decided.

The boys found a small hostelry uptown, where they registered. Chet was finally saved from complete collapse, for they all entered the dining room at once. There the stout lad stowed away food with great enthusiasm, as though he were making up for lost time.

"It's the sea atmosphere, I think," he explained, looking up from a huge helping of pudding. "It gives me an appetite."

"Don't blame the sea air for your appetite," laughed Joe. "You've always had it."

"And I hope I always shall," added Chet.

"What shall we do tonight?" asked Frank. Chet said he was tired of movies, and volunteered the information that Croston boasted a theatre of the legitimate drama.

"I haven't seen a stage show for ages. Let's take it in," he suggested.

"What's on?"

"I saw a playbill in the lobby. It's a Civil War drama called 'The Spy from the North.'"

"Sounds interesting," said Frank. "If you're quite sure you can't manage another helping of pudding, Mr. Morton, we'll see if we can get tickets."

Chet looked regretfully at the empty dish.

"Perhaps I'd better not. The waiters might think I'm greedy."

"They've been staring at you for the past half hour," Joe assured him. "The hotel didn't make any profit out of that meal."

"If hotels are foolish enough to allow me to eat all I want for seventy-five cents," Chet replied, "it's their lookout."

The boys went to their room and freshened up, then set out for the theatre shortly after eight o'clock. Before leaving Frank put in a call to the hospital and inquired about Mr. Blackstone. He was told, non-committally, that the patient was "holding his own."

"Let's forget about him, the robbery charge, the handwriting specimens and the Resolute affair altogether," Joe suggested on their way to the theatre. "We've had enough worries. Let's enjoy ourselves for one evening at least."

"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may go to jail," misquoted Chet. "Good idea, Joe. I'll try to forget that I'm Public Enemy Number Three for a while! You can take your choice of Numbers One and Two."

Seasoned playgoers might have found fault with "The Spy from the North," the show presented at the Croston Theatre that night, but the Hardy boys and Chet were not disposed to be critical, and enjoyed the rousing melodrama thoroughly. The plot dealt with the adventures of the daughter of a Northern officer who masqueraded as a man, and ventured behind the Southern lines. The intrigues and thrilling escapes which featured the heroine's career maintained a high level of suspense, and at the end of the second act the boys applauded noisily.

At this point in the play the heroine had just been exposed as a spy, her identity having been revealed to the military authorities by the villain. She had been offered her freedom on condition that she go back of the Northern lines and obtain certain papers from a Union general.

Miss Alice Fox, in the role of the heroine, shook her head defiantly.

"And what if I should refuse?" she cried.

"You will be shot at sunrise!" answered the villain, leering unpleasantly.

"Then I shall die for my country!" declared the heroine, and the curtain descended.

"Gosh, I hope they don't shoot her," said Chet, greatly worried, "but I can't imagine how she's going to get out of that jam."

"She'll get out of it, all right," Frank assured him. "It's a good play. That girl is a swell actress."

The curtain was late in rising on the third act. The audience grew impatient meanwhile, and wondered audibly about the delay. Finally a stout man in evening clothes came out on the stage and raised his hand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "I am very sorry that there has been this slight delay. The third act will commence immediately. I regret to announce, however, that Miss Alice Fox, the leading lady, will be unable to continue her performance, so an understudy will have to replace her. You will all be sorry to hear that Miss Fox has been called suddenly to the bedside of her father, Mr. Samuel Blackstone, who is critically ill in Croston Hospital. It is feared that he has not long to live. Under the circumstances, you can understand that it was impossible for Miss Fox to conclude tonight's performance."

The manager retired hastily, and the curtain rose on the final act of the play. But the Hardy boys and Chet scarcely realized that the performance had resumed.

Samuel Blackstone was dying! And this girl, whose acting they had been admiring so greatly, was his daughter!

Frank nudged his brother.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered.

"Where are you going?"

"To the hospital."

Hastily the boys left the theatre. They had lost all interest in the play. The manager's announcement left them sick with apprehension. If Samuel Blackstone should die their own position would be very serious indeed, for they stood

accused of the responsibility for his injuries.

They piled into a waiting taxi and ordered the driver to hurry to the institution to which the actress had gone.

"I suppose Alice Fox is just a stage name," observed Frank. "It's very strange, but it had never occurred to me that Mr. Blackstone might have a family."

The taxi skidded around a corner, and the lights of the hospital gleamed before the boys.

CHAPTER XII

THE DETECTIVE

"How is Mr. Blackstone tonight?" inquired Frank, as the boys hurried to the information desk at the hospital.

The clerk looked up.

"Mr. Blackstone took a serious turn for the worse tonight, but seems to have rallied the past few minutes. His condition was so serious that we sent for his daughter. I think there is no immediate danger, however."

"That's fine," said Joe.

They heard footsteps on the staircase, and saw a woman descending into the lobby.

"Here is Mr. Blackstone's daughter," the clerk told them.

The boys turned, and recognized the woman as Alice Fox.

"These young men were inquiring about your father, Miss Fox," said the attendant.

The actress looked at the trio in surprise.

"Are you friends of Mr. Blackstone?" she asked.

"Well--I'm afraid he doesn't think so," Frank replied, "but we were eager to learn how he is. We were at the theatre tonight and the manager said you had been called to the hospital."

Miss Fox raised her eyebrows quizzically. She was evidently puzzled.

"Why are you interested in my father's condition?" she asked. "As a matter of fact, I didn't know he was in this institution until half an hour ago. He didn't notify me that he was ill.'"

"We're so interested--well--because we've been blamed for Mr. Blackstone's condition," Frank explained. "He was on board the Resolute."

"On the Resolute!" she exclaimed. "The ship that was wrecked a few days ago! I didn't know that. I'm on tour much of the time, you see, and don't hear from my father very often. I was dreadfully surprised when I was told he was here in this place. But what do you mean by saying you have been blamed for his condition?" Miss Fox pointed to a nearby bench in the waiting room. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

The Hardys and Chet were surprised to learn that the actress knew none of the details that had led to her father's presence in the hospital. They told her how they had met Mr. Blackstone on the ship and how he had confided in them the fact that he was carrying a large sum of money. They went on to explain how they had persuaded him to turn the funds over to the purser for safe-keeping; that they had become involved in the struggle with the mysterious stateroom intruder; that Mr. Blackstone had been discovered lying on the corridor floor; and how he had been rescued.

"The worst of it is," concluded Frank, "that we have been accused of attacking him and stealing the money." Then he concluded by telling Miss Fox about their arrest.

The actress was intensely interested.

"Isn't there some trouble, some sort of a feud, perhaps, between the Blackstones and the Rands?" asked Joe.

Miss Fox looked at him sharply.

"Why do you ask that?"

"We were warned not to interfere in the quarrel."

The woman did not answer at once, evidently being reticent about mentioning any family matters.

"I prefer to say nothing about the affair," she said finally. "The Rands and the Blackstones have homesteads at Hidden Harbor. There will be bickering as long as any members of either family are left, I suppose."

The boys tried to inveigle her into telling more of the story, but in this they were unsuccessful.

"How did you know about the quarrel?" she insisted. "I'm sure the differences between the Rands and the Blackstones have nothing to do with this affair."

"I think it has a great deal to do with the present trouble," Frank told her boldly. "In fact, we're quite sure Ruel Rand is the man who attacked your father."

"Ruel Rand!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "Was he on that boat?"

"He was not only on the boat, but we saw him kneeling beside your father in the corridor after the wreck. He said Mr. Blackstone was a scoundrel!" declared Joe.

"He shall pay for this!" declared Miss Fox after a moment's silence. Then she looked at the boys suspiciously. "But if my father placed a charge against

you he must have had a good reason for doing so. Were you accomplices of Ruel Rand? Why did you follow me from the theatre tonight? Why are you trying to get me to talk about the feud?"

She grew suddenly hostile. The boys were embarrassed.

"Why--of course we're not helping Rand," faltered Joe. "We only want to clear ourselves if we can."

"I think you know more than you're telling me!" she exclaimed. "Father wouldn't accuse you of robbing him unless--"

"Miss Fox!" interrupted the desk clerk. "Do you mind going into the office? Dr. Forester wishes to speak to you."

The boys were glad of the respite as the actress arose and hurried away. Their interview had taken an unexpected and unpleasant turn.

"Let's get out of here," suggested Joe. "The more we talk to her the more she suspects that we did have something to do with the robbery."

"She's too fiery to suit me!" declared Chet emphatically. "If we stick around much longer we'll more than likely find ourselves arrested all over again."

Frank agreed that little would be gained by seeking further information from the actress, who was not only disinclined to speak of the affairs of the Blackstone family, but appeared also to have a mounting suspicion that the boys were quite as guilty as her father believed them to be. They got up, walked out, and made their way back to the hotel on foot.

They would have been surprised had they been aware that Miss Fox was furious when she emerged from the hospital office a few minutes after their departure and learned that they had gone.

"Sneaked away as soon as they saw I didn't believe their story!" she said to herself.

Miss Fox was now confirmed in her suspicions. Being a young lady of action, she went to the telephone and called the number of a private detective agency in Croston.

"Mr. Heator?" she said, when a voice answered. "This is Alice Fox speaking."

"Yes, Miss Fox. What can I do for you?"

"I want you, or one of your men, to check up on three boys for me. They're staying in town but I don't know where."

"They don't live here?"

"No. They come from Bayport."

"Probably stopping at a hotel. What are their names, Miss Fox, and what do you wish me to do?"

The actress gave him a full description of the Hardy boys and Chet Morton. She explained that they were out on bail after having been arrested on charges of attacking and robbing Mr. Blackstone.

"They deny it, of course," she said, "but I think they know more about the

business than they pretend to. I'm particularly eager to find out if they are in touch with a man named Ruel Rand, of Hidden Harbor. I want you to locate them, Mr. Heator, and shadow them. Obtain as much information about them as you can."

"I'll get to work on the case at once, Miss Fox," promised the detective.

Unaware of the turn of events, the boys went back to their hotel. They set out shortly after breakfast next morning to call at the office of the steamship company. This time they were shown into the suite of a department manager, who listened to their story.

"You want to go on board the Resolute!" he exclaimed. "Impossible. It's too dangerous. We couldn't allow it."

"But we've already been on board," said Frank. "An officer of the coast guard made us leave."

"Quite right of him, too. We don't want any more trouble over the Resolute. We're facing enough damage claims as it is."

"But it's very important that we get those handwriting specimens from the stateroom as soon as possible," ventured Joe.

"Can't help it. Can't help it." The manager was brusque. "I won't take the responsibility of giving you permission to go on board that vessel. It might sink, and then the company would be held liable. You can put in a claim for the loss of your effects, but I can't let you go to get your missing luggage. How could we be sure that you wouldn't take anything but your own belongings. Understand? I'm not insinuating that you are dishonest, but we must protect ourselves. How valuable were the specimens?"

"They're not worth anything to a soul but my father," Frank told him.

"Make out a claim for any personal belongings you have lost, and estimate their value. I'll see that the matter's looked after," promised the man. "But that's the best I can do."

The boys were disappointed. They had hoped to venture on board the derelict Resolute again, but this flat refusal put an end to their plans in that direction. With but little show of enthusiasm they filled out a form enumerating the pieces of baggage they had left in the wreck, signed their claim, and departed from the office. Once outside, they stopped in front of the building to discuss their next move.

"This means that we must make another trip to Larchmont," decided Frank. "Dad has to have those specimens and perhaps we can get some more to replace the ones we lost."

"We'll have to run home first," said Joe.

"If we do go back to Larchmont," Chet observed, "we might kill two birds with one stone."

"What do you mean?"

"We can pay a little visit to Hidden Harbor and while there perhaps call on our friend Ruel Rand."

As this conversation was taking place, a quiet little man in a gray suit was

standing by the curb, apparently engaged in aimlessly watching the traffic. The boys scarcely noticed him, but when Chet passed his ironic remark about "our friend Ruel Rand," the stranger cast a sharp look at the trio.

"Yes, I had thought of that," Frank said. "As you say, Chet, we can kill two birds with one stone. I'd certainly like to have a talk with Rand."

"Let's go back to the hotel and pack up," suggested Joe. "We'll take the first train to Bayport and tell Dad we're setting out for Larchmont."

The boys moved off down the street. The quiet man in the gray suit waited a while, then lounged idly along at a safe distance behind them. He followed them to their hotel. Arriving there, he made his way to a telephone booth and called a number.

"Miss Fox?" he queried.

"Yes."

"This is Edward Heator speaking. I located those boys without any trouble. This morning they went to the offices of one of the steamship companies, and I overheard them talking as they came out. It appears that they are planning to go to Larchmont at once."

"Larchmont!" exclaimed the actress.

"Yes. One of them spoke of calling on their friend Ruel Rand."

"Their friend! I thought so!" declared Miss Fox triumphantly. "So they are in league with that man!"

"I don't know what it's all about, Miss Fox. They are going to Bayport on the next train, and from there they plan to head for Larchmont."

"Follow them, Mr. Heator! Don't let them out of your sight. Obtain as much information as you can. I've suspected all along that they were friends of Ruel Rand."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW SHADOWED

"VERY WELL, Miss Fox," said the detective, "you can rely on me to follow the Hardy boys and their friend Chet Morton."

When he came out of the telephone booth Mr. Heator made inquiries at the information desk and found that a train would leave for Bayport within the hour.

"I'll just have time to go home and pack," he said to himself.

Meanwhile the boys returned, and the Hardys were glad to find their father back. They lost no time in giving him an account of their adventures, including their attempt to search the Resolute for the lost handwriting specimens. When they related their experiences in Croston and told of their interview with Alice Fox, their aunt bristled with wrath.

"An actress!" she exclaimed in horror. "Has it come to that! Fenton Hardy, I think it's high time you made these boys stay at home. Now they're getting mixed up with women on the stage. The idea!"

Aunt Gertrude was very old-fashioned in some of her notions. From her horrified manner one would be inclined to think that the boys had confessed to revelry with squads of gay chorus girls while on their visit to Croston!

"She seemed to be a very nice lady," said Frank, "but I think she didn't believe our story. She practically accused us of being accomplices of Ruel Rand."

"And didn't she tell you anything about the feud?" asked Mr. Hardy.

"No. She wouldn't say a word about it."

Mr. Hardy was silent and thoughtful. After a while he said:

"There should be no harm in your going to Larchmont. You may be able to get duplicate specimens of handwriting for me. Moreover, it's to your own interests to find out more about this Ruel Rand."

"Actresses!" sniffed Aunt Gertrude, her knitting needles flashing furiously. "In my day if a boy came home and said he had been talking to an actress he'd have got a good licking."

Fenton Hardy did not reply to this, for he seemed to be engrossed with his own thoughts. The boys hurried upstairs to prepare for the journey, leaving Aunt Gertrude muttering to herself.

"No good will come of all this gallivanting," she said meaningly.

The Hardy boys and Chet left for Larchmont the next morning. They had just taken their seats in the express, to which they had changed from the Bayport local, when a quiet-spoken man in a gray suit came down the aisle and slipped into the vacant space beside the stout boy.

"Don't mind if I sit here, do you?" he asked, smiling.

"Not at all," answered all three boys, for the coach was crowded.

None of the lads could recall having seen the stranger before, so they could hardly have been expected to recognize in him the person who had been standing on the curb outside the steamship office in Croston. Mr. Heator was quite confident that the boys would never suspect that he had not chosen his seat in the train by accident.

He was an agreeable companion and a ready talker. In a short time he had introduced himself to the boys as a refrigerator salesman. "Greatest invention of the century--the electric ice-box," he said.

Chet agreed with him heartily.

"It certainly keeps everything nice and fresh," he said.

This led to the subject of food, a topic of conversation that was of unflinching interest to Chet. Before long he and the stranger were discussing all kinds of eatables, from their favorite breakfast foods to their choice of desserts. Frank in the meantime was reading a newspaper, while Joe was looking out the window.

Chet became so interested in his conversation with Heator that he let fall the fact that he and his friends were on their way to Larchmont, and that his companions were the sons of Fenton Hardy, the famous detective. Frank secretly gave the fat boy a kick on the shins. A little later, after Mr. Heator had excused himself and retired to the smoking compartment for a while, Frank said:

"Better be careful, Chet. After all, we don't know that fellow."

"What's the matter?" demanded his friend, greatly aggrieved. "What have I to be careful about? We were just having a chat."

"You let drop some information. It doesn't pay to be too friendly with strangers."

"Oh gosh!" exclaimed Chet, peeved. "I only told him we were going to Larchmont, and

-and a few other things. It's pretty tough when a fellow can't even talk!"

Thereupon he lapsed into a gloomy and dignified silence, which was broken only when it was lunch time.

Heator returned presently. Chet, heeding Frank's warning, kept a check on his tongue whenever the friendly stranger swung the conversation around to anything personal. The boys noticed that the man got off the train at several station stops and made his way toward the telegraph window on every occasion.

"Queer sort of salesman," reflected Joe. "Surely he doesn't have to report to the office every little while."

The next time Heator got off Joe ambled in pursuit and pretended to be idling on the platform. Through the window he could see the salesman busily writing a message. Apparently it was not an ordinary one, for the writer constantly consulted a little red book. Once, apparently dissatisfied with the result, he crumpled up the sheet and tossed it to the floor.

Joe watched his chance, and when Heator left the station he slipped inside and retrieved the discarded bit of paper, which he unfolded. If he had hoped to learn anything about the friendly salesman from that message, he was bound to be disappointed, for it was apparently only a meaningless string of words.

"skyscraper beyond absolute automobile definite cattle oranges."

Joe rubbed his chin in bewilderment.

"I can't make head nor tail out of that!" he said to himself, and took advantage of the first opportunity to show the paper secretly to his brother.

Frank quickly guessed the explanation.

"It's a code message. Now, why should a refrigerator salesman be sending

telegrams in code?"

"Something queer about it."

"I thought that fellow seemed a little too friendly. He was trying to pump information out of Chet. I think we had better keep an eye on him."

When they returned to the train the Hardy boys bent their energies toward learning something from Heator about himself, but were unsuccessful. The salesman was not in the least disposed to speak of his own affairs. Beyond telling them that he was going farther than Larchmont, he revealed nothing of importance.

Frank's suspicions, however, were not readily dispelled. He could not rid himself of the opinion that there must be some motive back of the traveler's apparent friendliness to them. The man was still very affable when the train finally reached Larchmont.

"Well, goodbye, fellows!" he cried, shaking hands with them. "I'm glad I met you. Maybe we'll run across one another again some time."

"Never can tell," agreed Chet meaningly.

"I guess I'll settle down and have a nap," said the salesman. "I have a long journey ahead of me."

They bade him adieu and descended from the train. Frank sought out the conductor, who was standing on the platform.

"What is the next stop after Larchmont?" he asked.

"We don't stop until we come to Dalesburg, fifty miles south. Of course, there's the junction. We stay there a few minutes."

"How far away is that?"

"About a mile."

Frank turned to the others. "We're going to beat this train to the junction. I think Mr. Heator is not going much farther. Come on!"

The boys climbed into a taxi and gave the driver his instructions. The car then sped down the road before the train pulled out.

"I may be wrong about this," remarked Frank, "but I feel certain we'll see Heator again."

He was correct in his surmise. Their driver parked the car by the roadside at the railway junction, and when the train pulled in the boys saw their erstwhile companion get off. He went into a small waiting room, and as he did so, another machine drove up and came to a full stop.

From the shelter of the taxi the boys watched the detective as he emerged from the waiting room. In the short while he had been out of their sight he had effected a remarkable transformation in his appearance. He had added a heavy black mustache and a pair of bushy eyebrows, and had donned spectacles. Had it not been for the fact that the boys had seen him go into the waiting room they would not have recognized in him the neat, dapper salesman who had been their train companion.

"Slick work!" said Joe.

Heator made his way quickly over to the other car. The door swung open, he climbed in, and the machine sped off in the direction of Larchmont.

"Follow him," the older Hardy boy ordered their driver.

"I have to give you credit, Frank," said Chet. "You were right about that man. It was mighty clever of you to think of coming out to the junction to watch for him."

"I thought there was something suspicious all along. If he really was following us I inferred that the logical thing for him to do would be to try to throw us off the trail by staying on the train when we got off at Larchmont."

"It's a lucky thing we came here," Joe said. "Now we axe familiar with his disguise. But why is he following us? I can't figure that out."

"It's beyond me," Frank admitted. "We certainly started something when we met old Mr. Blackstone on the ship that night."

They trailed Heator without any difficulty, and watched him step from his car in front of a lodging house on the outskirts of town. The machine then drove away, Frank making a note of the street and number, and ordering the driver to go ahead into the town.

"Where shall we stay?" Chet asked.

"We can find a hotel, I suppose," replied Joe.

"I have a better idea than that," Frank said. "We came here to find out about the homesteads at Hidden Harbor, didn't we? Well, then, why not live near Hidden Harbor? We'll buy a tent and camp out."

This scheme was readily applauded, and the three boys immediately set about carrying it out. Within a short time they had purchased a tent, cooking utensils, and necessary supplies for living out of doors. In a short while their taxi was jouncing merrily down a lonely road toward the sea.

"There's the old Rand place," said the driver suddenly, pointing out a poorly kept estate just south of the road. "Better not camp on that property or you'll get into trouble."

The homestead looked far from inviting. It had a neglected and poverty-stricken appearance. The grounds were overrun with weeds. Through the trees the boys caught a glimpse of a winding driveway and a rambling old mansion that looked to be in need of repairs.

"Isn't there a place near here owned by a family named Blackstone?" asked Frank.

The taxi man gestured toward the opposite side of the road.

"Just across the way," he said. "All the ground on that side belongs to the Blackstones."

The boys noticed another driveway which led into an estate that appeared to be kept in better condition than was the Rand place. Through the trees they could see a large red brick structure, which was the home of Samuel Blackstone.

They drove on and soon saw the water. The road came to an end on some grassy dunes that sloped to the seashore.

"If you're bound to camp out," the taxi-driver told them, "this is the spot for you. Everything back of here is private property."

"It's good enough for us," Joe assured him. Thereupon the boys unloaded their equipment, and paid the driver, who sped back to town. They pitched their tent in a sheltered spot. Chet was in favor of building a campfire at once and preparing a meal, but Frank and Joe wanted to explore the surrounding territory.

"Let's go back and have another look at the Rand homestead before we do anything else," Frank suggested. "We'll have plenty of time to eat later."

Chet looked very glum at this suggestion, but trailed along when the Hardy boys set out on the road that divided the two estates.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "Call on Ruel Rand?"

"Not yet," Frank answered. "Perhaps we'll learn more by staying under cover."

They came within sight of the gateway to the Rand property, and were just in time to see a man on foot leave a car by the roadside and enter the driveway. Frank stared, then uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Come on, fellows! Over the fence! Don't let him see us!"

With Frank in the lead, they scrambled across the enclosure in an instant, to find themselves on the grounds of the Rand estate.

"What's the idea?" asked Chet, bewildered. "Who is that fellow?"

"Didn't you recognize him?"

"I failed to get a good look at him."

The boys edged forward through the undergrowth until they were again in sight of the driveway, where they got a clear view of the pedestrian who was approaching the Rand mansion. Portfolio in hand, he strode briskly down the driveway, unaware that he was being observed.

"It's the man who was on the train!" exclaimed Joe. "The one who put on a disguise!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE HIDDEN HARBOR CAMP

"WONDER what he is doing here?" queried Joe. "How did he know we were interested in this place?"

"Perhaps it was Ruel Rand who hired him to shadow us," Frank suggested.

Heator was apparently a stranger at the spot. The boys watched him as he ascended the steps and rang the bell. When the door was opened there was a brief delay before he was allowed to enter. As soon as he had vanished into the house Frank hastened forward.

"Now it's our turn to do a little spying," he said.

"Take care there isn't a dog around here somewhere," cautioned Chet.

The boys reached the veranda unmolested. Frank had an idea.

"Joe," he said, "I'm going to peer through one of these windows and see if I can learn something about this fellow. In the meantime, you go back to the road and search his car, which is parked near the gate. See if you can find some papers--anything at all that will tell us his real business."

"Sure," said Joe, eager to do his brother's bidding.

"If the fellow should leave the house and go back toward the road, I'll hoot like an owl."

"Be sure to hoot loud enough. I don't want him to catch me going through his car."

Joe hurried back across the grounds toward the highway, while Frank crawled softly up onto the porch and made his way toward the window which was nearest the front door of the house. Carefully, step by step, he edged forward. Chet, quaking for fear his friends might be discovered, stayed on guard to be on the alert in case anyone should come around from the rear of the building.

Through the window Frank could look into the dimly-lighted hall of the Rand homestead. And, wonder of wonders, the first person upon whom his eyes rested was Ruel Rand!

The tall, melancholy young man was listening to Mr. Heator who, with his portfolio open, was diligently carrying on his pretense of being an icebox salesman.

"You can't afford to be without one," he was saying. "Let me install a refrigerator in your home on trial. I'll guarantee that you won't let me take it away. Our terms are very reasonable--"

"I don't want one, I tell you," Rand interrupted testily. "I've got along without an electric refrigerator for years and I guess I can do so for a while yet."

"Very well," replied Mr. Heator, as he slowly started to replace his papers and catalogs into his portfolio. Frank could see that the fellow's sharp eyes were taking in every detail of the hall as he spoke. "I do wish you would let me put the refrigerator in on trial, just the same. You'll be under no obligation to us."

"No," said Rand shortly.

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes." Rand was becoming impatient. "I'm busy now," he said. "Too busy to

answer questions about my private affairs."

"No offense, no offense," said Heator cheerfully, as he prepared to leave. "I'll come around again some time. Maybe you'll change your mind about the refrigerator."

"You needn't bother," said Rand curtly.

Frank jumped off the veranda in a flash, and did so none too soon. He had scarcely hidden himself below the level of the rail when the door opened and Mr. Heator emerged. The detective looked neither to right nor left, but strode down the steps and struck for the driveway, whistling.

Chet peered from behind a nearby bush.

"Is he gone?"

"We must warn Joe."

Frank slipped to the side of the house so that he would not be seen in case Ruel Rand should happen to be looking through one of the front windows. Then the two boys hastened across the grounds, under cover of the trees and brush. When they were within hearing distance of the road Frank hooted, giving a very realistic imitation of an owl.

A little later he and Chet heard the sound of the auto's engine as the pseudo-salesman started toward the town. They scrambled over the fence just as Joe crawled out of the ditch and onto the other side of the road.

"He almost caught me!" cried the younger Hardy boy. "I heard the hooting, all right, but I was so interested in what I found in the car that I forgot all about the warning. Luckily I heard him whistling, and I had just time enough to dive out of the machine and into the ditch before he came through the gate."

"What did you find?" asked Frank eagerly.

"Plenty. I discovered who the man is and who set him on our trail. He is Edward Heator."

"Who asked him to follow us?"

"Alice Fox!" said Joe.

Chet and Frank were astounded.

"Is he a detective?" demanded Frank

"You bet he is. A private detective with an agency of his own in Croston. In a side pocket of the car I found some papers which explain everything."

"So Miss Fox didn't trust us!" Frank exclaimed, "and thinks we are accomplices of Rand. That's why Heator went to the Rand house. He thought we were staying there."

"I feel," observed Chet plaintively, "that we'd be able to talk over this situation better if we had something to eat. I'm just about famished."

The boys went back to their camp, where the stout lad seized a frying pan and launched himself enthusiastically into the task of preparing a meal.

"This detective work is all right," he said, "and I'm just as eager to clear up the mystery as anyone is, but a fellow doesn't have to starve to death while he's doing it."

The camping spot was ideally located, al though the site was a lonely one. There was a sandy beach from which the dunes sloped gradually to the water. Driftwood abounded, and the place was well sheltered from the wind. Most important, of course, was the fact that it was but a short distance from both the Blackstone and the Rand estates.

"We'll have a look at the Blackstone establishment," decided Frank, when the boys were at breakfast the next morning. "Maybe we'll be able to learn more about this feud."

"Don't forget that we must make another attempt to get those handwriting specimens," Joe reminded him.

"That's true. We shall have to call on Miss Pennyweather again. Well, we can drop in at the Blackstone homestead on the way."

There was no sign of life about the place when the boys made their way up the driveway. A huge "No Trespassing" sign did not deter them, either.

"I don't mind those signs as long as they aren't backed up by a couple of bulldogs," said Chet, as they proceeded toward the house.

They did not get far, however, before an elderly Negro appeared.

"What you folks want here?" he asked testily.

"We know Mr. Blackstone," explained Frank, "and were just looking around. He's in the hospital, isn't he?"

"He's up No'th," agreed the Negro. "Mah son Luke is with Mistah Blackstone. Yo' know Luke? Luke Jones?"

When the boys said they did not know who Luke Jones was, the old man displayed no disposition to be friendly.

"Strangers ain't allowed around heah," he said.

"When do you expect Mr. Blackstone?" asked Frank.

"He'll be back when he's back," said the old man. "Ain't nobody roun' heah but me jes' now."

"Does Miss Fox ever come here?" asked Joe.

"Miss Fox? Who you mean?"

"Mr. Blackstone's daughter. The actress," Joe explained.

"You means Miss Alice. Sometime she come here. Not often. Wha' for you aksin' me all dese questions, white boys?"

Frank saw that it was time to beat a retreat before the suspicions of the old caretaker were too greatly aroused.

"Just curious," he said. "I don't suppose you would let us have a look around

the grounds, would you?"

"Mebbe yo' didn't see dat sign down neah de road. It say 'No Trespassin', an' it mean Ah ain't to let nobody prowls roun' heah when Mistah Blackstone is away."

"We don't believe in signs," chirped Chet. "So long, Mr. Jones. We'll be on our way."

"Wish dat boy Luke would come back," the old man grumbled as he escorted the lads to the gate. "Ain't heard nuffin' 'bout him since he went away."

Jones saw them to the road and watched until they were well on their way toward town.

"Not much success there," grumbled Chet. "Seems to me I've heard the name Luke Jones before," said Joe reflectively, "but I can't remember just where."

"Same here," agreed Frank. They racked their brains in an effort to recall at what place, if any, they had heard it.

"We may as well go into Larchmont now and see Miss Pennyweather," Joe said finally.

Chet, however, objected to this suggestion. "I have nothing to do with those handwriting specimens," he said. "Besides, I'm hungry. I'll go back and watch camp. Perhaps I can do some prowling around the Rand or Blackstone estates while you 're gone. Anyway, someone might come along and steal our food."

Frank grinned.

"That would be a tragedy," he agreed. "All right, Chet. You stay behind. We'll go on and have our talk with Miss Pennyweather."

The lady in question lived on a quiet, respectable side street in the residential section of the town. She was a spinster of uncertain age and very retiring.

"Back again?" she exclaimed in surprise when she answered the bell, to find the Hardy Boys on her doorstep. "What's the matter?"

It was from Miss Pennyweather that the two brothers had procured the original handwriting specimens they had lost in the wreck of the Resolute.

"Back again," said Frank brightly. "I hope we're not bothering you, Miss Pennyweather, but we lost the samples of writing you gave us."

"Lost them!" Miss Pennyweather looked at the boys sharply through her spectacles. She was evidently puzzled. "That was extremely careless of you."

"Not exactly careless. It just couldn't be helped. We were shipwrecked on the way home."

Miss Pennyweather opened the door a little wider.

"Come in and tell me about it," she said.

CHAPTER XV

BEHIND THE FEUD

THE HARDY boys knew something of the history of the case on which Fenton Hardy was working that involved Miss Pennyweather. The spinster's father had once been a prominent lawyer, who had another side to his nature as well. In his spare time he liked to write plays.

"They were excellent productions," Miss Pennyweather told the boys, "and were presented in New York as well as on the road. My father made a great deal of money from them."

A man by the name of Joel Warner later appeared on the scene to accuse Mr. Pennyweather of plagiarism. He claimed that the plays were copies of dramas which he had written himself, and had accordingly taken the matter to court.

"Mr. Warner was nothing but a disappointed playwright," said Miss Pennyweather. "My father never once read anything he wrote."

Mr. Pennyweather had died while the case was still before the courts. His works were forthwith purchased by a large motion picture concern. This transaction naturally gave rise to further complications, which led eventually to Mr. Hardy's entry into the case. He had been engaged by the film company to protect their rights to the plays.

Miss Pennyweather was a gentle, mild-mannered little woman, and totally bewildered by the strange legal tangle in which she found herself enmeshed. She could hardly make up her mind whether to look upon Fenton Hardy as a friend or as a foe.

His duty, of course, was to gather sufficient evidence to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that Amos Pennyweather was the author of the plays that had been purchased by the film company. In these works the specimens of his handwriting played an important part, for Joel Warner claimed that certain notes on which the dramas had been based had been written by himself, not by Mr. Pennyweather.

"If you don't," said Frank, "we should like to look through a few of these notations as well as any old documents you may have in connection with the plays."

Miss Pennyweather readily gave her consent, and unlocked the antique desk. From one of the drawers she took a bundle of old papers.

"Here is all the material in connection with my father's plays," she said. "You may look it over if you like."

Frank and Joe set to work at once with great enthusiasm. On their previous visit they had not been accorded the privilege of examining the records. It now occurred to Frank that they might discover some data that would assist their father in the case.

They had not gone far before Frank discovered a faded newspaper clipping. The headline startled him, for it read:

"RAND-BLACKSTONE FEUD

TERMINATES IN LYNCHING"

The lad stared at the account. The Rands and the Blackstones! What connection did they have with Miss Pennyweather and her father's plays?

He looked at the date scribbled across the article, and discovered the paper had been printed some thirty years before.

"Do you mind if I read this?" he asked.

Miss Pennyweather picked up the clipping, flushed, and looked very much embarrassed. Suddenly she snatched the slip of paper.

"Please!" she begged. "I don't want to have you see that. I didn't know it was among the papers."

"It happens that at the present time we're rather interested in the Rands and the Blackstones," Frank said. "That's why the headline caught my eye."

"Why should you be interested in them?" asked Miss Pennyweather.

The boys then told her about the affair on the Resolute, with its unpleasant consequences. She was deeply interested.

"I know Mr. Blackstone very well," Miss Pennyweather said. "In fact," she added hesitantly, "at one time I was engaged to him. The Rands, too—they have always been friends of my family. John Rand, Ruel Rand's father, once proposed to me, but I refused him."

The Hardy boys were astonished at these revelations. The tangled threads of the Rand-Blackstone mystery were being brought together in an unexpected place. They were learning more from Miss Pennyweather, the last source they would have imagined, than they had gleaned from all their other investigations.

"Mr. Blackstone was engaged to you?" Frank queried suddenly.

Miss Pennyweather flushed with embarrassment.

"He married another girl," she replied simply, with a note of sad finality in her voice.

"What was the cause of the feud between the Rand and Blackstone families!" inquired Joe abruptly.

"It's a long story," the lady answered. "The two families had never been on good terms. The affair came to a head when Mr. Blackstone was running for sheriff, for he was politically influential in town. During his campaign John Rand was lynched, and as he had opposed the election, it was hinted that Blackstone may have had something to do with the lynching."

"I have never believed the story myself, but the Rands did. Naturally, their bitterness toward the Blackstones increased. The elder son of the Rands, Ewald, witnessed the lynching, and it drove him insane. He has been unbalanced ever since."

"Does he still live at home?" inquired Frank.

"Oh, yes. His mother took care of him after the lynching. It is said that Ewald is partly to blame for the continuation of the feud, for he ran away several times, and was actually accused of poisoning a well on the Blackstone place. Oh, there have been some bitter quarrels between those two families! Rand's dogs killed some of Blackstone's chickens, so they were shot. Then a few of Rand's horses died from a peculiar ailment and he accused Blackstone of poisoning them. Blackstone tried to have Ewald Rand sent to an asylum, and nearly killed him one time trying to get him out of the house while Ruel was away."

Frank leaned forward.

"Aren't some of those episodes contained in one of Mr. Pennyweather's plays?" he suggested.

"Yes, indeed. All of them deal with life in this locality. I know Father made use of the Rand-Blackstone feud for play material several times."

"That's enough proof that they were his own words!" declared Frank. "Joel Warner couldn't have written them because he never lived in Larchmont, wasn't acquainted with the Rands or the Blackstones, couldn't have known about the feud, and didn't have the proper material. This information may make all the difference in the world when the case comes up."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Miss Pennyweather. "It's true, too. My father based one of his plays, 'The Troublemaker', directly on the feud. I have his notebooks here to prove my assertion."

She went to a nearby desk, opened a drawer and produced several booklets as well as a sheaf of documents. After the Hardy boys had examined them they declared there was material to support Frank's theory that many

of the plays were based on incidents in the local feud.

"If Mr. Blackstone and Ruel Rand would produce some evidence to prove this," said Frank, "the plagiarism case would fall to pieces. Joel Warner wouldn't have a chance."

Miss Pennyweather looked doubtful.

"We would never be able to do that."

"It would be very difficult, no doubt," agreed Joe, "but it would certainly win the case against Warner."

"The Rand-Blackstone feud has been going on for many years," said Miss Pennyweather. "Neither family would be likely to divulge secrets just to help me."

The boys agreed with her that there was very little hope of their getting the two men to give out any information about their long-standing differences.

"My father made many efforts to end the quarrel," Miss Pennyweather told them.

"He was a lawyer, and both families called upon him at various times to act for one against the other. It was awkward for him, as he wanted to be on good terms with everybody."

When she concluded her story the boys did not doubt that much of the material for the plays had been inspired by the historic feud. Now they were faced with the problem of proving it. Without the assistance of both Rand and Blackstone it would be difficult.

Finally the lads took their departure and returned to the campsite, where they found Chet in a state of great excitement.

"I was hoping you would hurry back," he exclaimed. "I have some news."

"What's up?"

Chet looked very mysterious.

"I'm beginning to think I'm not such a poor detective myself," he said. "I did a little snooping around. And what do you think I learned?"

"Out with it," said Frank. "Don't keep us in suspense."

"Samuel Blackstone is here at Hidden Harbor," Chet announced.

The Hardy boys were amazed.

"How did you discover that?" Joe asked.

"I saw him. I was prowling around his estate and saw a car drive up to the door. Mr. Blackstone was carried out of the auto and taken into the house. Miss Fox came with him, as well as our good friend Heator, the detective."

Frank whistled softly.

"Good work, Chet. You're sure you weren't mistaken? It was Samuel Blackstone?"

"I saw him with my own eyes. I overheard Miss Fox and Heator conversing in the garden later, and Heator was making love to her."

"Let's go back there and spy out the land," Joe suggested. "Perhaps we'll get a chance to talk to Mr. Blackstone."

"And more than likely get chased off his property," grinned Chet.

Bearing in mind the "No Trespassing" sign that had been pointed out to them by the old caretaker, the boys did not make an open approach to the Blackstone estate; instead, they crawled over a fence and kept under cover of the bushes and shrubbery, coming finally within sight of the garden. Frank, who was in the lead as the boys stole quietly forward, suddenly came to a stop and made a warning gesture to the others.

In the silence they could hear voices--the voices of the detective and Alice Fox.

THE MAN WITH THE ROCK

"I KEPT track of them as well as I could," grumbled Heator. "They would have been suspicious if I had alighted at the Larchmont station so I went on to the junction and got off there. But I haven't been able to find those boys since."

"They're staying at the Rand place, very likely," returned Miss Fox.

"I went there. I've been watching that estate and I 'm sure they didn't show up there. My own opinion is that you 're on the wrong track, Alice. Those kids aren't smart enough to be in league with Ruel Rand."

"They were clever enough to rob my father, If you could speak of it as such."

"Well," said Heator, "I talked to them on the train and somehow I think they are not crooked."

"Why did they come down here to Larchmont if they weren't in league with Ruel Rand?" demanded the actress.

"Probably they're just on a vacation," ventured Heator.

I particularly asked you to shadow them and find out what they were doing. Then, just as soon as they reach Larchmont you lose them. What sort of detective work do you call that?"

I did the best I could," said Heator. "Don't be angry, Alice. If they are still in Larchmont I'll find them."

Frank edged forward and peered through the bushes. The detective and Miss Fox were walking slowly down a garden path. Suddenly Heator grasped the actress's hand.

"Why are you so cold to me, Alice? You know I've been in love with you ever since I first saw you on the stage--"

Miss Fox, however, was evidently in no mood for love-making. She drew away her hand.

"Please don't be foolish, Mr. Heator."

Suddenly Frank heard a slight crackling of twigs. He turned, and glanced over his shoulder. Not ten feet away from him, gazing out from behind a clump of bushes, stood a Negro. There was something extremely familiar about the man's face. He was young and loudly dressed. Then, in an instant Frank recognized in him the colored man who had been on the train during their journey to Croston. Luke Jones was what he had called himself. Frank knew now why that name had seemed familiar when old Mr. Jones, the caretaker of the Blackstone estate, had spoken of his son being in the North. That overdressed, arrogant colored youth was none other than Mr. Blackstone's servant.

When the colored fellow saw that Frank had spied him he instantly disappeared in the bushes. Meanwhile, Miss Fox and Heator had gone on toward

the house. Neither Chet nor Joe had seen the Negro, and were greatly upset when Frank told them about the incident.

"He'll go right up to the house and tell Heator," said Joe.

"Maybe we can head him off," Chet suggested.

The three immediately set out in pursuit of Luke Jones. Soon they caught sight of the fellow scurrying through the grounds in the direction of the caretaker's house, which was located some distance back of the Blackstone mansion. They caught up to him without difficulty. He regarded them with an insolent stare.

"What you boys doin' heah?" he demanded. "Spyin' on Missy Alice, huh?"

"How about yourself?" asked Frank. "Weren't you spying, too?"

The more he saw of Luke Jones the more he disliked the fellow, who was dressed in a suit of extreme collegiate cut, and wore a pink shirt with a violet necktie. A diamond ring twinkled on his finger, and his patent leather shoes shone.

"Yo' white boys bettah git away from heah, Ah's warnin' yo'," he said. "You'll git into plenty ob trouble hangin' 'roun' de Blackstone place. Ah knows who yo' is. Ah knows lots mo' dan yo' thinks Ah does, but Ah 'm not tellin' nuthin'."

"How is Mr. Blackstone? Is he getting any better?" asked Joe.

Luke Jones looked mysterious.

"Mebbe he is an' mebbe he ain't. Yo's not gittin' nuthin' out ob me." He twisted the big diamond ring on his finger, held it up to the light, and regarded the valuable stone with pride. "Ah knows all 'bout how Mr. Blackstone got hurt. Ef yo' don' want to git into no trouble, jes' stay 'way from heah."

At that moment the door of the caretaker's house opened and old Mr. Jones came out. As he approached the group he said:

"Luke! What yo' talkin' 'bout now, yo' wuthless one? An' yo' white boys--didn' Ah tell yo' not to come trespassin' on dis yeah property?"

"We're leaving right away," said Frank, trying to placate the old fellow. "We were just having a little talk with your son."

The old man sniffed contemptuously.

"Wastin' yo' time when yo' talks to him. Evah since he's been up No'th with Massa Blackstone he thinks he's smart. Fine new clothes, big diamon' ring, an' he swaggers 'roun' heah lak he own de place."

Jones eyed his son with disfavor. It was evident that he was worried over Luke's apparent prosperity, as well as his unseemly conduct since coming back from up North.

"I think that fellow will bear watching," remarked Frank. The boys were on their way back to camp after having failed to extract any information of value from either the caretaker or his son. "Luke Jones is too fresh, for one thing. Perhaps he is only boasting, but he pretends to know a lot of things he isn't

willing to talk about."

"I hope he doesn't tell Heator that we were on the property," Joe said.

Frank's remarks concerning Luke Jones were borne out in striking fashion the next evening, when an incident occurred which gave the boys conclusive proof not only about this fact, but also about the idea that the Rand-Blackstone feud was far from buried. They had decided to watch the Rand homestead, and from a vantage point among the trees had seen Ruel leave the house and go around to a side door, which he unlocked. Near the entrance was a heavily barred window.

"Perhaps that is where Ewald Rand, the insane brother, is kept," suggested Joe.

He was right in his surmise. In a few moments Ruel Rand emerged, accompanied by a small, untidily garbed man who walked with a strange, shambling gait. His hair was unkempt, while in his eyes there was the vacant stare of one whose mind is unbalanced. Ruel Rand held him firmly by the arm.

The pair did not attempt to go toward the main road but struck out across the grounds in the direction of the seashore. This, apparently, was a method of giving the afflicted man sufficient exercise. The Hardy boys and Chet followed. The two men reached the trees that skirted the shores of Hidden Harbor and strolled up and down for about an hour. The hidden watchers were becoming a little weary of their vigil when Frank suddenly seized Joe urgently by the shoulder.

"Look!" he whispered in excitement. "Do you see someone sneaking through the trees over there to the left?"

Joe and Chet peered through the gathering twilight, and caught a glimpse of a dark figure flitting through the bushes. A moment later it emerged into a tiny clearing, and halted in plain view of the watchers.

The man was Luke Jones. What was he doing on the Rand property? And why was he so furtive?

Details of the Rand-Blackstone feud instantly flashed through the minds of the boys. Was the servant seeking in some way to avenge his master, Samuel Blackstone?

"Perhaps he's only hunting," suggested Chet.

"We mustn't let him out of our sight!" Frank ordered.

Cautiously they followed him. Luke Jones disappeared among the trees again. The boys crept closer until they were once more within sight of the burly young Negro.

He advanced stealthily until he came out onto a little ridge a short distance above the spot where Ruel Rand and his brother were walking up and down. The Hardys and Chet were mystified, for Luke stood motionless, gazing at the two figures below him.

Suddenly he stooped down, and the boys could see him tugging at a large rock. In a few moments he had dislodged it and began to roll it to the edge of the ridge.

"What do you suppose--" whispered Joe. Before he could say any more,

Luke Jones tipped the boulder over the edge. Ewald was directly below!

CHAPTER XVII

RAND'S DENIAL

THERE was no time to lose. In another moment Luke would let go his missile. At that distance he could not miss the unsuspecting man below.

"Stop!" cried out Frank.

It was the only thing to do to disconcert the fellow's attention before he might push the rock. At the same instant the Hardy boy dashed forward, with Joe and Chet close at his heels, shouting.

The sudden yell frightened Luke Jones. He looked up sharply just as the stone left his hand. Then he swung around to meet the rush of the three boys.

The screams had been heard by Ewald, who dodged just in time to keep from being injured. Frank saw all this by a hurried glance just as he leaped past a thicket and hurled himself upon the Negro.

Luke swung around and grabbed a second stone from the ground. Frank tried to twist it out of the man's grasp. Had the Hardy boy been alone he would have been at a decided disadvantage in the struggle, for the colored youth was tall and powerful. Both Joe and Chet tackled the fellow a moment later.

The servant was bewildered by the sudden onslaught of the trio. Moreover he had been greatly startled when he had found that his actions had been witnessed. Growling, he tried to fight the boys off. Frank hung on grimly, while Joe and Chet tried to grasp the fellow's legs.

Luke Jones was smart, and when he saw he had three antagonists to deal with, he decided that his policy should be flight rather than fight. With an abrupt turn he released his grasp on the rock, and the movement was so unexpected that Frank stumbled backward, the missile gripped in his hands. The colored boy suddenly swung violently around and sent Chet reeling into a clump of bushes. Then, tearing himself free from Joe's grasp, he sprang away and went plunging through the trees.

The boys ran after him, but were no match for the frightened fellow. Luke Jones disappeared in a moment among the shadows, running madly back toward the Blackstone estate. The Hardys and Chet soon saw that further pursuit would be useless, so they gave up the chase.

"Well, we gave him a good scare, anyhow," said Frank.

"And I got a wallop on the jaw," panted the stout lad out of breath from the

brief run.

"The black rascal!" Joe exclaimed. "He would have injured Ewald Rand if we hadn't yelled in time."

Frank shook his head gravely.

"I think this Rand-Blackstone feud is far more serious than we imagined it to be," he said.

The boys looked around in search of Ruel Rand and his brother, but the pair had disappeared, evidently having been frightened away by the sounds of the subsequent struggle in the bushes.

"They can't be far from here," Joe suggested. "Let's go up and tell them what has happened."

"They'll be far more interested to know what almost happened," grumbled Chet.

The boys went back from the beach to the grounds of the Rand estate. It was growing darker, and as they approached the house they indistinctly saw a man emerge from a side door with something under his arm. He walked directly toward them, and soon they recognized him as Ruel Rand. In his hand was a shotgun.

"Good gosh! Let's get out of here!" Chet quavered. "Maybe he thinks we threw that rock at his brother and he's coming out to tackle us."

The Hardy boys stood their ground, however, and waited until Rand came striding up.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here!" he demanded angrily. "Who threw that rock at my brother! What was the meaning of all that rumpus on the ridge?"

He peered at them in the gloom. Then, in a startled voice, he said:

"I've seen you fellows before."

"We were passengers with you on board the Resolute!" Frank told him.

His voice became harsh. "What are you doing here?"

"We saved your brother from being wounded, that's all," declared Chet, growing braver. "I think you ought not to kick about that."

"Who aimed at him!"

"Luke Jones."

"Samuel Blackstone's man, eh? He tried to hurt Ewald!"

"He came mighty close to doing it," said Frank. "We just happened on the scene in time to frighten him as he pushed over the boulder. Now he has cleared out."

Ruel Rand looked at the three boys suspiciously.

"How did you happen to be near by at the time?"

"We saw him following you and your brother so we came along to find out what he was up to," Joe replied, not caring to give a more definite explanation of their presence on the estate.

"Look here, Mr. Rand," said Frank boldly, deciding to confront the man with the details of the affair on the Resolute, "we've been hoping to have a talk with you for some time; in fact, we came down from Bayport for that very purpose."

"Why should you wish to talk to me? I don't know you."

"I suppose you are aware that old Mr. Blackstone was assaulted and robbed of a big sum of money during the shipwreck?"

Ruel Rand shrugged indifferently. "I didn't hear anything about it. Even so, I shouldn't care. There's no friendly feeling between me and Samuel Blackstone."

"You didn't hear about it? But don't you know something about it?"

"Why should I know anything about it?"

"You were on the ship. You were in the corridor when Mr. Blackstone was knocked down, and were seen bending over him."

"I saw you," declared Chet.

"We have been accused of robbing him," Frank continued. "As a matter of fact, we have been arrested for it, although we're innocent."

Ruel Rand was silent for a while.

"And now you're accusing me!" he exclaimed finally. "Well, I must say you have a nerve, coming onto a man's property and accusing him of being a thief."

"Didn't you do it?"

"No!" shouted Rand angrily. "I didn't lay a finger on Sam Blackstone. I didn't take a nickel of his money."

"You were on the same boat, and you are his enemy," Joe reminded him.

"That's true enough. I admit that the Rands and the Blackstones have been enemies for years. My father was lynched as a result of that feud. My mother is broken-hearted because of it. My brother was driven insane. The doctors tell me my own mind has been affected by all that has happened. I suffer from melancholia.

"Perhaps you thought I had been drinking that night when I was at dinner on the Resolute. Lots of people get that impression. I never drink. When I act queerly it's because of my mental condition and the Rand-Blackstone feud is to blame for it. Do you wonder that I have small love for Sam Blackstone and that I called him a scoundrel? But I didn't strike him, and I certainly didn't steal his money."

Ruel Rand broke off suddenly in his furious denial.

"But why are you asking me all these questions?" he demanded. "Sam Blackstone sent you here. You were with Luke Jones, and now you're trying to pretend you're friendly to me. You're spies, that's what you are! Get off my property."

The boys were so astonished by this sudden change of demeanor on the part of the eccentric Ruel Rand that they were speechless for a moment. The man gestured with his shotgun.

"Get out of here, I tell you! I have talked too much. Blackstone sent you to find out what you could. Go away! If I catch any of you on my property again I'll use this weapon, I warn you."

"We're sorry you look at it that way, Mr. Rand-" began Frank, hoping to placate him.

But the man would not listen.

"Get off my property! Clear out! Clear out of here!" he stormed. "And if you come back it will be the worse for you."

Argument was useless. The boys turned and walked back toward the trees on the edge of the estate, while Ruel Rand stood watching to see that they obeyed his command.

"Nice, friendly sort of fellow!" observed Chet ruefully. "He's as changeable as the weather. I think he is as cracked as his brother."

"We didn't gain much by talking to him, that's sure," Frank agreed. "And yet he seemed pretty positive in his denial that he had anything to do with robbing Samuel Blackstone."

"If he didn't, then who did?" demanded Joe. "That's the question. Still, I'm beginning to believe the man was telling the truth. Perhaps someone else robbed the old gentleman after all."

"A fat chance we have of proving it," said Chet.

"Let's get back to camp and go to bed," Joe suggested. "It looks as if we're not to be popular on either the Rand or the Blackstone estates."

When the boys returned to the shore of Hidden Harbor a few minutes later they discovered that some marauder had been there before them. The tent had been torn down, their blankets had been tossed out on the beach, boxes of supplies had been upset, and the place in general looked as if it had been struck by a hurricane.

"What lowdown person did this?" yelled Chet wrathfully.

With exclamations of anger and indignation the boys set about sizing up the damage. Clearly the destruction had been wrought out of sheer spite, for they soon found that nothing had been stolen. This relieved Chet considerably for he had leaped to the dreadful conclusion that the food supplies were gone.

They lit a fire, and by the light of the blaze began setting the camp in order again. While Joe and Chet put up the tent, Frank began gathering together the packages and boxes scattered along the beach.

Suddenly, as he walked back to the campfire, he stooped and picked up something from the sand. As he gazed at it, his eyes shone with satisfaction.

"I know who did the damage, fellows!" Frank sang out. "I've found an important clue here."

CHAPTER XVIII

FRANK'S DISGUISE

Joe and Chet dashed over to Frank. "What did you find?" they demanded eagerly.

Frank held out his hand. In the open palm there rested a large diamond ring. The stone sparkled and glittered in the light of the campfire. Chet and Joe recognized it at once.

"Luke Jones's ring!" exclaimed the latter.

Frank nodded.

"He must have dropped it while he was tearing our camp to pieces. I'm sure it's the one we saw on his finger today."

Joe picked up the piece of jewelry and examined it curiously. He turned it over, then brought it closer to the light, peering intently, at the inside of the band.

"I wonder if it belongs to Luke Jones after all," he said quietly. "Come and take a look at this."

What Joe had discovered was an inscription engraved on the inside of the ring. It was very fine, but could be read easily.

"To Father from Alice," it said.

Chet, slower in grasping its meaning, queried:

"Who is Alice?"

"Alice Fox!" exclaimed Frank. "Samuel Blackstone's daughter."

"Then that ring must belong to old Mr. Blackstone himself!" said Chet. "How did Luke Jones ever get possession of it?",

"Stole it, most likely. It's hardly probable that the old man would give his servant that valuable ring as a present, particularly when it was a gift from his own daughter," reasoned Joe.

They put the piece of jewelry carefully away and continued their work of restoring the camp to some semblance of order. After supper Frank sat for a long time deeply engrossed in thought. Finally he said:

"I have an idea as to how I'm going to find out about that ring," but he would

not tell Joe and Chet the details of his plan.

Early the next morning he was up and on his way to Larchmont before his companions were awake. When he returned he carried with him a bulky package, which he carried into the tent. Joe and Chet were preparing breakfast outside.

"What is he up to?" inquired Chet curiously, frying the bacon over the campfire.

"He has some scheme under way," replied Joe. "We'll find out when he's ready to tell us about it."

Suddenly a voice broke in:

"Gentlemens, would you want to buy a new tent cheap?"

The two boys looked up. Standing in front of the canopy was a strange man, wearing grey trousers and a black coat. On his head was a black derby, and he had a short black beard.

"We don't want to buy a tent," said Chet. "We have one."

"Vell, maybe you like to trade?"

Suddenly Joe broke into a roar of laughter.

"It's Frank!" he shouted.

The figure in the stiff hat grinned. "Fooled you, eh?" asked the elder Hardy boy.

Chet gazed at him, open-mouthed. "Well, you certainly fooled me!" he admitted. "I thought you were a second-hand man. Where did you get that outfit? And the make-up?"

"I rented the clothes and the false beard in Larchmont this morning."

"What's the idea?" Joe asked curiously. "I'm going to call at the Blackstone homestead," Frank told them. "Do you think I'll get by without being recognized? Of course I won't use that awful accent on Mr. Blackstone."

Both Chet and Joe agreed that the disguise was perfect. Frank outlined his plan, which was to pose as a sort of dealer and pawnbroker. He would call at the Blackstone house with the ring to try to find out if it actually did belong to the elderly gentleman who owned the place.

"Who knows but that I might pick up some other information, too, if the people there don't suspect who I really am?"

Frank spent the greater part of the morning rehearsing his part and improving on his make-up until he felt confident that he should be able to present himself at the door of the Blackstone house without risk of discovery. His greatest danger, he realized, lay in the fact that Alice Fox was an actress and consequently might be able to glean that he was merely in disguise.

That afternoon he made his way up the driveway to the Blackstone mansion. The bell was answered by Mr. Ed Heator, the private detective.

"I'm a dealer in valuable second-hand articles," said Frank in a soft voice but without an accent. "May I see Mr. Blackstone at once?"

"No," growled Heator. "We haven't anything to sell. You have a lot of nerve coming here trying to drum up business."

"I'm not trying to get business. You're mistaken. I wish to do Mr. Blackstone a favor."

Frank was glad to see that Heator appeared to be completely fooled by the disguise.

"What sort of favor?" asked the detective.

"It's about a ring. A diamond ring. It's worth a lot of money. I think it belongs to Mr. Blackstone," responded Frank softly.

"If it belongs to Mr. Blackstone, how did you get it?"

"That would be telling," returned Frank shrewdly.

"Let's see the ring."

"Isn't Mr. Blackstone here? Can't he see it himself? I'm not handing this personal property over to strangers. It's too valuable," concluded the Hardy boy wisely.

"Well, wait a minute and I'll see if Mr. Blackstone knows anything about it.",

Heator disappeared, grumbling to himself, but came back a few minutes later and said:

"You may come in. Mr. Blackstone said he did lose a ring.

Frank was ushered into the house. He was a trifle nervous as he followed the detective into a large, luxuriously furnished room where once again he came face to face with Samuel Blackstone. The old man, his head still heavily bandaged, reclined in an easy chair near the window, with his daughter standing by his side.

"What's this about a ring?" he demanded.

"I'm a dealer in many articles," said Frank. "In my business I often run across some very funny things. Today I got a ring. Don't ask me how I received it, because I do not wish to tell. But if, you have lost one, perhaps I have it."

"I lost a diamond ring a short time ago," answered the elderly man. "It was stolen from me."

"Describe it, Mr. Blackstone. Maybe it's the one I have."

"Inside the band there is an inscription which reads 'To Father from Alice,'" replied the old man.

Frank dug into his pocket and produced the piece of jewelry.

"I'm happy to be able to restore it to you, Mr. Blackstone," he said, handing over the ring.

"Where did you get it?" inquired the old man in amazement.

Frank shook his head.

"Ask me no questions. My business has its secrets. I deal in jewels, stage properties and queer, unreal things. It is all in the game."

Heator, the detective, was strongly disposed to interrogate the stranger, but Frank succeeded in warding him off. Mr. Blackstone insisted that the recovery of the ring warranted a reward, but the boy refused to accept any compensation.

"It cost me nothing," he said. It doesn't belong to me. It belongs to you. Why should I take money for giving back to you what is rightfully yours?"

"But how did you know it was mine?"

Frank's manner was still mysterious. "I was talking to Miss Pennyweather yesterday," he replied. "She told me her interesting father was a friend of yours."

There was a dual motive behind this remark. The boy wanted to leave the impression that Miss Pennyweather might have put him on the track of the ring's owner; at the same time, he desired to turn the subject to a discussion of the deceased playwright's affairs. The ruse worked, Mr. Blackstone admitting that Mr. Pennyweather had indeed been a friend of his. One thing led to another, and Frank stressed his love for the stage until he finally managed to work the conversation around to the subject of the dramas the lawyer had written.

"He got some of his ideas from local gossip, I've been told," Frank hinted.

"Well, yes, that's true," admitted Blackstone. "As a matter of fact, one of his plays is based on an incident that occurred in my own home. Pennyweather wrote and asked me to give him permission to use the material, some of which deals with our own family history." The elderly man opened a desk drawer, and after rummaging around for a moment produced several old, faded envelopes. "These are the very letters he sent me."

"A man told me Pennyweather didn't write those plays," said Frank. "What a shame! Such excellent plots! So he did not pen them?"

"Nonsense! These letters alone prove that Pennyweather was the author of them. Nobody else could have conceived them." Mr. Blackstone looked thoughtfully at the envelopes in his hand. "I've been intending to burn these for a long time, so I might as well do it now. No use cluttering up my desk with a lot of useless correspondence."

He made a movement as if to arise and toss the papers into the fire, but Frank broke in quickly.

"Let me assist you," he said.

Before Mr. Blackstone could utter a word the boy reached forward, took the letters from the old man's hand, and strode toward the fireplace where a fire was burning in the grate.

Frank's back was turned for but a moment, yet in that time he executed a difficult feat of sleight-of-hand. So deftly that no one observed what he was doing, he substituted for the letters a handful of worthless papers he had snatched from his coat pocket. These he promptly flung into the fire, at the same time slipping the valuable missives into an inside pocket.

Congratulating himself on the success of his ruse, Frank came back to the chair where he had been sitting and picked up his hat.

"I must go now," he said, bowing to Mr. Blackstone and Alice. "I'm a busy fellow."

"I wish you'd let me reward you for restoring to me my ring. Can't you tell me where you found it?" queried the old man.

Frank merely shook his head, then started toward the hall, eager to get out of the house with the precious letters as quickly as possible. Heator escorted him to the door, and was just about to open it when Miss Fox suddenly hurried from the living room.

"Just a moment!" she exclaimed sharply. Then, coming close to Frank, she looked at him intently. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" she asked.

The boy was embarrassed. Had the shrewd actress penetrated his disguise? He hoped not.

"Maybe so," he said. "I've been lots of places. Perhaps you've been in my shop."

"You're no pawnbroker!" declared Miss Fox scornfully. "I thought there was something odd about you. I've been watching you ever since you came into the house."

"What's the big idea, Alice?" demanded the detective, getting excited. "What's it all about?"

"If you weren't so stupid, Ed Heator," she cried, "you would know without being told. This fellow isn't a pawnbroker, but one of the persons I paid you to shadow. He is one of the Hardy boys who followed me to the hospital in Croston. One of the Hardy boys-right under your nose, and you didn't recognize him!"

Frank made a lunge toward the door in a vain attempt to escape. But the detective was too quick for him.

"No, you don't!" growled Heator, barring the way.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE RUMBLESEAT

FRANK realized that he was in a predicament. He had been caught in disguise in Blackstone's house, and if a search were to reveal the important letters he had taken, his plight would be a serious one indeed.

Heator grabbed the boy and began pushing him back toward the living room.

"Come in here!" ordered the detective. "One of the Hardy boys, eh? We must talk this over."

"What's the matter? What has happened?" demanded Mr. Blackstone, as the struggling pair came into the room, followed by Miss Fox. "Bless my soul, Heator, what are you doing to the dealer?"

"He's no dealer. He's a spy!" cried the detective, as proud as if he had actually made the discovery himself. "He's one of those Hardy boys who beat you up and robbed you on the boat!"

Mr. Blackstone was wildly angry.

"One of the Hardy boys !" he exclaimed.

"Sure!" Heator snatched the false beard from Frank's face. "Take a look at him!"

"It's true!" shouted Blackstone. He got out of his chair with difficulty and advanced toward Frank, wrathfully brandishing his cane in the air. "You're one of those rascally friends of Ruel Rand, and now I know where you got that ring. Either you or Rand stole it from me."

"Trying to give it back because they were afraid it would be traced to them if they were to sell it,," guessed Heator. "I'm going to put the handcuffs on this lad, Mr. Blackstone, and see that he is turned over to the police."

"No, you're not!" said Frank, beginning to struggle in real earnest. A further police charge, he knew, would be highly serious in view of the fact that he was already out on bail as a consequence of Mr. Blackstone's accusations in Croston.

With a swift movement he wrenched his arms free from Heator's grasp. Then, as the detective plunged at him, Frank ducked and leaped aside.

Miss Fox screamed. Blackstone aimed a blow at Frank with his stick. Heator made another dive at the boy, grappled with him. They both stumbled up against the wall. The detective was trying to get handcuffs out of his pocket and cling to Frank at the same time.

The excitement was too much for old Mr. Blackstone, and suddenly he clapped his hand over his heart. His face turned pale. Then he collapsed to the floor in a faint.

Miss Fox cried out in alarm and rushed to her father's side. Heator wheeled about, forgetting all about Frank in the face of this new development. He, too, stepped to Mr. Blackstone's assistance.

Given this moment's respite, Frank would have attempted to make his escape by the front door. He had taken only a step, however, when something surprising happened. A section of the wall against which he and the detective had stumbled in their short fight opened, then swung slowly inward.

The aperture was just sufficiently large to admit him. Frank slipped into the opening, then reached out his hand and pulled the secret door shut behind him. He realized that the spring controlling the hidden entrance had doubtless been released by the sudden impact of the two bodies as they struck against the wall during the struggle. Heator and Miss Fox were so busy trying to revive

Mr. Blackstone that neither of them had noticed the dramatic disappearance of the boy.

Frank groped his way forward in the darkness, and found a flight of stairs which led downward between the walls of the old house.

Cautiously, step by step, he descended. When he reached the bottom he struck a match and looked around. He found himself in a long narrow passage, apparently a secret corridor between two parts of the mansion's basement.

He made his way quickly down this hallway. Frank knew he had been fortunate to escape, but realized that he was still in grave danger. The Blackstones doubtless were aware of the secret door, and it was possible that he might be followed.

The passage ended in another flight of steps that led upward. Close to the bottom of the stairway Frank noticed a large pile of fresh earth, and saw the entrance to a tunnel. Striking another match, he examined the place more closely. The tunnel, now empty, had apparently been crudely dug, and appeared to extend for a considerable distance. It did not seem to offer an avenue of escape, however, so Frank turned to the steps again and ascended them until he bumped his head against a trap-door directly above the stairs.

The Hardy boy waited, listening, wondering all the while just what he ought to do. If he should raise the board above him he might find himself in the Blackstone house again. As he was going over these things in his mind he heard someone whistling. Then came the slow tread of footsteps and the sound of an axe.

Someone, more than likely old Jones, the caretaker, was chopping wood not far from the trapdoor.

Slowly Frank reached up and pushed against the aperture, hoping that it was not barred from above. To his relief it gave way. Raising it a few inches, he peered out.

He looked into an empty shed, through the entrance of which he could see old Jones at the wood-pile out in the yard. Concluding there was no chance to escape that way, Frank decided he would have to remain where he was until it should grow dark. Then he would try to escape from the Blackstone place without being seen.

He lowered the trap-door and sat down on the steps in the gloom. He took comfort in the thought that he still had the letters, those valuable missives to prove Pennyweather's authorship of the plays. If he could get to his father and give him the papers, Fenton Hardy would be able to win the case with ease for the playwright's daughter.

Frank could hear the steady chop-chop of the axe as the old caretaker attacked the woodpile. Then he heard a voice cry out:

"Yo' done any diggin' dis afternoon?"

Frank perked up his ears. It was Luke Jones. Then the old man answered:

"Ah ain't had time to dig."

"We got a lot of work to do on dat tunnel yet," replied Luke. "Maybe we bettah git busy an' do some diggin' tonight."

Frank gathered that the two men were speaking of the mysterious passage he had seen at the foot of the underground staircase. He was puzzled and curious. Why were Luke and his father digging it?

"Luke, how long is it goin' to take us to finish dat tunnel?" asked the old man.

"Ah dunno," replied Luke, "but when we gits it done we'll be right under dat Rand house and kin topple it down on der heads."

Frank now grasped the plot clearly.

"Ah dunno where you got such a good idea, Luke," said the old man admiringly.

"Ah got it from a movie, Ah did. It was a movie made out ob one ob old Mistah Pennyweather's plays."

"I knew you didn't think dat up all out ob yo' own haid."

"Maybe not. Pennyweather thought it up but it's yo' and me dat do de diggin'. We gotta git back to work in dat tunnel tonight."

Luke had evidently moved some distance away, for his voice could no longer be heard. The old man then resumed his wood-chopping. After a while the noise of the axe ceased, and Frank peered out again. The place was deserted.

Cautiously he raised the trap-door and ascended into the shed. There was not a soul in the yard. He slipped quickly outside and made a dash for the shelter of the wood-pile, where he was hidden from the gaze of anyone who might chance to be looking from the house.

Fortunately he had not been seen, and now he found it an easy matter to reach some tall bushes near by and from there make his way to the borders of the estate. When he finally arrived back at camp he found Chet and Joe greatly worried about his prolonged absence.

He had a thrilling story to tell of his experiences in the Blackstone house, the discovery of his disguise, and his subsequent escape. Most important of all, however, was the fact that he had succeeded in getting away with the letters that would prove Pennyweather's title to the plays.

"We'll have to wire Dad about this right away," said Joe. "Let's go uptown to the telegraph office and send him a message."

"You might do that," returned Frank. "I have several other things to attend to."

He had told Joe and Chet nothing about his discovery of the secret tunnel and the plot against the Rands. He wanted to investigate this matter single-handed, for he felt that there would be more risk of discovery if all the boys should work on this angle of the case.

Chet and Joe left him at the camp and struck out along the road leading into town. They went directly to the telegraph office, where the Hardy boy drafted a message to his father, in forming him of the discovery of the letters.

Meanwhile the stout lad stood at the window and gazed curiously out into the street. Suddenly he noticed a roadster drive past, in which sat Alice Fox and the detective, Ed Heator. Chet yanked open the door of the building and stepped outside, where he saw the car heading in the direction of the railroad

station a few blocks away.

"I'll bet the fellow is being packed off and taken home," said Chet to himself.

When Joe came out of the office his friend told him what he had seen.

"Let's go to the depot and find out if Heator is really leaving town," Joe suggested at once, and they immediately headed for that place.

Behind the station they found the automobile, empty. The boys made their way cautiously around the side of the building and looked searchingly down the platform. A few yards away stood Heator and Miss Fox, evidently in the midst of an argument.

"No!" the actress was saying. "I'm not going to have you work on this case any longer, and that's final. You have made a mess of it from the start. I engaged you to follow those boys, and told you not to lose sight of them. You lost them as soon as they reached Larchmont. Then, when that boy came to the house in disguise this afternoon you didn't even recognize him. When we caught him you couldn't hold him, so he escaped. I'm not going to pay you money for wasting time like that."

"Please give me another chance and I'll find those boys for you," pleaded Heator.

"I'll find them myself. I think I can do a better job of locating those snooping youngsters than you can."

Joe nudged Chet. "Is that so?" he said softly. "Come on."

He led the way to the rear of the station and stopped beside the actress's car.

"What are you going to do?" asked Chet.

"We'll let her drive us back to Hidden Harbor," responded Joe with a grin. Quickly he raised the cover of the rumbleseat. "Climb in, Chet," he said.

The boys hastily concealed themselves in the back of the car. They did not have long to wait, for in a few minutes the train arrived. Shortly thereafter they heard the car door open, and Miss Fox get in, settling herself behind the wheel. The roadster then pulled away from the station.

Crouched down~ the boys felt themselves being carried swiftly through the streets of the town. The ride grew rougher as the machine left the pavement and struck the dirt road leading to Hidden Harbor. Joe and Chet began to regret their act, for Miss Fox started to speed, and the two lads were shaken unmercifully.

"Gosh, I hope we soon get there," grunted Chet.

At that moment they heard the blast of the horn of the car. The auto lurched violently, skidded, and theft there came a terrific crash!

THE INITIATION

Miss Fox, in rounding a curve at a high rate of speed, had been unable to avoid a collision with another car traveling toward town. Fortunately she had swung the wheel around and applied the brakes in time to lessen the force of the crash. The rear of the auto had skidded around and slammed up against a tree.

Chet and Joe, trapped inside the rumbleseat, were stunned by the force of the impact. Then, when Joe tried to thrust open the cover of the seat, he found that it was jammed.

"Hey! Help us out of here!" shouted Chet, vainly struggling to help raise the door.

Miss Fox had not been injured, nor had the driver of the other machine. The actress, white and shaking, was just scrambling out when the occupant of the other auto left his car and came across the road.

"Are you hurt!" he inquired anxiously.

"N-no!" replied Miss Fox in a trembling voice. "Are you?"

"I'm all right," the man replied.

As he stepped into the glare of the head-lights, Miss Fox recognized him at once. He was Ruel Rand!

Simultaneously he saw before him the daughter of Samuel Blackstone, his enemy. He stiffened as the realization dawned upon him.

"Oh, it's you, is it!" he said gruffly. "Why don't you look where you're going? You came around that curve at forty miles an hour. It's lucky we both weren't killed."

"How did I know you were coming!" she snapped. "Why didn't you sound your horn!"

The two boys, trapped in the back of the roadster, began raising a loud clamor.

"Let us out of here! Open up this seat! We can't raise it!"

Miss Fox swung around in complete bewilderment. At first she could not figure out the source of the uproar. Rand went around to the back of the Blackstone car to investigate.

"Looks as if your passengers were in a jam," he said.

"But I haven't any passengers. I was all alone."

"Maybe that's what you thought," Rand retorted. "We can't raise this cover while the car is against the tree. I'll back my machine up a bit and then you

can drive ahead."

He climbed into his own motor and retreated, leaving sufficient space for Miss Fox to pull her roadster ahead. When this had been done the seat cover was no longer jammed, so that the boys were able to raise it without difficulty. They scrambled out, sheepish and frightened.

Alice Fox uttered a cry of amazement.

"Why, it's two of those boys!"

Ruel Rand glared at them.

"I always thought you fellows were accomplices of Blackstone," he said. "Now I know it."

"What do you mean by hiding in my car!" demanded Miss Fox wrathfully. Then she swung on Rand. "You put them up to this. I know it."

"Don't try to pretend you were unaware that they were there," said Rand scornfully. "You're trying to protect them. Your father has been using them to spy on me." He advanced menacingly toward Chet and Joe. "It's true, isn't it?"

Before the lads could defend themselves or explain the situation, there came an interruption. A heavy truck rumbled around the curve and drew to a stop, its headlights shining on the two damaged cars and the group standing in the roadway. From out of the darkness came a belligerent voice, shouting:

"Hey, what's the idea of blockin' the road! Move them cars over and let me get past."

Miss Fox and Ruel Rand immediately got into their autos and began maneuvering them out of the truck's course.

"Let's run !" urged Chet, glad of a chance to escape.

"I'm with you," said Joe fervently, and in a moment the two had scrambled over the fence beside the road and vanished into the darkness. They lost no time in putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the scene of the collision.

They had not saved many minutes by following Joe's suggestion of hiding in the rumbleseat of Miss Fox's car. Besides being frightened and embarrassed, they experienced further unpleasantness when they lost their way in the woods while attempting a short cut to Hidden Harbor. It was therefore almost nine o'clock that night before they finally reached their camp.

They were surprised to find the place deserted. On a box beside the embers of the fire lay a note weighted down with a stone. Joe took up the slip of paper and read:

"'As soon as you come back, go down the shore until you reach the old Blackstone boathouse. Just back of the boathouse you will find a big tree. Climb it and wait for developments.'

The note was signed "Frank."

"Wants us to climb a tree, eh?" said Chet.

"I wonder what is going on at the boathouse! And why must we hide up in the tree!" ruminated Joe.

"Slice some bread and open that bottle of pickles, Joseph, my boy. Food comes first. Tree-climbing comes afterward," counseled Chet sagely.

The two boys ate a hasty meal--if a meal could be described as hasty with Chet present--and then they left camp and struck out down the shore of Hidden Harbor. Chet, meanwhile, was devouring a huge piece of pie he had snatched up at the last moment.

Eventually they came in sight of the old boathouse. It had, evidently been a luxurious place at one time, but had been abandoned and was now in a state of neglect. The building was weird and gloomy, with a sagging roof, and the mournful lapping of the waves against the dock added to the uncanny atmosphere.

The boys crept silently up the shore, past the ghostly old boathouse, and soon came in sight of the tree mentioned in Frank's message.

"What if Frank didn't write that note at all?" suggested Joe. "Maybe we're being led into a trap."

"I'm sure it was your brother's writing."

"I don't like the looks of this place," said Chet. "It smells like trouble to me. Go ahead, though. I won't back out of it now." The overhanging branches of the great tree cast a sinister shadow upon the slope. Joe ascended first, and clambered up the broad trunk until he reached the lower branches. Then he leaned over and gave Chet a hand. The stout boy came up, panting and struggling. He almost fell out of the tree, when from the darkness of the foliage above, there came a quiet voice:

"I thought you fellows would never get here. Don't make a sound. You're just in time."

"G-good g-gosh, Frank, you scared me!" squeaked Chet.

"Shh! They're coming! Look!"

Chet and Joe peered out from among the branches and saw a strange procession coming down the slope toward the old boathouse. There were about a dozen young men and boys in all, and the wan moonlight revealed that the newcomers were colored youths. At their head marched a familiar, swaggering figure--none other than Luke Jones from the Blackstone estate. When the gang was within a few yards of the big tree the members halted in its shadow and formed a ring around their leader.

"Membahs ob dis secret society!" he orated. "We is gathered heah tonight to initiate a new person into our club."

"Heah Ah is, Luke," cried a big Negro, shuffling forward. He was a huge, broad-shouldered, bullet-headed youth, very dark, and rather stupid looking.

"Everybody heah knows Jed," continued Luke. "Anybody whut don't want him to join our secret society, jes' step up heah an' say why dey don' want him."

"All right by me"- 'Jed's all right"- "Initiate him"- "He make a good membab," shouted several voices.

Evidently Jed was going to have no trouble being admitted to membership in the secret organization.

"Good!" said Luke. "Come on into de clubhouse an' we'll hold de fust part ob de initiation."

The gang trooped off into the old boathouse. Soon lights could be seen flashing beyond some of the windows. After a while there was a wild yell of terror, presumably from the luckless Jed, who was being initiated.

"Let's go down and see what's going on," Joe suggested.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be safe," said Frank. "They may hold part of their ceremony outdoors."

Frank was right. About fifteen minutes later the lights in the old boathouse were extinguished, and the members of the club, trooping into the open again, marched up the slope. The boys saw that Jed was blindfolded, and that he carried an old-fashioned revolver in each hand.

"I hope one of those guns doesn't go off accidentally," murmured Chet, fearful that the weapons were loaded.

The initiate was led to a spot directly beneath the tree. Luke Jones stood in front of him.

"Now, Jed," he ordered, "you go ahead and do some exercises, holdin' dem two guns. Fust ob all, hold yo' hands up ovah yo' haid."

The youth obeyed, and the pistols swung upward, both of them coming within a few inches of Chet, who was crouching on a lower branch. Each of the muzzles was aimed directly at the fat boy.

This was too much for Chet. He tried to move hastily to a safer place, but in doing so lost his grip on the branch. With a wild yell he tumbled into the midst of the members of the secret society!

CHAPTER XXI

EWALD IN PERIL

IT is a question as to who was the more frightened--Chet, or the members of the secret society. The fat boy, the breath entirely knocked out of him by his fall from the tree, lay sprawled on the ground.

One colored youth, with a bleat of fear, yelled, "It's a ghost!" and fled in terror.

Luke Jones, however, stood his ground. Grabbing Chet by the arm, he hauled the lad 'to his feet, and recognized him at once.

"It's one ob dem white boys. Spyin' on us, is yo'?" he cried viciously.

Frank and Joe were undecided just what to do. None of the group thought of looking up, for they took it for granted that Chet was alone. The Hardys reasoned that if they were to go to their chum's assistance they would be hopelessly outnumbered by the crowd below, so they decided that it would be wiser for them to stay where they were for the time being. If Chet should become involved in any real danger, that would be the time for them to show themselves.

Chet retained sufficient presence of mind to say nothing about his friends being in the vicinity. When Luke Jones pulled him to Ms feet he cried out indignantly: "I wasn't spying on you. Let me go!"

The colored fellow twisted Chet's arm so viciously that the boy almost screamed in pain.

"Yo' been spyin' on our society, dat's what yo' been doin'. Now we's gwine to teach yo' a lesson, white boy."

Several of the other members who had recovered from their first fear applauded enthusiastically.

"That's right, Luke. We'll teach him a lesson he won't fergit soon."

"What we gwine do wid him?" demanded one, looking around.

"Initiate him into de society."

"Torture him."

"Throw him in de harbor."

There were several other suggestions. The fellows were in a ferocious state of mind and might do almost anything. Finally Luke said:

"I got an idea. We put him in a boat and let him drift out to sea widout no oars."

The others unanimously agreed that this would be a fitting punishment for the spy, as they called him. "Nobody nevah see him no mo'," said one. "He won't be able to tell nobody none ob our secrets."

"Look here!" cried Chet. "I don't know any of your crazy secrets and I wouldn't be bothered telling them anyhow. Let me go!"

"We's not gwine let yo' go, white boy," declared Luke Jones, tightening his grip on Chet's collar. "We's gwine give yo' a nice ride in a boat. But yo' ain't gwine come back. Maybe ef yo' is lucky yo'll go clean 'cross de big ocean."

The club members hastened to carry out their leader's suggestion, and hustled Chet down to the boathouse. Such a series of heart rending shrieks then emanated from the old building that Frank and Joe felt almost in dined to jump

down from the tree and go to their chum's rescue. Such a course, however, would have been a foolish and hopeless one, for the Hardys were badly outnumbered and would have been no match for Luke's gang.

"Do you really think they'll set him adrift in a boat?" asked Joe.

"I have a hunch they're just trying to frighten him. It's likely they'll set him loose."

The colored youths were not bluffing, however. They finally emerged from the boathouse, dragging Chet with them, bound hand and foot. Then they procured an old boat, dumped their prisoner into it, and thrust the craft clear of the dock, when it was set loose to drift with the outgoing tide.

The Hardy boys looked on, horrified. If they were to reveal their presence now they would share the same fate as Chet. Their only hope was that the gang would soon disperse so that they might have a chance to get to their chum before his boat would drift too far from shore.

"Come on, now!" ordered Luke Jones. "Yo' knows whut we said we was gwine to do to-night. Let's git busy."

"Dat's right, Luke."

"Jed, yo' must still take orders. Is yo' ready to do whut we told yo'?"

"Ah sho is," agreed the big black stolidly.

Luke Jones then pulled a huge roll of bills from his pocket.

"Ah got lots ob money," he bragged. "When we gits through wid de job tonight, Ah's gwine to buy de society a swell feed."

This announcement was greeted with much hilarity and applause.

"Where yo' git all dat money, Luke?" asked one member inquisitively.

"Dat's mah business," returned the colored leader. "Ah's got plenty, dat's all yo' needs to know."

As the club members now moved down the beach on their mysterious errand, Frank spoke to his brother, for the sight of the big wad of money in Luke's hand had given him an idea. Perhaps things would be all right after all.

"Joe," he said excitedly, "I think I know where Luke got all that cash. Perhaps Ruel Rand wasn't the man who robbed Blackstone of the six thousand dollars after all."

"You mean it might have been Luke-the old man's own servant!"

"He stole the ring, didn't he? And he seems to be flashing a pretty big roll of bills for a colored fellow who probably doesn't make much money."

"I think you're right, Frank. But let's get out of here and give Chet a hand I believe it's safe now to leave here."

Quickly the two descended the tree and ran down to the water. The drifting boat was now several hundred yards out from shore. Frank and Joe hurriedly searched for some sort of a craft and were lucky to find one. Although it was a battered, leaky old rowboat, still it was serviceable. Joe and Frank leaped

into it and pushed off from the dock.

Chet was in a state of actual terror by the time his friends reached his side. He had undergone a nerve-wracking experience and was dreadfully shaken up. As they cut the ropes that bound him, he gasped:

"I thought you were never coming I began to wonder if those blacks had caught you fellows, too. Boy, I never want to live through anything like that again."

"We couldn't help you at all. If the secret society members had caught us, we'd have been given the same treatment," said Frank. "We just had to sit still until they left."

While the Hardys rowed back to shore, Chet told them that when the gang took him into the boathouse he had been roughly handled. His experience had left him with a wholesome fear of the heartless fellows.

"Luke and his cohorts are up to some mischief tonight," declared Frank. "Let's hurry and follow them."

"Not me," returned Chet promptly. "I've seen enough of that crowd for one evening."

However, when the stout lad found that he would have to remain in camp alone, he changed his mind and decided to go along. Frank and Joe were determined to shadow Luke and his organization.

"I don't know what they're planning to do," said Frank, "but they are putting their new member up to some sort of mischief, and I think it's serious business."

The boys went back to their camp, which they found to be undisturbed. Aided by a flashlight, they searched the shore, hoping to pick up a trail. Easily enough they found tracks, which led directly to the Rand estate.

Frank recalled the tunnel he had discovered underneath the Blackstone place. Could it be possible that Luke was planning to carry out his plot against the Rand mansion that very night?

The boys hurried toward the large estate. When they came in sight of the house, they observed lights flashing in the darkness of the grounds and could hear someone shouting.

"Hurry!" cried Frank. "Something has happened. Maybe we're not too late after all."

They raced over the broad lawns. The front entrance to the Rand home was wide open, and a servant girl stood on the steps, wringing her hands in anxiety and distress.

"Follow them! Follow them!" she cried. "They've got Ewald! And Mrs. Rand is hurt!"

"What happened?" shouted Frank, as the three boys dashed up the steps.

The maid was so frightened and upset that she could hardly speak.

"A group of colored boys--they came here and took Ewald away--Mr. Ruel Rand isn't here--and when Mrs. Rand tried to protect Ewald they struck her--"

She pointed inside the doorway. On the floor of the hall lay Mrs. Rand, mother of the demented boy. She was unconscious, and blood was flowing from an ugly gash in her forehead. Frank knelt beside the elderly woman, and could tell at a glance that her injury was serious.

"Call the doctor," he instructed the servant. "How long is it since those boys were here!"

"We haven't a telephone," faltered the girl. Valuable time would be lost if they had to walk into town for a physician, but Mrs. Rand must have attention at once.

"Come on I" said Frank to the others. "We'll get the doctor ourselves. After that we'll try to trace those wild lads and save Ewald from their clutches."

CHAPTER XXII

THE CAPTURE OF LUKE

"MR. RAND took the big car," the maid told them, "but there is an old one in the garage."

"Let's have it, then," snapped Frank. "I hope there is plenty of gas in the tank."

They located the garage with the help of the servant, and found the car. It was very old but still in running order. Frank backed it out into the driveway and swung around to the front of the house. Chet and Joe gently carried Mrs. Rand, who was still unconscious, down the steps and placed her in the back seat of the auto.

"Where is the nearest doctor?" they asked the servant.

She gave them detailed instructions as to how to reach the physician's office, and then the ear lurched away. Frank drove as quickly as he dared, but could not work up much speed with the old-fashioned vehicle. He knew that every second counted. There was no telling what that wild society, under the influence of the callous Luke, would do to Ewald Rand

Ten minutes passed, however, before they reached the doctor's office. Arriving there, they carried the unconscious woman up the steps and into the waiting room.

The physician was talking to a lady. As she swung around, alarmed by the confusion, the boys recognized her as Alice Fox. At the same moment she saw the limp figure being borne into the room.

"Why-it's Mrs. Rand!" she gasped. "What has happened?"

"She has been badly hurt," Frank explained quickly. "A club of negroes took

Ewald from the Rand house as a lark His mother was wounded when she tried to protect him. We have no time to lose."

They put the injured woman on a sofa.

"I'll look after her," said the doctor curtly. "You fellows get out and see if you can find Ewald. This is serious. There is no telling what may happen. I'll call the police."

Joe suddenly turned to Alice Fox.

"Will you stay here and help Mrs. Rand? I don't care if there is a feud between your families. It's your duty to aid her."

Miss Fox flushed.

"Why, of course I'll help her. I'll do all I can," she promised. "I'm not inhuman. I dislike to see a person suffer, even an enemy."

Satisfied that the injured woman was in competent hands, the Hardy boys and Chet raced out of the doctor's office and scrambled into the car. Frank swung the old rattletrap around, and headed toward Hidden Harbor.

They had not gone far before they spied a confused mass of figures in the road. In the glare of the headlights they could see Luke Jones waving his arms and shouting orders at his companions.

A short distance away stood Ewald Rand—a terrifying figure. He was muttering insanely. His hair hung down over his face, and his clothes were torn. He had managed to free himself from his tormentors and somehow had obtained the two revolvers, which Jed, the new member, had been carrying.

He now held the society at bay. So the weapons were loaded!

"Don't touch me!" he shrieked. "If you come a step nearer I'll shoot."

"Grab him, somebody !" yelled Luke Jones. He himself did not make any move toward the menacing figure, however. "Grab him and take dem guns from him," he cried, which was all the action he took in the matter.

The others muttered among themselves. It was clear that no one dared to risk his life. They milled about uncertainly in a state of complete disorder.

Frank had applied the brakes, and stopped the car. He and his companions, realizing that Ewald, now that he was armed, was far more dangerous than normally, hardly knew what to do. If the boys should approach him he would not know that they were his friends. Before the lads could formulate a plan of any kind the poor fool suddenly ran back out of the light and leaped over the fence beside the road.

There was a wild howl from the society members.

"Git after him !" shouted Luke Jones. "Chase him and take dem guns away from him. Jed, do somethin'."

The leader was content to let the others do the dangerous work, and remained on the road.

"Come on!" said Frank, with a ring of determination in his voice. "We're going to settle matters with Luke Jones right here and now," he added.

"What shall we do?" piped up Chet nervously.

"Capture him!"

Members of Luke's club were already crawling over the fence and taking up the pursuit of Ewald, so for the moment the big Negro was left alone. The three boys got out of the car. Frank had switched out the lights.

"Who dat?" called out the colored fellow.

They did not answer, but crept closer. Luke backed away.

"Who dat?" he cried out again.

Deserted as he was by his friends he was evidently frightened by the approach of the three stealthy figures. So he turned and broke into a run. But it was to no avail. He had waited too long. The Hardys and Chet rushed after him. Frank sprang through the air and tackled Luke about the knees, bringing the big fellow down in the road with a crash.

He bellowed with fear, thrashed and struggled, but by this time Chet and Joe had flung themselves upon him, also. Luke was strong and powerful, and fought like a tiger, but he was not husky enough to free himself from the three determined lads. The battle lasted only a few minutes, ending with the Negro being ignominiously dragged toward the car. Chet took a length of rope from the back seat, and in spite of his struggles and ravings the black man's wrists and ankles were firmly tied.

"This will pay you back for that boat-ride you gave me," said Chet grimly, as he tugged at one of the knots.

They shoved Luke into the rear of the auto, where he lay, helpless.

"Where shall we take him?" asked Joe.

"We'll bring him to the camp. Then we'll come back and see if we can find Ewald."

When the boys reached their destination with Luke Jones in tow, they lifted him from the car. A coward at heart, the colored youth howled for mercy.

"Don't worry," said Frank scornfully. "We're not going to bother with you just now. We'll attend to you when we're ready."

Leaving the bully lying in the sand beside their tent, the boys got back into the car and drove off. As their camp was in a remote spot on the shore, they were fairly certain that Luke's shouts could not be heard at any distance.

The boys were doomed to a long and disappointing search. They drove all the way back into town without finding any trace of either the gang or of Ewald Rand.

"There will very likely be a lot of trouble over this," said Frank apprehensively. "Ewald isn't responsible for his actions. He is armed and frightened, and may do almost anything."

"I hope he doesn't go near the Blackstone place," said Joe.

The trio went back over the road again, still without success, and drove up to

the Rand house, where the frightened servant told them that Ewald had not returned as yet.

The boys were in a quandary. Luke might escape in their absence, and they would then lose any advantage that might be gained by his capture. Finally they decided to return to the camp. There they found the prisoner literally frothing at the mouth, making vain attempts to break loose from the ropes that bound him hand and foot.

"Let me go, white boys!" he snarled menacingly. "You'll git in plenty ob trouble fo' treatin' me lak dis."

"You're going to have a pretty hard time keeping out of trouble yourself," Frank told him curtly. "How about that ring you stole from Mr. Blackstone?"

"Ah don' know nothin' 'bout no ring, retorted the black sullenly.

"How about the money, then? You'd better confess, Luke. I think you're at the bottom of a good many things that have been going on around here. Suppose we were to see the authorities and tell them about that tunnel you've been digging toward the Rand place? Suppose we were to tell them that you got those friends of yours to kidnap Ewald Rand tonight, and that once you tried to hit him with a boulder? Suppose we should inform them of your secret society? How would you like us to have you arrested for setting Chet adrift in a boat?"

Luke Jones blinked. He was beginning to grow frightened. How did these boys know so much about his activities?

"Dat's jes' a lot ob talk," he said weakly.

"Are you going to tell us where you got that ring? And the money?" demanded Joe threateningly. "You'd better come clean."

"Yo' cain't do nothin' to me."

"We can tell Mr. Blackstone what we know about you. And we can inform the police that you led that group onto the Rand place to night. Mrs. Rand is seriously hurt. There is going to be a lot of trouble about that affair."

Luke was beginning to realize that he was in a predicament. His sins had found him out at last. His natural cowardice asserted itself, and he began to whine.

"What yo' want me to tell yo'?" he demanded.

CHAPTER XXIII

"LYNCH HIM!"

THE boys were jubilant. Luke Jones was weakening. Frank tried to conceal the excitement in his voice as he asked:

"Where did you get the ring?"

"Ah-Ah done stole it from Mistah Blackstone."

"You were on the Resolute?"

"Yes," admitted Luke reluctantly. "Ah done followed him coz Ah knowed he had a lot ob money on him."

"Did you steal the money, too?"

A long silence. Luke Jones gulped.

"Did you steal the money?" demanded Frank. "Come! Out with it! Tell the truth!"

"Yes, Ah done stole de money," confessed Luke.

'When?"

"Ah followed yo' down to dat stateroom, an' when de boat got wrecked Ah done seen mah chance. Ah hit Mr. Blackstone an' knocked him down. Den Ah took his money an' got into a lifeboat an' come ashore."

"You robbed your master, eh?" said Chet. "I'll bet if the whole truth were known, it would be found that you've been responsible for a lot of the trouble between the Rands and the Blackstones."

Luke flared up.

"Yo' bet Ah has!" he declared viciously. "Ah done plenty ob t'ings dat each ob 'em blamed on de oder."

Since childhood the vicious fellow had furthered the feud between the rival white families. Desiring to gain prestige with his master, Mr. Blackstone, he had deliberately caused the Rand horses and dogs to come onto the Blackstone property and do some damage. Then he had faked rescues, until finally he had become a favorite servant. In this trusted position he had not been loyal, but had turned to robbery and assault on his benefactor.

"I'll bet you were the one who left that warning at our door in Bayport!" cried Joe suddenly.

"Ah done it to gib yo' boys a good scare, sneered Luke. "Ah didn' want yo' messin' 'round an' spoilin' things fo' me."

"And I suppose Mr. Blackstone would have been blamed if you had finished that tunnel under the Rand house!" Frank exclaimed. "Luke Jones, you're the worst scoundrel we have ever come across, and we have run into some pretty bad customers during all our experiences."

Instead of being abashed by this statement Luke seemed actually flattered by the distinction.

"Get into the car!" Frank ordered. "We're going to have this feud business cleared up at once. By the time the Blackstones and the Rands hear this story they'll look at things in a new light."

The boys hustled their prisoner to his feet and thrust him into the auto. Then

they drove back from the camp toward the Rand estate.

A machine was parked in front of the house when they arrived, and lights were burning in all the lower floor rooms. In the hall stood the doctor and Miss Fox, conversing.

"We brought Mrs. Rand home," the medical man explained. "Miss Fox has promised to be her nurse."

"How is she? Will she be all right?" Chet asked anxiously.

"She is in pretty bad shape," returned the physician, "but with proper care and rest she will become well again. The blow would have killed her, though, if it had been any harder."

Frank spoke to the actress.

Miss Fox," he said, "do you think you could persuade your father to come here?"

The woman looked astonished. "Ask my father to come to the Rand place!" she exclaimed. "He wouldn't set foot on the property, even if his life depended upon it.

"He'll come when he learns what we've discovered," Frank told her. "We have found the man who stole his money and the ring; the man who has been responsible for the Rand-Blackstone feud. What's more, we have a confession from him."

Miss Fox needed no further urging when she heard this astounding statement. With a gasp of surprise she ran out of the house and hurried down the road.

While the group was waiting for Mr. Blackstone to arrive, they heard sounds of wailing from the sick room. It was Mrs. Rand calling for her son.

"Ewald!" she cried. "Where is Ewald? They took him away."

The doctor tried to quiet the distressed mother, but without success.

"I want Ewald! My poor boy! Where is he? They'll hurt him if I don't protect him! I want my boy!"

"Do you know what happened to him?" the doctor asked the boys.

Frank shook his head.

"We did see him. A group of black boys had cornered him but he broke away. He carried a revolver in each hand."

The doctor's face looked serious.

"That's bad," he said. "If the fellows frightened Ewald he won't be responsible for anything he does. If he is armed it will be bad for anyone who crosses his path."

The boys were more impatient than ever to resume their search for the pitiful member of the Rand family, but were equally eager that Mr. Blackstone should hear the confession that would clear them from any suspicion of having had a thing to do with the robbery and assault on board the Resolute.

A few moments later a car drove swiftly up to the house and skidded to a frantic stop. A police officer leaped out and hurried up onto the veranda.

"Has Ewald been found?" he demanded.

"Not yet," he was told.

"There is going to be trouble tonight," the man said grimly. "I don't know if Ewald is to blame for it or not, but someone has thrown the whole countryside into a state of confusion. A man fired bullets at a car coming down the shore road a little while ago. The people in a farmhouse farther on were given a bad scare when a fellow ran through their yard, shrieking at the top of his lungs. Reports have been coming in from half a dozen places. We haven't told anyone that Ewald is at large, but I hope we can catch him before matters get any worse."

The officer was plainly worried.

"Ewald himself may not do much damage to himself, but the people are getting aroused. They're talking of forming a posse' to hunt down the wild man. Of course, they don't know it's Ewald or they would make allowance for his condition. But if they should catch him-well, I hate to think what may happen."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"If some of our hot-headed farmers get aroused by such doings, they'll probably take matters into their own hands."

"You mean the men might kill him?"

"They're just as likely to lynch him as not. We must find Ewald before he does any more damage, and see that he gets home safe."

Neither Chet nor the Hardy boys had thought for a moment that the situation would take such a serious turn, yet the officer was evidently sincere in his statement and alive to the emergency.

Mr. Blackstone and Alice Fox came up the steps at that moment, the old gentleman obviously reluctant to enter the Rand home. His daughter's persuasions, however, resulted in his relenting, and the two went into the building.

"You wish to see me?" snapped Mr. Blackstone, glaring at the boys in a manner that could not be described as friendly.

"Yes, sir, we do," replied Frank. "And I'm glad this police officer is here because we've a prisoner for him. We have in custody the man who stole your money, Mr. Blackstone. I don't know if there is very much of it left, but I think you will be able to recover some of it."

"Who is the fellow?"

The boys strode to the car, opened the door and hauled out Luke Jones. The big black fellow, at one time blustering and swaggering, had lost most of his arrogant manner. When he saw his master, he cringed and hung his head.

"Luke!" exclaimed Mr. Blackstone incredulously. "Surely it wasn't Luke-"

"It was this fellow who followed you on board the Resolute, who knocked you

down and stole the ring and the money. It is he who has been to blame for all the recent trouble between the Rands and the Blackstones."

"Is this true?" demanded the old man wrathfully, taking a stride toward his servant. "Is it true, Luke? Speak up!"

The youth made no attempt to defend himself.

"Yes, Mistah Blackstone, it's true!" he admitted. "Ah didn' spend all dat money. Ah got some ob it left."

"Tell Mr. Blackstone what you told us," commanded Joe.

In faltering tones the fellow repeated his confession. He told of his numerous plots against the Rands, by which he gained favor with his master, and engendered the ill-feeling and hatred that existed between the two families. Then he related how he had followed his master onto the boat and robbed him.

After his confession there was no fight left in Luke--he was a beaten man. When he had finished with what he had to say, the officer seized him by the arm.

"You ought to get a long term for this, Jones. Come along!"

The prisoner was just being brought down the steps of the house when a band of farmers swept up the Hidden Harbor road. Some of them carried torches that flickered eerily in the night. Suddenly a tumultuous cry broke out:

"Lynch him! Lynch him!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE POSSE

THE thought that first flashed through the minds of the Hardy boys and Chet was that Ewald had been captured. They thrilled with horror as they debated what might be the fate of the unfortunate man in the hands of the furious and unreasoning crowd.

Suddenly they heard a fellow shouting. He was evidently one of the leaders of the surging masses.

"Search every main and side road until you find him, boys! We'll hunt him out somehow!" rang out the command.

"We must beat that mob to it," snapped the policeman. "We must find Ewald and do it at once."

He hustled Luke into his car.

"I'll attend to you first and get you to the jail. You can be glad it isn't you they're after."

The colored youth's eyes rolled with terror at the very thought of being hunted by the farmers. Then the officer got in behind the wheel and drove off at great speed.

"If we could only find Ruel Rand!" exclaimed Frank excitedly.

"Let's get moving," Joe suggested. "Maybe we can help the police locate Ewald and get him to safety before the farmers hunt him down."

Now that Mrs. Rand had recovered consciousness, she was in a state of wild anxiety, fearing for the safety of her son.

"I want Ewald !" she screamed. "Something has happened to him! I want my boy!"

Her heart-rending appeals rang through the house. Miss Fox and the doctor were doing their best to calm her, but with little success. She would not be quieted.

The boys delayed no longer. They scrambled into the old automobile and dashed down the driveway toward the Hidden Harbor road.

The multitude had scattered, splitting up into groups, which searched each and every section of the place. The Hardys and Chet drove directly to the station house, where only one man was in charge. He was shouting over the telephone when they hurried into the building.

"Send us some help !" the fellow was ordering. "We can't handle this crowd alone. If they ever catch that guy they'll string him up to the nearest tree. The whole countryside is aroused."

He slammed down the receiver, his face drawn with apprehension.

"No word of Ewald yet?"

"Calls have been coming in from all over town, saying he's been seen in half a dozen places. I've tried to reason with that band and tell 'em it's the crazy Rand they're after, but they won't believe me."

"If we only knew where to look for him!" exclaimed Joe.

"Anywhere! Everywhere!" cried the officer in distraction. He tossed them a whistle he snatched up from a desk, saying, "If you find him, or if you get into any kind of trouble yourselves, use that gadget. It may help you."

The boys thanked him, and left the station house. The next fifteen minutes they patrolled the roads in the car, every now and then coming upon some of the searchers. Seeing the boys, the men would yell "Found him yet?" under the impression that the lads were on their side. And the answer would be "Not yet!"

Joe, Frank and Chet never would forget that night as long as they lived. As the search went on and their quarry eluded capture, the crowd increased in numbers and its temper grew more and more vicious. There would be little or no hope for Ewald now, should he fall into their hands.

The old car the boys had commandeered from the Rand garage began to grow

troublesome. The engine spluttered, kicked, and died. The machine lurched to a full stop with unexpected suddenness. Frank made several vain attempts to start the motor, but nothing seemed to help.

"No use!" he said finally. "It's done for." The boys abandoned the car and continued their search on foot. Joe called the attention of his companions to the fact that they seemed to be on a familiar road, for he was sure he had seen some of the buildings before.

"Seems to me we have been here," he said.

"Miss Pennyweather lives in this section."

Frank suddenly had an inspiration.

"I wonder if Ewald's poor diseased brain would try to devise a method of harming that lady because of her father's plays."

"We might go to her home and find out if she is safe," declared Joe.

They made their way down the dark highway. When they came in sight of Miss Pennyweather's dwelling the lads saw a light in one of the front windows.

Suddenly a dark figure burst forth from the shadow of a clump of trees on the opposite side of the avenue and darted across the road, about twenty yards from the boys.

"Perhaps that is Ewald!" gasped Joe.

"What can he be up to?" Chet demanded, as the dark figure slunk toward Miss Pennyweather's home. The light fell full upon the face of the man who had sped across the road. It was that of Ewald Rand!

There was an expression of maniacal intensity on his face. In each hand he gripped a revolver, and before the boys could move he raised one arm and fired point-blank at the window.

"Ewald!" shouted Frank, and all three lads broke into a run.

The demented man looked around, and saw the trio sweeping down upon him, but he stood still.

There had been a crash of breaking glass as the bullet shattered the window, and Miss Pennyweather who was in the room had leaped to her feet in alarm. To their horror the boys saw the woman slump to the floor in fright.

"Ewald! Stop!" cried Frank.

But the crazed individual heard nothing. He swung around again and fired at the advancing boys, but fortunately the bullet went wide. The Hardys and Chet knew they were risking their lives in attempting to capture the fellow, who was now completely insane with fear, but they felt they could not retreat.

"Spread out!" ordered Frank.

They scattered, then closed in on their quarry. Ewald Rand, screeching like a tortured owl, fired again aimlessly.

Frank ducked and ran toward him, flung himself forward, tackled the madman, and brought him down. As he did so, the guns flew out of Ewald's hands.

Then there ensued a terrific struggle. The boys were surprised at the fellow's strength. They rolled over and over in the roadway, clinging desperately to their prisoner.

So absorbed were they in the violent encounter that not one of them observed a group of searchers from the main body of the mob come around the corner a few yards away. A shout went up.

"There they are! Grab 'em!"

The shot had been heard, and a crowd of farmers, attracted by the reports, had come to investigate. Immediately there was a rush toward the struggling figures in the road.

At the same time hoarse shouts summoned other members of the posse'. A roar of voices, a heavy tramping of feet, and the searchers swooped down. Chet was almost crushed underfoot, and found himself lost in the milling crowd. Ewald, Frank and Joe, on the other hand, were seized by rough hands and pulled to their feet.

Suddenly a woman rushed out of the Pennyweather house.

"Help!" she shrieked. "They've hurt Miss Pennyweather!"

The shattered window told the story. The mob, inflamed with anger, immediately jumped to the conclusion that the Hardy boys had been accomplices of Ewald Rand.

"Lynch them!" went up the cry.

The street was now crowded, and the Bayport lads were roughly handled by the infuriated people. A rope seemed to come from nowhere, its loop settling down over Ewald and the Hardy boys. It was drawn tight around their waists, pinning their arms to their sides.

Frank knew they were in a terrible predicament. He managed to get the policeman's whistle out of his pocket in an attempt to raise it to his lips, but his efforts were futile. The captives were hustled across the road into the shadow of the big trees beyond the pavement.

Finally Frank, with another desperate effort, managed to get the whistle up to his mouth. He blew a shrill blast, but had scant hope that it would be heard by the police. Even if the officers should arrive, they would be outnumbered by the lawless mass.

"Throw the rope over that bough and string 'em up!" yelled someone in a rough voice.

Cheers greeted the suggestion. The three prisoners were thrust forward to what seemed to them certain doom.

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF THE FEUD

THE rope tightened. One end of it was flung over a bough of the tree. As it came down it was grabbed by a dozen eager hands. There was a mighty pull, and

the three struggling figures were hauled into the air, Ewald all the while whimpering loudly like an animal in pain. Joe grit his teeth, but would not cry out.

In this moment of peril Frank, as always, retained his presence of mind. In spite of the fact that his arms were pinned tight by the rope and every movement was torture, he groped for a pen-knife in his pocket, got his fingers on it, and succeeded in opening it so he might use the blade to sever the rope.

The boy twisted the sharp edge around until he got the knife up against the rope that was beginning to squeeze the very life out of him. Then he began sawing the bonds.

The rope parted, and the three prisoners were precipitated to the ground. The men who were hauling on the cable fell back suddenly, wondering what had happened.

But this was nothing more than a respite, for other members of the posse pounced upon the three prisoners immediately. They would have been roughly handled had there not come another interruption at that moment.

"Boys! Boys! Listen to me! Hold on a minute!"

It was the voice of the doctor who had attended Mrs. Rand. He was pushing his way through the crowd, followed closely by Ruel Rand, Mr. Blackstone, and a police officer.

The multitude fell back, uncomprehending. "It's the Doc !" muttered some of the calmer men. "Let him speak!"

"Are you men mad?" demanded the physician, turning upon them. "Do you realize what you are doing? You are trying to lynch Ewald Rand, a man who isn't responsible for what he is doing. And these lads with him--they weren't helping Ewald. They were trying to bring him home safe to his mother. Scatter, all of you !"

The ringleaders, looking abashed, fell back as though they had been whipped.

"We thought they was all in it together, Doc," said one. "We didn't know it was Ewald Rand. Ain't none of us seen him for years so we didn't recognize him."

"Yes," declared Ruel Rand, putting an arm around his brother, "this is Ewald. If he has done any harm it isn't his fault. You all know he isn't well, that he has been ill for years. As for these lads, I owe them more than I can express. I want to tell you, men, that the Rand-Blackstone feud is at an end. And these boys are responsible for settling it and clearing up the quarrel."

"What have you to say about that, Mr. Blackstone?," shouted someone.

The old gentleman looked at the crowd with dignity, his eyes burning with emotion.

"It is true !" he said. "The Rand-Blackstone feud is over. Luke Jones was to blame for much of it and Luke Jones is now in jail. I'll shake hands with Ruel Rand here before all of you to prove I mean what I say."

He reached out his hand, and Ruel Rand clasped it in his own. For the first time in many, many years a Rand and a Blackstone acknowledged each other in

public--shook hands in friendly spirit before their fellow townspeople.

A great cheer went up. Instantly the fury of the crowd was dissipated. Then Ruel Rand turned to the Hardy boys and took their hands fervently.

"Thank goodness we came in time!" he said. "When I reached home Mr. Blackstone and his daughter were there. They told me what had happened. I don't know how to thank you for all you have done for us."

"Is it true, then, that the feud is over?" asked Frank eagerly.

"Yes. Mr. Blackstone and I have come to an understanding, and there will never be anything but a spirit of good-will between the Rands and the Blackstones from this time on."

The doctor in the meantime had hurried into the Pennyweather house, to find that the spinster had not been seriously hurt by the glass, but had sustained only a slight flesh wound in the shoulder. She appeared to be suffering more from shock and fright than from anything else. The injury was soon dressed, and Miss Pennyweather was assured that she was in no danger of any kind.

Luke Jones, who pleaded guilty to having stolen Mr. Blackstone's money, was sentenced to a term in prison. Fortunately he had not spent all the old man's money. More than five thousand dollars of the sum, discovered concealed among his belongings, was eventually returned to Mr. Blackstone.

Mrs. Rand, who had been injured by Luke Jones and his friends when they took Ewald, was recovering. In a day or so the doctor pronounced her all right. She was then able to thank the Hardy boys and Chet personally for what they had done for her. Ewald Rand was committed to an institution where he was assured of good care, and where he would no longer be a menace to society.

Ruel Rand apologized to the Hardy boys, manfully and contritely.

"I did think you were working for Mr. Blackstone," he told them, "and when you accused me of stealing his money I became very angry. Of course, I didn't know at the time that Luke Jones was the real thief."

"May we ask you one question, Mr. Rand?" queried Joe.

"Go ahead."

"What were you doing in our stateroom on the night the Resolute was wrecked?"

Ruel Rand smiled.

"Please believe me," he said. "I give you my word of honor that I got into your cabin by mistake. Mine was Number 17, and yours was Number 19. The door was unlocked and I simply made an error, not realizing it at first. I was as surprised as you were to find that I was in the wrong room."

The Hardys and Chet were soon cleared of the charges Mr. Blackstone had preferred against them in Croston. The old gentleman, with profuse apologies for having misjudged the boys who had been trying to protect his interests all the while, withdrew his accusation of theft. Then the three lads were free to return to their homes in Bayport.

When they finally arrived they had with them the letters Frank had obtained from Mr. Blackstone--the letters that settled once and for all the Pennyweather rights to the plays. Mr. Blackstone had been greatly relieved at

learning they had not been destroyed, and had complimented Frank on his cleverness in saving them from the fire.

When the documents were handed to Fenton Hardy the detective was greatly pleased. Words were inadequate to express his joy.

"Why, these will carry far more weight than any handwriting specimens!" he exclaimed. "Warner won't have any case at all now. He'll have to withdraw. How did you get this evidence?"

The boys then told him of their adventures on the trail of the handwriting specimens, to which he listened with undisguised interest. Aunt Gertrude, however, was greatly shocked.

"Such goings-on!" she exclaimed. "You might have been killed!"

This was true enough, but they had escaped and had been factors in solving a baffling case. Soon their abilities were to be needed in combating threats of "The Sinister Signpost."

In the mail awaiting them the boys found a letter from the steamship company that had owned the ill-fated Resolute. Its contents drew forth peals of laughter.

"We won't have to worry about those old handwriting specimens any more," said Joe, his eyes twinkling.

The contents of the note were as follows:

"We have just completed a search of the wreck and beg to inform you that nothing of value has been found in Stateroom No.19. We think you must have been mistaken in your claim."

Aunt Gertrude nodded her head vigorously. "You see!" she said. "There never were any handwriting specimens in the first place. Somehow I have an idea that I have been tricked into believing a whole lot of things that aren't true."

"Maybe so," agreed her nephews, winking at each other.

THE END