

THE PHANTOM FREIGHTER
By FRANKLIN W. DIXON
No. 26 in the Hardy Boys series.
This is the 1947 original text.

In the 1947 original, the Hardy Boys break up a smuggling ring which uses the mysterious, disappearing "Phantom Freighter." In the 1970 revision the text is altered.

The Hardy Boys series by Franklin W. Dixon, the first 58 titles.
The first year is the original year. The second is the year it was revised.

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- 02 The House on the Cliff 1927, 1959
- 03 The Secret of the Old Mill 1927, 1962
- 04 The Missing Chums 1927, 1962
- 05 Hunting for Hidden Gold 1928, 1963
- 06 The Shore Road Mystery 1928, 1964.
- 07 The Secret of the Caves 1929, 1965
- 08 The Mystery of Cabin Island 1929, 1966
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- 55 The Witch-Master's Key 1976
- 56 The Jungle Pyramid 1977
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The Phantom Freighter

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THE PHANTOM FREIGHTER

CHAPTER I

A Strange Substitute

"What a strange letter!" exclaimed Frank Hardy. "I wonder what the man wants."

His brother Joe, one year younger, studied the sheet of paper. "Thaddeus McClintock," he said, reading the signature. "Never heard of him."

"Since he's living at the Bayport Hotel, he's probably a stranger in town. Who do you suppose told him about us?"

The boys' mother, seated at the breakfast table with them, smiled at dark-haired Frank, and fair, curly-haired Joe. "Any one of many people, I should say," she answered knowingly.

The letter had arrived in the morning mail. It was addressed to Frank and Joe Hardy and read:

I have heard that you are boys with your feet on the ground and I wonder if you would call and have

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a talk with me. I have an interesting job for you if you care to take it.

Frank looked at his brother. "What do you say? There's no harm in talking to Mr. McClintock."

"Please be on your guard," Mrs. Hardy warned. "The man may be a schemer of some kind. If he should ask any questions about your father, be very careful what you say."

"That," said Frank, "is Rule Number One in the Hardy household and we're not likely to forget it. Don't worry, Mother. If Mr. McClintock should ask us anything about Dad, we don't know where he is, when he's expected home, or what sort of case he's working on."

"Come to think of it, we don't know," remarked Joe. "What is this new case of Dad's?"

"You'll have to ask him when he comes back," Mrs. Hardy said. "All I know is, it's a very important one."

Fenton Hardy was one of the most brilliant private detectives in the United States. His sons, still of high school age, had inherited much of his ability and had been taught many of his methods. Both had learned that a good detective knows how to hold his tongue.

Many times they had given Mr. Hardy valuable help in his work. Very recently, in The Secret Panel, they not only got to the bottom of a puzzling

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affair concerning a mysterious old house without visible locks, but had helped him clear up a series of museum robberies.

The boys drove to the Bayport Hotel and inquired for Mr. McClintock. "Sorry, boys," the clerk said, "Mr. McClintock is not here right now. He went out about half an hour ago, but left a message for you. He said that if you called to tell you to come back this afternoon."

"Who is Mr. McClintock?" Frank asked. "Where does he come from? Is he young or old?"

The hotel clerk, who had known Frank and Joe for years, glanced at the boy in surprise. "You don't know him?"

"No, but he wants to see us." "Mr. McClintock has been living at the hotel for the past three months. He's a little beyond middle age. Doesn't say much about himself." "What's his line of work?" Joe asked. The clerk shrugged. "He doesn't work, so he must have some money. Pays his bills promptly, but never buys any extras. Outside of that I can't tell you much about him. He gets very little mail and is secretive about his affairs. Doesn't seem to have any friends here in Bayport."

"Thanks," said Frank, as the boys turned away from the desk. "Guess that will hold us

until this afternoon," he added, grinning.

He and Joe returned to the house, more interested

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than ever in meeting Mr. McClintock. As they went up the steps of the front porch they heard a voice inside scolding about a high taxi fare that had just been paid.

"Aunt Gertrude!" said Joe. "And already on the warpath!"

Aunt Gertrude was Mr. Hardy's sister. She was a maiden lady with a heart of gold but an unpredictable temper. During the past years she had visited her numerous relatives for long periods. The Bayport Hardys had tried to persuade her to live with them permanently. Aunt Gertrude, apparently preferring a nomadic life, had always declined. Frank and Joe were greatly surprised and a bit dismayed to learn, upon greeting her, that she had come to stay. Aunt Gertrude did not approve of the freedom her nephews enjoyed and said so!

"It's time I quit gadding about," remarked the tall, graying woman. "I'm moving in, bag and baggage. Frank, take this suitcase to the third floor."

"Oh, Aunty, not the *third* floor?" Joe cried out. "Frank and I have . . ."

"Yes, I know you have a lot of junk up there. But it shouldn't be jhere. Carry it out to your workroom over the garage. I want the third-floor bedroom."

Mrs. Hardy and her sons rarely argued with Aunt Gertrude. They had found it was useless, and be-

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sides, she was usually right in her ideas, though dictatorial. While the boys carried out their ship models and model aircraft materials, their mother and Aunt Gertrude started unpacking. Miss Hardy said that her belongings, scattered throughout half a dozen states, would appear in installments.

Installment Number One arrived within an hour. An expressman dumped a trunk and a carton in the front hall, and went off.

"That's my trunk, all right," Aunt Gertrude said a little later. "I'd know it anywhere. But that carton ... it isn't mine." She tapped the offending box with the toe of her shoe and glared at it.

"It's for a James Johnson," said Frank, reading the black crayon words. "One forty-two Springdale Avenue."

Aunt Gertrude looked into the top of the carton, which was not securely tied. "Seems to be full of raw wool," she snapped. "And *my* carton was full of valuable family papers. I'm going to call up the express company and give them a piece of my mind."

Aunt Gertrude was very good at dispensing pieces of her mind. Her spectacles bounced with the joy of combat as she went to the telephone.

It was an interesting session, although a little noisy toward the finish, when Miss Hardy kept shouting, "Now you listen to me," and the clerk at the other end of the line insisted on talking instead of

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listening. Finally Aunt Gertrude, irate, slammed down the receiver.

"They won't do a thing about it until tomorrow," she announced. "Said their driver would pick up this carton in the morning. Said mine must have gone to the Springdale Avenue address."

"In that case," said Joe cheerfully, "I guess there's nothing you can do but wait until tomorrow."

"I can't wait until tomorrow," said Aunt Gertrude. "My carton, full of valuable papers, may be pried into by those Springdale Avenue people. And *that*," she added grimly, "*must not happen!*"

"How can you stop it?" asked Joe, a twinkle in his mischievous blue eyes.

"Very easily. You and Frank can go right out to Springdale Avenue and make the exchange."

Frank looked at his wrist watch. It was nearly lunchtime, and he and Joe were going to call on Mr. McClintock directly afterward. His aunt must have guessed there was a doubt in

his mind about doing the errand.

"No excuses," she said firmly. "It won't take you any time to run out there." Then she smiled. "I'll whip up a strawberry shortcake for you while you're gone."

"That's a promise, Aunty," Frank laughed, and picked up the carton. He went out the door, followed by Joe.

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» In a few minutes they were speeding toward the east side of Bayport in their convertible. Finally they turned into Springdale Avenue. It hardly seemed to be part of Bayport at all. By the time the boys passed a small stone house numbered fifty-two, they entered a section where the sidewalks came to an end and buildings were far apart. The car bumped along an uneven dirt road.

"We're practically out in the country," said Joe. "I'll bet we're beyond the city limits. Maybe there isn't any hundred and forty-two."

A short distance ahead of them and a little in from the road, they could see a large frame house, surrounded by a picket fence, with a small barn at the back.

"This is probably the place," Frank said, as they neared it, then added excitedly, "Joel Look! The barn's on fire!"

From an upper window of the barn a curl of white smoke rolled out toward the eaves. It was followed by a heavy black puff and a flicker of red flame.

Frank stepped on the gas. The car shot forward, swung through the open gate and came to a stop. Joe leaped out, ran up the steps and hammered at the front door. There was no response. Joe tried the doorknob.

"Locked! No one at home," he yelled. "Go get the fire engines, Frank!"

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Frank swung the car around and roared back toward the road. Joe jumped off the porch and ran toward the barn. By this time smoke was pouring from all the upper windows and red tongues of flame were leaping through the shingled roof.

Joe's first thought was for any animals that might be trapped in the barn. He ran to the big front doors and seized the heavy iron handle. But the doors were locked securely by an iron chain and padlock.

The boy raced around the building until he found a small side door, but this too was locked. Catching sight of a window, he rushed to it. A glance through the dusty glass revealed two stalls. They were empty.

Sheets of angry flame and billows of smoke now leaped up from the floor of the barn. *And not far away stood a large cardboard carton!*

"That must be Aunt Gertrude's!" thought Joe excitedly. "I must get it out!" he decided, remembering that his aunt had said the carton contained valuable family papers.

He looked back toward the road. There was no sign of Frank nor of the fire engines. The window was so small Joe knew he could not crawl through it. He ran back to the side door, and thrust his shoulder against the wood. The door creaked but did not give.

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Looking around, he spied a woodpile at the back of the house, with an axe beside the chopping block. Rushing across the yard, he snatched up the axe, then raced back to the barn.

CHAPTER II

The Three-cornered Scar

Joe braced himself in front of the door and swung the axe.

Thud!

The door quivered under the blow. Joe swung again. But the wood was tough and the lock was stout.

The flames had broken through the roof in a dozen places now, and the upper part of the barn was a roaring mass of flame. Black smoke swirled toward the boy as he attacked the locked door.

Joe heard the sharp blast of a car horn and the squeal of brakes. Frank was back. He leaped out and ran toward his brother.

"I phoned the fire company from that house down the road," he cried. "But they won't get here in time to do any good. What are you doing?"

"Help me . . . break down . . . this door!" Joe

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.gasped as he swung the axe. "Aunt Gertrude's carton ... is ... inside the barn!"

Frank needed no further explanation. He caught sight of a stout length of scantling propped against the side of the barn a few yards away. "Here's a battering ram I Better than an axe!"

Holding the wood firmly, they drove it against the door with all their strength. At the very first impact the boards splintered. They drew back and rammed the door again. This time the lock snapped and the door fell in with a crash. Dense clouds of black smoke poured through the opening.

As Joe looked into the burning building, he knew he must act quickly to retrieve the valuable carton. "Stand by," he said to Frank. "I'm going in."

"Take it easy," warned Frank. "Stay close to the floor."

Joe nodded. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, he held it in his lungs. His eyes closed, he crept across the barn floor toward the carton. : His judgment of distance and position proved correct. In a few seconds his groping fingers encountered the box. He grabbed the twine with which it was tied and began dragging the box backward toward the door. But he felt as if his lungs 'Would burst!

Frank, jittery, was ready to go to his assistance if necessary. Hearing a crackling sound overhead, he

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looked up and saw a blazing rafter which had almost burned through. The next moment one of its supports gave way. Amid a shower of sparks and embers it crashed below. The flaming rafter sagged.

Joe was still a good ten feet from the door. The weakened rafter hung directly overhead!

Frank plunged into the smoke, groping his way until he found Joe's outstretched hand. The rafter crackled. There was a hissing sound, then crack!

Frank tugged, dragging Joe across the doorsill, just as the beam crashed. There was an explosion of sparks and a sheet of flame inside the barn. The boys had not escaped a moment too soon!

Joe's eyebrows were singed, and his skin parched from the heat. As he drew in deep breaths of the fresh air he grinned weakly at his brother.

"Thanks," he gasped, placing a grateful hand on Frank's shoulder. "Well, we saved the carton anyway!"

By this time help was arriving. Cars were driving into the yard. A siren wailed as a fire truck raced down Springdale Avenue.

The barn, however, was doomed. The firemen turned their efforts to saving the house, which was threatened by flying sparks.

When the owner of the place and his wife drove into the yard half an hour later, their home was safe but nothing was left of the barn but a blackened foundation and a heap of smoking ashes. Learning

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that the Hardy boys had given the alarm, they came over to thank them.

"It was lucky you boys happened to be driving along and saw the smoke," the man said.

"We didn't just happen to be driving along," Frank told him. "As a matter of fact we were coming to make an exchange of cartons. We brought yours. Ours was delivered here by mistake, and we rescued it from the barn, Mr. Johnson."

"Johnson? My name's not Johnson. It's Phillips. No one named Johnson lives here."

The Hardys stared incredulously. Joe rushed to the carton and brought it over.

"Do you mean to say you went into the burning barn after that box!" Mr. Phillips exclaimed. "There's nothing in it but old newspapers. I was keeping them for the junkman."

Joe and Frank were flabbergasted. To think they had taken such a risk for a lot of old newspapers! They had not saved Aunt Gertrude's carton of irreplaceable family papers and other articles after all!

Disgusted, they took the other carton from the back of their car and showed it to Mr. Phillips. When the man examined it, he shook his head in bewilderment.

"It doesn't belong here," he insisted.

Just then an express-company truck drove into the yard. The driver got out and came over to them. He knew the boys.

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"Your aunt called up the office a while ago about a carton," he said to the Hardys, "so I thought I'd better drive out and check up on it. I delivered one to your house and one to this place. Fellow here named Johnson signed for it. Maybe . . ."

"What!" Mr. Phillips interrupted. "My wife and I have been away several days and the house has been locked up!"

"Maybe so," returned the driver. "But I delivered a carton here this morning. There was a man standing on the porch when I got here. He signed for the carton." The driver took out his book and flipped the pages. "Here's his name."

The boys studied the scrawled signature of James Johnson.

"Something strange about this," said Frank. "Do you mind if I copy the signature?" Using a piece of plain paper and a carbon from the back of the driver's book he made a tracing.

"What did the man look like?" Joe asked.

"He was about forty," replied the driver. "Kind of beady eyes, with a low forehead. Had a scar high up on his right cheek. A three-cornered scar, like a triangle."

Mr. Phillips looked grim. "I'd like to meet him and find out what he was doing here. I'll bet he set my barn on fire!"

Joe spoke up. "If Johnson got the wrong carton, maybe he'll go to the express office to pick up the

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right one. Suppose we ask the police to question •him if he does."

"Good idea," agreed Phillips.

"Well, I don't want any more trouble," said the driver. "There's enough already." Turning to the Hardys, he added, "I'll take this carton along, and hope I won't lose my job over the mix-up."

As Frank and Joe drove toward Bayport they discussed the affair of the two cartons from various angles. What had happened to Aunt Gertrude's box of papers? Had the man with the scar taken it away? Or had it been destroyed in the fire? In any case, Frank thought the man with the scar had not given his real name, and that he would never show up at the express office to claim his property.

"I wonder how Aunt Gertrude will take the news," grinned Joe.

"I hate to tell her," said Frank. "She made it plain that she didn't want anyone to see the contents of the box. Maybe," he dropped his voice to a dramatic whisper, "maybe she had some secret love letters."

As they passed through the downtown section of Bayport, Joe suggested that since it was past lunch-time that they have a bite to eat and then call on Mr. McClintock. Frank telephoned home, asking that the strawberry shortcake be saved until later, but refrained from mentioning the carton.

"I hope Mr. McClintock is back," said Joe when

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the boys entered the Bayport Hotel half an hour later.

The clerk nodded to them as they approached the desk. "Just in time," he said. "Mr. McClintock returned a little while ago. He's waiting for you."

Mr. McClintock was a tall man, past middle age, and a little stoop-shouldered. He had sharp, fidgety eyes and a nervous habit of snapping his fingers when he talked. He greeted the brothers affably enough and asked them to sit down. His manner was businesslike rather than friendly.

"So you're the Hardy boys, eh?" he said in a dry, high-pitched voice. "I've heard interesting things about you. Now, I'm a plain man and never beat around the bush so I'll come right to the point. My doctor has advised me that I need a complete change in my way of living. Says I brood too much."

With that Mr. McClintock bounded from his chair and started pacing back and forth. His face was grim. Suddenly he stopped short and continued bitterly:

"The doctor would brood, too, if his lifework had been- Well, that's beside the point. He thinks maybe my health would improve if I were around young people. He's got some newfangled notion about a fresh start in life or some such thing -hmm. Anyway, here's my proposition:

"I want to go on a trip. A long trip. I'd like you

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boys to go with me. But you must plan it and make all the arrangements."

After a moment of astonished silence, Joe gasped, "You-want-us-to-go?"

"Exactly. You're what the doctor ordered. After I see how clever you are at planning a trip, I may even give you a mystery to solve. I'll see."

Frank and Joe glanced at each other. Their eyes asked the same question. Did he have a mystery to solve? Or was he just trying to interest the boys in going with him on a trip, the lure being a mystery!

"Where do you wish to go, Mr. McClintock?" asked Frank.

"How should I know?" rasped McClintock. "That's up to you."

"But you say you want to go on a long trip . . ."

"Exactly. And I don't care where. I just want to go on a trip. I want company, and I don't want to have all the trouble of making the arrangements."

"But what kind of trip do you like best, sir?" inquired Joe. "A motor trip, a hike, a sea voyage? Do you think your health could stand a trip?"

"Do I look *that* sick?" demanded McClintock. "Does a man have to be an invalid before he's entitled to take a trip?" He glanced narrowly at the two boys. "You look mighty doubtful about it. Don't make up your minds right away. Go home and think about it. If you say what you're thinking

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right now, you'll say I'm a crazy man and you don't want to have anything to do with me.

"Well, I'm not crazy and I'm not really sick- just need a change," he went on. "After you think it over, maybe you'll decide to accept my proposition. I'm not asking you to do it for nothing, mind. I'll pay all expenses and when the trip is over you'll be paid. Money, if you like. Or something else."

"For example?" suggested Frank.

Mr. McClintock shook his head. "I'm not saying. But I'm a man of my word and I guarantee you won't be disappointed."

The Hardy boys did not know what to make of McClintock's extraordinary proposition. They were convinced that the man was perfectly sane, although undoubtedly eccentric.

"We'll be glad to think it over, Mr. McClintock," said Frank. "It isn't the sort of thing we can decide right off. You say we'll be paid for our services. How much would it be worth to you?"

"You name your figure," replied McClintock shrewdly. "If it's too high, I'll say so. If it's too low, I won't say a word."

"And if we preferred this other reward instead of money?"

McClintock chuckled. "That's a secret. I promise you, though, it's more valuable than money."

CHAPTER III

Suspicion

"It won't be easy to plan a trip unless we know how you want to travel," said Joe. "How about a motor trip?"

McClintock scowled and shook his head. "I said that I'd leave the arrangements to you boys," he grunted, "but I should have told you I don't like cars. A motor trip is out. Too bumpy and dirty."

"A train trip, then?" suggested Frank.

McClintock wrinkled his nose. "I can't sleep on trains."

"How about a plane?" Joe ventured.

"They go too fast. Get you there too soon. I want a long trip."

"Ocean liner?" Frank said.

"No, sir! Too many people. I'd have to dress up. Too fancy. That's not the sort of trip I mean at all."

The boys gave up. Plainly, Mr. McClintock was not going to be easy to please!

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"The fact of the matter is," he said, "I know the kind of trip I *don't* like. You've named all of them. But I don't know what kind of trip I *do* like. That's your job. Figure something out and when you hit on one that looks interesting I'll tell you."

The Hardys got up.

"We'll think about it, Mr. McClintock," said Frank. "As soon as we've decided, we'll let you know."

"Take your time. Come back in a day or so. I don't like people who make snap decisions."

Frank and Joe left the eccentric Mr. McClintock and went downstairs.

"For a man who just wants a trip and doesn't care where he goes, he seems mighty particular," remarked Frank as they left the hotel. "I'm stumped. Trains are out, planes are out, cars are out ..."

"And he doesn't look as if a hiking trip would appeal to him either. We forgot bicycles," Joe said jokingly. "Look! Here comes Chet!"

Down the street trudged their friend, stout, round-faced and apple-cheeked Chet Morton. Usually Chet was the picture of irresponsible bliss but today he looked different. His brows were knit in a frown, and when he greeted the Hardy boys his voice sounded gloomy.

"H'ya, fellows," he mumbled.

"Going fishing?" asked Joe, indicating a case the stout boy was carrying under his arm.

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"No," said Chet. "But maybe *you'd* like to. If so, you'll need a rod. I can sell you one cheap. A very fine fly rod. Genuine bamboo. I bought it for my father."

"Didn't he like it?"

Chet shook his head, "I'm in trouble," he confessed. "This is a custom-made rod. I was so sure my father would like it that I paid for it out of my own money. Thirty-five dollars."

Frank whistled. "How did you ever save thirty-five dollars?"

"To tell you the truth I had only twenty dollars. The other fifteen I borrowed from the money Dad gave me to buy some seed. I was sure he wouldn't mind, because the rod was a real bargain."

"But he did mind?" asked Joe.

"Mind!" said Chet mournfully. "He says I've got to earn fifteen dollars to pay him back."

"Use the rod to catch fish. Then sell the fish," suggested Joe, suppressing a grin.

Chet looked at him sourly. "Fifteen dollars worth of fish? Nothing doing. I may be able to

make some money selling flies. That's what I figure on doing." He brightened a bit at the thought.

"Flies? Where could you sell flies?" asked Frank.

"I don't mean houseflies. Artificial flies, for fishing. I sent away for a book that tells how to tie 'em. How about coming up to the house and helping me?"

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The Hardys recognized this as just one more of Chet's impractical schemes for making money. He was always embarking on some kind of venture, the most recent one having been in the field of taxidermy. Each time, Frank and Joe were enlisted to help, and usually found themselves doing most of the work, for Chet shunned work of all kinds.

"Too busy to tie flies," replied Frank promptly. "A man just made us a proposition and we have to do some thinking about it." He told Chet about their interview with Mr. McClintock.

Chet listened with interest. "Golly, he even hinted at a mystery!" An impish grin came into his eyes. "Funny though, with your reputation as super detectives, he didn't tell you about it right away. What do you suppose it is?"

"Haven't the least idea," Joe replied.

"He hinted at something about his lifework," said Frank. "I guess he had trouble in business or lost a lot of money."

"Right now he seems less interested in solving the mystery he spoke of than in going on the trip," Joe added.

"Why not suggest a fishing trip!" Chet exclaimed. "I'll bet he'd go for that. No trains, no planes, no cars, no ocean liners. Just a nice lazy fishing trip."

"Sounds like a pretty fair idea," remarked Joe. "Mr. McClintock might like the plan, at that."

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"Good!" said Chet. "You can sell him this fishing *•god*. After all, he'll need equipment. You go and talk to him right away."

But the Hardys were not to be lured into Chet's little sales scheme that easily.

"We'll think about it," Frank promised. "If Mr. McClintock wants to go on a fishing trip; if he really needs any equipment; if he wants to pay thirty-five dollars for a rod; and if your rod is worth that much, we'll ask him to talk to you."

"Sounds like a lot of ifs," grumbled Chet. "I'll probably have the rod sold by then." He sauntered off. "See you later."

The Hardys were about to get into their car and drive home when Frank remembered that Mrs. Hardy had asked him to buy some socks and handkerchiefs for their father. There was a clothing store near the hotel so the boys went inside.

A customer was standing at the counter when they entered. He was a rough-looking fellow of about forty, with beady eyes and a low brow. But the most significant detail about him was a scar high on his right cheek.

The man, after glancing at them, turned back to the counter and examined some belts the clerk had brought out. Frank and Joe retired to the back of *the* store for a whispered conference.

"This fellow fits the expressman's description of

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the man who called himself Johnson," said Frank.

"Sure does," agreed Joe. "There's a phone booth in the drugstore next door. I'll call the expressman and ask him to come over. If the man leaves, you follow him."

Joe slipped out of the store. Frank idled about, pretending to be interested in some sports jackets. The customer was evidently in no hurry. He purchased a belt, then looked at neckties. He was about to buy a purple one with yellow dots when Joe returned.

"Expressman is out," he told his brother quietly.

Frank walked up to the counter, and tried to maneuver himself into a position where he

could get a better look at the man's face. Noticing some neckties which the customer had discarded, Frank asked pleasantly:

"Have you finished with these?"

"Yeah," grunted the man rudely.

But as Frank glanced at his face, the boy's heart began to pound. The scar on the man's cheek was triangular in shape!

Suddenly the suspect turned and saw Frank staring at him. The boy quickly averted his eyes, but the fellow glared angrily at him, picked up his change, and thrust his purchase into the pocket of his jacket. He strode hurriedly out the door without looking back.

Suspicion 25

"That will teach you not to be inquisitive," the clerk said laughingly to Frank. "Say, where're you going? I thought you wanted to buy something!"

Frank and Joe were already at the door. "We'll be back," called Frank.

The man by this time was nearly half a block away, walking rapidly. Frank and Joe jumped into their car and followed him. The man turned right at the end of the block.

"He's going down toward the harbor," said Joe.

"So are we," said Frank, stepping on the gas.

CHAPTER IV

"JVb *Passengers!*"

As the car swung into the street leading toward the harbor the boys caught sight of the scarred man again. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Hope he doesn't recognize us," said Frank, "or he'll know we're trailing him."

The fellow quickened his pace. Then suddenly he stepped into an alley that opened between two buildings, and broke into a run.

Frank swung the car into the alley, but found it blocked by a truck unloading supplies. The man dodged around the front of it.

"I'll get out and meet you at the other end of the alley," said Joe.

As Joe ran after the suspect, Frank swiftly backed the car out into the street again and drove around the block. But when he reached the far end of the alley there was Joe but no sign of their quarry.

"No Passengers!" 27

"Gave me the slip!" muttered Joe in exasperation. "But I'll bet he's Johnson all right. Otherwise, why did he run when he saw we were following him?"

"We might catch sight of him around the docks," suggested Frank. "He was heading that way."

"It's worth trying," agreed Joe, hopping into the Car.

They rode down the hill to Bayport's harbor. The streets near the wharves were lined with secondhand stores, cheap restaurants and chandlers' supply houses. Trucks roared back and forth to the piers. Down at the docks there was a steady clatter of activity; the tooting of whistles, the clank of chains and the chugging of small engines, intermingled with the shouts of longshoremen.

Frank parked the car and the boys began their hunt along the water front. But there was no sign of the man whom they suspected might have their aunt's missing carton.

"Guess we'll have to give it up," said Frank. "That guy will probably stay out of sight for a while if he thinks we're looking for him. We'll come back later."

As they walked through a large pier shed, the brothers stopped to watch the busy scene. Tons of supplies which had been delivered by trucks and railroad cars were being loaded onto a waiting freighter. The great shed echoed with the noisy racket of small

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hand trucks which the longshoremen were trundling to the platform near the ship.

On the freighter, the arm of a boom swung out over the loading platform, and a hook snapped into the rope net holding several hundred pounds of cargo. The cable tightened,

the mass rose slowly into the air and across the ship's side, then hung suspended for a moment over the open hold. As the engine clattered and the drum spun, the cable was payed out again and the cargo lowered into the depths of the freighter.

Suddenly Frank snapped his fingers in excitement. He turned to Joe.

"I have an ideal"

"It seems to have hit you with quite a wallop," said Joe with a grin. "What is it?"

"It's about Mr. McClintock's trip. Why not a voyage by freighter?"

Joe's grin disappeared. "You mean a trip on a boat like this? They wouldn't take us."

"Sure they would. At least, some of them would. A lot of these freighters have room for five or six passengers. Don't you remember Biff Hooper telling us about his cousin going on a freighter to South America a few years ago?"

"But Mr. McClintock said he didn't want an ocean voyage."

"He said he didn't want to travel on a passenger

"No Passengers!" 29

liner because there'd be too many people around and he'd have to dress up," said Frank. "A freighter voyage might be the very thing."

"I think you've got something," agreed Joe. He glanced at the big steel freighter. "And to tell you the truth I wouldn't mind a trip like that myself."

On the way home the boys discussed it excitedly. The more they thought of the plan, the better they liked it and the more they were convinced that this might be the solution to Mr. McClintock's problem.

Frank stopped the car in front of the hotel haberdashery again, and Joe went in to purchase the socks and handkerchiefs for his father. He asked the clerk if he knew the scar-faced customer. The haberdasher said no, but from what little the man had said, he had gathered that the fellow was a seaman.

When the boys reached home, Mrs. Hardy greeted them at the door with the welcome news that their father had just returned. And Aunt Gertrude greeted them with inquiries about her missing carton. When they told her of the fire, she became very Upset.

"The express company ought to be sued!" she de-dared. "The idea of handing over my carton to a total stranger! It probably was destroyed in the fire."

• "I'm sure the express company will do what it can, Aunty," said Frank.

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Aunt Gertrude replied that money could not repay her for the family papers and personal letters contained in the missing carton. Mr. Hardy came out of his study and wanted to know what had happened. The boys told him about the expressman's mistake and their adventure in the blazing barn.

"And that," declared Aunt Gertrude, "was very foolish of you both. Why, you might have been burned to death. Risking your lives that way! Don't you ever dare take chances like that again!" Aunt Gertrude could certainly change her mind in the twinkling of an eye!

Fenton Hardy suggested that his sister talk to an official of the express company. "There seems to be something fishy about the whole affair," he said, frowning. "You'd better see what you can do about it."

That evening Mr. Hardy related stories of his travels in connection with his work during the past few weeks. Specialists dealing in rare documents and valuable autographs had found their business threatened by skillful forgeries that had appeared on the market. So clever were the fakes that even experts had been fooled by them. Copies of rare old letters and documents were bringing prices paid only for the genuine articles.

"For instance, look at this letter," said Mr. Hardy,

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taking a yellowed, crumbling piece of paper from a folder. "It looks like the real thing, doesn't it?"

The letter was passed around.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Joe. "Signed by George Washington himself! That's his signature,

all right. I've seen it in books."

"Is it really a forgery?" asked Mrs. Hardy.

"It is such an exact copy of the real letter that the buyer paid a thousand dollars for it and thought he got a bargain," her husband replied. "The real letter is in the hands of a Boston dealer. The crooks also compose letters and papers, and that was how I got my first clue."

The fakers, he explained, were not too well versed in old phraseology, and that was how their work had been discovered. But they were skilled imitators and evidently had the help of a clever chemist in "aging" the paper. Mr. Hardy had visited half a dozen large cities in his efforts to run down clues, but so far he had met with little success.

"However, time will tell," he added confidently. "These forgers are clever but they'll make a mistake sometime as all crooks do, and give themselves away."

Aunt Gertrude announced dinner, saying the shortcake would wait no longer. As the family was eating the delectable dessert, Frank brought up the

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subject of a trip with Mr. McClintock. After hearing how eccentric the man seemed to be, Aunt Gertrude predicted that probably only trouble would come to her nephews should they accept his proposition.

"There's no telling what a person like that might do," she said firmly. "Leave you stranded in some foreign country, or never pay you a cent for all your trouble."

It was finally decided that Mr. Hardy would accompany his sons to the hotel and talk to Mr. McClintock himself. With his rare discernment of character, he would settle the matter.

Frank and Joe had become so interested in taking a voyage that they were fearful their father might disapprove. But the next morning, after talking with McClintock about an hour, Mr. Hardy gave his consent to the trip. Arising he said:

"I must go. I'll leave you three to make plans and trust you'll work out something enjoyable to all of you."

After he had gone, Mr. McClintock turned to the boys. "Now, if you can only figure out how and where to travel ..."

"We have a suggestion, sir," said Frank. "How about a voyage by ocean freighter?"

McClintock's eyebrows came down in a scowl. "Ocean freighter? You mean an old tramp steamer?"

"No Passengers!" 33

Ridiculous! Couldn't think of it. No room for passengers. Dirty. Smelly. Poor food."

"It wouldn't be that bad," Frank spoke up quickly. "A modern freighter is a mighty clean ship. Some of them make a business of carrying a few passengers. We'd pick one of those and see that the food and accommodations were right."

"You'd find it a lot of fun," put in Joe. "They go to unusual places where regular boats don't go, and . . ."

"Well, all right, look into it," interrupted Mc-Clintock. "If you find the right kind of ship, let me know."

As the boys left the hotel, Frank advised that they strike while the iron was hot, and try to find a freighter that would carry passengers.

"We'd better get it settled before Mr. McClintock has time to change his mind," he said, laughing.

"Right!" agreed Joe. "He's such a strange man you can't tell what he'll do or say next. I like him, though. By the way, Frank, did you notice he steered clear of mentioning anything about the mystery he might let us solve?"

"Yes, I did," replied his brother, then smiling, said, "Guess he doesn't think we could do it."

"Just wait until he sees us in action, Frank!"

The boys rode to the docks. The freighter that they had seen the previous day had already sailed.

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but another ship was in its berth, Frank spoke to a longshoreman who was just coming out of the office of the loading shed.

"Do you know where we can find a freighter that carries passengers?"

The man gestured with a grimy thumb.

"Right there," he said. "That's the *Hawk*. She's loading now. Accommodation for five or six passengers. I'll show you where to climb aboard. You can talk to the captain."

The freighter rode high in the water because loading had just begun and there was very little cargo in the holds. The longshoreman showed the boys a ladder running from the dockside to the ship's rail high above.

"If the captain's not around, ask for the first mate." The man gave his belt a hitch and went back to his work.

Frank and Joe climbed the ladder and swung themselves over the rail. A sandy-haired seaman in sweater and dungarees emerged from the galley and glanced at them curiously.

"We're looking for the captain," Frank explained.

"He's up for'ard," grunted the seaman. "What do you want him for?"

"We want to ship as passengers."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Nothin* doin'," he growled. "We don't carry passengers."

"But we were told . . ."

"No Passengers 1" 35

"You heard me!" growled the seaman. "No passengers. Now beat it!"

"I think we'll talk to the captain just the same," said Frank.

The boys turned away and walked down the narrow space between the rail and the open hatches toward the officers' quarters.

"You heard what I said!" bellowed the man angrily. "You stay away from the captain!"

The boys did not answer. If they were going to be refused passage they wanted the refusal to come from someone in authority.

They passed by the gap of an open hatch. Then their way was barred by stacks of freight. They retraced their steps, deciding to go around the deckhouse. A huge net filled with boxes of cargo swung over from the dock and toward the hatch.

"Have to keep our wits about us here," commented Joe, who was in the lead, as the heavy steel bar veered in front of him suddenly.

Frank was not paying attention. He had turned to watch the unfriendly seaman.

"Look out, Frank!" Joe cried warningly.

The boom suddenly reversed its direction and swung swiftly back again, this time lower. Joe flung himself flat on the deck, but Frank did not dodge in time.

The heavy boom struck him. He was carried upward off his feet. Then he was swept overboard!

CHAPTER V

Captain Sharp

Joe leaped to the railing. He saw Frank hurtle down past the steel side of the freighter, not three feet from the pier. His body was twisting and turning as if it were limp. The impact of the boom evidently had knocked him out. He struck the water with a resounding smack.

Joe scrambled out of his coat and flung it aside. He leaped up onto the rail, balanced a moment, then dived.

It was a thirty-foot drop, but the boy struck the water cleanly, just a few yards from the place where Frank had disappeared. Under water, he opened his eyes. Catching sight of a dark object a short distance away, he raced toward it, then shot to the surface, one arm around his brother.

Joe swam with him toward a ladder hanging from the pier, wondering how badly Frank was hurt. He was greatly relieved when the boy made a con-

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vulsive movement and began to struggle and thrash about.

"It's okay. Take it easy," muttered Joe.

Two longshoremen, having seen Frank's mishap, had rushed to the edge of the dock. Now they reached down and hoisted the two boys out of the murky water. They carried Frank, not yet fully conscious, to a small office inside the loading shed. Joe followed, breathless and frightened.

"Get a doctor!" ordered one of the men.

But the other acted instantly. He started giving Frank first aid at once. Presently the boy opened his eyes and looked around dully.

"Thank goodness you came to," said Joe in relief.

"He wouldn't 'a if it hadn't been for you," spoke up one of the men. "I saw the whole thing. He'd 'a drowned if you hadn't got him." ; Frank weakly smiled his thanks. "Take-me-home," he gasped.

He was carried to the convertible and Joe took the wheel. The men offered to go along, but Joe declined their assistance, saying he was sure that his brother would be all right. At the Hardy home there was great consternation when the boys' mother and Aunt Gertrude saw Joe assisting Frank up the Steps. They scurried about, talking, advising and getting Frank to bed as fast as possible with a heating pad.

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"Oh, I'm okay now," the boy insisted. "Just got a little headache. That's all." When the two women finally left the room, he said to Joe, who had showered and changed his clothes, "Listen. I think I was bumped on purpose by that boom."

"Really?"

"Yes. I saw that guy who tried to put us off the *Hawk* motioning to someone on the dock. I'll bet he was signaling for him to swing the boom so it would hit us."

Joe's jaw snapped into a determined position. He said between clenched teeth, "That fellow's not going to get away with this." He left the room and started down the stairs.

"Better not go alone," Frank called.

Joe might have objected, but at this instant the front door opened to admit Biff Hooper, a schoolmate of the Hardy boys. Biff was on the wrestling team and had muscles like steel.

"Hi!" Joe called. "You're the very person I'm looking for. I need a bodyguard. Want to go give a big, tough guy a good sock?"

"Since when have you stopped doing that yourself?" grinned Biff.

The two boys went out the door. On the way to the dock in the Hardy convertible, Joe explained what had happened. Biff, though a wrestler, never picked fights, and by the time they reached the

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flawk he had convinced Joe he had no proof that the affair had been anything but an unavoidable accident, and there was no point in starting trouble.

"Just the same, I'm going aboard," declared Joe, "and finish what I started to do-see the captain."

The two boys mounted the ladder. The seaman the Hardys had encountered before was not in sight. No loading was going on. Two of the crew lounged on deck. One of them jumped up.

"What you want?" he asked.

"To see your captain," Joe replied.

"What about?"

"I'll talk to him."

"You will, eh?" the man said sneeringly. "Not if I say you can't. And if I say you can't see Captain Sharp, you can't. Understand?"

Joe and Biff turned red and a fight might have started then and there if the captain himself had not appeared. Captain Sharp lived up to his name. He was a tall, thin-featured, narrow-jawed man with keen, cruel eyes.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"I'm trying to book passage on a freighter for three people," Joe explained.

Captain Sharp shook his head abruptly. "You're on the wrong ship," he answered shortly. "Can't accommodate you."

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"A man on the dock told me you carry passengers."

"We used to," the captain said. "But not any more. It didn't work out. There's no point in dis* cussing it." He made a gesture of dismissal.

"We'd be willing to pay well-"

Joe's attempt to continue the talk was cut short.

"No passengers at any price!" cried the captain. "Now get off and stay off!"

The boys left the *Hawk* and went back over the side. Biff Hooper was indignant. "I don't see why he had to be so nasty," he said. "You'd think we were a couple of criminals."

"Looks suspicious to me," Joe said, then laughed. "I don't mean us. I mean the *Hawk*."

"Say," said Biff, "I know where you can book passage. At Klack's Agency. It's not far from here. Next street."

He led the way to a dingy-looking establishment with several blackboards in the window. On them were chalked such legends as *Cook Wanted*, *Fireman (First class) for S. A. Cruise and Stokers Wtd.*

"A lot of freighter crews are signed up here," Biff explained. "They book freighter passengers as a side line."

Mr. Klack was out. A stringy-haired blonde girl, chewing vigorously on a wad of gum, looked languidly at the boys and inquired what they wanted.

"I'm looking for a freighter . . ." Joe got no further than that for she interrupted him.

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"You?" she mumbled, shifting the gum so she could speak more clearly. "You're kidding."

"What makes you think I'm kidding?" asked Joe. "I want to go on a freighter as . . ."

"You ain't the type," drawled the girl.

"Look," said Biff Hooper, "some friends of mine ..."

"Oooh! Such muscles!" said the young lady admiringly. "Now if *you* was the one who wanted to sign up-"

"I'm not looking for a job," laughed Joe, catching her. "I simply want to . . ."

"If you don't want a job, why did you come around here botherin' me, then?" The girl looked annoyed.

"I want to book passage for three people- freighter passage."

"Then why didn't you say so in the first place?" asked the girl. Turning to Biff she remarked again, "Such muscles!"

Joe grinned. Biff turned red. "Never mind my muscles," he said. "Can you fix up my friend with freighter passage?"

The girl shook her head. "I can take his name. But there's no ships in port-none takin' passengers, that is. If somepin' turns up, I'll let you know."

She condescended to write down Joe's name, street address and telephone number, all the while darting admiring glances at the brawny Biff.

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Crimson with embarrassment, Biff fled. Out in the street he glared at Joe Hardy. "If you tell any of the fellows at school ..."

"About what?" asked Joe innocently. "Just because a beautiful and intelligent young woman admires your muscles . . ." he teased.

"Okay, okay," grinned Biff, shamefaced. "Can I help it if I've got biceps? But for the love of Pete, don't tell anyone what that dizzy girl said."

Joe promised to keep the secret of Biff's "conquest." The wrestler left his friend a few minutes later, and Joe went home. Frank had fallen asleep and Mrs. Hardy said he was not to be disturbed.

Aunt Gertrude, she told them, had gone to the express office to see what she could do about the missing carton. Joe had barely begun to tell his mother about his suspicions regarding the *Hawk*, when the telephone rang. The boy answered it, but the first word from the other end of the line made him hold the receiver far away from his ear.

"Joel" Aunt Gertrude called loudly and excitedly. "Come down here right away! Quick!"

"Tell me . . ."

"Don't argue. Get into the car and hurry down here right away!"

"But, Aunt Gertrude, if you'll . . ."

"Joe Hardy, there isn't a minute to lose!" she exclaimed.

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"But where are you, Aunty?"

"Why, at the express office, of course!" replied Aunt Gertrude. "There's a chance to solve the mystery! Hurry!"

"I'll come right down," Joe promised, and raced from the house.

CHAPTER VI

A Chase

when Joe pulled up in front of the express office, Aunt Gertrude flew out, pointing to a truck about to pull away from the curb. It was loaded with trunks, bags and boxes.

"Follow him!" Miss Hardy ordered, getting in beside her nephew.

"Why, Aunty?"

"You want to solve the mystery, don't you?" she snapped.

"You mean the expressman is going to lead us to your missing carton?" Joe asked, starting off.

Miss Hardy snorted, then assumed an attitude of patient tolerance. "No. There's no word about *my* carton. But this morning a carton that looks like mine and like that other one with the raw wool in it arrived at the express office."

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"Oh," said Joe. "And it's being delivered somewhere. You think that maybe James Johnson will be there to receive it."

"Now your brain's working," sniffed Aunt Gertrude. "The carton's marked for a Mrs. Harrison, and according to the telephone book Mrs. Harrison lives at that address. But you and Frank and your father said there might be something fishy going on, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to investigate this." • "Good idea," Joe agreed. "By the way, Johnson never called for his carton, did he?" 1 "I forgot to ask."

The expressman ahead was the same one who had made the initial mistake. Joe was eager to reach the Harrison place, but the driver seemed to be in no hurry. He delivered big parcels and little parcels, large boxes and small boxes to various parts of town. • Finally, with only the carton left, he set off for the outskirts of Bayport. Joe followed doggedly.

At length the truck came to a stop in front of a handsome, modern home on a street with scattered Kouses. The expressman unloaded the carton and carried it to the front steps. Joe was out of the car and at his heels in a minute. The man rang the bell. The gray-haired woman who opened the door looked sharply at Joe.

"Mrs. Harrison?" asked the driver, setting the carton in the hall.

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."Yes."

"Sign here, please," he said, handing her a pencil and pointing out a blank space on his pad.

Joe expected the signature to be in the same handwriting as that of James Johnson, and the signer to be a man masquerading as a woman. But he was wrong. The woman's writing was definitely feminine as was her voice.

"Is Mr. Harrison at home?" Joe inquired.

"*Mr.* Harrison? Why ... er ... no," she answered haltingly.

"This is his carton, isn't it?" the boy asked, still clinging to a hope his errand was not to be in vain.

"What is this?" Mrs. Harrison snapped. "A quiz program?" Abruptly she slammed the door.

The expressman grinned. "Fool's errand for you, eh?" he said to Joe as they returned to the street.

"I'm afraid so," sighed the boy, and got back into the car.

Aunt Gertrude, when she heard the story, was convinced that the transaction was not entirely above-board. • "Ladies don't slam doors in people's faces," she said, annoyed. "People who do it are afraid of something."

The next morning she brought up the subject again and expressed her views about Mrs. Harrison's conduct.

"I never saw such bad manners," she exploded.

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"Which Mrs. Harrison is this?" asked Mrs. Hardy, interested.

"Oh, she lives on Mount Pleasant Drive." replied Aunt Gertrude. "Mrs. Robert Harrison. A very rude woman."

"Why, Gertrude!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, shocked. "I know Martha Harrison. She's a lovely person. You mustn't say such things about her."

"You may think she's a lovely person, Laura, but judging from her actions yesterday . . ."

"Yesterday?" said Mrs. Hardy. "Why, Martha Harrison is out of town."

"You're sure?" Joe spoke up excitedly.

"She's attending a convention of women's clubs in Highburg. There isn't anyone home now because Mr. Harrison's in Mexico."

Joe dashed to the telephone and called the Harrison number. There was no answer.

"I'm going out there!" he cried. "Frank, feel well enough to come?" f. "Sure do," his brother answered.

Mrs. Hardy's revelation had convinced Joe that there might well be something strange about the delivery of the carton to the Harrison residence after all.

"Mrs. Harrison can't be in Bayport and Highburg at the same time, that's certain," he said, as the boys got into their convertible.

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They hurried out to Mount Pleasant Drive. When Frank rang the bell, there was no answer. A boy who was riding a bicycle along the street said he was a neighbor, and volunteered the information that the Harrisons had closed their house a week before and would not be back until the end of the month.

Frank and Joe returned home.

"I knew it!" declared Aunt Gertrude. "I knew there was something suspicious about that woman the moment I heard she slammed the door in your face, Joe."

"But why would she be living in the Harrison house?" asked Mrs. Hardy, puzzled.

"I have a theory about that," said Fenton Hardy, who emerged from the library to hear the story. "Sometimes crooks watch the social columns of the newspapers for the names of people who are to be away from home. They learn when a house is going to be unoccupied, and then rob it."

"You think there were thieves in the Harrison house?" his wife cried.

Mr. Hardy shrugged. "Perhaps. But in this case, I believe a different kind of crook was using it as a convenient address."

"For the delivery of cartons?" asked Frank.

"Exactly. And they contain stolen goods," guessed the detective. "The crooks may be moving

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valuable stuff from state to state, and by using other people's names and addresses they can't be traced. I suggest that you boys notify the express company. No doubt they'll turn

the matter over to the police."

"The carton that came here had raw wool in it," said Aunt Gertrude. "Is that worth stealing?"

Mr. Hardy smiled at his sister. "But something 'Valuable may have been secreted in it."

In the meantime Mrs. Hardy had put in a longdistance call to Mrs. Harrison who was shocked at the news. She said that she had given no one permission to use her house and would come right home •to see if anything had been stolen.

The boys drove downtown at once and called at the express office, where they told their story to the 'manager, Mr. Nixon. He was concerned and upset 'to hear that his company's services probably were being used to move stolen goods.

"No one has claimed that carton marked Johnson," he said. "I'm going to open it, and if you're right, I'll certainly tell Police Chief Collig about it. Come along."

He led the way to a rear room. There was no carton in sight. All three searched the place but it did not come to light.

"Funny," said Mr. Nixon, scratching his head in perplexity.

"I'm afraid it's been stolen," said Frank. "That.

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man calling himself James Johnson was taking no chances."

"You'll report it to the police?" suggested Frank.

The manager shook his head. "I'd rather not turn this over to the police just now," he said. "There would be unpleasant publicity. How about you boys taking the case? I suppose your father's too busy. But I've heard a good deal about your success as detectives and you've been in on this mystery from the start. You know the facts better than anyone else. How about it?"

The boys hesitated. They did not see how they could accept the case in view of their trip with Mr. McClintock. Frank explained this to the manager.

"Fair enough," he replied. "But why not work on it until you leave on your trip? If it hasn't been cleared up by the time you go, I'll turn it over to the police."

"All right," said Frank. "We'll do what we can for you."

When the Hardys came out of the express-company office, they bumped squarely into Mr. McClintock.

"Heard you were here," he said. "I've been thinking about that freighter proposition you suggested. Doesn't sound too bad. But I don't know a thing about freighters. Do you suppose I could see one? Then I'd soon tell you if I'd like that kind of trip."

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"There's one in port now," said Frank. "It's called the *Hawk*. We can't book passage on it, but at least you can see what a big freighter looks like."

The man climbed into the car. When they reached the water front they found that the *Hawk* was much lower in the water, though not loaded to capacity. A large sign said, "Positively no visitors," but it was easy to study the details of the ship from the dockside.

Mr. McClintock was pleasantly surprised. "Might be all right to travel on a ship like that," he agreed. "I'll let you know."

"Why not come up to our house to dinner tonight? We'll have more information then. We've left our names at an agency," Joe told him.

"Never eat much at night," said Mr. McClintock. "I don't go out to dinner at people's houses because they always expect me to sit around for a couple of hours afterward and it keeps me up past my bedtime. Now if you want to ask me up to lunch, that's different. I'm hungry anyway."

"Lunch it is, then," laughed Frank. "First of all, we'll telephone the house and let Mother know you're coming."

So Mr. McClintock had lunch with the Hardy family and apparently enjoyed himself immensely. To the amazement of the boys, he and their Aunt Gertrude got along wonderfully. It was obvious that Mr. McClintock approved wholeheartedly of

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her, and equally clear that Aunt Gertrude thought highly of him. After he departed, she said as much.

"A very fine man. If you could persuade him to take this freighter trip it would be a good thing for you boys," declared Aunt Gertrude.

Frank and Joe looked at each other. Their relative certainly could be changeable!

Mr. McClintock, apparently, did not need any further persuading about the freighter trip. Early that evening he telephoned the boys, saying he had made up his mind. He not only had decided to go on a freighter trip, but had decided to go right away. In fact, he had already picked the ship.

"The one we saw at the dock looks all right to me. Book passage on it at once and we'll sail as soon as it's ready."

Vainly, Frank explained that the *Hawk's* captain had already refused them passage. Mr. McClintock had made up his mind.

"Try them again. Offer them double fare. That'll bring them around. I want to go on that boat!"

To please him, Frank telephoned the Klack agency, but he held out little hope that Captain Sharp would change his mind. Mr. Klack himself answered the call.

"No passengers," the man told him. "You couldn't go on the *Hawk* now anyway," he said. "She sailed a few minutes ago."

A Chase 53

That, apparently, settled it. But the Hardy boys did not know Mr. McClintock. There was a very persistent streak in the man.

"I've made up my mind to take a trip on that boat and I'm going to," he announced, when Frank reported to him over the telephone.

"But how?" Frank asked. "It's gone."

"We can hire a fast motorboat and catch the *Hawk*," the determined man cried. "Don't you know where to get one?"

Frank was fearful Mr. McClintock was becoming too excited. Quickly he said:

"We own a motorboat. It can go a good deal faster than a freighter and I guess we could overtake the *Hawk* all right, but ..."

"Then what are we waiting for?" demanded Mr. McClintock. "Throw some clothes into a suitcase. I'll call for you in a taxi in ten minutes."

"But we'll have to find somebody to bring our boat back," said Frank.

"That's your lookout," replied McClintock and hung up.

Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude, understanding the need for playing along with the man's idea, helped the boys pack, while Joe telephoned to several of his friends. Finally he found Tony Prito, who was willing to go along and bring back their speedboat, the *Sleuth*, if the Hardys should get on the *Hawk*.

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Mr. McClintock *did* not let the grass grow under his feet. He was at the Hardy house in ten minutes. And ten minutes later the *Sleuth* was nosing its way out of the boathouse and roaring off into the twilight.

"When this Captain Sharp sees we're determined to go with him, he'll change his mind," predicted Mr. McClintock.

Even granting the freighter a good start, the Hardys knew that the *Sleuth* should be able to overtake the *Hawk* by the time it could reach the entrance to Barmet Bay. The regular steamer channel was clearly marked by buoys, and as the speedboat ate up the miles the brothers thought it would be only a matter of time before they would see the lights of the big ship ahead. They sped on and on, peering into the gloom. But no glimpse of the freighter!

"Thought you said this boat of yours was a fast one," jibed McClintock. "Can't you catch up to a slow steamer?"

"There isn't a faster speedboat on Barmet Bay," spoke up Tony, quick to defend his

friends' craft.

The moon rose, flooding the bay with light. They could see to the very mouth of the bay. The *Hawk* was not in sight.

"She's faster than I thought," said Frank.

He put his boat to the limit of her power and they

A Chase 55

came out into the open sea. Nothing but water. There was no freighter; no moving lights to indicate the presence of any ship.

Frank swung the wheel. The motorboat turned.

"Giving up?" demanded McClintock.

"Not entirely," said Frank. "We'll go back to Bayport and find out the *Hawk's* first port of call. If it's not too far away, we can go there by car and board the ship."

McClintock grumbled a little, but he realized that there was no point in continuing the chase by sea. The speedboat roared back to port. When they reached Bayport the boys learned at the Klack agency that the *Hawk* was to stop at Southport on Eagle Bay. Frank telephoned to the harbor master there. His reply left them astonished and bewildered.

"That freighter hasn't docked here. We aren't even expecting her. You must have made a mistake."

CHAPTER VII

Chefs Mew Business

when Frank and Joe reported to Mr. McClintock that the *Hawk* had vanished mysteriously, he went into a tirade which ordinarily would have embarrassed them. But the boys scarcely heard him. Instead, their thoughts turned to the strange happenings in connection with the ship. The threatening seaman, the swinging boom that had knocked Frank into the water, the unpleasant captain and his refusal to consider passengers, and now a new route for the *Hawk* evidently determined upon in a hurry.

"-so do something. And do it quick," the Hardys suddenly realized Mr. McClintock was saying. "I thought you were boys who got things done in a hurry."

Frank gulped. "Sorry, Mr. McClintock. We'll find another freighter."

"I'll go and ask at Klack's," Joe offered, hurrying back inside the agency.

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Chet's New Business 57

He told the man in charge about their names being on a waiting list for a freighter voyage. "What are the chances of getting passage?" he asked.

"Practically none at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Not many of 'em take passengers, and most of 'em are booked up."

"When can I see Mr. Klack?" asked Joe.

"I'm Mr. Klack."

"Oh," said Joe. "Well, you have our phone number. Please let us know when you get a reservation. The sooner the better."

He left the office and returned to the waiting taxi. He was unusually quiet until they had dropped Mr. McClintock at his hotel. Then the boy burst out.

"Frank, I don't like that man Klack. I have a feeling he wouldn't give us a reservation if he had one."

"But why?" asked his brother.

Joe shrugged. "I'm going to make some investigations of my own."

True to his word, he was down at the docks the next morning. A freighter which had come in at seven o'clock, he learned, carried six passengers. Hurrying to the captain, he asked him if the Hardy party might take the outgoing trip.

"Sorry, son," smiled the pleasant man, "but the space was reserved not an hour ago."

As Joe

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groaned, the captain continued, "The Klack Agency sold it."

Fire in his eye, Joe hurried to Klack's. Only the gum-chewing girl was there. The boy demanded to know why passage had not been given to him.

"My, but you're mad for so early in the morning," the girl said placidly. "That friend of yours with those big muscles, he wouldn't try to chew me up the way you're doin'."

"You haven't answered my question," Joe interrupted icily.

"And I ain't goin' to," the girl replied. "I get my orders from Mr. Klack, not you."

"You mean—"

"I mean I ain't sayin' another word." She began to pound a typewriter.

Joe, nonplused, returned home. When Frank heard the disturbing report, he said:

"Something queer about it all. I'm beginning to think that somebody doesn't want us to sail on a freighter."

"What'll we do now?" Joe exclaimed. "Mr. Mc-Clintock will be calling up here—"

"And won't find us," grinned Frank. "We're going out to Chet Morton's. He phoned that he needs our help badly. He's pretty sore at us."

"We *have* neglected him," Joe agreed. "Wonder how much of his fifteen dollars he's earned?"

Chet's New Business 59

"He said his fly-tying business hasn't started yet. And Joe, we forgot to try to sell his rod to Mr. Mc-Clintock."

"Gosh, that's right. Well, we can still do it," said Joe. "Let's bring the rod back with us."

Chet Morton lived on a farm a few miles outside Bayport. The brothers found him sitting on the back porch surrounded by a vast assortment of tools and equipment for tying flies. There were bits of tinsel, silk floss, fur, chenille and wool. Near by lay chunks of cork, lengths of silk and wire, fishhooks of various sizes, bottles of wax and cement, and scissors and pliers. A vise was set up at the edge of the porch. Chet looked important and busy, if a little confused.

"Quite a layout, Chet," said Frank, as he and Joe sat down on the steps.

Joe gave a yelp and got up hastily. He detached a small hook from the seat of his pants.

"A trout fly *looks* simple," explained Chet, "but it is really pretty complicated." The stout boy had a large book propped up against the leg of a chair. He consulted the book and picked up a size sixteen hook. "I'm tying a Quill Gordon just now. Let's see—black hackle and yellow mallard wings."

"Is this your first fly?" asked Joe.

"I've made two, so far," Chet bragged. "Here's one."

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He picked up a weird-looking thing from a tin box and handed it over. The Hardys examined it dubiously. It was like no fly they had ever seen before. One wing was considerably bigger than the other, and the hook was completely engulfed in a confused tangle of furs and feathers.

"If I were a fish," remarked Frank, "and saw anything like that plop down on the water, I'd be scared to death. What is it?"

"Actually," Chet confessed, "I started out to tie a Royal Coachman, but I didn't have any peacock feathers so I decided to turn it into a Grizzly King, but it came out different from what I expected. So I've decided to call it a Morton Special."

"It's original, at any rate," Frank commented, grinning.

"Maybe you could tie a better fly yourself," returned Chet with dignity. "Just try your hand at this Quill Gordon." He thrust over the pliers and scissors. "There's the instruction book. Go ahead."

The Hardys recognized this as a familiar maneuver. Whenever Chet began a piece of work some innocent bystander usually finished it. Frank, however, was interested in the fly tying so he studied the instructions for tying the Gordon and settled down to the job. Chet made himself comfortable with his back against a post.

Chet's New Business 61

"The big thing," he said, "is to remember that trout are suspicious of bright-colored flies. Then, too, you have to make your cast so that the fly will float as long as possible. That's for dry-fly fishing, of course. If the fly goes under the water you have to retrieve it and dry it off. It should be waterproofed with an absorbent pad and you should use dressing on the line so it will float."

Chet gave this little lecture with such an air of authority that the boys were convinced he had memorized it word for word. He chattered cheerfully about all the money he would get selling flies, and was still going strong on the subject when Frank finished tying the Gordon.

"Not bad," admitted Chet critically. "A little too much gold wire on the ribs, and the head seems a little too large because you didn't wind the tying silk tightly enough-but on the whole, not bad at all. For a beginner."

"Let's go down to the stream and try it out," suggested Joe. "You try the Morton Special, Chet. Frank will use the Gordon and we'll see who gets the fish. Me, I'll dig a few worms just in case."

"Worms!" exclaimed Chet with lofty scorn. "No true angler would ever fish with a worm. Say, I guess we'd better take along a lunch. I'll see what's in the kitchen."

While Frank and Joe looked for other rods in the

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barn, Chet helped himself to some food. When he emerged from the house a few minutes later he was lugging a large hamper.

"It isn't much," he apologized. "Just a roast chicken and a cake and some pop and-"

"Wow!" cried Joe. "Are we eating or fishing?"

Frank drove the car into the hills to a trout stream called Bosnian's Creek. It was a perfect day for a picnic if not for fishing. They walked part of the way to a favorite spot. It was a wide, deep pool, sheltered by overhanging trees, at the foot of a waterfall.

Chet fitted together the ferrules of his expensive new bamboo rod, giving a little lecture as he did so.

"Nice cork grip, fairly large," he said. "It isn't so tiring as a small one. With a long-tapered rod like this a fellow should be able to place a fly almost anywhere he wishes." Chet made a few practice casts and the line snaked out over the pool. "See that white rock at the foot of the falls? I'll just lay the Morton Special to the left of it and-"

The fly shot out over the water and landed about two yards to the right of the rock. It floated for a second or so, then disappeared in a soggy mass under the water.

"Hm," said Chet. "It should float better than that."

He retrieved the Morton Special, dried it and

Chet's New Business 63

tried again. This time, on the back cast, the fly and the line became tangled in the branches of a tree.

"Oh, gosh," Chet groaned. "How about climbing up there, one of you fellows?"

The Hardys shook their heads. Chet had to climb the tree himself. He worked his way out along the branch. Under his weight, it suddenly cracked alarmingly and sagged low over the pool.

"I don't think it will take your weight, Chet," warned Frank. "Better come back."

Chet grunted. "At this time of year these branches are so green it's practically impossible to break them." He reached out, his hand not six inches from the fly. "They bend, but they won't-"

CRACK!

The sagging branch snapped off clean. There was a bleat of anguish from Chet, then a tremendous splash as he and the branch hit the pool together.

The boys were shaking with laughter when Chet rose to the surface, dripping wet, his hair plastered down over his forehead. He floundered out, muttering to himself.

"Don't see what's so funny," he grumbled.

Frank hauled the broken branch out of the pool and retrieved the line and the Morton Special.

The commotion had apparently scared any trout that might have been in the pool, because it was an

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hour before anyone was rewarded with a bite. And the lucky fisherman was Joe with a worm as bait!

"You've got a fish!" yelled Chet as he saw the line straighten out. "Strike him! Quick!"

Joe knew that a trout feeding below surface at this time of day could not be handled in such fashion. He let out more line, then drew it in slowly. Not until he felt a tug of resistance did he give battle, and finally land the fish on the bank. As it lay flapping in the grass, Chet gasped.

"What a trout!"

"Eats worms too," chuckled Joe.

This was too much for Chet. He decided it was time to eat. After three rolls, half a chicken, a large slice of cake, a doughnut, a couple of oranges and an apple, he stretched out under a tree. Joe wanted to go back to town to work on the freighter reservation, but Chet refused to budge.

"You should relax after eating," he said, and closed his eyes for a nap.

"We'll drop the hamper at your house," said Joe, starting off.

"Hey, don't leave me," Chet cried, getting up and following his friends to the car.

The Hardys dropped Chet off at the farm and drove to town. On the edge of Bayport they saw a familiar figure walking along.

Chet's New Business 65

"Looks like Patrolman Con Riley," said Joe with a grin.

Frank brought the car to a stop. Con Riley, who was on the Bayport police force, was slow-witted and never given any very important work to do. He waved to the boys, but did not smile. The policeman was wary of the Hardys, for they usually outguessed him, and a few times unwittingly had made him the laughingstock of the other policemen.

"You're a long way from headquarters," said Frank. "What's up?"

"I'm on a case."

"What's the trouble?" asked Frank. "Somebody been helping himself to an empty house?"

Con Riley's jaw dropped. He gaped at the boys,

"How did you know?" he demanded.

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"How did you know?" he demanded.

CHAPTER VIII

A Mew Lead

Frank did not answer Riley's question in full, though he was excited about the man's revelation.

"Oh, I've heard something of that sort's going on," the boy said.

"How about letting us go with you?" asked Joe, trying not to show his eagerness.

Riley thought this over. "It's strictly a police matter. Very confidential," he said weightily. "But I guess Chief Collig won't mind you boys watchin' me work. It's at Mrs. Updyke's house down the street."

He hopped into their car and Frank turned the corner. The house stood alone at the far end of an unpaved street. Mrs. Updyke, middle-aged and pleasant, invited them into the living room. Riley explained that the boys were learning to be detectives. For once he had put it over on the brothers, and they could not defend themselves!

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A New Lead 67

"This case isn't so serious as I thought when I telephoned police headquarters," Mrs. Updyke told the policeman. "You see, I've been away from home for the past three weeks—"

"One thing at a time, please, ma'am." Riley took a thick, black notebook from his pocket. "First of all, I want a list of the stolen goods."

"But nothing has been stolen—at least nothing of importance."

Riley frowned. "I was sent out here to investigate a case of burglary."

"There hasn't been any burglary."

"How did the thieves enter—by a window? Or did they force— What did you say?"

"I'm not sure there were any thieves."

Riley wagged his head disgustedly and put the notebook away. "In that case there's nothing for me to report."

Frank ventured a question. "What actually happened? Did some stranger occupy the house while you were away?"

"Yes. I found that one of the beds had been slept in, and some of the kitchen dishes had been used."

"Indicating that the person was here for several hours at least," suggested Frank. To himself he added, "Waiting for the expressman, perhaps." Aloud he asked, "May I use your phone, Mrs. Updyke? It may have some bearing on the case."

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"Go right ahead."

Frank called the express-company office. He was not surprised to learn that a carton had been delivered to the Updyke house, but was amazed to learn that it had arrived there two weeks before.

"No telling how long this funny business has been going on," he thought.

As he was reporting his findings to the others, Mrs. Updyke suddenly gasped and

pointed. "The documents-they're gone! I hadn't noticed before."

On the wall the boys saw two rectangular places where the wallpaper was not faded like the rest around it. The missing articles must have hung there.

"You think they were stolen?" Frank asked. Instantly he thought of the case on which his father was working.

"They were hanging there when I left home," Mrs. Updyke replied.

Riley got out his notebook and began writing: old and valuable doku- "How do you spell dokumints, ma'am?" he asked.

The woman told him, saying they were insured, but that she hated to lose them. One was a rare letter of Abraham Lincoln's, the other a Revolutionary military order. As soon as the Hardys had heard the description of the papers, they left the house. Riley, still taking notes but looking bewildered, remained.

A New Lead 69

The boys drove home, eager to report this new development to their father. Fortunately Fenton Hardy was at home. He listened attentively to their story..

"From what you've told me," he said when they finished, "I think there's no doubt that the theft of the documents was committed by the man who received the carton, but I don't see any connection between my case and that of the cartons. I believe he knew the value of the old papers and thought he could sell them. But I'd like to talk with Mrs. Up-dyke. Perhaps I can pick up something to help spot the thief."

Con Riley was still looking for clues to the intruder when the boys returned with their father. The policeman had found nothing of importance.

Fenton Hardy wasted no time. He asked Mrs. Updyke a few questions, inspected the library, then a kitchen closet where she kept paper and string. On the floor lay a piece of heavy cord tied in a knot.

"I figured the thief wouldn't walk out of here with the framed documents unwrapped," the detective said. "They would be too conspicuous. This is the unused part of the cord he tied them with." Mr. Hardy turned it over to his sons. "What does it tell you?" he asked.

"It isn't the sort of knot people usually tie," Joe observed.

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"It's a stevedore's knot!" cried Frank. "Oh, boy, this case is beginning to . . ."

Just then Con Riley came into the room. "I've searched the place high and low," he said, "but not a clue can I find. You folks have any luck?"

Mr. Hardy saw a teasing expression cross his sons' faces. Before they could speak, he said, "Nothing much, Riley. But we can tell you this: look for your thief along the water front."

The patrolman's mouth flew open. "In Bay-port?"

"Who knows?" grinned Joe.

They left Riley thinking things over, and went home.

Joe thought they ought to look for the man with the scar. "He certainly acted suspiciously. I'll bet if we could lay our hands on him, we'd be able to clear up the case about the cartons," the boy said thoughtfully.

"And maybe find Aunt Gertrude's papers," Frank added. "Say, how about using that copy of James Johnson's signature we got from the expressman?"

"Good idea."

Fen ton Hardy wished them luck as they drove down to the water front. After parking the car they made a tour of the docks, employment offices and water-front hotels, keeping their eyes open for the man with the scar. They showed the carbon copy of the "Johnson" signature at each place. No

A New Lead 71

one knew him or recognized either the name or the handwriting.

"If he's a longshoreman he may be working around a freighter that came in about an hour ago," one clerk suggested. "It's the *Annie J* down at Pier Ten."

The boys hurried to Pier Ten and looked closely at the stevedores working there. The

scar-faced man was not among them.

"Say, I wonder if this freighter carries passengers?" remarked Joe. "We might be able to arrange something for Mr. McClintock without doing it through Klack's."

Frank turned to one of the stevedores and asked if the *Annie J* had passenger accommodations.

"Dunno," grunted the man. "Ask some of the crew. Hey, you up there!" he cut loose with a shout that could have been heard on the other side of Barmet Bay.

High above them, a man came out on the freighter's deck.

"These boys want to talk to you," the stevedore called.

The moment the Hardys saw the fellow's face they knew he was the one for whom they had searched the water front high and low. As for the seaman, the moment he saw the boys he wheeled and ran.

"Come on, Frank! Up the ladder!" cried Joe.

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He scrambled up and over the side of the ship's rail, with Frank close at his heels.

The boys were just in time to see their man leap over a stack of hatch covers and race toward the fo'c'sle. As they rushed in pursuit, Frank tripped over a coil of rope and sprawled on the slippery deck. Joe heard a warning shout from a stevedore and ducked just in time to avoid being hit by a huge steel hook that came swinging up and over from an open hatch as boom and cable sent it back to the dockside.

Frank picked himself up. The sailor had disappeared.

"Cut across to the other side of the ship, Joe. I'll look for him in the fo'c'sle," Frank told his brother.

In the meantime Joe had seen the man disappear through a doorway. He yanked it open and stepped inside. The boy found himself in a narrow passage opening into a galley where the seamen ate their meals. Halfway down the passage a flight of steel steps led down to their sleeping quarters.

Joe listened. He thought he heard hurried footsteps below, and started down the steps.

Suddenly someone lunged at him from above and knocked him off balance. He fell forward and crashed heavily on the steel floor at the foot of the stairs. His head struck sharply against the metal. He saw a million stars, then blackness.

CHAPTER IX

The Phantom Freighter

the shock of cold water splashing against his face brought Joe back to consciousness. He heard a voice saying, "That's enough. He's coming around now," and opened his eyes.

Two men crouched beside him. One, a seaman in dungarees and jersey, knelt by a bucket of water. The other, lean, sharp-eyed and gray-haired, was evidently the captain of the ship.

"Feeling better?" he asked. "I was getting worried about you, young fellow. Thought maybe you'd fractured your skull."

Joe sat up and rubbed his head. He was still groggy, but not too groggy to wonder where Frank was.

"My brother was with me. Have you seen him?" he asked.

"He went chasing some fellow down the ladder half an hour ago. What's it all about?"

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Half an hour! He had been unconscious a long time!

The men helped him to his feet. "I'm sorry, Captain-

"Dryden is the name."

"I'm sorry we made such a commotion, Captain Dryden, but we've been trying to catch that man. So when we saw him on deck-

"You were after him?" asked the officer, puzzled.

He dismissed the seaman and helped Joe up the companionway to the deck, and then

toward his cabin. At this moment Frank appeared, having climbed up the ladder.

"Lost him again," he grumbled. "That fellow is as slippery as- Why, Joe, what's the matter?" he asked, noticing how white and unsteady his brother was.

"Somebody shoved me down a stairway, that's all."

"Come into my cabin," suggested Captain Dryden. "It strikes me that this thing needs an explanation."

He was cordial and solicitous as he ushered them into his own quarters, and the three seated themselves.

"First of all, what are your names?" he asked.

"I'm Frank Hardy, sir, and this is my brother Joe."

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The man's friendly smile immediately disappeared. He looked stern and suspicious.

"Hardy!" he cried. "What right do you think you had barging onto my ship as you did?" he demanded curtly.

The brothers were dumfounded at his change in attitude.

"Now get out of here!" he ordered.

"May I ask you a question first, sir?" Frank asked.

"Depends on the question."

"Until you heard our names you seemed friendly, Captain Dryden. Now there's a difference. Why?"

The officer had not expected anything so flat and direct. He cleared his throat, grunted and mumbled. Finally he came out with it:

"Your name does make a difference. I've already been warned against you two boys. But you can't hurt me."

"Warned against us?"

"A detective came on board as soon as we docked. Sent by a friend of mine, he said. Told me you boys probably would show up here trying to book passage on the *Annie J*, but not to let you aboard because you'd only make trouble."

"How did you know he was a detective?" asked Frank, suspicious.

"He showed me his badge. Said he dressed like a seaman because of his work on ships."

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Captain Dryden studied the boys for a moment. When he continued, some of the coldness was gone from his voice. "To tell you the truth, now that I've met you, I don't believe half of what he told me," he said.

"What did he tell you?"

"Before I answer, I'd like to know if you've ever heard of me before."

"No, sir," answered the Hardys in unison.

The captain cleared his throat, started to speak, stopped, then finally said, "I think you're telling the truth. Well, last year I got into a little mix-up in a foreign port. It wasn't my fault and I thought the whole thing had blown over. This detective told me you Hardys had been engaged to get new evidence, and if I was wise I'd keep you off my ship."

"Every word of that is false," declared Frank angrily. "What did the detective look like?"

Captain Dryden's description fitted the man with the scar perfectly.

"He's the fellow we're trying to find!" the boy exclaimed. "The one I was chasing! I'm sure he's not a detective."

"More likely a crook," added Joe, "and I'll bet he's the one who knocked me down the stairs."

It was the captain's turn to be puzzled. But the boys did not tell him that they were sure now there

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was some sinister reason why they were being kept from sailing.

"Do you still feel that you wouldn't want us on board?" Frank asked.

The captain laughed. "Not at all. I'd be glad to have you as passengers, but this voyage wouldn't interest you, I'm sure. It's just a short run down the coast and back."

"Will you be taking a longer trip later?"

"Not for three months."

The boys were disappointed. As Captain Dryden escorted them to the ship's ladder, he said he would keep his eyes open for the bogus detective and would let them know at once if the man showed up again.

When they returned home Mrs. Hardy reported that Mr. McClintock had telephoned several times, and that the boys were to call him as soon as they arrived.

"I think he's getting impatient," she remarked.

She was right. Mr. McClintock was more than impatient. He was angry and querulous.

"How long have I got to wait before you find a ship?" he demanded. "I'm beginning to think you're not even trying."

"If you could see the bump on Joe's head from trying, you'd think so," said Frank.

"Don't be funny," stormed McClintock. "I want action-and quick. If you can't find a ship by to-

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morrow, I'll call the whole trip off," he snapped.

Aunt Gertrude, who had been hovering near the telephone, gave Frank a nudge.

"Ask him up to dinner," she whispered. "That will cool him off."

Frank took the cue. Aunt Gertrude's invitation did have a surprisingly soothing effect. After grumbling that he would not come unless they got him back to the hotel by nine o'clock, Mr. McClintock said he would be glad to eat a home-cooked meal, and accepted the invitation.

Aunt Gertrude hurried to the kitchen. She was an excellent cook and this time did herself proud. When their guest showed up at six o'clock he sniffed appreciatively, for there was a tantalizing fragrance of food in the air, and he began to beam at once.

"Nothing like a well-cooked meal," he said.

"I quite agree with you, sir," said a voice from the doorway, and Chet Morton walked in.

He introduced himself, saying he had heard Mr. McClintock was there and wanted to meet him. Frank and Joe were fearful that he might bring up the subject of the bamboo fishing rod and it would annoy the man. So Frank said quickly:

"How about staying to dinner, Chet? Aunt Gertrude has something special. I'll show you."

He escorted his friend to the kitchen and there

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warned him that Mr. McClintock was jittery and should not be disturbed by being asked to purchase anything. Chet acquiesced. In a few minutes the family, except Mr. Hardy, who was away, sat down to dinner with their guests.

"Urn, cream of tomato soup," grinned Chet. "My favorite." Presently, as he saw the meat course come in, he exclaimed enthusiastically, "Fried chicken! This is my lucky day!"

The irrepressible Chet chatted first about food, then fly fishing. He was so amusing in his comments that he quite won Mr. McClintock's admiration.

"I like a boy who relishes his meals," declared McClintock, "and also is interested in fishing."

Chet gave the Hardy boys a sidewise glance, and steered the conversation around to the subject of fly tying.

"You tie your own flies?" inquired Mr. McClintock, with a gleam of enthusiasm in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed," replied Chet. "I've just gone into the business."

Frank nearly choked on the salad in his mouth.

"Why, this is *very* interesting," declared Mr. McClintock. "I've tied hundreds of flies in my time. It used to be one of my favorite hobbies. You must let me visit your shop."

Chet, speechless, turned pale. Frank spoke up to ask McClintock if he did much trout fishing.

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"Not any more," said the guest. "Lost interest in it. Deep-sea fishing is the thing. More thrills. Better sport."

Suddenly he looked up, his face wreathed in smiles. He snapped his fingers with excitement.

"Why, that's it! Why didn't I think of this before? I'll take a deep-sea fishing trip!" He leaned toward Chet. "Do you think you could find a fishing boat, and a captain who would take us?"

Frank and Joe were aghast. Was he going to give up the freighter idea? Were they to lose both the trip and the reward at the end? His next remark relieved their minds somewhat.

"The Hardy boys have been trying to arrange a freighter voyage, but they can't find a freighter, so it may be weeks before we can go. In the meantime, we'll go fishing. I'll pay all expenses. Arrange a deep-sea fishing trip for me, Chet."

"I'll try, sir," the stout boy promised.

During the rest of the dinner Chet and Mr. McClintock discussed deep-sea fishing. Chet talked so learnedly about marlin, swordfish and tuna that the boys knew he must have read up on the subject very recently. But after they had taken Mr. McClintock to his hotel and were driving their friend home, he suddenly gave a deep sigh and said quaveringly:

"Jeepers, fellows, that was a tough evening on me. What am I going to do?"

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"Oh, arrange a trip, make all the flies to catch whale, and-" said Joe.

Chet groaned. "Listen, you two. You've got to help me. You know more about boats than I do. You arrange trips. You-

"We?" said Frank in pretended innocence. "Why, we're not even invited."

"Oh, you've got to go!" wailed Chet. "I wouldn't know a marlin from a goldfish!"

"Well, if you insist," grinned Joe.

The next morning found the Hardy boys at a wharf talking to Captain Andy Harkness. He was a grizzled veteran of the coast, and owned several fishing vessels.

"Fishing trip? Sure," he said, when they told him about Mr. McClintock's request. "I'll take you and your man anywhere you like, so long as you don't ask me to cruise off the Barmet Shoals."

"What's wrong with the shoals, Captain?" asked Frank. "You know every foot of water in these parts. You're not afraid of them, are you?"

"Not me. But I got a terrible fright there last evening and I don't want to go near the place again."

The boys were curious. Captain Andy Harkness was not the sort of man who scared easily. They asked him what had happened.

"Don't know if I ought to tell you," the fisherman grumbled. "Most likely you won't believe a word

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of it, but it's true just the same. Some time after sundown, with a high sea running, I got off my direction a bit. Suddenly I spotted a freighter off my starboard bow. I could see our courses were going to cross, so I threw the helm over hard, but I couldn't hold my boat against the rough water. I knew I was going to hit the freighter but there wasn't a thing I could do, 'cause she didn't see me."

"And the freighter rammed you?" asked Joe.

Captain Andy wagged his head. "It did and it didn't. I'd say I ran right through her! That's the part you won't believe, but it's true as my name is Andy Harkness. By rights I shouldn't be alive now to tell the tale."

"You ran *through* the freighter?" Frank gasped.

"That's the way it seemed. One minute she's looming up ahead of me big as a mountain, all her lights on, and the next minute she ain't there at all and my boat is swinging northward off the shoals."

"And where was the freighter?" Joe queried, unbelieving.

Captain Andy Harkness looked at them challengingly, as if defying them to doubt his weird story. "She wasn't in sight!"

"Not in sight?" cried Frank. "Where could she have gone?"

The old captain gave a convulsive shrug, as if even the recollection frightened him.

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"She was a phantom freighter!" he vowed.

The Hardy boys asked him several other questions, but he stuck to his story. The only thing he admitted was that the lights on the freighter had vanished an instant before the unavoidable accident would have occurred.

"But I was right there," he insisted. "Too close to avoid being hit."

"Did you see any name on the freighter?" asked Frank.

"Yep! Caught a glimpse of her name up on her bow. The *Falcon*, she was called. Never heard of her before. But she's a phantom freighter, that's what she is, boys; a phantom freighter!"

CHAPTER X

Missing Letters

"It was smart of you to ask if Captain Harkness noticed the name of the phantom freighter," said Fenton Hardy when his sons related the strange story. "It gives us a clue to work on, at any rate."

He went to a bookshelf. Taking down a thick volume, he thumbed through the pages.

"Registry of shipping," he explained, scanning a column. "If there is such a ship as the *Falcon* it should be listed here-and it's not."

"Not registered?" asked Frank.

Mr. Hardy shook his head. "No ship of that name is listed."

"Isn't there a chance this phantom freighter is registered under another name?" asked Frank.

"Possibly. But I wonder if the whole thing wasn't some hallucination of Captain Harkness."

When the boys left their father's study, they en-

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countered Aunt Gertrude, who began to fuss and fume because the carton containing her valuable papers had not been recovered.

"Seems to me you should have found them by this time," she grumbled. "With three detectives in the family, a little thing like that shouldn't be much of a problem."

"We've been working on it, Auntie," Joe defended them, though he had to admit their leads had come to little.

"I don't think you looked very hard," she declared. "The carton was probably in that barn all the time. Did you look through the rubbish after the fire?"

"There didn't seem to be much point in grubbing through the ruins," Frank said. "Any papers would have been burnt to ashes."

"Military medals wouldn't burn to ashes," returned Aunt Gertrude. "There were a couple of old ones among those papers. I'd like to know what happened to that carton one way or the other."

Frank and Joe got into their car and drove out to the Phillips house. They obtained permission to search the ruins of the barn, and for the next hour they poked through the blackened ashes. They were about to give up the hunt as hopeless when Joe picked up a small object near the front foundation.

"Looks like a penny with a hole in it," he said,

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cleaning off the metal and holding it to the light. Two words were now legible. "Good luck!" he read.

"I've seen medals like that in the stores down at the docks," remarked Frank. "Some of the sailors wear them."

They asked Mrs. Phillips if she knew anything about it, but she was sure it did not belong to them. Joe telephoned Aunt Gertrude, who said the medal had not been among her possessions.

Frank put the medal in his pocket, saying to Joe as they started for town, "It must have belonged to our friend with the scar. One more bit of evidence that he has something to do with ships or shipping."

"If the medal means anything, he won't have the good luck now. We will," Joe said, grinning.

On their way back into Bayport a car overtook them and pulled up alongside. Chet Morton was at the wheel, with Biff Hooper beside him.

"Looking for you," cried Chet. "We want you to go out in the *Sleuth*. Got something to show you."

The Hardys followed, wondering what was up. When they reached the boathouse they learned that Chet wanted to go fishing.

"Not just for the sake of fishing, mind you," he declared hastily. "It's a scientific experiment for our trip. I've invented a new fish lure. If it works I'll make a fortune. Look!"

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From a cardboard box he produced a weird gadget made of tin and strips of aluminum, barbed with fearsome-looking hooks.

"I can't imagine any fish going for that," said Frank. "What is it?"

"What is it?" demanded Chet, offended and hurt. "Don't you recognize it?"

"A fish might recognize it, but I don't. Looks like a toy airplane that got run over by a truck."

"Toy airplane!" scoffed Chet. "It's a herring. A mechanical herring. Commercial fishermen won't have to use real herring for bait any more. One of my mechanical herrings will last a lifetime. I'll sell so many I'll make fifteen dollars in no time. Come on, let's see how it works."

The four boys climbed into the *Sleuth*. In a few minutes the trim little craft was headed for the ocean. About a quarter of a mile from Bayport Chet attached his mechanical herring to a stout trace and a length of heavy line. Then he doused it with an evil-smelling fluid from a bottle.

Joe sniffed. "Wow! What do I smell?" he cried.

Biff Hooper took a deep breath, choked and gagged. "There won't be a fish left within five miles of us when they get a whiff of that. What is it?" he asked.

"Herring oil," Chet explained. "A mechanical herring should smell like a herring, shouldn't it?"

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There was no answer to that, although Joe pointed out that he had read somewhere that fish have no sense of smell.

"Of course fish smell," returned Chet.

"They do when they've been left out in the sun too long," muttered Biff.

"This boat will certainly smell if you don't hurry up and dump that gadget overboard," said Frank.

Chet carefully lowered the offending object into the water and payed out the line. Frank throttled down the engine to trolling speed, and they cruised out into the bay.

"The whole secret of this lure," Chet began to explain, only to break off and yell, "I've got a bite!"

The others stared at him incredulously. They could not believe that any fish would be

hungry or stupid enough to come within yards of Chet's contraption.

But Chet was hauling in the line, whooping gleefully. When he finally landed a small sea bass with a shout of triumph, Frank merely said:

"Well, now I've seen everything. If that smelly gadget can catch fish we can soak the anchor with herring oil and catch whales."

"I knew it would work," declared Chet smugly. "Just wait until I put that mechanical herring on the market. I'll sell thousands. I'll pay all my debts. I'll--"

"Look!" cried Joe suddenly.

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His attention had been caught by a fast motorboat running offshore. It was speeding crazily, as if out of control. As the boys watched they saw two men in the craft who were engaged in a violent struggle.

Frank snatched up a pair of binoculars. Through the glasses he saw that the men were apparently battling for possession of a big cardboard carton. One of them stumbled back with the box in his arms. As the other leaped toward him he raised it high in the air and hurled it overboard.

His opponent sprang on him, knocking him down with a savage blow to the jaw. He then lurched to the wheel of the motorboat, swung the craft away from the rocky shore and steered for the open water at the exit to the bay.

"It might be Aunt Gertrude's carton," Frank thought excitedly.

He would have gone after the men, but they had too much of a start. Instead, he headed for the spot where the carton was bobbing up and down in the water. It had no marks of identification, and when the boys examined the carton they found it contained nothing but compressed raw wool.

"Why were those two fellows fighting over a box of wool?" asked Biff, puzzled.

"It's too much for me," Chet remarked. "Let's go out into deeper water again. I'd like to try out my mechanical herring."

The Hardy boys decided, however, that the gadget

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had been tested sufficiently. They were eager to take the carton of wool home and examine it carefully for possible clues. Both Frank and Joe recalled that the James Johnson carton which had come to their house by mistake had contained raw wool! They were sure there was a link between that one and the water-soaked carton now in their boat.

Arriving at their garage, Frank went over every inch of the outside of the box, while Joe looked for a sharp knife with which to slit it.

"Not a mark on this," Frank reported.

The carton was opened and every bit of the compressed wool pulled apart. There was no trace of anything secreted in the fluffy mass.

"Only one more place to look," said Frank, and carefully examined the inside walls of the carton. "Nothing here," he added. "But I still think those two men had something to do with the mystery. Wish we'd followed them."

"So do I."

The boys put the wool back into the carton and went to the house. There they found that the mystery had taken a new and unexpected turn. Aunt Gertrude met them in the kitchen, a grim look on her face.

"My papers!" she exclaimed in excitement. "Some of them have turned up. Your father just

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had a letter about them, and wants you to take care of it. Read this!"

Her nephews read the letter, which had been postmarked Hopkinsville, several miles away, and mailed the previous day:

dear mr. hardy:

I am a dealer in autographs and historical documents. Recently, there came into my

hands a number of letters in which you may be interested. They were written in 1812 by Admiral Hardy, one of your ancestors. If you would like to consider purchasing these letters, please get in touch with me.

Yours very truly, Daniel J. Eaton.

The boys gazed at their aunt in astonishment.

"Where did he come across the letters?" exclaimed Frank.

"That's what I'm wondering!" declared Aunt Gertrude. "Because those very letters were in my lost carton. The man has the impudence to try to sell us our own property!"

CHAPTER XI

The Mysterious Telephone Call

Frank and Joe lost no time in getting to Hopkinsville and finding Daniel J. Eaton.

He was a small, baldish man, and his little store was wedged inconspicuously between a shabby establishment advertising antique glass and one selling furniture. Hopkinsville seemed to have a good many such places-stores dealing in stamps, old coins and rare books. An ideal spot to dispose of old documents!

"Here are the letters. They're authentic, all right," Mr. Eaton told the boys.

Frank and Joe examined the Admiral Hardy letters.

"Will you please tell us where you got these?" Frank requested.

"They were sold to me by a Mrs. Elizabeth Hardy a few days ago," the man replied.

"She said the let-

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ters had been in the possession of her branch of the family for many years."

"Would they be valuable to a museum or to a collector?" asked Joe.

Mr. Eaton shook his head. "Not very valuable. To another member of the Hardy family, however -someone such as your father-"

"Then why didn't this Mrs. Elizabeth Hardy offer to sell them to us, instead of to you?"

"She explained about the family quarrel. Oh, don't worry, I shan't mention it. She assured me, though, that you would be eager to buy the letters, so I'd be sure of a small profit if I handled the deal. Mrs. Hardy said she was in financial difficulties; otherwise she wouldn't have parted with the letters at all."

"Does this woman live in Hopkinsville?" asked Frank.

"No. She said she came from out of town; was only passing through. I had never seen her before," answered the dealer. "But why all these questions? Doesn't your father want the letters?"

"He wants them, all right, but he doesn't want to buy them. The letters were stolen from my aunt several days ago."

The boys then told Mr. Eaton the whole story of the missing carton, and said there had been no family quarrel and that the woman no doubt was a

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fraud. He was apparently an honest man, and when he saw the identification they carried and was convinced that the Hardys were telling him the truth he wrapped up the letters quickly and handed them across the counter.

"I don't deal in stolen goods," he said. "Please return these to your aunt with my compliments. As for the money I paid for them, the amount was not large. If I'm the loser it's my own fault."

The boys thanked him. Mr. Eaton said that while he had bought only the letters from "Mrs. Hardy," she had offered him a number of old books that also might have been in the carton.

"She may have sold them elsewhere in town," he suggested. "There are some old-book stores and antique shops on the next block too. If you look around, you may recover the entire lot."

Before the boys left the store they went toward the back, to examine some old framed

documents hanging on the wall. Mr. Eaton said he had bought them in the course of the previous week.

"Quite valuable," he said. "I'm certain they're authentic."

"They *look* authentic," Frank remarked. "We can give you a tip, though, Mr. Eaton. Many faked documents are being put on the market. They're so cleverly done it's hard to tell they're fakes. If you're offered any more, you'd better study the

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wording on them. That's where the crooks who make them slip up."

"Thanks for the tip," said Mr. Eaton gratefully.

He promised not to divulge the information to anyone, and to send the Hardys the name and address of anyone offering him documents for sale.

Unseen by the boys or Mr. Eaton, a man had entered the shop. Catching Frank's words, he came to a sudden halt, listened a moment, then edged outside quickly. There was a knowing expression on his crafty face. By the time the Hardys left the store, the eavesdropper was standing idly by the curb, pretending to be deeply absorbed in the traffic.

Frank and Joe visited half a dozen other dealers. From a list Aunt Gertrude had supplied them, they were able to identify several rare old books, autographed first editions and a number of historical documents. All had been sold to the dealers within recent days by a gray-haired woman who claimed to belong to the Hardy family. In every case a detailed description of her was the same and tallied with that of the fake "Mrs. Harrison," though she had used various names.

"She's the one who helped herself to Mrs. Harrison's house in Bayport, all right," Joe declared. "Now this mystery is beginning to shape up. She and the man with the scar are in cahoots!"

At one shop the boys were sure they had picked

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up a promising clue. Although the woman had sold Aunt Gertrude's family heirlooms to several dealers, only one had insisted upon learning her address. To this man she had given her name as Mrs. Randall, her address as the Palace Hotel.

The Hardys hastened over to the Palace, a small hotel about a block from the railroad station. There they found the lead was false. No one by the name of Mrs. Randall had stayed there; nor could the clerk recall anyone answering the woman's description. Joe, thinking perhaps he could recognize her handwriting, looked through the register but found nothing suspicious.

"That's that," said Joe, disappointed, as the boys emerged from the hotel.

"Maybe she's still in town," suggested Frank hopefully.

Vainly the brothers walked up one street and down another. Nowhere did they see the woman or her friend with the triangular scar on his cheek. As they were returning to their car, preparatory to going home, a familiar voice cried out:

"Well, look who's here!"

The Hardys turned. Beaming at them, his mouth full of peanuts, stood Chet Morton. With him were two girls; his sister Lola and her friend Gallic Shaw.

"Hi!" laughed Gallic. "Surprise!"

"Surprise yourself!" declared Frank. "What are you doing in Hopkinsville?"

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"We followed you," teased Lola. "Chet called your house. When he heard you were here he decided to come too."

"Just a little business trip, really," said Chet grandly. "I've been calling on some of the storekeepers here. Got orders for a dozen mechanical herrings and some Morton Special flies. Now all I have to do is make the herrings, tie the flies and deliver them."

He produced an order book and thumbed the pages with an air of importance, while Frank and Joe howled with laughter.

"It's not funny," said Chet. "It means money. Now if you fellows would only help me-"

"Help you?" cried Joe. "How about that deep-sea fishing trip?"

"Guess you're right." Chet became silent.

"Oh," said Gallic. "I have something to tell you. It may be important."

"Mighty important, I'd say," observed Chet. "Sounds to me as if you fellows are playing with dynamite. Tell him about it, Gallic."

"I will if you'll give me a chance. We came to Hopkinsville by train. While Chet was out getting orders, lola and I went back to the station to find out about the return train for Bayport. I decided to phone a friend of mine here. The line was busy. While I was waiting for the call, I heard a man talking in the next booth. I didn't pay any attention

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until he cried out, 'Those boys are wise guys. They've got to keep out of our business, or their old man won't see 'em for a long time!' "

Gallic took a deep breath.

"Go on," said Frank eagerly.

"Then the man said, 'Yes, I mean Frank and Joe Hardy.' With that he dashed out of the booth and got on a train."

"Did you know him?" asked Joe excitedly.

"Oh, no."

"What did he look like? Did he have a triangular scar on his face?"

Gallic shook her head. "Not that I noticed."

"Did he mention the name of the person to whom he was talking?" asked Frank.

"He did at the beginning," said Gallic, "but at that time I wasn't paying much attention. I've been trying to remember it. I keep thinking of the word 'duck' but it wasn't that."

"Speaking of ducks," interrupted Chet, "I could go for a chicken sandwich right now. It's been a long time since I've eaten. Let's try that restaurant across the street."

In the restaurant, waiting for sandwiches and milk, Frank and Joe questioned Gallic closely about the overheard telephone conversation, but she could recall little more than what she had already told them.

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"It's silly of me to forget," she said ruefully. "I *know* he mentioned the name of the person at the other end of the line."

"Mother says the best way to remember something you've forgotten," Chet said solemnly, "is to forget about it. I mean, change the subject. Talk about something else. Let's talk about the freighter trip, for example. You fellows had better book a fourth passage, by the way. Mr. McClintock says he wants me to go along. In fact, he insists on it."

"We've got to find a freighter first," said Joe.

At this moment the waitress brought the food. Chet picked up his sandwich. As he opened his mouth, preparatory to taking a huge bite, Gallic suddenly cried out:

"I know! Duck! Quack! Klack!"

There was a howl from Chet. At the word "duck" he had ducked his head smartly, at the same time clamping his teeth firmly on his thumb holding the sandwich.

"Ouch!" he yelped.

Gallic paid no attention.

"Klack! That's the name of the man he talked to on the telephone."

CHAPTER XII

Code Numbers

"So klack. *is* mixed up in this mystery," said Frank grimly. "I thought so."

"We'd better go right back to Bayport and see him," declared Joe.

Despite the fact that they did not like to break up what had started out to be a nice party, Joe and Frank felt they should interview Klack as soon as possible. Chet and the girls rode with them as far as the agency, then left. The Hardys went into the office.

"Mr. Klack is out of town," said the same bored girl to whom they had spoken before.

"When do you expect him back?" Frank asked.

"Don't know," she shrugged. "He went out of town for a week, maybe."

"Has Mr. Klack booked passage for us yet?" Joe asked.

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The girl shook her head. "No reservations for you."

"Pardon me, boys," said a familiar voice. A man stepped up to the desk. "Have you a freighter reservation for me, young lady? I telephoned yesterday. The name is Jennings." The man smiled at the boys. "You fellows taking a trip too?"

Mr. Jennings was instructor of ancient and modern history at Bayport High. As the girl pawed through a list of reservations he chatted pleasantly with the boys. He had long planned a freighter voyage down the coast for his summer vacation with his two sons, he said, and now he was ready to leave.

"Here you are, Mr. Jennings," said the girl.

The boys gasped, as he paid for the passages and put the papers in his billfold.

"I suppose you made your reservations a long while ago, Mr. Jennings?" Frank asked politely.

"Well, no," returned the teacher. "It wasn't until yesterday that I knew I could get away at all. I telephoned Mr. Klack about four o'clock. Very quick service."

He strolled out of the office, leaving the Hardys wrathful at the agency. Frank demanded that the girl explain why the Hardys were unable to get tickets when others could.

"You'll have to ask Mr. Klack about that," she said.

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The boys went out. By now they were convinced that there was a definite reason for their failure to get freighter passage and that Klack had something to do with it.

"I believe we shouldn't take reservations from him even if we can get them," said Frank. "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," Joe agreed. "What say we try an out-of-town agency? Southport, for instance?"

"Good idea."

The next day they drove over to Southport. The people working in the agency which booked passage on freighters were a great deal more courteous than at Klack's and the owner more co-operative. While Frank discussed their problem with him, Joe picked up a stray copy of the local newspaper and glanced through it to see the shipping notes.

"We haven't anything just now," said the agent pleasantly, "but I'll get in touch with the Neptune Line. It may take half an hour or so."

"Good," said Frank. "We'll come back."

"Say, look here," said Joe to his brother, pointing to an item on the front page.

uninvited visitors

When Mrs. W. G. Armstrong of Rushdale Road returned home yesterday from a vacation trip to Maine, she discovered that someone had broken into her house

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during her absence and had apparently lived in the place for several days.

So far as is known, nothing of value was taken, but the police are investigating.

A driver for the Southport express agency reports having delivered several cartons addressed to Mrs. Armstrong and says they were accepted by a woman claiming to be a relative of Mrs. Armstrong. The cartons were not in the house and Mrs. Armstrong says she had not ordered anything delivered.

#

"Sounds familiar, doesn't it?" said Joe. "Same old racket. Owner absent. Someone moves in. Cartons are delivered. The person skips out with them before the house owner gets back."

"I think we'd better call on Mrs. Armstrong," suggested Frank.

Mrs. Armstrong, like Mrs. Updyke in Bayport, could tell the boys very little except what the *South-port Times* had reported. Beds had been slept in and kitchenware and dishes used, but nothing had been stolen.

"The police have searched the house thoroughly," she said, "but my visitor didn't leave any clues. Unless you could call this a clue," she added, taking a ragged slip of paper from the mantel. "I found it in a corner when I was dusting this morning."

The boys examined the paper. On it had been scribbled some letters and numbers:

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A23-151- C2-D576-A19395-M14

"Can you make anything of that?" she asked.

Frank shook his head. "It could be a motor number, a safe combination, a lot of things. Do you mind if I copy these numbers?"

"Not at all."

Frank took a notebook from his pocket and wrote down the numbers. They might or might not be a clue, but Frank was leaving nothing to chance. After the boys had left the house, Joe said:

"I believe it's a code of some kind."

"Let's memorize the numbers," suggested Frank. "They may prove to be important, so we'd better not carry them around."

Both boys went over them several times until they were sure they would not forget them, then went back to the booking office. This time they were in luck.

"I got in touch with the Neptune Line," said the agent, "and I managed to get passage for you. One of their boats, the *Crown of Neptune* will be leaving in two weeks."

"Can we pick up the tickets now?" asked Joe.

"Not right away. I have to wait for confirmation. The tickets will be ready in a day or so. In the meantime I'd suggest that you and your friends get

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birth certificates and passports, because the boat will be putting in at a couple of Central American ports and you'd better have all your papers in order."

"Fine," agreed Frank. "We'll do that right away."

They drove back to Bayport, relieved that they would have favorable news for Mr. McClintock at last.

"Two weeks, eh?" he said. "Well, that's not so bad as I thought it might be."

He promised to get his passport picture very soon. The Hardys and Chet went together to get theirs. "I saw a sign down near Klack's Agency of a fellow who takes passport pictures. Let's go there," suggested Joe.

The photographer occupied a shabby little place at the end of a narrow, water-front street. In the window were several dozen hideous samples of his art. All his subjects looked popeyed and in need of a shave.

"Come in, boys, come in," he invited, rubbing his hands. "Won't take five minutes. Quick service, that's my motto. Every photo looks so much like you that you think you're looking in the mirror. All right, young man," he said to Chet, "sit down."

He sat the boy in a straight-backed chair, switched on a dazzling light and trotted back to his camera.

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"You been inoculated yet?" he asked. "If you're traveling to foreign parts you'd better be inoculated against smallpox, typhoid, leprosy-"

"Nobody's going to jab me full of holes with a needle!" replied Chet, wincing at the thought.

"Then I guess you can't leave the country," said the helpful photographer. "Sit back, young man. There now. Hold still a moment, please."

The camera clicked. One after another the man snapped the boys' pictures. While he developed them behind a screen, Chet looked worried.

"Gee whiz, fellows," he said, "if I've got to be punctured with a lot of sharp needles, the trip's off."

The pictures were ready in a few minutes. Though the photographer bragged about how lifelike they were, the boys laughed at the strange likenesses. Chet's was particularly grotesque.

"They'd never recognize me in South America," he said. "I look as if I had several diseases already!"

"Let's go out on the docks," Joe suggested, as they left the place. "We might run across that fellow with the scar."

A burly longshoreman, who had been lounging outside the door listening, slowly followed them. As they walked toward a truck being unloaded by a stevedore, he became very nervous, and tried to signal to the worker.

At this moment Joe happened to turn around and

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saw the man's strange motions. Quickly he looked ahead again to see what was going on. What he saw convinced him that the matter needed investigating. The stevedore quickly threw a carton back on the truck and dived out of sight.

Like a flash Joe leaped into action. Racing ahead of the others', he sprang to the truck and looked underneath. A man was just crawling out the other side. Joe ran around just in time to see him dodge through a doorway. He was the man with the scar!

"He won't get away this time!" decided Joe grimly, starting after him.

But he was stopped by two workmen with several packages. They blocked his way completely. Joe stepped back and raced around to the other side of the vehicle. He hoped that the fellow he was chasing would still be in sight.

He was so absorbed in the chase that he did not see that he was heading straight for an accident. But Frank did!

"Joe, look out!" he screamed.

Out of the shed doorway, through which the scarred man had disappeared, sped a loaded hand truck. No one was at the wheel!

In another instant Joe would be crushed by the runaway vehicle!

CHAPTER XIII

The Fourth Dummy

"Look out, Joe!" Frank cried again in horror at his brother's predicament.

Joe dived to safety under the large truck. He had scarcely hit the floor when the driverless cart smashed into the larger vehicle. Boxes and parcels on the hand truck flew through the air.

Joe, unhurt, scrambled out. He suspected that the fugitive had shoved the hand truck toward him in an attempt to gain time for himself and disappear in the network of alleys along the water front.

He caught sight of the fellow at a gateway to the dockyard. Then the fugitive vanished from view.

Joe raced in pursuit. As he reached the open gate he got a brief glimpse of the fugitive hurrying up the street, but a moment later he was gone again.

"Probably ducked into one of those stores," Joe concluded.

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That, in fact, was just what the man with the scar had done. The place was a clothing store known as "Fit-Your-Figure Charlie's." The owner was on the sidewalk, looking in his display window. Three dummies dressed in gaudy business suits stood staring toward the street. The stevedore, thinking he was unobserved, darted into the store and looked for a rear exit. But there was none.

Charlie, who was small, stout and alert for customers, had seen the man, however, and followed him into the store.

"You seem in an awful hurry, mister," he remarked. "What can I do for you? A nice suit, maybe. A pair of pants-"

"You've got to hide me! Quick! You got a basement in this place?" demanded the man roughly.

Fit-Your-Figure Charlie drew back. He decided instantly that this stranger was a fugitive and he wanted no part of him.

"Outside, mister!" he ordered. "I'm hiding nobody. If you didn't come here to buy, you-"

Charlie got no further. A heavy fist lashed out and landed full on his jaw. The merchant went down, and sprawled unconscious against the counter.

His assailant took a step toward the door. Then he drew back, crouching. Joe Hardy was racing up the street. The boy hesitated a moment, as if to enter. Then he hurried on, not sure which door the

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man he was after had entered. The boy looked into the next two stores, then spoke to a fellow lounging outside a pawnshop.

"Did a man run past here just now?" he asked excitedly.

The loungeer blinked. "I saw a guy run into Fit-Your-Figure Charlie's a minute ago. Seemed in a hurry."

Joe rushed back and dashed into the clothing store. It was apparently deserted. No clerk. No customers. Puzzled, the boy returned to the street. Then he heard a groan.

Stepping into the store again, he heard another groan, this time louder. He traced it to its source, and found the unconscious shopkeeper on the floor. Joe ran to a small office at the rear of the store, where he found a water faucet and a towel. He wet the towel and returned to Charlie. The cold water revived the man and he sat up.

"Fellow came in here-slugged me-" he mumbled.

"A man with a scar on his cheek?" asked Joe quickly.

Charlie nodded. "Knocked me out-don't know where he went."

There was a clatter of footsteps in the doorway. Joe caught a glimpse of Chet's astonished face.

"What's going on?" he asked.

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Joe explained hurriedly. "Help Charlie to the couch in his office," Joe directed. "I'm going to call the police."

He looked around for a telephone but saw none. Joe ran out the front door, but on the sidewalk he paused. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught a glimpse of the display window. Four dummies stood there, one of them sideways. It was clad in a raincoat, with a hat pulled low over its head.

From their earliest years the Hardy boys had been taught by their father that a good detective must be observant of small details. When Joe had passed Fit-Your-Figure Charlie's store a few minutes before, he had noticed there were three dummies in the window. Now there were four.

It had puzzled him that he had seen no one leave the store. Now he knew why. Quietly he stepped back inside, slipped the automatic catch on the lock to the store window and went back to Chet.

"Come here," he said. Then out of range of hearing of Charlie, Joe told him of his discovery. "I locked him in. He's our prisoner!"

Chet did not like the idea of being left alone with the fellow. By some miracle he might get out of the window. The stout boy's knees began to tremble.

"Do you have to-" He started pleadingly, but Joe already was out the door.

He ran to a drugstore at the corner and called po-

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lice headquarters. A familiar voice answered; Con Riley's.

"This is Joe Hardy. Listen, how fast can you make it to Mack Street? Do you know

Fit-Your-Figure Charlie's place? I want you to arrest a dummy in the window."

"Arrest a dummy?" bleated Con Riley.

"A live one. There are three real dummies in the window and a live one. He slugged Charlie. I think he's the crook we're after."

"If you're kidding me," grunted Riley, "it's going to be just too bad for you. But I'll come."

Back at the store the prisoner had become highly alarmed. After Joe had raced down the street, he had awaited a chance, when no one might be passing, to step out of the window and escape. It was several minutes before an opportunity came.

Then he had found the door behind him locked!

Desperate, the crook wondered what to do. He saw Joe emerging from the drugstore. Then he acted. As the boy hurried up the street he heard a crash. A figure hurtled through the show window of Fit-Your-Figure Charlie's store front and landed on the sidewalk. It was followed by a man in a raincoat, who speedily took to his heels.

Joe sprinted toward him. At the same instant Chet raced from the store and tackled the fugitive. They went down in a heap. The man with the scar

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struggled to escape, but Chet hung on grimly, yelling for help.

Joe reached them and they subdued the fellow. A moment later a police car roared up and Con Riley jumped out. He snapped a pair of handcuffs on the man's wrists.

"What's this all about?" the prisoner snarled. "I haven't done anything."

"That's what they all say," replied Riley. "You're coming down to the station house for a little talk."

Chet and Joe, after making certain that Fit-Your-Figure Charlie was all right, climbed into the police car with Riley and the scowling prisoner. They drove to headquarters, where the man gave his name as John Smith and stubbornly denied that he had ever gone under the name of Johnson, that he had ever been to the Phillips house, or had received any cartons.

He was booked on a charge of assault and battery. The express-company driver was sent for and identified him as the man signing for Aunt Gertrude's missing carton. The prisoner said the expressman was crazy, and after that maintained a stony silence.

"Any identification papers on him?" Joe asked Riley after he had been searched.

"Not a thing," the policeman reported. "Just some figures scribbled on the back of an old envelope. Can't make head or tail of 'em myself."

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Riley produced the envelope. Joe whooped. Scrawled on it were letters and numbers: A23-151-C2-D576-A19395-M14.

"The same as those found at Mrs. Armstrong's home!" the boy thought excitedly.

Beneath the figures was written *Falcon*.

"The name of the phantom freighter!" Joe g?>ped.

CHAPTER XIV

Frank in Trouble

when Joe and Chet returned to the Hardy home, they expected to find Frank there. But he had no* returned.

"That's strange," reflected Joe. "Where'd he go?"

"When I last saw him he was looking at some of the packages that fell off the truck. I thought he was going to follow me."

Frank, however, had discovered something highly interesting when he examined the packages on the dock. He had seen that Joe had escaped injury and his first impulse had been to join his brother in the chase for the fugitive. Then he had noticed something that seemed to call for immediate investigation; a strange series of numbers printed on the side of a large box. He decided that Joe and Chet could handle the chase themselves.

Turning the box over on its side, he examined the

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numbers carefully. Then he gave a low whistle of surprise.

A23-151-C2

The first three numbers on the paper found in Mrs. Armstrong's home at Southport!

Quickly, Frank examined several other boxes. Two of them bore similar numbers.

Looking for an address, he found a tag nailed to each box, marked: *Wasp-Dock Three, Bayport.*

Several longshoremen, attracted by the noise of the truck crash, began to gather, so Frank slipped away quietly. He was convinced he had stumbled on an important clue and wanted to hunt for the *Wasp* at once.

"The person who stayed in Mrs. Armstrong's house has some connection with these boxes," he decided. "I wonder if he works on the ship."

At Dock Three Frank found the *Wasp*. It was a big motor launch, painted yellow and black, with a small cabin. There was no sign of anyone on board. Frank looked around. No one was in sight on the dock. Quickly he leaped to the deck of the launch near an open hatch. Boxes of cargo were stacked below, to within a few feet of the deck.

Frank lowered himself through the hatch to examine them. They appeared to be similar in size and appearance to the boxes on the truck. Numbers

Frank in Trouble 117

were painted on the sides of all Frank could see. Some of them were identical with the code found in the Armstrong home.

Suddenly Frank heard a voice. "All right, let's go aboard," said a rough voice.

Frank ducked behind a row of boxes. There was a succession of heavy thuds as men jumped onto the deck. A deep voice said:

"We've got to get that stuff or old Crowfeet will have a stroke."

"I'm not going to risk it," argued the first man. "It's too dangerous. We can come back tomorrow."

Frank heard the men moving about. Presently there was a noise of hammering. A minute later someone came aboard and shouted excitedly:

"Hey, men, we've got to get out of here quick!"

"What's the matter?"

"Hank's been arrested. Bayport's getting too risky for this sort of work."

There was a sound of running footsteps on the deck, a heavy thud and then the hold was plunged into darkness. The hatch cover had been closed!

A bell rang. The launch's motors began to throb. There was a sudden roar and the *Wasp* pulled away from the dock.

Frank's heart pounded. Should he make his presence known? He decided against this. It was doubtful they would assume he was just a curious

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youth who had wandered on board and let him go. More likely, they would keep him a prisoner. He would wait for a chance to escape.

Who was Hank? The man Joe went after? If so, these pals of his might recognize Frank on sight. He decided to stay hidden.

"Wish I had a flashlight," the boy thought. "I'd like to find out what's in these boxes."

Thinking he might be able to identify it by feel, he took out his pocketknife and tried to pry open one of the boxes. But it was securely nailed, and finally the blade of the knife snapped off.

The *Wasp*, in the meantime, was rushing forward at an ever-increasing rate of speed. Frank knew many of the motor launches that plied Barmet Bay, but this one was new to him. It was faster and more powerful than any he had ever seen in those waters.

"Where is it going?" he wondered. "And who's Crowfeet?"

The air in the hold was getting stuffy. It became rank with the fumes of oil, and the heat was almost unendurable. Frank climbed on top of the boxes and thrust his hands against the

hatch cover, to open it a crack. It was tightly closed.

After an hour passed, the youth began to worry about his plight. Even if he tried to attract attention his shouts would not be heard above the roar of the engines. Should the launch be bound on a long

Frank in Trouble 119

voyage he might suffocate before the cover could be removed. Then suddenly the pounding of the engines decreased in volume. The speed of the launch lessened, and finally the engines were cut off altogether. The boat swayed from side to side, and shuddered as it bumped against timbers.

Frank heard voices, as footsteps thudded overhead. Then, with a rattle and a crash, the hatch cover was hauled away. The boy tried to slip down among the boxes but he was too late. A burly seaman shouted:

"Hey! We've got a stowaway!"

Frank was trapped. As he looked up, blinking in the glare of the sunlight, rough hands yanked him to the deck.

"Put your hands up!" a voice cried.

"Take him forward!" rasped one of the men.

Half-blinded by the light, Frank was dragged and pushed along the deck toward the cabin.

In the meantime, at the Hardy home the family and Chet waited anxiously for news of Frank. With growing concern Joe and Chet had searched the docks thoroughly and had made scores of inquiries. No one had been able to cast any light on Frank's strange disappearance.

Mrs. Hardy, pale and tight-lipped, sat near the telephone. Her husband was away, so she could not consult him.

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Aunt Gertrude paced up and down. "That man they have locked up in jail-I'll bet he knows what happened," she decided. "If I had my way-

"But the police have questioned him a dozen times, Aunty," said Joe. "He says he hasn't any idea what could have happened to Frank."

"He's lying," snorted Aunt Gertrude. "I'd shake the truth out of him in a hurry if they'd let me talk to him."

"What time is it?" asked Mrs. Hardy quietly.

"It's two o'clock in the morning, Mother," said Joe. "You'd better go to bed and get some rest."

Mrs. Hardy shook her head. "I wouldn't be able to sleep."

"I wish I'd stayed with Frank," mourned Chet. "But when I saw him looking at those boxes, I never dreamed he'd get into trouble."

"If he doesn't show up by seven," decided Mrs. Hardy, "I'll have to telephone your father."

"No use bothering Fenton until we're sure it's serious," declared Aunt Gertrude. "Frank will turn up," she added to calm Mrs. Hardy, but to herself she said, "I'm afraid something terrible has happened to him. I always said that one of these days-

The telephone jangled harshly. Mrs. Hardy sprang to her feet. But Joe reached the instrument ahead of her. Chief Collig had promised to notify

Frank in Trouble 121

them if the police discovered any clue to Frank's disappearance. As Joe snatched up the receiver he was afraid of what he might hear.

"Is this the home of Fenton Hardy?" demanded a rough voice.

"Yes."

"Who is this?"

"Joe Hardy."

"All right, chum. In case you're worryin' about your brother, here's a tip for you. You'll find him on the porch of a summer bungalow about two miles up the Willow River. Better go and

get him because he's in no shape to walk home."

"Who's speaking? What bungalow? Is he all right?"

"That's all, chum!"

The connection was cut off.

"What is it, Joe?" asked Mrs. Hardy tensely.

Joe repeated the conversation.

"But he's alive? How badly is he hurt?" demanded Aunt Gertrude.

The message had been ominous, but Joe tried to be cheerful. "Oh, I'm sure Frank's all right. Come on, Chet. We'll take the *Sleuth* and get going."

"I'm going with you," decided Aunt Gertrude brusquely. "Come on, Laura. We'll all go!"

Joe looked up. "Better not. What if it is a trap?"

"A trap? What nonsensical notion-?"

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"Maybe someone wants to get us all out of the house, for some reason," suggested Joe.

Mrs. Hardy was distressed. "Then maybe Frank won't be there at all?" she quavered nervously.

"Oh, I'm sure he is, Mother. But we'd better not take chances."

Aunt Gertrude nodded. "Joe is right," she said. "Sit down, Laura. We'll stay where we are. And if I hear so much as a footstep around this house while you boys are gone, I'll reach for the telephone and call the police."

Mrs. Hardy was not convinced the boys were not walking into trouble. "Better see if Biff Hooper can go with you, so you'll have some help in case you need it."

After telephoning to Biff and asking him to meet them at the boathouse, Joe and Chet hurried off. As they sped down the deserted streets in the Hardy boys' car, they said little. Perhaps the message was a hoax after all. But if it were not, how badly was Frank injured? Joe could not forget the rough voice on the telephone:

Better go and get him because he's in no shape to walk home.

CHAPTER XV

The Missing Tickets

the search for Frank was long and wearing. The early morning mist was heavy, and it was difficult to see the homes back of the shore line of the Willow River. The *Sleuth* roared back and forth on the river near the two-mile mark. Joe was discouraged when they found no bungalow. He decided the telephone call had been a trick.

There was only one dock where they could land. They found it belonged to a picnic ground. Once Joe waded ashore when they saw a cottage, but it had no porch and there was no sign of Frank.

It was not until the mist rose and they were over three miles from the mouth of the Willow River that they saw a dark figure sprawled on the porch of a deserted cabin.

"Frank!" cried Joe.

He pulled up to a makeshift, half-rotted pier and

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jumped out. His brother was bound hand and foot, and tightly blindfolded, but unharmed. As Joe and Biff cut loose the ropes and whipped off the blindfold, they hurled dozens of questions at him. Frank slowly rubbed his aching limbs and got up. He looked directly at Chet.

"I'm starving," he said. "Do you happen to have any food with you?"

Joe and Biff stared blankly at each other, but Chet beamed happily. He fished an apple and a sandwich from his pocket.

"I sure have. You fellows are always kidding me because I don't believe in going very far without supplies, but this time they came in handy!" he gloated.

As the motorboat sped back down the river and across the bay, Frank ate the food and

told the story of his strange adventure. When he reached the point where he had been hauled out of the hold of the *Wasp* and taken to the cabin, Joe exclaimed in excitement:

"Why, then, you've practically solved the case. You'll be able to identify these men—"

Frank shook his head. "I didn't really see any of them. I was so blinded by the sudden light after being in that dark hold, I closed my eyes. Then a blindfold was clapped over them. A man gave an order, then someone said, 'Shut up!' and after that

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no one spoke. I couldn't identify any of the men except one. He wasn't anybody we've talked to before.

"I don't know where I was. They moved me from the *Wasp* to another boat. We cruised around for a while until I was finally lifted out and put in a row-boat.

"The man who took me up the river was kinder than the others. He was supposed to get rid of me and leave no clues, but I guess he was afraid. When he left me at the cottage he merely said:

" 'Let this be a lesson to you, young fellow, to mind your own business. Any more snooping and you won't get off so easy!' "

Chet gulped. "If I were you fellows I think I'd forget about this mystery."

But the Hardy boys had received similar threats on other occasions and had no intention of dropping the case.

"It gives us all the more reason for nabbing a bunch of crooks!" Frank declared.

"We'll check in at the house, and after we've had a little sleep let's go down and have a talk with the man who's in jail," suggested Joe. "I'm sure he's the 'Hank' you heard mentioned, Frank. He probably knows all about the *Wasp*."

Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude wept with joy when Frank and Joe stumbled wearily into the

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house. Aunt Gertrude bustled about the kitchen, preparing breakfast and occasionally dabbing tears of relief from her eyes. To tell the truth, she had given up Frank for dead. Now, with the weight of worry removed, she scolded him roundly for running such risks, then kissed the back of his neck and insisted that he "eat hearty."

After breakfast Mrs. Hardy packed both boys off to bed, saying she would tell Chief Collig of Frank's safe return. The brothers slept soundly until almost noon. When they appeared, refreshed and ready to take up their work, their mother said Mr. McClintock had telephoned.

"I didn't want to disturb you so I told him you'd call him later," she said.

"I guess he wants to know if we had any luck getting freighter reservations," Frank suggested. "I'll call the agent in Southport and see if the tickets are ready."

But when Frank spoke to him, the boy received a distinct shock. "Tickets? You got your tickets," declared the agent.

"Not yet," answered Frank.

"That man you sent over picked them up early this morning and paid for them. Said you boys told him to call for them."

"We didn't send anyone," said Frank. "Did he give you his name?"

"No, he didn't, I can't understand this."

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"Describe him, please."

"In his thirties, I'd say. Dark hair. Not too well-dressed. Naturally, when he said you had sent him, I had no reason to think he was lying, and didn't pay much attention to his looks."

Frank groaned. Then he said grimly, "The tickets have been stolen!"

The agent was greatly disturbed. He believed the boys and assumed some blame for what had happened, but said that he was powerless to do anything about it.

"When the man shows up on the sailing date, we can get an explanation," he offered.

"I can't wait that long," said Frank. "Why don't you just issue us new tickets?"

The agent could not do this. Furthermore, he said he knew of no other passage on a freighter for a long time to come. Nonplused, Frank put down the telephone.

"There's no doubt but that somebody or bodies is bent on seeing that we don't make that freighter voyage," he said to his brother.

"I would have made it hot for that agent in South-port," Joe burst out angrily.

"He's not to blame, I'm sure," said Frank. "Say, maybe McClintock is the reason for all this. Someone may be trying to keep *him* from making the trip."

"Then let's go and talk to him!" Joe cried.

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"Go ahead. If he tells you anything worth while, let me know," said Collig.

A guard showed the boys to the cells. The man with the scar was lying on his bunk, sullenly reading a newspaper. He did not move as the boys approached his door.

"Good morning, Hank," said Frank quietly.

The prisoner looked up, startled. "How do you know my-" Then he checked himself. His expression became wary. "You've made a mistake, fellow," he growled. "My name's not Hank."

"That's what the boys on the *Wasp* call you, anyhow," said Frank coolly.

The man's eyes flickered. "The *Wasp*?" he cried. Then calmly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Say, how about those numbers?" asked Joe, hoping to catch the prisoner off guard on this one, too.

"Which numbers?"

"A23, 151, C2."

The prisoner swung himself off the bunk and strode toward the door of the cell. "Now look," he said thickly. "About those numbers. You can't-"

"We can't what?" asked Frank sharply as Hank hesitated.

The man stared at the boys distrustfully. "I don't know anything about any numbers. Go away and leave me alone." He turned his back to them and returned to the bunk.

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The boys made several attempts to get him to talk but the prisoner stubbornly refused to say another word. Finally they left him. But of two things they were sure. The man's name really was Hank, and he knew something about the mysterious numbers.

When Frank and Joe reached home, they found that their father had returned. Fenton Hardy had already been told about Frank's adventure on the *Wasp*, and now listened with interest as his sons told about their call on the man in jail.

"He recognized the numbers, all right," Frank said. "At first we thought he was going to talk about them. Then he seemed to change his mind."

"Tell me about these numbers," said Fenton Hardy eagerly.

Frank mentioned the crumpled scrap found in Mrs. Armstrong's home, the paper in the prisoner's pocket, and the boxes in the hold of the *Wasp*, all of which contained the same numbers.

"So the prisoner wouldn't talk?" Mr. Hardy said resolutely. "Well, never mind. I believe I can solve that part of the mystery without his help."

CHAPTER XVI

The Giant Tuna

Frank and Joe, astonished, leaned forward to hear their father's explanation of the mysterious numbers.

"It fits in with something I happen to know," said Fenton Hardy. "A few days ago I told you I was working on a couple of important cases. One concerned fake documents and autographs. The other case came to me from a large company manufacturing electric motors. The president engaged me to check on a lot of new motors which bear his trade name but weren't sold by his company. They're appearing in various cities along the coast, but his branch offices in those places say they know nothing about them."

"Wouldn't it be an easy matter to check the serial number of the motors that leave the factory against

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the motors being received at the branches, to be sure of this?" asked Frank.

"My men have done that and all the invoices match up. If five hundred motors are produced in the factory, five hundred motors reach the branch offices. So I'm inclined to think the extra motors are being assembled in secret somewhere from stolen parts."

Joe was puzzled. "What have the numbers got to do with it?"

"They sound like motor numbers and may have a great deal to do with it. At any rate, I'm going to transfer some of my men to the Bayport water front right away."

With that, the detective dropped the subject and the boys knew better than to question him further,

"But I did have a little luck on another matter," he said. "Joe, will you ask your Aunt Gertrude to come into the library? I think she'll be interested in this." Mr. Hardy unbuckled the straps of the big suitcase he carried on his longer trips. When Aunt Gertrude came into the room he was removing the wrapping paper from a flat parcel.

"Recognize this, Gertrude?" he asked.

He held up a small picture; an oil painting in an old-fashioned frame. It was the portrait of a stern-looking old gentleman with muttonchop whiskers.

"Great-grandfather Hardy!" gasped Aunt Ger-

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trude. "That picture was in my lost carton! Where did you find it? Don't just sit there grinning at me, Fenton. Speak up!"

Mr. Hardy told how he had come across the picture in Washington while visiting antique shops in search of forged documents. He had recognized the portrait at once, because Great-grandfather Hardy had stared down at him from over the piano in the Hardy homestead when he was a boy, and he could never forget him.

"He didn't look very happy in that antique shop," Mr. Hardy smiled. "The proprietor couldn't tell me much about the woman who had sold it to him, along with various odds and ends, about a week ago. He couldn't describe her very well, so I wasn't able to trace her."

Aunt Gertrude said nervously she hoped the rest of the contents of the carton would come back to her without too much trouble. "There were certain things ..." she said dreamily. Just then they heard the postman's step on the front porch. "I'll get it!" she cried, and fled toward the hallway.

Frank glanced at his brother. "Have you noticed how jumpy Aunty has been ever since she lost the carton?"

"And every time the phone rings she jumps as if she'd been stuck with a pin," Joe grinned.

Both boys had noticed their aunt's odd behavior

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in recent days. They had laid it to the fact that she was worrying about her lost carton. Now, however, it seemed to them that there might be more behind her conduct than worry about missing letters and papers. Aunt Gertrude was jittery and nervous because she was expecting a message-either a telephone call or a letter. Was it in connection with the mystery? There were times when she secretly helped on cases in her own way. As they were discussing this, the brothers heard the telephone ring.

"I'll get it," shrieked Aunt Gertrude from the hall. A moment later she called out in a disappointed voice, "It's only Chet. Will one of you boys come and talk to him?"

When Frank answered, their friend remarked in an aggrieved tone, "It's *only* Chet. A fine thing to say about me. Listen, Frank, isn't tomorrow the day we go tuna fishing with Captain Andy Hark-ness?"

"You're right. We'll be there! Call Biff, will you?" Frank asked.

"And say, Mr. McClintock's going to look at that rod I want to sell. I bet you he'll buy it!"

When the Hardys arrived at the wharf the following day, Mr. McClintock was hopping about like a youngster. Swinging over one shoulder were straps holding a binocular case.

"With all my deep-sea fishing, I never went out

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for tuna," he remarked. "Wonderful day for it," he beamed, looking up at the blue sky and sniffing the salty air. "I tell you, when this fellow Chet Morton organizes an expedition he gets somewhere. None of this business of waiting around for days."

Mr. McClintock glanced meaningly at the Hardys. Chet turned pleading eyes on them not to give him away.

"All aboard that's comin' aboard!" bellowed Captain Andy Harkness. "We ain't got all day."

In a few minutes the fishing boat swung away from the wharf and went chugging smoothly down the bay. Chet, as commander of the expedition, bustled about importantly. He assigned places to every one and explained the technique of tuna fishing, about which he had just read.

"I brought along some deep-sea fishing rods," he said. "They belong to my father."

The Hardys noticed that Chet did not have with him the bamboo rod he wanted to sell to Mr. McClintock.

"Mighty nice of your dad to lend us these tuna rods," declared Biff appreciatively.

"My dad is like that," returned Chet. "He'd be glad to lend them to us. At least, I'm pretty sure he would if I'd asked him. I didn't ask him, though, just in case he might worry a little. I do hate to see

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my father worried, because he loses his appetite and that makes my mother worry, and when Mother worries we all worry. So it saves bother all around if I don't ask him about borrowing things."

It was a calm, warm day and the sea was smooth with only a slight swell. A few miles beyond the mouth of the bay, Captain Harkness announced they had reached tuna water. He distributed the herring he had brought along as bait and scattered freshly ground chum over the side to attract the fish.

Mr. McClintock took up his position in a fishing chair, and Chet showed him the proper way to hold the heavy rod. He threw the bait overboard and watched it sink until the end of the leader disappeared from sight. Next, he coiled about fifteen feet of the thirty-nine-thread line on the stern and held the line.

"Tuna grow pretty big, don't they?" asked Mr. McClintock, becoming a little nervous. "It won't pull me overboard, will it?"

"Could be," grinned Captain Harkness.

The fishermen had no luck until early afternoon. Then suddenly Mr. McClintock let out a yelp as there was a slow tug at the line. Then it started to uncoil fast.

"Strike him!" shouted the captain, realizing there probably was a tuna at the end of it.

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The line straightened out. McClintock yanked the rod sharply upward. The reel screamed. The man was pulled halfway out of his chair.

"Help me, somebody!" he bawled, his eyes bulging. "Take this rod! I can't hold on! I'll be dragged overboard!"

He would have let the rod get away from him in his panic but Chet seized it and held on with all his might. Yard after yard of line unwound, as the tuna headed out to sea. Captain Harkness shut off the engines and let the tuna tow the boat. Though its heavy weight slowed the big fish down, Chet had to fight with all his strength to keep from losing the prize.

"He's ... a ... monster!" the boy puffed.

The battle went on for a long time. There was nothing the others could do but watch the struggle. Chet was growing tired. Even through the stout gloves and stalls his hands were

burned. Beads of sweat hung on his forehead.

Suddenly the boat began to swing around. They caught a glimpse of the great dorsal fin and the huge black tail of the tuna above the waves. It was a monster!

"I ... I can't hold on any longer!" gasped Chet. "Take over, somebody!"

Joe, Frank and Biff sprang to help him. Joe reached Chet's side first. Slowly, the big rod was

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transferred to him. Gripping it hard, he realized why Chet was exhausted. It was like trying to hold a runaway horse going at breakneck speed. Nearer and nearer shore the fish raced, showing no signs of exhaustion.

"Head him out to sea or we'll go on the rocks!" roared Captain Harkness.

Joe caught a glimpse of the jagged, black teeth of a reef not two hundred yards away. He pumped on the line, trying to head the big fish from the dangerous waters. It did not work!

CHAPTER XVII

The Ghost Ship

"No use!" shouted Captain Harkness, as Joe tried desperately to head the tuna out to sea again. "I'll have to start the engine and pull her away, or we'll pile up on the reef. Chet, get ready to cut that line!"

"Please . . . not yet!" Joe gritted his teeth. Though the rod was bent almost double, and the strain on the line was terrific, he felt sure he was gaining the upper hand in forcing the tuna away from the dangerous spot. Slowly the boat turned. Inch by inch, Joe won the contest. Then, with a rush, the tuna was away again, but this time running for open water. The captain gave a shout of triumph.

The big fish took them far out to sea, but after another hour it gave up the struggle and at last surfaced. Joe reeled in foot after foot of line. There

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The Ghost Ship 141

was a last wild flurry from the tuna as the boat closed in. Its huge tail lashed the water into froth. The launch spun around in a circle. Frank reached down and grabbed the leader, hanging on while Captain Harkness stood ready to strike with the gaff. The tuna rolled on its side, about forty feet from the boat. Joe, Frank and the captain together finally conquered the monstrous fish and swung a rope around its tail.

> "Weights four hundred pounds if he weighs an ounce," said the captain. "After we tow him back to Bayport we'll have him put on display."

Mr. McClintock rubbed his hands and capered about in a great state of excitement. He regarded the tuna as his own personal property and seemed to be under the impression that he had caught it himself.

"Most exciting afternoon I've ever had in my life!" he declared.

Captain Harkness swung the wheel over. "We'd better start for home right away. We won't make as good speed towing four hundred pounds of tuna behind us, and I want to get to Bayport before dark."

The fight with the giant fish had taken more than two hours! The boat had gone only a short distance when suddenly the engine coughed, sputtered, picked up again, gave a convulsive gasp and died. The fishermen stared at each other in consternation.

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"Sounds as if we're out of gas," ventured Frank.

"Can't be!" roared Captain Harkness. "I filled the tank to the brim before we left the wharf."

He tinkered with the engine, spun the flywheel. Then he thrust a rod into the tank. It came out dry. The man was dumfounded.

"No gas!" he muttered. "I don't understand it. There was enough gas in that tank to take us halfway across the Atlantic and back again."

Captain Harkness was a man given to occasional exaggeration. Nevertheless, the boys

realized his surprise was genuine.

"Do you think somebody may have tampered with it, Captain?" asked Frank.

"Could be. I was away from the boat for about half an hour. But I don't know why anybody would be mean enough to do that," he returned slowly. "Most of the men around the fishing wharves know it's a serious thing to run out of gas when you're out in open water."

Mr. McClintock nervously asked the man what he planned to do about the situation. Captain Harkness replied that there was little he could do except wait for help. Fortunately, they were not far out at sea and would signal the first ship they saw for help.

Long minutes passed. Sunset flooded the water with orange and crimson light. Twilight changed to darkness. There had been no sign of a ship. Captain Harkness tested his flashlight and began to

The Ghost Ship 143

signal with it. No response. Nervously he remarked they were drifting toward Barmet Shoals.

"I don't like it," he said.

They sat in the dark and waited, thankful that the sea was calm. No one spoke. Chet curled up and went to sleep. Presently Frank's sharp eyes detected a faint, moving glimmer.

"I think I see lights!" he said excitedly.

They stared into the gloom. A distant flicker of red and green. Then across the water they could hear a dull, throbbing sound.

"Sounds like a freighter. Off our starboard," said Captain Harkness.

The lights bore steadily toward them. The sound of the ship's engines became louder and louder. The fishing captain flashed signals.

Suddenly the ship's lights vanished. The motors became silent.

"Strange!" muttered Frank.

Captain Harkness gave a hoarse cry. "We're too near Barmet Shoals. I knew it," he moaned. "There's no ship there at all. It's the phantom freighter! There never was any ship!"

The Hardy boys were not superstitious. They had seen the lights and heard the engines. Somewhere out there in the darkness was a ship. But why had the lights vanished? Why had she silenced her engines?

Frank persuaded the captain to flash another SOS

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signal. They shouted, raising as much noise as they could. Biff Hooper's lusty bellow could be heard for miles. But there was no answering shout or flash.

The night had been cloudy. Now the moon appeared from behind a ragged cloud bank. It cast a pale radiance across the water. And in this weird light they saw a huge black hulk silhouetted against the sky not a hundred yards from them!

"Ahoy there!" shouted Frank.

"Ahoy!" squeaked Mr. McClintock.

But there was no answer from the ship.

"Maybe it's not the same one we heard," suggested Frank practically. "Maybe this is a deserted ship."

"If we could get our boat closer we might be able to climb aboard it," suggested Mr. McClintock.

"I'll swim over," offered Joe.

"You couldn't climb a sheer steel hull," said the captain.

A cloud came over the moon again and the big dark shape was lost to view. Frank and Joe were filled with keen excitement. As soon as morning dawned, they planned to find a way to board the mysterious ship.

That night the marooned fishermen took turns keeping watch and sleeping. Frank and Joe were both wide awake, however, when the first gray light of dawn lit up the sky. They stared off starboard over the ocean.

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The freighter had vanished!

Frank grabbed Mr. McClintock's binoculars and raced first aft, then stern, gazing through the glasses north, east, south and west. There was no ship of any kind in sight.

"Funny how that freighter could have got away without our hearing her," said Joe, who had followed his brother. "There wasn't a sound all night of a ship's engines starting."

Frank, too, was puzzled. "Maybe it was a derelict after all," he said. "But I was sure I saw lights on it. Do you suppose she got caught in a crosscurrent and drifted off?"

Captain Harkness, who had been dozing on the aft deck, came to with a start and cried out:

"Derelict nothing! Crosscurrent nothing! No real ship could have got away. That was the ghost ship! The phantom freighter! Now do you believe me?"

CHAPTER XVIII

"Mrs. Harrison" Again

during the morning, a coast patrol aircraft spotted the fishing launch. Half an hour later a rescue boat pulled up alongside. The men exclaimed over the unusual size of the giant tuna. Captain Harkness indignantly refused offers of a tow, but admitted he could use some gasoline. He told the officer in charge about the phantom freighter whose name might be *Falcon*, but his story was received with smiles of incredulity.

"Mr. Hardy asked us to search for you," the officer said, "but we didn't bargain on hunting ghost ships. I'll signal our patrol plane, though, to make a sweep of the area. If there's any derelict or a freighter named *Falcon* within three hundred miles the plane will spot it and report back by radio. And by the way," he added, turning to Captain Harkness, "maybe if you installed a transmitter on your boat,

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"Mrs. Harrison" Again 147

you wouldn't have to drift all night when you run out of gas."

With this parting shot, he left them. The captain grumbled all the way home about newfangled notions and smart alecks in uniform.

"Got along without a transmitter all my life," he fumed.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardy met the group at the dock, accompanied by Chet Morton's parents and Biff Hooper's father. All were vastly relieved to see the adventurers safe. Chet was so ravenous with hunger that he almost forgot to claim credit for helping to capture the tuna. As for McClintock, he said he never wanted to go fishing again.

"Too hard on my system," he groaned. "I'm going back to the hotel, and have my breakfast and go to bed for a week."

When the boys arrived home they were alternately praised and scolded by Aunt Gertrude. "I was pretty sure you'd turn up," she said, "but I admit I was worried. I almost canceled my trip because of it." She looked at the clock. "There's still time to catch the train, though."

"Leaving us, Aunty?" asked Frank in amazement. "You've just come."

"I'm only going for a couple of days," returned Aunt Gertrude evasively. "Maybe not that long."

The boys looked inquiringly at their mother.

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Mrs. Hardy shrugged. When Aunt Gertrude decided to be secretive about her affairs she could be very .secretive indeed.

"Going far, Aunty?" hinted Joe.

"Not very far," Aunt Gertrude snapped the lock of her traveling case. "Who's going to drive me to the station?"

Both nephews accompanied her.

"Have a nice visit, Aunty," said Frank, as he helped her out of the car at the station.

"Who said I was going on a visit? If you must know, this is a business trip."

"Oh!" exclaimed Frank innocently. "A business trip! That's different. Naturally, if you're

going to Wayside I thought you'd visit Aunt Maude."

"Wayside? Who said anything about Wayside? Why, Bridgewater isn't even in the same direction. My goodness, I wish you'd get things straight. Well, good-bye and take care of yourselves. I may be back tonight and I may be away for a day or so."

Aunt Gertrude boarded the train.

"So she's going to Bridgewater," murmured Joe. "And it's a business trip. Now, I'm not naturally inquisitive," he grinned, "but I wonder what's going on."

Did this mysterious trip have some connection with Aunt Gertrude's recent added interest in the mail and the telephone? The boys were full of speculations as they drove back to the house.

"Mrs. Harrison" Again 149

That afternoon they heard the city of Bridgewater mentioned again, but under different circumstances. The manager of the Bayport Express Company telephoned shortly after lunch, saying:

"I've just heard something that may interest you Hardys. A letter came from my brother-in-law who works in the express office in Bridgewater. You remember that carton that was addressed to your aunt, and was delivered to the Phillips house? Well, the same kind of thing occurred in Bridgewater a few days ago. The express company delivered a carton to a certain address. They later discovered that the owner of the house was out of town and that the woman who had signed for it had cleared out. Sounds as if the same racket's being worked in Bridgewater."

"Sure does," said Frank, who had answered the call.

"The express company is investigating, of course, but I thought you'd want to hear about it. I'll let you know if anything further turns up."

The news about the Bridgewater incident, close on the heels of Aunt Gertrude's trip there, struck the boys as being more than a coincidence. Was she mixed up in another carton episode?

"I think we'd better drive down to Bridgewater and do a little investigating ourselves," decided Joe.

"Good idea," his brother agreed.

Bridgewater was a pleasant city, somewhat smaller

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than Bayport. When the boys arrived there, they called immediately at the express office. After introducing themselves the manager told them the details about three strangely claimed shipments.

"I don't think you'll learn much from the people at those addresses," he said. "The Bridgewater police have checked every angle."

Frank smiled. "Maybe not, but may we have the addresses?"

"Glad to let you have them."

As the brothers left the express office, Frank came to a sudden stop.

"Look who's over there!" he said.

In front of Bridgewater's leading hotel, directly across the street, two women were in earnest conversation.

"Aunt Gertrude!" exclaimed Joe.

"But who's the woman with her?" puzzled Frank.

Joe looked again. Then he gasped. "Why, that's 'Mrs. Harrison!'"

Aunt Gertrude's companion was none other than the woman who had signed for an express parcel at the Harrison residence in Bayport while the real Mrs. Harrison was out of town.

Why had their relative come to Bridgewater to meet this impostor? As the boys gaped, confused and puzzled, they saw their aunt and the other woman enter the doorway of the hotel restaurant.

"Mrs. Harrison" Again 151

"We'll have to do a little plain and fancy shadowing if we want to learn what this is all about," said Joe. "Maybe we should call the police. Remember, the Bayport police are looking for that woman."

"Let's wait until she leaves Aunt Gertrude," advised Frank. "If we call the police now, it would put Aunt Gertrude in an awkward spot, particularly since we don't know what it's all about."

"I guess you're right. I wonder what *is* behind it?" said Joe. "I'll bet that woman's blackmailing Aunt Gertrude," he guessed. "Maybe she has some of Aunt's private letters from the carton and is demanding money for them."

"If Aunt falls for it, she's got a mighty good reason," declared Frank. "I guess that's what she's been so jittery about lately. 'Mrs. Harrison' must have written or phoned her."

The boys hurried into the hotel and made their way toward the restaurant. From the lobby they could see Aunt Gertrude and "Mrs. Harrison" seated at a table near the street door. Frank and Joe slipped in and sat down near a potted palm which shielded them from view. Seeing a waitress bring salads to the others, they ordered sandwiches and milk.

Presently they saw their aunt open her handbag. She surreptitiously took out a purse and handed it across the table. The woman put it into her pocket-

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book and brought out a packet of letters which she gave to Miss Hardy.

"Just as I said. Blackmail!" said Joe excitedly.

"I can't understand it," Frank shook his head.

Aunt Gertrude got up and walked out of the restaurant to the street. The other woman finished her coffee and prepared to leave.

"Get the house detective," Joe told his brother. "I'll stall her along in the meantime."

While Frank hurried into the lobby Joe got up and walked across to the woman's table.

"Well, if it isn't Mrs. Harrison!" he exclaimed, smiling.

The woman looked up at him coldly. "You've made a mistake," she said. "My name isn't Harrison."

"Don't you remember me? I called at your house in Bayport."

The woman's eyes were wary. Hastily she got up.

"I was never in Bayport in my life," she snapped.

"Better sit down and talk it over, Mrs. Harrison, or I'll call the police," suggested Joe.

The threat worked. The woman turned pale. She sat down again.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"I want some information from you. Where do your friends keep the stuff they steal?"

"Mrs. Harrison" Again 153

The woman did not answer. Instead, she uttered a low moan, then slumped forward with her head on the table.

"Why, she's fainted!" gasped a waitress, running forward.

Joe got up to help. Then he realized this was just a ruse to get him out of the way. Instantly he decided it was a ruse that might be put to good account. He ran out of the restaurant. In the lobby he met Frank, hurrying across from the desk with a burly, cigar-chewing individual who looked every inch a hotel detective.

"Our friend has pretended to faint," said Joe quickly. "Maybe we'd better let her think she's getting away with it."

"Not around this hotel she won't get away with it," grunted the detective.

"Maybe the publicity wouldn't be good for the hotel," Joe suggested smoothly. "If you'll see that she's helped out to a taxi, we'll take over."

The detective nodded. He went into the restaurant. In the meantime Frank and Joe went out the front entrance and jumped into their car. In a few minutes the false Mrs. Harrison was escorted to the street.

"I'm feeling much better now," they heard her say. "If you'll get me a taxi ... so stupid of me . . . just a weak spell . . . I'll be all right."

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"Okay, lady," said the house detective, as he helped her into a cab. "Hope you feel better by the time you get home."

"Thank you."

He shut the door but stood there, hoping to hear the address she would give the cabbie. But "Mrs. Harrison" said nothing. The detective opened the door and asked if she really felt all right to go alone.

"Oh, yes."

"Want me to give the driver your address?" he pursued solicitously.

"No, thanks. I can manage. You needn't wait."

There seemed to be no excuse for the man to stay longer. Noting that Frank and Joe were ready to take up the pursuit, however, he went back into the hotel satisfied.

The cab pulled away. The Hardy boys followed close behind.

CHAPTER XIX

The Spy in the Shadows

"the cab's stopping!" said Joe excitedly, five minutes later.

"Mrs. Harrison" got out in front of a rooming house about six blocks from the hotel. She paid the driver and hurried up the steps.

After she had gone inside, Joe stood guard while Frank rushed to a store on the corner and telephoned police headquarters. When he said a suspect in the express carton racket had been cornered, he was told that a detective would be sent to the rooming house at once.

"We had a call a few minutes ago that that woman was at the hotel," the officer reported. "She moves fast."

"Aunt Gertrude must have called the police," Frank thought to himself.

Within three minutes a squad car pulled up at the

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curb and a tall, rawboned man from headquarters jumped out. Quickly the boys introduced themselves and said they would like to go into the house with him.

"Come on!" agreed the detective.

The only occupant of the rooming house at the moment besides the owner was "Mrs. Harrison" herself. They found her packing a trunk, in a room that was in a state of wild disorder. She looked up in alarm.

"Planning a trip, lady?" asked the Bridgewater detective, showing his badge. "Let's have a look at some of this baggage."

"I haven't done anything. You're making a mistake."

The man pounced on a bundle of papers the woman tried to hide behind her back. They were tied with faded ribbon. Written across the top paper were the words:

Family papers. Property of Gertrude Hardy.

That settled it, so far as the detective was concerned. In spite of the woman's protests, he made a thorough search of the room. Papers, letters, old books and pictures, antique jewelry and heirlooms, some of them from Aunt Gertrude's carton, were brought to light. In fact, even a cutout section of the carton itself was found, containing Miss Hardy's name and Bayport address.

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"Sorry, lady, but you'll have to come down to headquarters with me," the detective said.

Under examination at police headquarters the woman maintained a stubborn silence. She refused to tell how the carton had come into her possession and denied that she had ever been in Bayport. Nevertheless, she was locked up on a charge of theft. Before she was led away, "Mrs. Harrison" turned furiously on the Hardy boys.

"Your aunt will be sorry for this!" she screamed. "She double-crossed me! I warned her not to talk! I'll get even with her if it takes me the rest of my life!"

Frank and Joe smiled to themselves. Miss Hardy was working on the case in her own way!

The Bridgewater chief of police thanked the boys for their help, gave them permission to take home the piece cut from the carton, and said that the police would let their aunt know when she could claim her property.

"It's a lucky break for us, getting that 'Harrison' woman behind bars," he added. "After she's had time to think the matter over, she'll probably start talking. Then we'll nab the rest of the gang."

After they left the police station, Frank and Joe drove around in search of their aunt. Failing to find her, they went to the railroad station. The train for Bayport had just pulled out.

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They hurried home, reaching the house about ten minutes before their aunt arrived. When she walked in, both boys were innocently absorbed in the afternoon newspaper. The cutout section from the carton was lying on the living-room table.

"Back so soon, Aunt Gertrude!" exclaimed Joe. "We thought you planned to be away several days."

"I transacted my business sooner than I expected." Miss Hardy was taking off her hat when her eyes fell on the section of carton. She blinked, took off her spectacles, put them back on again. Then she gasped. "Where did this come from?"

"We found it in Bridgewater," replied Joe calmly.

"You what?" Aunt Gertrude turned crimson.

"Expressman here gave us a tip," Frank explained. "We rushed over and nabbed a woman in a rooming house."

Aunt Gertrude gave both boys a steady look. They knew she was wondering whether they had seen her in Bridgewater. She said nothing, however, and went to her room.

"It isn't often we see Aunt Gertrude blush," laughed Joe. "She's dying to ask us questions, but she's afraid. What do you suppose is in those letters? She must have wanted them mighty badly."

"I'll bet they're old love letters," grinned Frank. "Dad said Aunt Gertrude was engaged at one time."

The brothers found it difficult to think of their

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goodhearted aunt as a figure of romance, but Mr. Hardy had often told them that his sister was very popular and had had many admirers. Conversation on the topic was interrupted by a telephone call from Mr. McClintock.

"What has a man got to do to get a freighter reservation?" he demanded testily. "Bring along a letter from the President and an order from the Maritime Commission? I've been doing all I can to get tickets but I haven't had any luck."

The boys were secretly amused. Now Mr. McClintock was finding out for himself how difficult it was to get reservations!

"If we don't get tickets pretty soon," he said, "I'm going to hire a strong-arm man and see what he can do. I was down at the docks and heard someone say there'll be a freighter docking at Bayport tomorrow morning. Get down there early and meet the boat," he ordered.

Following instructions, the boys went to the water front before breakfast, arriving just as a big freighter came slowly up Barmet Bay. As it approached the dock the Hardys were amazed to see it was the *Hawk*.

"Wonder why she came back so soon," Joe remarked. "She couldn't have sailed very far."

"Maybe she's in for repairs," Frank replied. "Say, perhaps Captain Sharp will be in a better frame of mind this time and give us passage."

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But when the *Hawk* was moored, and Captain Sharp came ashore, he looked as

hard-mouthed and surly as ever. Nevertheless, the boys decided to speak to him. They walked up, smiling.

"Welcome back, Captain," said Frank. "Carrying any passengers this time?"

The man squinted at them.

"Hm! I'll say you two are persistent," he grunted. "Didn't I tell you I don't want any passengers?"

"We hoped you might have changed your mind."

"Well, I haven't," snapped Captain Sharp. "And don't bother me again!"

He brushed past them, but Joe followed. "All right, we won't mention it again, but I'd like to ask you something else. Have you ever seen or heard of a ghost ship, a phantom freighter, out beyond Bar-met Shoals?"

Captain Sharp glared at the boy. "Are you trying to make a fool out of me?" he rasped. "Phantom freighter! Do I look like a man who believes in ghosts and fairy tales?"

"There's been talk around here . . ." began Joe, when Captain Sharp interrupted him fiercely.

"That will be enough of your impudence, young fellow. Get out of my way!" He pushed Joe rudely aside and strode off down the pier.

The brothers decided to eat breakfast at a diner

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along the water front, thinking perhaps they could pick up some information about a passenger freighter. They had no luck, so started for home. On the way they passed Klack's agency.

"What say we go in and see if we can find out anything about that telephone call Gallic overheard?" Frank suggested.

"Good idea," his brother agreed. "If Klack's there, I'm going to-"

"Take it easy," Frank advised. "We don't want anyone to know we suspect-"

"Sh!" whispered Joe.

He had noticed a man near them who seemed to be listening. The fellow flopped down on a bench outside the agency.

At the same moment Captain Sharp, hurrying up the street, turned into the place. The boys followed, but he did not speak to them. Addressing the girl, he said:

"I want to hire another cook. Mine jumped ship."

The girl nibbled at the end of her pencil. "Well, I dunno," she mumbled. "Haven't had many cooks in here looking for jobs lately. If you can wait until Mr. Klack comes back-"

"Wait?" growled the man. "I want to hire a man and I want him right now!"

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The shabbily dressed fellow who had been lounging on a bench just outside the door, got up and sidled inside to Captain Sharp.

"I'm your man, skipper," he said. "How much does the job pay?"

Captain Sharp looked him over from head to foot. He asked a few brusque questions about the fellow's experience, and a bargain was struck.

"Go down to the *Hawk* and report to the mate," the captain ordered.

As the man shambled out, the girl said, "It ain't right for you to come in here and hire a man without payin' a fee to Mr. Klack."

"I asked you to get me a man, didn't I?" growled Sharp. "Now shut up!" He stormed out of the office.

The girl, furious, looked at the boys. "You here again?" she cried.

Frank, having heard Klack was away, merely asked her if she had booked passage yet for his party. She replied in a bored manner, as if repeating a lesson, that there were no reservations for them; that Mr. Klack was out of town; and that they would have to wait until he got back.

"Let me know when he returns," said Frank. He rather thought from the look on the girl's face that she would do nothing of the sort.

Reaching home, the boys had a conference with

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their father, and told about the return of the *Hawk*.

"Captain Sharp is in on something crooked, I believe," said Fenton Hardy. "I don't know what it is, but I think his freighter should be watched. As for Klack, I can tell you why he's out of town. I've just learned that the FBI has become interested in his activities."

"You think he's in hiding?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"On the *Hawk*?"

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"No," replied the detective. "The *Hawk* could be searched too easily."

Joe had been standing near a front window. He happened to glance out, and saw something that made him step back quickly.

"We're being watched!" he cried.

Mr. Hardy and Frank came toward the window, not close enough to be seen, but close enough to look out. Across the road, in the shadow of a house, stood a poorly dressed man gazing toward the Hardy residence.

"Why, that's the man Captain Sharp hired in Klack's office!" exclaimed Frank.

"It sure is," affirmed Joe. "He's no cook. He was following us before Captain Sharp spoke to him in Klack's office. He had *already* hired him-to spy on us!"

CHAPTER XX

The Abandoned Farm

"captain sharp has something to hide . . . that's clear now," said Fenton Hardy grimly. "He's afraid we know or suspect something."

"And Klack's mixed up in the business and responsible for our failure to get freighter passage," added Joe.

"Mr. McClintock said something about finding a strong-arm man to get freighter tickets for us," Frank said. "How about asking Biff Hooper to help us out?"

Mr. Hardy approved the idea, but said they must be cagey about it. No telephone call; the wire might be tapped. He decided that it might be wise for the boys to stay indoors until they saw the outcome of their experiment.

"Then how can we ask Biff?" Joe wanted to know.

His father called in Mrs. Hardy, who readily

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agreed to the plan he outlined. That afternoon she was to go to the butcher shop where she had traded for years, and ask the owner to deliver a note to Biff with the next order to the Hooper home.

"If the spy follows you, we'll follow him," Mr. Hardy told her.

But the spy in the shadows remained where he was, seemingly not interested in her leaving.

"I must get out of here myself," said Mr. Hardy. "I almost hope he does follow me. I may learn something."

He went upstairs. After a while the boys heard shuffling footsteps in the hall. An old man, white-whiskered and bent with age, peered into the living room.

"I won't be long, boys," he croaked, a twinkle in his eye. "Jest goin' down to the docks to look at a freighter I'm kinda interested in. It's called the *Hawk*. Keep an eye on the house, and if you see anybody followin* me, don't worry."

The boys laughed. Fenton Hardy's disguise was perfect! The detective let himself out the back door and shuffled down the driveway to the street. Slowly he made his way toward the corner.

Eagerly, his sons watched from the window. Either the suspicions of the spy across the street had not been aroused, or else he was posted there to watch the boys, for he did not

stir from his hiding

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place. The boys stayed up late, but their father did not return. It was not until the next morning that they learned from him the *Hawk* had sailed early the previous evening, ahead of schedule.

"There wasn't anything suspicious about it," he reported. "I've had one of my men posted at the docks for the past two days, looking things over. He watched the *Hawk* being loaded. Most of the cargo was destined for islands down the coast. A big part of the cargo consisted of large cans of paint."

"Is the spy still on duty?" asked Frank, going to the window. Then he exclaimed, "The man's gone; but I'll bet another fellow has taken his place."

He pointed out a taller, leaner person but just as shabbily dressed as the other. He was strolling back and forth as if waiting for someone who had failed to show up.

The telephone rang. Biff Hooper was calling.

"The trip's off," he said to Joe, who had jumped to the instrument.

"Good," Joe replied. "Good-bye. See you later."

Biff had received the note and obeyed instructions. He had spoken in code in case the wire was being tapped. The note had instructed him to use the expression "the trip's off" if he agreed to try picking up reservations for them that day outside Bayport

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"I wish we could get rid of that spy," said Joe. "If he is a spy."

"We can soon find out," Frank replied after thinking a moment. "I have a plan, and if he leaves, we'll have a pretty good idea why he was posted here."

The ruse was simple. Joe walked out of the house and down the steps. He headed off along the street. The man across the way eyed him carefully, apparently undecided whether or not to follow. When Joe was halfway down the block Frank ran out of the house.

"Joel" he shouted.

His brother turned, looked back.

"Telephone call." Then, as Joe began walking back rapidly toward the house, Frank called out loudly:

"The trip's off."

"The freighter trip?"

"Yes. Mr. McClintock says to forget it. He's leaving town."

Joe came up the steps and into the house. From behind the window curtains the boys watched the man across the street. Apparently he had heard enough, for he walked briskly away and disappeared from sight around the corner.

The ruse had worked! There was no doubt he had gone off to report the news he had heard.

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"Let's get out of here while he's gone," said Frank. "I'd like to follow up something new. You remember when I was on the *Wasp* I heard a man speak of old Crowfeet? I'd like to find out who he is."

"How?"

"When we were out with Captain Andy Harkness the other night, I heard him mention an Abel Jed-son, a retired old officer. Says he knows every ship along this coast and everybody on them. Suppose we ask him about Crowfeet."

"And Captain Sharp, too," said Joe.

They found Abel Jedson living in a little cottage near the bay, where he could watch the comings and goings of the ships. He was a spry, shrewd little man with a stubby gray beard and twinkling blue eyes.

Cap'n Abel, as he called himself, sat in a rocking chair on the porch, listening to the radio. On the window sill near by was a noisy parrot that squawked, "No boarders wanted!" as the boys came up the walk.

They introduced themselves, and after talking about ships in general, Frank asked, "Have you ever heard any stories about a phantom freighter?"

"Hundreds of 'em," chuckled the old man. "I've been hearin' yarns about phantom freighters ever since I was knee-high. All nonsense."

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Joe asked if he knew Captain Sharp of the *Hawk*. The old sailor merely cocked his head to one side, looked thoughtful and said he had seen the freighter coming up the bay but knew nothing about it or its captain.

"Ever hear of a man called Crowfeet?" ventured Frank.

Cap'n Abel twiddled the short-wave dial of the radio and brought forth a barrage of squeals that provoked the parrot to rasping protest. "Turn it off! Turn it off!" the bird squawked.

"Crowfeet, huh?" mused Cap'n Abel. "Name seems familiar, somehow. I'll try and remember. Wait till I put on my thinkin' cap."

To put on his thinking cap the old sailor merely closed his eyes tightly and gave the dial another twist. Suddenly the boys jumped in astonishment. Over short wave they heard a gruff voice say, "A23, 151, C2." Then silence.

The numbers printed on the boxes Frank had seen in the hold of the *Wasp* and on the slip of paper in the Armstrong house!

"Crowfeet," muttered Cap'n Abel, unaware of the excitement the announcement had aroused. "Name certainly does sound familiar. Crowfeet. Seems to me it had something to do with a fellow named Harry-that's it-Harry Piper! That's what folks used to call him-Crowfeet."

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"Is Harry Piper still alive?"

"I dunno. Never heard of him dyin', anyway. Captain Harry Piper of the freighter *Falcon*."

"The *Falcon*!" exclaimed Frank.

"That's right. Tell you where you might find out about Harry Piper. When he was ashore he used to live with his brother John, about ten miles out o' town. John had a dairy farm a little ways in from Shore Road."

The Hardys were elated. At last they had unearthed a valuable clue! After thanking Cap'n Abel, they got into the car and set off toward Shore Road.

The Piper farm was difficult to locate. A man cutting grass in a small country cemetery finally put the boys on the right track. He pointed out an abandoned property next to the cemetery.

"John Piper died last year," he informed them. "No one has lived there since."

The boys decided to leave the car and cross the unkempt fields on foot. The whole place was in a state of neglect. Weeds grew high in the yard. Parts of farm machinery lay rusting by a tumbledown fence. The farmhouse windows were boarded up. But the place might hold a clue!

"Let's explore the barn first," suggested Joe.

To their surprise the hayloft was stacked high.

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On the floor was another immense pile of hay, but upon investigation the boys found that it was merely a covering for quantities of animal hides.

"These hides are worth thousands of dollars!" exclaimed Frank, puzzled. "I wonder why they're stored here."

The brothers decided to ask the cemetery caretaker if he knew anything about it, and crossed the fields again to talk to him. The man was amazed to hear the news concerning the hides.

"Can't figure it out," he said. "I haven't seen anyone near the farm since John Piper died."

"Did he have a large herd of cattle?"

"Heck, no. Never kept more'n one cow."

"Let's go back there," Joe cried excitedly. "Something funny about this."

Surprisingly a truck had arrived in their absence and was parked in the barnyard.

"We'd better take it easy," advised Frank. "I don't like this!"

They approached cautiously, circling to the rear of the barn. Quietly they crept up to the back door and opened it. The place seemed as deserted as before. Then the Hardys noticed that the great pile of hay on the barn floor had been scattered from one end of the place to the other. Stepping inside, they gasped in amazement.

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The stacks of hides had disappeared!

"We'd better go out and take a look at that truck," suggested Frank.

Before the boys even started for the door, there was a sudden murmur of voices and sounds of footsteps above them. They looked up just as a huge mass of hay came tumbling down directly at them.

Frank, unable to get out of the way, was knocked to the floor by its weight and completely covered. He held his breath to avoid sucking in the dust until he could fight his way out. When he tried to rise, though, he could not seem to throw off the heavy bulk.

With a startled cry, Joe had leaped back, but too late. Though the hay did not engulf him, a heavy object struck him a glancing blow.

He fell to the floor, unconscious.

CHAPTER XXI

Success and Failure

Frank, struggling to get from under the heavy hay, was almost smothered. As he fought his way clear of it, the boy heard a man say:

"That'll take care o' those kids till we can get the rest of this stuff moved."

"Let's hurry and get out of here," urged his companion.

A moment later Frank vaguely heard the roar of the truck as it lumbered off down the lane. He was still clawing at the hay and gasping for air. Stumbling free at last, he saw to his horror that Joe lay motionless on the floor. There was a large box beside his head.

It was several minutes before Joe revived. "What hit me?" he gasped.

Frank pointed to the box. When he lifted it, he realized that Joe might have been fatally injured, had the box struck him squarely. Out of curiosity

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the boy opened it, and found an electric motor inside.

"Wow! Maybe we've really hit on something this time!" he cried. "Dad'H want to see this!"

Fenton Hardy was indeed interested when his sons brought the motor home. He took the number and said he would check with his client. The detective felt sure the boys had located one of the hiding places for the stolen goods.

"Wool, hides, motors and fake documents," mused Mr. Hardy as the three discussed the various elements of the mystery. "I think we're on the track of a big group of swindlers who are handling all these things."

"Do you think Crowfeet is the ringleader?" asked Joe.

"Possibly. There certainly seems to be a direct link between him and the abandoned Piper farm. In all likelihood he's a smuggler. He may have lain off shore to send in hides and wool in small boats like the *Wasp*, and received stolen motor parts in return."

"On the *Falcon*?" Frank asked.

"Yes, and I have an idea that Crowfeet was warned and has changed the name of his freighter."

"With some of that paint Captain Sharp had on the *Hawk*!" cried Frank excitedly.

"Then that's why Captain Sharp didn't want us

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on board and hired a man to watch our house?" asked Joe.

Mr. Hardy shrugged. "It certainly all seems to fit together," he said. "Only many questions are still to be answered. One is, why is a smuggler mixed up with the faking of documents found in various inland states of our country? Well, your good work has made more work for me," the detective smiled. "I must be off."

After he left the house, the brothers continued to talk over the aspects of the case which still puzzled them. What was the strange abandoned ship they had seen? Where had it gone? What of Captain Andy's story about the phantom freighter he said was named *Falcon*?

The conference was interrupted by the arrival of Biff Hooper. The tall, muscular boy brought good news. Beaming, he held up four tickets.

"Reservations!" he grinned. "You sail from Southport day after tomorrow."

The Hardys could hardly believe their ears. After all the difficulties they had experienced it seemed impossible that Biff had succeeded in securing accommodations so quickly.

"Where did you get them?" cried Joe.

"I simply went to the agency at Southport and asked for them," replied Biff calmly. "They're cancellations. I didn't mention your names, of course."

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Eagerly, the boys examined the precious tickets which were for one of the freighters of the Neptune line—the *Father Neptune*.

"The ship docks at Southport tomorrow and it's sailing for the Caribbean Islands and South America," Biff explained.

"Mr. McClintock sure will be glad to hear this," said Joe and raced to the telephone.

"No, let's go tell him," urged Frank. "Then Biff can be repaid the money his father put out for our tickets."

The three boys hurried out of the house, piled into the car and drove down to the Bayport Hotel.

"I knew it! I knew it!" beamed Mr. McClintock, rubbing his hands in glee when he heard the news. "A strong-arm man was just what we needed to do the job. Thank you, Biff. Thank you."

Mr. McClintock kept cash in the hotel safe. He paid the boy, then began talking about all he would have to do to get ready for the trip. The Hardys left him, smiles on their faces. They recalled the time he had suddenly decided to go on the *Hawk* and had given them ten minutes in which to get ready!

Frank and Joe's next stop was at the Morton farm. The brothers expected Chet to whoop with joy at hearing the news about the voyage on the *Father Neptune*, But he did nothing of the sort.

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"Say, what's the matter with you?" Joe exploded. "Don't you understand? Here's your ticket for South America, all expenses paid!"

"Sorry, fellows," Chet groaned. "I can't go with you. I'll be here in Bayport, working my head off, tying flies and trying to sell them, while you're out on the ocean having a wonderful time."

"What happened?" Frank asked.

Chet explained that his father had put his foot down. Chet was not to be allowed to go on the trip unless he first paid back every cent of the money he had borrowed to buy the thirty-five-dollar rod.

"I thought you were going to sell it to Mr. McClintock," said Joe.

Chet hung his head. "Be . . . before I had a chance to, I ran over it with the car in the garage and ruined the rod. And so," concluded Chet drearily, "you'll have to go without me. Take Biff in my place."

Frank and Joe looked at each other. Somehow the zest had gone out of the trip. It would not be the same without jolly Chet Morton.

"I've got it!" cried Frank. "I know what we'll do!"

CHAPTER XXII

The Boomerang

"step up-step up, ladies and gentlemen! The greatest bargain at the carnival! For a few cents, for a fraction of a dollar, you can buy the lures that catch the biggest fish! Step up-step up! Fine handmade flies. Step up!"

Chet Morton, red-faced and beaming, paused for breath. Then he blew a loud blast on a fish horn. When startled people attending the Southport carnival jumped and looked his way, he held aloft a handful of brightly colored flies and went into his speech again.

"You risk no money. You merely make an investment in a fish dinner. Every fly guaranteed to pay for itself in fresh fish!" bawled Chet.

Few of those who stopped to look had any intention of buying flies. But they drifted closer, attracted by Chet's torrent of language and his per-

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sonality, and laughingly parted with fifteen or twenty-five cents.

Chet was having the time of his life!

Chet and the Hardy boys, accompanied by Lola Morton and Gallic Shaw, had helped Chet get started on his venture. Frank and Joe had stayed up most of the night helping him tie flies, and then got permission for Chet to sell them, so he could pay his debts and go on the trip. The girls had helped him decorate a stand at the carnival.

After he was well launched on his venture, they left him on his own and went down to see the *Father Neptune*. Her skipper, Captain Gramwell, was a far different type of seafarer from Captain Sharp. He was a slender, white-haired man who welcomed the boys and girls courteously when they came on board the freighter.

It was a big, modern vessel with passenger cabins that were bright and airy. The ship itself was spotlessly clean and the crew moved about briskly, like well-disciplined men who know their jobs.

Captain Gramwell introduced the visitors to the first mate, the radio operator, whom everyone called Sparks, and to the ship's carpenter nicknamed Chips. They then met the bos'n, a rugged old man with one eye and a fund of amazing tales to explain how he'd lost the other one. The Hardy boys were to learn that the missing eye formed the basis of all his yarns

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and that he had lost it in nearly all parts of the world!

"I'm a little upset," Captain Gramwell confided to the brothers. "Not more than an hour after we reached port I lost one of my best men. He took sick while he was in town and had to be taken to the hospital. Fortunately, the man who brought the message had good references and experience, so I hired him to replace Sanderson."

When the Hardy boys and their friends left the ship, Frank said to his brother, "Do you know, something doesn't ring right about that story."

"But Captain Gramwell seems perfectly honest."

"Of course. But doesn't it seem strange that some sort of misfortune struck this ship the moment we got passage? Captain Gramwell's men have been with him a long time. Now a stranger suddenly joins the crew. Couldn't he be one of the gang against us?"

"You mean he put the seaman in the hospital on purpose?" Joe gasped.

"There's one way of checking up," Frank decided. "We can go to the hospital and inquire about Sanderson."

They left the girls at the carnival and went to Southport's only hospital. At the desk, the woman in charge shook her head.

"There's no one here by that name," she said. "There must be a mistake."

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The boys were now convinced that their suspicions were well founded. They determined to go back to the ship and meet the new seaman. On the way out, Frank saw a figure dash

through the shrubbery on the hospital grounds and run across the lawn. The boy gave no indication that he had seen anything amiss until he and his brother reached the gates at the entrance to the driveway. Then he grabbed Joe by the arm.

"Quick! In here!"

Swiftly the boys darted into the shelter of the big stone pillars.

"What's up?" asked Joe.

"I saw someone run across the lawn after we came down the steps. I thought maybe we were being shadowed."

A moment later they heard rapid footsteps on the concrete walk. The boys edged farther out of sight behind the pillar. A man walked past. He looked puzzled, glanced from left to right, up the street, back over his shoulder. Then he quickened his footsteps, hurried on and disappeared from sight around the next corner.

"Looks familiar," Joe commented. "Where have we seen him before?"

"Don't you remember? He's the first spy who was watching our house."

"That settles it. Let's go back and warn Captain Gramwell."

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They wondered how the captain would receive the news. It was possible that the skipper of the *Father Neptune* might fight shy of becoming mixed up in any trouble. He might even ask the Hardys to cancel their passage. Captain Gramwell's attitude, however, was just what the boys had hoped it would be.

"I'll have no monkey business on my ship!" he declared with fire in his eye. "I'd like nothing better than to lay my hands on some of those smugglers. As soon as that new man shows up, I'll find out what's what!"

They did not have long to wait. Within a quarter of an hour a rough-looking fellow came up the gangplank with a dunnage bag over his shoulder.

"There he is!" snapped the captain. He turned to the mate. "Go ashore and get me a policeman. If Sanderson has met with foul play, it will be just too bad for this fellow."

When the new hand came over the side the Hardys blinked in amazement.

"Why, he's the second spy!" cried Joe.

It was, indeed, the man who had replaced the first watcher in front of the Hardy home. As he saw the two boys he wheeled quickly and would have taken to his heels, but Captain Gramwell leaped forward quickly and blocked his escape.

"Now then, my bucko!" snapped the captain.

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"What happened to Sanderson? Where is he, and what did you do to him?"

"I told you, Captain. He's in the hospital."

"That's a lie. Now speak up, and speak fast."

The man turned sullen. "You've got nothing on me. I'm not talking."

Under questioning from the policeman who arrived, the fellow still would admit nothing, and was taken off to the Southport police station. There he was searched, but the officers found nothing in his pockets except a wad of compressed wool. This, of course, meant nothing to the police but it was significant to the Hardy boys who had gone along. They persuaded the sergeant to question the man relentlessly, until at last he broke down.

"Sanderson ain't sick," he admitted. "You'll find him in an old house outside o' town. He's tied up. I took him there 'cause I wanted to ship on board the *Father Neptune*. He ain't hurt."

"Maybe not, but he might have starved to death for all you cared!" roared Captain Gramwell.

The seaman, who gave his name as Joe Flint, was promptly put in jail. Captain Gramwell and the Hardys went with the police in a squad car to the house Flint had mentioned. There, in a tumbledown, deserted dwelling, they found Sanderson. He was tied hand and foot, exhausted by his hopeless struggles, but otherwise unharmed.

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Captain Gramwell had the man taken back to the ship and ordered that he be given the best of care. Sanderson tried to express his gratitude to the Hardy boys for the part they had played in his rescue.

"You'll have plenty of chances to say thank you to the boys in the next few weeks," the Captain told him. "They're sailing with us."

"And that reminds me," laughed Frank, "we left a friend of ours at the carnival, trying to raise money so he can go with us. We'd better go back and see how he made out, Joe."

The carnival was in full swing when the boys returned to the grounds. They found Chet in front of his stand, brandishing a fistful of flies, making pleading motions at the crowd. His overworked voice was reduced to a mere whisper.

"Step up, ladies and gentlemen-step up," he croaked. Then, seeing his friends, he demanded wearily, "Where have you been? I'm so tired and hungry I can hardly stand up."

"How's business?" asked Frank.

"Sold nearly everything," whispered Chet. "Another dollar and a half and I'm in. Take over for me, will you? I want to get something to eat."

As he sped for a lunch counter, Frank peeled off his coat and Joe cut loose with a lusty bellow of "Step up-step up, ladies and gentlemen." In a few minutes sales picked up again and finally Frank

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handed out the last Grizzly King. Chet's goal had been reached!

They hurried to the lunch counter to tell him the good news and arrived just in the nick of time. Chet had been obliged to stand in line. Now, hungrier than ever, he was just giving a mammoth order to the counterman, including steak and two desserts.

"You'll have a sandwich and a glass of milk," broke in Frank firmly. "Think we're going to let you spend all your profits?"

Chet moaned feeble protests but Frank was determined, and stood near by to see that he did not order anything more.

Joe had stopped to watch a man who was putting on a show with a stack of cardboard boomerangs taken from a suitcase.

"An exact replica of the boomerang used on the plains of Australia!" he bawled. "Only one dime. I throw it away from me. It comes back. Watch closely, folks."

He hurled one of the cardboard boomerangs. It described an arc and flew back toward him. A stranger carrying a suitcase stepped up.

"I'll buy one of them things, mister, if you'll let me try it first," he said.

"Go right ahead. Here you are."

The stranger took the piece of cardboard, swung it and let go. The crowd watched the flight of the

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boomerang. But Joe, watching, saw something the crowd did not notice. With a quick movement the salesman dropped his hand toward the suitcase. He whipped it open and in one deft motion took out a real boomerang; one that if used wrongly could be a dangerous weapon.

He swung. The boomerang left his hand. It streaked through the air, then circled and came spinning back. But not to the thrower's hand. The knifelike club whistled directly toward Frank!

CHAPTER XXIII

You'll Never Come Back Alive!"

there was no time for Joe to push Frank out of the way.

"Low bridge!" he yelled.

Instinctively Frank ducked. The boomerang skimmed over him, missing his head by a fraction of an inch and crashing into the side of the lunch counter.

Joe rushed over to the man as he picked up the boomerang. "What do you mean trying to hit my brother?" he demanded.

"Don't be a fool. I couldn't help what happened," the fellow answered.

"Why are you carrying a real boomerang?" the Hardy boy asked.

The man gave him a hard look and said calmly, "None of your business," then moved off.

Joe told Frank what had happened and they both started after the stranger as he hurried through the

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busy carnival grounds. Near the entrance they saw him meet another man, and an argument apparently developed between them. As the Hardys crept closer, keeping well out of sight, they heard the man who had thrown the boomerang shout angrily:

"A bargain's a bargain! I want my money!"

"You didn't do the job."

"Even if I didn't get that Hardy guy for you, I tried. You'll pay me or my boomerang will get *you!*"

As the boys reached the pair, they recognized the other man instantly. He was the spy who had trailed them to the hospital.

Frank whispered to Joe, "Get the police!"

While Joe was gone, Frank listened to the men, who continued to argue and nearly came to blows. The wrangle ended with the arrival of a policeman, who promptly collared the suspects and put them under arrest on charges of attempted assault preferred by the Hardys.

"Looks as if we're rounding up a bad gang one by one," said the Southport chief of police to the boys. "You've done a fine piece of work."

Just then a sergeant came into the chief's office with a message that the Bridgewater police had been trying to locate the Hardy boys. Would they come to Bridgewater right away?

"Any explanation?" asked Frank.

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"They merely said a prisoner had decided to talk if you would come."

"It must be the woman who blackmailed Aunt Gertrude," said Frank. "Let's go."

The boys got into the car. They stopped off at the carnival to pick up Chet and the girls, who were wandering from booth to booth in search of them. With his hard-earned money in his pocket, Chet was finding it hard to resist temptation, but he had bought only four ice cream cones, giving two to the girls, and a bag of potato chips.

"We're driving to Bridgewater," Frank announced. "Everyone want to go?"

"Maybe I'd better," conceded Chet. "Then I won't spend any more money."

At Bridgewater the girls went on an errand for Mrs. Morton, and Chet accompanied the Hardys to the police station. As Frank had surmised, the prisoner who wanted to talk was the false Mrs. Harrison. She was brought out in charge of a guard. To the disappointment of everyone, however, she did not talk about the case. She was still stubborn in her refusal to tell her name or give any information about herself.

"The reason I wanted to talk to these boys is just to ask them a question," she said. Then she turned to the Hardys. "Are you going on that ocean voy-age?"

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"Why?" asked Joe. "And how did you know about it?"

"Never mind how I know," she replied. "Are you going?"

"Maybe."

"And me, too," announced Chet proudly.

"Don't go," the woman said earnestly. "I mean it. I'm warning you. Don't go!"

"Why not?" squeaked Chet, looking frightened.

"Because you boys will never come back alive," said the woman. "That's all I'm going to say. *You'll never come back alive if you go!*"

She got up and nodded curtly to the guard, indicating that the interview was at an end. All the way home the Hardys wondered what was back of her warning. As for Chet, he was quivering like a pudding.

"I wonder if I should take time off from my work to go on that trip," he muttered. "Now that the fly-tying business is on its feet, maybe I'd be foolish to go away."

"Worried, Chet?" grinned Frank.

"Worried? Of course not. You don't think I took that woman seriously, do you? But say, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to have Biff go along, if we could get a ticket for him."

"It's a swell idea," said Frank. "You ask Mr. McClintock."

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The Hardys, though seemingly not worried by "Mrs. Harrison's" words, were deeply concerned. Was this a warning or a threat?

"Let's phone the jail and find out if she's had any visitors," Frank suggested.

The police captain reported the prisoner had had no other visitors, mail or other messages.

"Then I guess her warning was merely given for spite," Frank concluded.

The brothers continued their preparations for the trip and were ready to sail the next day. In the meantime Mr. Hardy had gone over a code with the boys until they had memorized it perfectly.

"If you come across any information about the smugglers, send your messages in this code to my man in Boston," he directed.

At the Southport pier there was laughter and excitement mixed with a certain amount of tenseness. Mr. and Mrs. Hardy, Aunt Gertrude, Biff Hooper's parents and the Morton family had gathered to watch the departure of the *Father Neptune*. Mr. McClintock, already aboard, kept running about and getting in the crew's way until finally the first mate suggested firmly that he go to his cabin.

Presently a whistle began to blow. The boys hurried up the gangplank. A moment later tugs began pushing the big freighter away from the dock. Out in deep water the tugs cast off, and the *Father*

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Neptune's engines began to throb steadily. Soon she swung off through the gap at the mouth of South-port Bay and headed out to sea.

After unpacking some of their luggage, the Hardys went on deck and found Chet and Biff already there. Chet was wondering when and where dinner would be served.

"This sea air gives me an appetite," he said.

Just then they saw Mr. McClintock hurrying down the deck. He had a slip of paper in his hand and looked intensely worried.

"I've just had a shock. A terrible shock!" he gasped. "Look what I found in my cabin. Pinned to my pillow."

He held out the slip of paper with shaking hands. Frank took it and read a typed message:

This is your last warning. Go ashore before it's too late.

Frank tried to calm the man by suggesting that the note was a practical joke, but the boy was worried just the same. Later on, in the privacy of their cabin, he discussed the warning message with Joe.

"Either one of the gang slipped on board for a few moments before we sailed, or else one of them has shipped with us," he said.

"But Captain Gramwell says every member of the crew has been with him for a long time. Do you suppose we have a stowaway?"

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Frank shrugged. "Let's speak to Captain Gram-well."

They made a search of the ship with him but found no one in hiding.

The *Father Neptune* headed southward on her course down the coast, and everything

went smoothly. The passengers retired early. Their bunks were so comfortable, and the salty air so fresh and tangy that they slept well and forgot any fears they had about trouble on the trip.

The next morning the Hardys roamed about the ship again, keeping their eyes open for a stowaway, and learning something of the simple routine aboard. Once the *Father Neptune* was at sea, the duties of the crew were relatively simple. Every man had his own job, from the ship's firemen to the cook and the donkeyman. The boys visited the crew's quarters in the fo'c'sle, then went down into the engine room, which was as clean and efficient as a navy vessel. Later they visited McClintock, who was suffering a touch of seasickness which they felt was largely imaginary, for the sea was unusually calm.

As they left McClintock's cabin they met Sparks, who had a message for the Hardy boys.

"Can't make head or tail of it," he laughed. "It must be in code."

The boys took the message, which was from their father, into their cabin. It was simple and they were able to decipher it without difficulty.

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"Important to locate phantom freighter to solve mystery-smuggling activities starting again-smugglers eluding authorities by clever disguises-Klack thought to be aboard-use every precaution."

The Hardys decided to tell Captain Gramwell about the message right away. As they reached the bridge, Frank suddenly remarked:

"Say, Joe, this ship is listing badly to starboard!"

Just then an excited seaman darted past them, yelling:

"Captain, Captain! The cargo's shifting! We're going over!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Crowfeet

captain gramwell was barking orders over the loud-speaker system:

"All hands report to the hold to move shifting cargo! Delay may mean disaster!"

The boys were already racing below deck, as were Chet and Biff from another part of the ship. In the hold, men, their bodies glistening with sweat, were heaving crates of cargo to the portside. Frantically they worked; the heavy thud of boxes the only sound -except for an occasional sharp command.

The boys were directed to a post where the men, formed in a double line, were swiftly passing cargo from one to another. Together, Frank and Joe caught the bulky cases as they came, and then tossed them on, their arms working like machines in high gear.

On, on, on came the cases in rapid-fire succession.

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Minutes passed, and each box felt heavier than the one before. The Hardy boys' backs ached, their hands stung, their breathing turned into short, painful gasps for air, and streams of perspiration rolled down over their eyelids. But to let up for even a fraction of a second would throw off the whole operation.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, but was only a few minutes, there was a perceptible movement underfoot. Slowly, reluctantly, the ship rolled toward the portside.

"We've righted her!" shouted the officer in charge.

The boys went up on deck. As they were discussing what had happened, Captain Gramwell came over to thank them for helping out. Then he shook his head, muttering grimly:

"I can't understand it. hoav that cargo could have been loaded so badly-whoever was in charge is going to hear about it-"

Frank and Joe looked at each other. The same thought had been running through the minds of both of them. Then Frank spoke slowly:

"I feel we ought to tell you this, sir. We think that it was done deliberately, because we

shipped with you."

Joe told him about the woman's warning: *You'll never come back alive!*

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The captain was incredulous. "Why, it's fantastic that anyone would go to such length!"

Next, the boys informed him of the note left for Mr. McClintock, and finally showed him the decoded wireless message from Mr. Hardy.

"Well!" sputtered the captain, showing some of his former fire, "one thing I *can* do is to have Sparks contact every ship in this area. If there is any freighter around not identifiable, we'll do a little investigating!"

That afternoon he called the boys to his cabin, and told them he had checked with the offices of his company by wireless. He had received a report on all vessels known to be within a three-hundred-mile radius, and had then established radio contact with each one.

"The only ship which reports seeing something strange is the *Lion Tamer*. Her captain suggested I change our course and go to meet her. Can't tell who might be picking up messages."

"Odd name for a ship," remarked Biff Hooper.

"She's in the wild-animal trade," the officer explained. "Specially equipped for carrying circus animals. I've known her captain for years."

The *Lion Tamer* was sighted shortly after three o'clock. Greatly to the delight of the Hardys and their friends, her captain invited them to go on

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board. A boat was swung out from the *Father Neptune*. The four boys and Mr. McClintock were rowed across to the "floating menagerie" as Chips called it.

"What a racket!" exclaimed Biff, as they climbed up the rope ladder that was lowered over the side. The *Lion Tamer* resounded with shrieks, squeals, roars and bellows. Dozens of animals were imprisoned in big cages, some down in the hold, others on deck.

"And what a smell!" gasped McClintock.

Captain Gordon of the *Lion Tamer* seemed to notice neither the noise nor the odors. He showed the boys around the ship, and then gave them the information about which he had hinted to Captain Gramwell.

"Your skipper was asking about an unreported freighter," he said. "Well, I saw one that seemed to be drifting. Couldn't see any signs of life and got no answer when we hailed her." He gave them the approximate position of the mysterious ship.

The visitors returned to the *Father Neptune* in a state of high excitement. They were sure that the drifting hulk must be the smugglers' ship. Captain Gramwell promptly set his course toward the position indicated. *

"Should sight her just before dark," he said.

His estimation was correct. The sun was just

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sinking in the west when there was a report from the crow's-nest.

"Freighter on the starboard bow!"

On the horizon they soon glimpsed the dark silhouette of a ship. Captain Gramwell gazed at the vessel through his binoculars.

"Just as Gordon said-no sign of life. It may be a derelict."

The *Father Neptune* drew steadily closer. Again the captain raised the glasses to his eyes.

"Freshly painted ship," he said. "Its name is the *Black Gull*. Say, I think I saw a man run across the deck just now and dive behind the fo'c'sle cabin."

Captain Gramwell ordered flag signals run up, in case the other ship's radio was out of commission. But there were no answering signals. Instead, there came a puff of smoke from the *Black Gull's* stack and the apparently derelict freighter began to move!

"She's on the run!" exclaimed Captain Gramwell, as he rang for full speed ahead.

"That's no derelict."

"Will she get away from us?" asked Frank apprehensively.

Captain Gramwell laughed. "That hulk!" he scoffed. "No boat of that type can outrun mine."

But the captain was mistaken. To his surprise and fury, the *Black Gull* not only remained out of reach but gradually widened the gap between the

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two ships. The captain snatched up the intercom telephone.

"What's the matter down there?" he shouted. "I called for full speed and we're not overhauling that ship."

"I can't understand it, sir," returned the chief engineer. "We register top speed."

It was growing dark. Captain Gramwell, puzzled by the inability of his vessel to overtake the clumsy-looking *Black Gull*, ordered a searchlight trained on the other ship. Frank slipped down to the wireless room and coded out a message to his father. It gave the approximate position of the *Black Gull*.

Believe phantom freighter Black Gull sighted but cannot overtake. Aircraft might be helpful.

Having despatched the message, he hurried back on deck. By this time the *Black Gull* had escaped the probing searchlight and vanished into the darkness. Captain Gramwell stalked the bridge in a rage. His pride was hurt.

"There's not a freighter in these waters faster than my ship!" he insisted. "I can't understand it."

Frank went back to the wireless room. As he walked in, there was a faint burst of signals from the set. Sparks heard them without interest. But Frank, also familiar with the international code, cried out in surprise.

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The signals spelled out the familiar numbers: A23-151-C2!

"That's the smugglers' code!" the boy exclaimed. "Not motor numbers at all!"

"The men aren't far away, if that message came from the *Black Gull*!" said Sparks.

A few minutes later, the numbers were repeated. The smugglers must have been confident their code would not be recognized, but this overconfidence gave them away. Using the "locator," Sparks was able to make a "fix" on the chart. Soon Captain Gramwell had set a new course, and the *Father Neptune* steamed swiftly through the night.

The Hardy boys went up on the bridge and stood beside the captain. Finally he gave an order. The searchlight blazed out across the water. Frank and Joe uttered whoops of excitement. The dark mass of the *Black Gull* lay clearly revealed in the light, not a quarter of a mile away.

But the freighter was no longer in motion. It lay apparently deserted and adrift, just as they had first discovered it.

"Maybe the crew abandoned it when they knew we were chasing the ship," suggested Joe.

"I'll send a boat over to make sure," said Captain Gramwell.

"Let me go, sir," requested Sparks quickly.

"And may we go with him?" begged Joe and Frank.

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Mr. McClintock spoke up. "You two watch your step," he advised. "I feel responsible for your safety."

The captain consented to their rowing over. "But don't go aboard unless you're sure no one's there," he ordered. "Just row around the *Black Gull* and if you hear voices or any sounds of life, come right back. We'll keep the searchlight trained on the ship. You stay out of range of the light, so you won't be a target."

Soon the Hardys and Sparks were rowing across the dark waters. Gradually they came closer to the black freighter, lying silent and mysterious in the night. There was not a sound except the steady splash of waves against its steel hull.

To keep out of range of the *Father Neptune's* searchlight, the three rowed around to the far side of the ship. As they went on slowly in the inky darkness, Joe pulled a flashlight from his pocket and switched it on. It revealed a ship's ladder dangling over the side of the ship.

"I guess you were right, Joe," whispered Sparks. "The crew got frightened and took to the boats."

"Let's go on board," said Frank.

They went alongside. Joe grabbed the ladder and climbed up. Frank followed, and Sparks came behind, after making the small boat fast to the lowest rung of the ladder. Once on deck they peered cau-

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tiously about in the gloom, keeping out of the rays of the searchlight.

"Not a soul on board," muttered Sparks. "Yes sir, they thought they were going to be caught, so they cleared out and-

The words died in his throat. From out of the shadows sprang a dozen men. The Hardy boys and Sparks were overwhelmed, knocked down and seized. Their wild struggles were useless. As they fought vainly, they heard a sardonic voice say:

"Didn't know when to stay out of trouble, hah! So now you're in old Crowfeet's hands! Take 'em below, men!"

They were roughly hauled down a companionway to a cabin. It was brightly lighted, but the portholes were covered with heavy blackout curtains. Here the three faced their captors who were a villainous-looking lot. The chief was a huge, black-bearded man. This was Crowfeet, leader of the smugglers. He looked his prisoners over, his hairy arms folded.

"Welcome, my buckoes!" he boomed. "Welcome to your new home. Behave yourselves and you'll get along fine."

"We won't be here long," returned Frank defiantly.

"And why not?" barked Crowfeet. "If you think you can escape from my ship, young fellow-

"We won't have to try. There'll be help coming
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from the *Father Neptune*. By morning there'll be others searching for this ship."

Crowfeet's laugh was derisive. "A lot of good that will do," he roared. "No one can board this ship unless I let him. No ship and no plane can touch me, as you'll find out. I've got protection. *A secret repeller!* The greatest invention of the past two years. So you'd better forget about rescue, because there won't be any!"

He turned to one of his men.

"Order full speed ahead. And if the *Father Neptune* tries to follow, turn the repeller on full power! Captain Gramwell will think his engines have gone into reverse!" Crowfeet chuckled evilly. "All right, men. On deck!" he ordered. "We'll let our prisoners have a chance to think things over."

The smugglers went out. Crowfeet followed, slamming the hatch. The captives heard a metallic bang as a heavy bolt fell into place.

CHAPTER XXV

Captured!

"This is a fine predicament!" cried Joe in disgust, hammering on the door of their prison.

"Won't do you any good," said Frank, and added, "If what Crowfeet says is really true, this repeller of his is one of the most remarkable discoveries of all time."

"Sure is," agreed Sparks. "If that villain has learned how to make a repelling force strong enough to hold off a near-by ship or plane, and maybe actually push it away, he's got something!"

"I'll bet he stole it," said Joe. "Otherwise he'd put the repeller to good use, like installing it on automobiles, or ships or planes to keep them from colliding."

"He'd stop at nothing to get rid of people like us who might upset his plans," groaned

Sparks nervously.

"I'm afraid you're right," said Frank. "Maybe

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our best bet is to play ball with Crowfeet for a while. We can pretend we're licked, and offer to throw in with him. Then we can look around and maybe figure something out."

Sparks was doubtful whether Crowfeet could be deceived, but agreed to try the plan. "He'll keep the *Father Neptune* away with his repeller, I suppose, so we can't hope for rescue there."

"Or help from Dad, either," added Frank.

It was not until the next morning that they heard the bolt slide back on the hatch. As Crowfeet entered, Frank said bitterly:

"A lot of help Captain Gramwell was to us! Ran away and left us, I suppose. You're very smart, Captain. We were crazy even to try to catch you."

"Now you're talking sense, boy. I'm smarter than most people," said the smuggler, grinning. "People call my ship the phantom freighter. Good name for it."

"You said last night that we'd get along all right if we behaved ourselves," Frank went on. "You mean you'll let us join up with your crew?" he asked with pretended eagerness.

"I can always use good men," grunted Crowfeet. "You're smart. You caught on to my code, though that was how I got you here in the end." He laughed uproariously.

Frank asked if the various parts of the code stood

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for ships or places and was told they did. "A23" meant the phantom freighter, and in combination with some other number meant a certain ship was to meet the freighter at a designated time and place.

The smuggler gave orders that they were to be given breakfast, and later they were allowed to go on deck. The boys scanned the ocean but saw no plume of smoke or other sign of a ship. Crowfeet came over and said leeringly:

"Not looking for the *Father Neptune* by any chance, are you? 'Cause we're far away from her. She doesn't know where we are."

The wily smuggler pointed over the side of his ship. Around the hull were bands of metal.

"There's the repeller," he said. "The only time it won't work is when another ship's engines are turned off."

Both boys, on hearing his disclosure, realized that this was the reason why their fishing boat, out of gas, had been able to get so close to the phantom freighter when it was off Barmet Shoals.

Crowfeet next showed them why his ship had been so hard to identify. On a staging lowered over the side, two men armed with giant spray guns were directing great clouds of gray paint at the dark hull of the *Black Gull*.

"Sometimes we hardly have time to let one coat dry before we have to change the color and the

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name," the man chuckled. "But we have always escaped from the people who suspected us. Got our supplies from other ships and never came into port."

"You called your ship the *Falcon* once, didn't you?" asked Frank.

Crowfeet nodded. "You almost found me out while I was using that name 'cause your motor went dead. But during the night I let my ship drift until she got far enough away so you didn't hear me start up the engines."

Just then a seaman slid up beside the boys. He was a dispirited-looking, elderly fellow in faded blue sweater and dungarees. Unlike the others on the ship, he had a fine, intelligent face. The Hardys wondered how the man happened to be part of a smuggler's crew.

"You haven't got a chance here," he said to them wearily. "Better join up and be done

with it, if you don't want to starve to death . . ."

"All right, Mitchell," roared Crowfeet. "Stow the gab and get to work!"

Mitchell cast a sullen look at the captain. "I came to tell you the radioman's sick," he said and turned away. Crowfeet followed him.

Five minutes later, while Frank and Joe were talking to Sparks, the captain came back to them. "Any

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of you know anything about wireless?" he asked.

His eyes were crafty and the three wondered if this was a trap of some sort.

"I know a little about it," said Sparks after a moment's hesitation.

"You know enough to send a message?"

"I can try," Sparks replied.

The boys could hardly conceal their elation as Crowfeet led them to the wireless cabin. But their hearts sank when the smuggler said roughly:

"Don't try any funny business. I can't run this outfit myself, but I can understand the signals."

He stood over Sparks as the operator sat at the key, and slowly dictated a message. It was in code and Sparks dared not take a chance on altering it.

While Crowfeet was thus occupied, Joe quickly figured out in Fenton Hardy's code the ship's position, which he noticed was scribbled on a wall chart.

"I know a little about wireless myself," said Joe. "Maybe I could help you out if I practiced up a little."

"Yeah?" jeered Crowfeet. "And send out a message for help, huh?"

"I wouldn't be stupid enough to try that," laughed Joe. "Just practice. . . ."

He started singing and tapping the keys slowly in an offhand manner.

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Little boy blue, come blow your horn, your horn. Blow, blow.

Crowfeet snorted but let the boy continue to tap out the apparently innocent words, which, in reality, would tell the ship's position to Mr. Hardy or to any of his men who might be listening.

As Joe sent out the message, Frank's mind was racing, for he knew that the secret repeller would slow down the engines of even the fastest boat that might be sent to their rescue. How in the world could they transmit this information to their father?

Suddenly he got the answer!

"Hey, give me a turn," he said, shoving his brother away and starting to chant. "Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main ..."

He sat down at the key and laboriously tapped out:

Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main,

For many a sailing ship can go faster than . . .

"Okay, that's enough," interrupted Crowfeet, roughly pulling Frank away from the set.

He pushed them out and locked the door. When the boys were alone, Joe asked whether Frank's tapping had sent a message of some kind.

Keeping his voice low, Frank explained. "Crowfeet said the repeller wouldn't work against a ship

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which had its engine cut off. I couldn't think of any way to tell Dad that. But I did think of the old sailing song. Why couldn't they come in a big sloop that could make twenty knots in a good wind-without using its auxiliary motor?"

"You're a genius," said Joe, grinning. "This tub can't make over thirteen."

The boys told Sparks but warned him not to show any elation. As the hours dragged by and no help came, they began to lose hope. Then suddenly, in midafternoon, they noticed a white spot on the horizon. Their hearts leaped wildly. The spot soon enlarged into a snowy canvas. Closer and closer it came, until they recognized a racing sloop, under full sail!

Suddenly there was a shout from Crowfeet. "What's that yacht doin' out there? I don't like it. Full speed ahead!"

The phantom freighter, its name now the *Red Bird*, rattled and groaned as its speed increased.

"Say, it looks like they're chasin' us!" cried Crowfeet wildly. "My repeller! My repeller! It's turned on, but it can't work against a sailing ship!"

Frenzied, he bellowed orders to the engine room. But it was no use. The big sloop soon overtook the *Red Bird*. Over the water blared crisp words from a loud-speaker:

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"Stop your engines and lower a ladder! We're boarding you for inspection."

"Coast Guard!" screamed Crowfeet.

He obeyed, and in a few minutes an officer came over the side, followed by Fenton Hardy.

In the joyous reunion between the detective and his sons, Crowfeet learned how he had been outsmarted. Realizing the game was up, the crook threw himself on the mercy of the authorities and made a full confession.

Vain, headstrong and unscrupulous, the smuggler had preyed on people in many walks of life. He had even stolen inventions and kidnaped their inventors. On board was a chemist, who had perfected a method of aging wood and paper in a few minutes. Crowfeet had forced him to counterfeit old documents and letters which were then sold as collectors' items.

"I figured out how to hide the papers in certain boxes of compressed wool, and ship them to houses where people were away," Crowfeet boasted. "And if I hadn't had such stupid fools working for me, you'd never have caught me!"

"Like the two who got in a fight in a motorboat on Barmet Bay and threw a carton of stolen wool overboard?" remarked Joe.

Crowfeet eyed the boy. "You're too smart," he grunted. "Yes, if my men had obeyed me instead of

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trying to get something for themselves on the side, they'd have been better off."

"And you stole electric motors," Frank reminded him. ,

The captain admitted he had. He even bragged of how he had outwitted the customs in smuggling thousands of dollars worth of goods in and out of the country, including the South American hides which the boys had discovered in the old barn. The Hardys also learned that one of the gang *had* tinkered with the gas gauge on Captain Harkness' boat, fearful the boys were going to search for the phantom freighter.

"How you kids got passage on the *Father Neptune* I'll never know," growled Crowfeet. "But when I heard you had, I sneaked men aboard to reload the cargo so it would shift."

Klack was found hiding below. The FBI would have one less crook to worry about!

Mr. Hardy revealed that the captains of the *Hawk* and the *Wasp*, and several others in the gang had been captured already. "Johnson" had finally confessed his part in the scheme, saying if he had not been greedy and kept Aunt Gertrude's carton and, with "Mrs. Harrison's" help, sold the contents, the Hardys probably never would have caught the gang. The thief admitted that he had been in the burned barn, where he lost his good-luck medal, but had

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locked the door behind him and knew nothing about the fire, which remained a mystery.

"Mrs. Harrison," forced by threats to work for the smugglers, had tried to keep Frank and Joe from injury and probably would get a lighter sentence than they, as well as the man who had telephoned the Hardys they would find Frank on the bungalow porch.

Contact was made with the *Father Neptune*. The frantic passengers cheered when they

heard the news of the smugglers' capture. As the phantom freighter went toward it, Crowfeet, who owned up to his real name, Harry Piper, came forth with a still more startling announcement.

"As for my seaman Mitchell, he's not a smuggler. He's the guy who invented the repeller. I kidnaped him and made him put his invention on my ship."

The elderly man who had spoken to the boys before came forward and told his story to Fenton Hardy.

"You don't know what this means to me," he sighed. "I had given up all hope of rescue, and the worst of it was that my own invention was helping these . . . these scoundrels. Now if I could only find my old partner Thaddeus McClintock . . ."

"Thaddeus McClintock!" shouted the two boys in unison.

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"Why, yes!" exclaimed Mr. Mitchell. "Do you know him?"

"Know him!" answered the boys. "He's aboard the *Father Neptune!*"

"I'm sure he thought I stole the plans. But now . . ."

When the boys witnessed the happy reunion of McClintock and his partner, they felt well rewarded for all their work on the mystery. Mr. McClintock told them this was the mystery he had been planning to ask them to solve when the trip was over!

He was a new man. Gone was his grouchiness and bitterness. His whole body was erect and strong-looking. He did not forget his promise to the boys of a reward "better than money."

"My reward to you was to be my part of the re-peller plans, of which I had a duplicate set," he said. "I had lost interest and thought that maybe someday you might be able to work on it yourselves. Now I think we'd better turn our discovery over to Uncle Sam as originally planned. But how about a new car or a . . ."

The Hardy boys stopped him short. "Please, sir," said Frank as spokesman, "just being able to help round up this gang, and have a trip is reward enough."

When the excitement was over, and the *Father Neptune* was plowing steadily southward, the Hardy boys began to look forward to more mystery, either in the Caribbean or back in Bayport. They were to find it in "The Secret of Skull Mountain."

Suddenly Chet, listening to them, gave a tremendous sigh. "Let's eat," he said.

"How about a phantom lunch?" grinned Biff.

"No! A freighterful of food!"

THE END

THE PHANTOM FREIGHTER

By FRANKLIN W. DIXON

No. 26 in the Hardy Boys series.

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