

*The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories®*

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WHAT  
HAPPENED  
AT  
MIDNIGHT

BY

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

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GROSSET & DUNLAP  
Publishers • New York  
A member of The Putnam & Grosset Group



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## WHAT HAPPENED AT MIDNIGHT

FRANK and Joe Hardy receive an unusual assignment from their detective father. They are to “break into” the house of a Bayport neighbor, Malcolm Wright, and retrieve a top-secret invention that the scientist had hidden in his study before leaving for California. The invention is in danger of being stolen, and the boys race against time to beat the thieves at their own game.

But the young detectives soon discover that they are involved in a mystery far greater in scope than just retrieving the invention. Their investigations put them on the trail of a dangerous gang of jewel thieves and smugglers. When Joe is kidnapped, this incident starts Frank off on a chase that almost ends disastrously for him and his pals.

The exciting capture of several members of the gang during a stormy night on Barmet Bay and a perilous encounter with the insidious Anchor Pete concludes one of the most complicated cases of the Hardys’ career.



The subway train rapidly gained on them!

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# CHAPTER I

## *Burglars*

“WHAT an assignment! And from our own Dad!”

Joe Hardy grinned at his brother Frank as the two boys slipped into ripple soled shoes and put on dark jackets.

“First time we’ve ever been asked to play burglar,” Frank answered with a chuckle.

A few days before, their father, an ace detective, and Malcolm Wright, an inventor, had left for California to hunt for Wright’s valuable stolen antique plane. Because they would be delayed in returning, the inventor had requested the brothers to “break into” his home and retrieve a top-secret invention before thieves took it.

“A little second-story work around midnight,” Joe mused, “and all because Mr. Wright left his keys inside the house and locked everything but that one bedroom window with a broken lock.”

“The invention must be something super or Dad and Mr. Wright wouldn’t have asked us to guard it with our lives,” Frank remarked. “I wonder what it is.”

“Dad gave us permission to find out. Say, suppose we can’t locate that secret compartment we think is in Mr. Wright’s desk before those thieves arrive?” Joe asked. “I wish Dad could have given us all the details before the call was cut off and we couldn’t get it back.”

Joe, who had blond hair, was a year younger than his dark-haired, eighteen-year-old brother Frank. Both had solved many mysteries, some of them for their father.

Fenton Hardy had told the boys on the telephone that just before Mr. Wright had left Bayport, where they all lived, he had been threatened by a mysterious gang. They had learned about the invention from a worker in a factory that had made some of the parts. He had breached the confidence placed in him.

The caller had told Mr. Wright that if he did not voluntarily turn over his invention before a certain time, “visitors” would come for it. The date they had set was the following day!

“Mr. Wright didn’t have time to put the invention in a safe-deposit box, so he hid it in his study,” Fenton Hardy had said. “He’s afraid the thieves may break into his house, so he has alerted the police to be there tomorrow morning. But he’s worried and he wants you boys to get the small box containing the invention before then. Don’t leave it at our house when you’re not there. Keep it with you at all times but well hidden.”

Frank and Joe relayed the conversation to their pretty, understanding mother, and to Aunt Gertrude, their father’s maiden sister who lived with them. She was inclined to be critical of her nephew’s involvement in detective work.

Instantly she said, “Be burglars! The idea! Why, suppose you fall off that house—I”

“Gertrude, *please!*” Mrs. Hardy broke in. “Don’t even mention such a possibility. I know the boys will be careful.”

“Of course,” said Joe. “Let’s go, Frank!”

The brothers hurried to the garage where their shiny convertible gleamed in the light of a street

lamp on the corner of High and Elm streets. Frank took the wheel and drove to within a block of Mr. Wright's rambling, old-fashioned house. The boys walked to it and were glad to see that the building stood in deep shadows.

They reconnoitered the grounds in silence. No one was around. Finally Frank whispered, "I guess our best bet to the second floor is that trellis. It looks sturdy. We'll go across the roof over the kitchen door and edge around to the unlocked window."

"I'll stay close by and hold onto your legs until you make it," Joe answered.

They followed each other up the trellis and crossed the narrow roof. Fortunately there was not much pitch to it. Joe crouched and grasped his brother's right leg.

"All set," he announced in a whisper.

Frank stretched over to the window ledge but could not reach the top of the sash to raise it.

"Give me a push upward," he murmured to Joe, who hoisted his brother until his fingers reached the top of the sash.

The window lifted easily. Frank pulled himself sideways through it. "Your turn, Joe." He reached out and grasped his brother's outstretched hands.

Joe, a little shorter than Frank, found he could not reach the window without swinging precariously in space. If Frank couldn't hold his brother's weight, he would be dragged outside. Both boys would plunge to the ground!

"No use being silly about this," Frank said. "I'll open the rear door for you."

Joe was about to climb down the trellis when a strong light suddenly lit the area.

"A car!" Frank exclaimed as the driver beamed a searchlight on their side of the street. "Maybe the thieves are in it! Duck!"

Frank quickly closed the window, while Joe flattened himself face down on the roof. He did not stand up until the area was in darkness again. Then he hurried down the trellis and through the rear door.



“Duck!” Frank exclaimed. “Maybe the thieves are in that car!”

“Close call!” said Frank.

Joe nodded. “I thought maybe it was a police car, but I guess not. It had no revolving top light.”

His brother agreed. “I’m sure Mr. Wright’s enemies are casing this place!”

“Yes. And they’ll probably be back soon! We’d better get moving.”

Holding their flashlights low to the floor, the boys sped up the stairs and found Mr. Wright’s study. A large walnut desk stood in the center of the room. Frank and Joe walked to the front of it, where

there were drawers to left and right of the wide kneehole.

"The secret compartment may be in one of them," Joe suggested.

"They're not locked," Frank whispered in amazement.

The boys searched diligently, lifting aside letters and other papers. They found nothing.

"Now what?" Joe asked.

Frank had an idea. "I'll look in the kneehole while you hunt for movable panels on the outside the desk."

Again there was silence as the two boys began to finger the woodwork. Minutes went by, then Joe said, "I've found something that moves."

Frank crawled out and watched as his brother slid open a panel, revealing a long, narrow space.

"Anything in it?" Frank asked.

Joe beamed his flashlight inside. A look of disappointment came over his face.

"Nothing," he announced. "There might have been at some time, though."

"You mean the invention?"

"Maybe. How are you making out?"

"Something in the kneehole looks suspicious," Frank answered.

Just then the boys heard the crash of glass and immediately clicked off their flashlights. Someone had broken a windowpane, and at this moment was no doubt reaching inside for the lock. Any minute one or more men might mount the stairs and enter the study!

The boys looked for a hiding place. There were no draperies, sofa, or large chairs, and no closet.

"Let's hide in the kneehole," Frank whispered, "then use our hand signals."

Some time before this, the Hardys had devised a series of hand-squeeze signals. One hard squeeze meant, "Let's attack!" Two indicated caution. Long, short, long meant, "We'd better scram." An ordinary handshake was, "Agreed."

"If there aren't more than two men, let's attack," Joe said in a barely audible tone.

"Okay."

Quickly the two crawled into the kneehole and pulled the desk chair into place. The boys were well hidden when they heard footsteps on the stairs, then voices.

"No failing this time or Shorty'll take us on our last ride," said a man with a nasal voice.

Frank and Joe wondered if the men had tried to break in earlier but failed.

The man's companion spoke in lower tones of disgust. "Oh, you'd believe Shorty invented fire if I told you he did. He ain't so great. Takes orders from the boss, don't he?" The other did not reply.

The two men entered the room and beamed flashlights around. "Where did Wright say he kept the invention?" the deep-toned man asked.

"I got in late on the conversation when I tapped that telephone call to the Hardy house," the other answered. "But I did hear the words 'secret compartment.' Where would that be? The desk?"

Frank and Joe froze. Were they about to be discovered?

"No, not the desk," the other man said. "The safe."

For the first time the boys noticed a small safe standing against the wall opposite them. Frank and Joe were fearful the men would detect their hiding place, but the attention of the burglars was focused on the safe. In a moment they squatted and the boys got a good glimpse of their faces. Both were swarthy and hard-looking.

At that moment the tower clock of the town hall began to strike. It was midnight!

The men waited until the echo of the twelfth stroke had died away, then the one with the nasal twang put his ear to the dial of the safe and began to turn the knob.

After a few moments his companion asked impatiently, "What's the matter? That safecrackin' e of yours turned to tin?"

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"Tumblers are noiseless," the other said. "Guess we'll have to blow it." He began to take some wi from his pocket.

Frank and Joe were trapped. If the door of the safe were blown off, it might head right in the direction!

Quickly Joe felt for Frank's hand and gave it a hard squeeze, meaning, "Let's attack!"

Instantly Frank answered with the "Agreed!" handshake.

In a flash Joe flung the desk chair at the two men, then the boys jumped them!

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## CHAPTER II

### *Amazing Invention*

TAKEN by surprise the burglars were at a disadvantage. Frank and Joe knocked them to the floor and sat on their backs.

“Ugh! What’s going—?” one mumbled.

The men were strong and with great heaves they tried to shake off the boys. Frank and Joe pressed down hard.

“Who are you?” Frank demanded.

No answer. Then suddenly the man Joe was holding rolled over and tried to sit up. Joe kept him down and the two, locked in a viselike grip, twisted to and fro across the floor.

Frank, meanwhile, had found his deep-voiced opponent a kicker, who viciously jabbed his heels in the boy’s back. Angry, Frank sent two swift blows which grazed the man’s chin.

The other two fighters bumped into them. In the mix-up the burglars were able to throw off the attackers and scramble to their feet. The four began to exchange punches.

“Finish off these guys!” the nasal-voiced man rasped.

For several seconds it looked as if they would. Their blows were swift and well-aimed. Then both men, breathing heavily, relaxed their guard. In a flash Frank and Joe delivered stinging upper-cuts to their opponents’ jaws. The burglars fell to the floor with thuds that shook the house. They lay quiet.

The boys grinned at each other and Joe said, “Knockouts!”

Frank nodded. “We must notify the police to get out here before these men come to.”

“We can wait,” Joe answered. “They’ll sleep for at least half an hour. Let’s find that invention first!”

“Good idea.”

Though bruised and weary the boys eagerly searched the side of the kneehole where Frank thought he had found a clue. There was a slight bulge in the wood. After pressing it in several directions, the panel began to slide counterclockwise. There was a click.

Just then one of the burglars groaned. The Hardys tensed. Was the man coming to? Joe leaned forward and beamed his flashlight on the two figures. Both were still unconscious.

Meanwhile, Frank had lifted out the panel. The space behind it contained a small metal box. Written on the box was: *Property of Malcolm Wright. Valuable. Reward for return.*

“I’ve found it!” Frank exclaimed.

“Then let’s go!” Joe urged.

“Okay,” Frank agreed. “You’ll find a phone in the lower hall. Call the police while I slip this panel back. Take the box.”

In a minute Joe was dialing headquarters. Without giving his name, he said, “Come to Malcolm Wright’s house at once. There are burglars in it.” He hung up.

Frank joined him and the boys dashed out the rear door. They took a circuitous route to the convertible to avoid being questioned by the police. At a cross street they saw a police car apparently

speeding to the inventor's house.

"Where do you suppose the burglars' car is?" Joe asked. "You'd think they'd have a lookout."

"Maybe it's cruising," Frank suggested.

The boys hopped into their convertible. As an extra precaution against a holdup and possible loss of Mr. Wright's invention, they locked themselves in.

"Boy, a lot can happen in an hour," Joe said, looking at the car clock. He reached over and turned on their two-way radio to police headquarters. "I wonder if there's any news yet from the Wright house."

The boys were just in time to pick up a broadcast. An officer was saying, "Send the ambulance to Wright's house."

"Ambulance?" Frank echoed. "Joe, we didn't hit 'em that hard—or did we?"

The policeman went on, "These guys aren't bad off, but they sure got knocked out. Looks like a gang feud. The men who kayoed them may have done the stealing."

Frank and Joe chuckled. "Someday we'll tell Chief Collig," Frank said, "but right now—"

He stopped speaking as a loud crack of static burst from the radio and a vivid flash of lightning made the night turn to day momentarily. A long roll of thunder followed.

"Looks as if we're in for a bad storm," Joe commented, and Frank put on speed.

A few minutes later the car was parked in the Hardys' garage. They were mounting the steps of the back porch when the storm broke. Quickly Frank inserted his key in the kitchen door and turned the knob. At once the burglar alarm rang loudly and all the first-floor lights went on.

Joe chuckled. "That'll bring Mother and Aunt Gertrude down in a hurry." He flicked off the alarm.

"And bring the police, too," Frank added. He picked up the kitchen phone and dialed headquarters. "This is Frank Hardy. Our alarm went off by accident. Forget it."

"Okay. You sure everything's all right?" the desk sergeant asked.

"Yes. Thank you. Good night."

By this time the two women had appeared and Mrs. Hardy said, "I didn't know the alarm was turned on."

"Well, I did," Aunt Gertrude spoke up. "I wanted to be sure to wake up and see how you boys made out. You must be starved. I'll fix some cocoa and cut slices of cake while you tell—Frank, look at your clothes! Your jacket's torn. And you, Joe, where did you get that lump on your forehead? And your faces—the two of you look as if you'd been rolling in the dirt."

"We have." Joe grinned. "Had a big fight. But we saved this!" He pulled the box from his pocket.

As the boys related their adventure, crashing thunder lent a booming orchestration to the story.

"This is the worst storm we've had in years," Mrs. Hardy remarked. "I'm glad you boys didn't have to be out in it." When Frank and Joe finished eating, she added, "And now you must get a good night's sleep."

"But first I'd like to open Mr. Wright's box and see just what we have to guard so carefully," Frank said.

Everyone watched excitedly as Joe unwrapped the package. Inside was a small transistor radio.

"Is that all it is?" Aunt Gertrude burst out. "You risked your lives to get *that*?"

The boys were puzzled. Surely their father would not have made such a request if this invention were not unusually valuable.

"Let's turn it on," Frank suggested.

Joe clicked the switch. A man was speaking in Spanish from Madrid, Spain, and announcing the start of a newscast. His voice was very clear.

Frank grabbed his brother's arm. "Do you hear that?" he cried. "The receiver is not picking up on



bit of static!”

“You’re right!” Joe agreed. “It must be designed to work in the high-frequency bands.”

“But how can we be receiving a broadcast direct from Madrid? That Spanish station must be transmitting by short-wave. Yet, we’re hearing it loud and clear. This is amazing!”

Joe gazed at the miniature radio with great interest. “I’ll bet there’s a lot more to Mr. Wright’s invention than just being able to hear overseas stations without static,” he observed. “After all, why is he so anxious to keep it a secret?”

Just then there was a loud knock on the back door and a voice from outside said, “Let me in! I’m here! I have a message for you!”

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## CHAPTER III

### *Warning Message*

FOR a few seconds none of the Hardys spoke. They were trying to decide if the caller at the kitchen door really was a radio ham with a message. Or a member of the burglary gang?

Finally Mrs. Hardy said, "We can't let the man stand out there in the rain."

Frank called, "Where's the message from?"

"Mr. Hardy in San Francisco."

"Open the door," Mrs. Hardy said quietly.

Joe hid the box containing the invention, then he and Frank stood on either side of the door, poised for any attack. Aunt Gertrude had armed herself with a broom. Joe turned the knob and a water-drenched figure in raincoat and hat stepped into the kitchen.

"Thanks," the man said, removing his hat. "What a night! My wife told me I was crazy to come out."

The speaker was an honest-faced man of about thirty-five. He noticed Aunt Gertrude's broom and smiled. "You can put that away," he said. "I'm harmless."

Miss Hardy looked embarrassed. "Take off your coat," she said. "I'll get you some coffee."

The man nodded. "I could use it. I got cold walking over here. My car wouldn't start."

"Did you come far?" Joe asked.

"About five blocks. I'm Larry Burton, 69 Meadowbrook Road. I've always wanted to meet the Hardy boys. This all came about in a funny way. I have a short-wave set. Tonight I picked up your father. He said he couldn't get through to you or the police on the phone—lines tied up—and you didn't answer his signal on your short-wave set."

"We weren't expecting a call," Frank answered. He did not say that the boys had not been at home and that their mother and Aunt Gertrude rarely paid attention to the set unless specifically asked to do so.

"By the time I phoned you, the lightning was fierce," Burton went on. "My wife's scared to death of lightning. She wouldn't let me use the phone, so I walked over."

Aunt Gertrude served the caller coffee and cake as they all sat around the big kitchen table.

"What was the message, Mr. Burton?" Joe asked.

"That you boys are in great danger. A gang is after you and will stop at nothing to get what they want."

"How dreadful!" Mrs. Hardy exclaimed. "Did my husband name this—this gang?"

"No. That's all there was to the message," Burton replied. "I'm sorry to bring you bad news, but I guess that's to be expected in a detective's family. Well, I must get along." He stood up.

Frank shook the man's hand. "We sure appreciate this. Maybe some time we can return the favor."

"Forget it," Burton said. "I only hope that gang doesn't harm you fellows."

Joe helped him with his coat and he went out. The storm had moved off.

For a few minutes the Hardys discussed the caller and confirmed his address in the telephone

directory. Joe was a bit skeptical, however. "Either he made up the whole story, or else Dad is really concerned for our safety."

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Frank was inclined to think Burton had told the truth. Had he and Joe already encountered two members of the gang at the Wright home?

Aunt Gertrude spoke up. "How in the world did my brother Fenton hear this in California?"

"News travels," said Mrs. Hardy. "Especially among detectives and police."

"Hmm!" Aunt Gertrude murmured, then announced she was going to bed.

Ten minutes later Frank and Joe were asleep and did not awaken until ten o'clock. At once Frank got up and opened a wooden chest of sports equipment under which he had hidden the box containing Mr. Wright's invention. It was still there.

"Where do you think we should keep this?" he asked Joe as they were dressing. "Dad said not to leave the box at home."

"A tough problem, Frank. With that gang after us, we can't take the chance of carrying it around with us," Frank answered.

"Right. And they may not be after us, but after the invention," Frank answered.

While they were having breakfast, Frank came up with the idea of a unique hiding place for the invention. "Let's put it in the well under the spare tire in the trunk of our car," he said.

Joe laughed. "Now you're using that old brain of yours. Best place you could have picked. The car's vibrations can't hurt the radio and no one would think of looking there."

Mrs. Hardy asked her sons what their plans were for the day.

"Dad told us to drop into the antique airplane show and see if we could spot anybody who seemed overly interested," Frank replied. "He thought the person who stole Mr. Wright's old plane might be planning another theft."

"Tonight," Joe continued, "we're going to Chet's party and stay until tomorrow. Okay?"

"Of course," his mother answered.

Chet Morton, an overweight, good-natured schoolmate, lived on a farm at the edge of Bayport. A group of boys and girls had been invited there to a barn dance and late supper. Frank and Joe would pick up Callie Shaw, a special friend of Frank's. His brother's date was usually Chet's sister Iola.

Mrs. Hardy remarked that since the boys would be away, she would spend the night with a friend. "Your aunt plans to visit Cousin Helen in Gresham, anyhow."

During the conversation Aunt Gertrude had left the table. She returned holding the local morning newspaper. "Well, you boys are in for real trouble!" she exclaimed. "Listen to this!"

Miss Hardy read an account of the captured burglars at the Wright home and the mysterious summons to the police. The item stressed the fact that the men's assailants, when caught, should be dealt with severely.

"When caught, eh?" Joe burst into laughter. "We're going to be mighty hard to find, aren't we, Frank?"

His brother grinned, but Mrs. Hardy looked worried. "Maybe you boys should explain everything to Chief Collig."

"Not without Dad's and Mr. Wright's permission," Frank answered. "For the time being—"

"I haven't finished," Aunt Gertrude interrupted. "It says here that the police think this incident might be part of a gang feud." She removed her reading glasses and gazed at her nephews. "You two are now considered to be part of a gang and the rival gang is about to harm you."

"Wow!" said Joe, pulling his hair over his eyes and striking the pose of a belligerent "bad guy." "We'd better look the part!"

Since the antique airplane show did not open until two o'clock, the boys did various chores during the morning. They also hid Mr. Wright's invention in the tire well and bolted the spare back into place.

After lunch Frank and Joe drove Aunt Gertrude to the train. From there they went directly to the Bayport Air Terminal where the antique airplane exhibit was housed in the spacious lobby. The first person they saw was Chet Morton.

"Hi, fellows!" he greeted them. "Say, take a look at those old planes. Aren't they beauties?"

"Sure are," Frank agreed. "I notice that most of them are biplanes. It must have been fun flying the days of the open cockpits."

"You can say that again!" Chet declared. As he stepped back for a better view, his foot slammed down on the toe of a man standing directly behind him.

"Ow!" the stranger yelped.

The boys turned to see the man hopping around on one foot. "You stupid, overgrown kid!" he screamed.

"I'm awfully sorry," Chet said apologetically.

The tall, muscular man, who had blond hair and hard features, looked at the youth menacingly. "You idiot!" he snarled.

Frank and Joe stepped in front of Chet as he stammered, "Who—who are you calling an idiot?"

"Now just a minute!" Joe interrupted. "It was an accident. No sense getting upset about this!"

"Can I be of any help?" the boys heard someone say. They looked around to see a lanky young man walking toward them. He had rust-colored hair and leathery skin that was deeply tanned.

"What are you butting in for?" snapped the stranger.

"This boy didn't step on you intentionally," the young man insisted. "I saw the whole thing. You were trying to listen to their conversation and got too close."

The tall stranger was about to say something, but hesitated. For a moment he glared at Chet and his companions, then stomped out of the lobby, swinging his brief case.

Frank and Joe looked at each other. Why had the man been listening to their conversation? Did he belong to the gang they had been warned about?

Meanwhile, Chet was saying, "Thanks for your help, Mr.—"

"My name is Cole Weber," the young man introduced himself. "I'm president of the Central Antique Airplane Club. We own the exhibit and are taking it to several airports. We're trying to encourage public interest in vintage aircraft."

"Sounds like a great club," Joe remarked.

"We think so," Weber said. "The majority of the models you see here are replicas of real airplanes owned and operated by our members."

"You mean that some of those old crates still fly?" Chet asked.

Weber grinned. "Well ... we don't think of them as crates. When properly rebuilt, most antique planes are as safe and reliable as the day they were originally made. I own one myself. It's outside of the ramp. Would you like to see it?"

"Would we!" Joe exclaimed.

Mr. Weber led the boys to the airport ramp. A short distance ahead stood an orange-and-white biplane. The boys peered into the two open cockpits.

"This is cool!" Joe declared.

The pilot smiled. "Compared to modern planes, mine doesn't have many instruments. But since we fly the antiques only for fun, we don't need elaborate equipment, such as that required for all-weather

operations.”

The boys looked closely at the diagonal pattern of wires stretching between the wings. Then they examined the plane’s radial engine and the long, slender wooden propeller.

“How many passengers can you carry?” Frank asked.

“Two in the front cockpit,” Weber answered. “Say! Would two of you like to go for a ride?”

The boys’ eyes widened with excitement. Then Frank and Joe remembered the sleuthing they had promised to do for their father.

“Thanks just the same,” Frank said, “but I’m afraid Joe and I can’t go this time.”

“But I’d like to,” Chet spoke up. “Say, fellows, could you drive me to the farm afterward?”

“Farm?” Weber interrupted. “Are there any level stretches of ground in the area?”

“Plenty of them. Why?”

“I’ll fly you home if you’d like.”

Chet tingled with excitement. “Great! Thanks.”

The flier opened the baggage compartment and took out a parachute, helmet, and goggles. “Put these on and climb into the front cockpit.”

“Mr. Weber, do you know Mr. Malcolm Wright?” Frank asked.

“Yes, indeed. He’s a member of our club.”

“Did you hear that his antique plane was stolen?” Joe put in.

Weber nodded. “Too bad. I understand he has some secret invention he was trying out in the plane. I hope that wasn’t stolen too.”

The boys caught their breath in astonishment but said nothing. They had not heard this. Weber did not seem to notice. He donned his own parachute and summoned a mechanic to twirl the propeller and start the engine. Then he climbed into the rear cockpit.

“Brakes on! Switch off!” the mechanic called.

“Brakes on! Switch off!” Weber echoed.

The mechanic pulled the propeller through several times. Then he stepped back and yelled:

“Contact!”

“Contact!” the pilot responded.

The engine caught on the first try. A staccato popping developed into a steady roar. Chet’s goggles fell from his face turned toward the Hardys. He waved wildly as Weber taxied out for take-off.

“See you at the party!” Chet shouted over the roar of the engine.

Minutes later the plane, looking like a box kite, was climbing above the Bayport field. As the Hardys turned to leave, Frank caught his brother’s arm.

“There’s that man Chet stepped on! He’s watching us from the doorway! This time I mean to find out why.” Frank started to run. “Come on, Joe!”

---

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Cold Trail*

As soon as the man saw Frank and Joe, he turned to hurry off. In doing so, he hit the doorframe and dropped his brief case, which burst open. At a distance the boys could not read any of the printing on the letters that fell out, but one had red and blue stripes at the top.

The tall, blond man snatched up the papers and stuffed them into the brief case. He quickly zipped it shut and began to run.

"He sure isn't on the level," Joe remarked, "or he wouldn't race off like that. We can't let him get away!"

The stranger's long legs and agility helped him cover a wide stretch in a short time. Before the Hardys could catch up to him, he reached the exit and jumped into a waiting car which zoomed off.

Frank and Joe stopped short, puzzled. Was the man afraid of them? And if so, why?

"Maybe that brief case had something to do with his running off," Frank said.

The boys went inside the terminal building. They continued to look at the planes while keeping their eyes open for any other suspicious characters. They saw none and finally returned home.

"You must be hungry," said Mrs. Hardy. "I have hot apple pie, but it's getting cold."

Joe patted her shoulder. "Shall we eat dessert first?" he teased.

Later the boys went upstairs to change for Chet's barn dance. Both put on jeans, plaid shirts, and bowler straw hats. They packed overnight bags, then joined their mother who was waiting to be driven to her friend's home.

Just before leaving the house, Frank heard a signal from their private short-wave set. "Dad must be calling," he said, and raced to Mr. Hardy's second-floor study.

"FH home," he said into the mike. "Over."

"Frank," said his father, "how's everything?"

"Okay, Dad. How about you?"

"Fair," the detective said. "But I have a new lead to follow. You won't be able to get in touch with me for a couple of days. Did you get my message from the ham operator?"

"Yes, Dad." Frank told him all that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, including the wiretapping.

Mr. Hardy whistled. "Then the gang knew where you were going."

"Shall Joe and I tell Chief Collig we were the first burglars?" Frank asked.

"I guess you'd better," the detective agreed. "But warn him the information is confidential and don't tell him what the invention is you were after."

He now explained that he had been tipped off by Chicago police that a gang suspected of robbing there had suddenly vanished. A "squealer" had reported they were out to "get" the Hardy detective. The boys' father did not know why, but surmised it might concern Mr. Wright's invention.

"And now let me speak to your mother," Mr. Hardy said.

Half an hour later Frank and Joe stopped at Chief Collig's home and made their report. The chi

burst into laughter. "So you're the ones who knocked out those men. I guess they had a real scar. They haven't talked since."

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By the time the boys reached the Mortons' farm with Callie Shaw, the dance was under way. Bayport High School combo was playing.

"Hi, masterminds!" Chet shouted as the Hardys strolled in. "I thought you'd never get here. Boy! Wait till I tell you about my flight!" He began to describe the adventure, supplementing his words with swooping motions of both hands.

His sister Iola joined Callie and the boys. She was a slim, dark-haired girl and very pretty. "Hi, Joe, Frank, Callie!" Then hearing her brother, she said laughingly, "Oh no! Is Chet talking about his flight again? He hasn't stopped since he landed."

"You just don't know anything about real flying," her brother said, "until you've been in one of those old biplanes."

"Our turn's next," Joe reminded him.

The following hours passed quickly. When it was time for supper, Joe and Iola decided to eat outside. They filled their paper plates with sandwiches, chocolate cake and cups of lemonade, and went to sit on the steps of the Mortons' front veranda.

As they ate, Iola glanced toward the driveway in which many of the guests had parked their cars. The Hardys' convertible was near the end of the long queue.

Suddenly Iola touched Joe's arm. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I saw someone lurking behind your car," Iola replied. "Yes. There he is."

Joe peered into the darkness. He saw a man, his hat pulled low, pop up from behind the car, then duck down again. At once the young detective sprang to his feet and ran toward the mysterious figure. The fellow might be after the secret radio!

"Who are you?" he shouted, seeing the trunk lid rise and the light go on. "What are you doing?"

The intruder ran from behind the car and disappeared into the darkness. Joe dashed after him.

"Keep your distance or you'll get hurt!" the man shouted. But Joe went on.

Iola screamed for help. Frank, Chet, and their classmates, Biff Hooper and Jerry Gilroy, raced from the barn.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked.

"We saw a man lurking behind your car," Iola answered in a trembling voice. "Joe ran after him through the woods but was warned away."

At once Frank and his companions rushed in that direction. The boys had not gone far when they heard a muffled cry for help, followed by the roar of a car speeding off.

Coming to a halt, Frank signaled to his friends for silence. The sounds of the car faded away. Everything was still, except the big grandfather clock in the hall of the Morton home. It began to strike. Midnight! Frank thought of what had happened just twenty-four hours earlier.

"Joe!" he shouted. "Joe! Where are you?"

His call went unanswered. The young detective stood frozen in his tracks. Had his brother become the victim of the gang?

By this time everyone at the party had raced outside to learn what had happened. They joined in a frantic search but without success.

"I'm afraid he was kidnapped," Frank said grimly.

"In the car we heard roar off?" Biff Hooper asked.

"Yes."

Jerry Gilroy chimed in, "But by whom? And for what reason?"

"I don't know," Frank said. He turned and rushed back to the convertible. Seeing the trunk open, he immediately looked in the tire well. The secret radio was still there.

"Joe must have blocked an attempted theft and been taken away so he couldn't identify the man," Frank thought.

He slammed the trunk shut, asked his friends to guard the car, and ran to the house. He scooped up the telephone and dialed the home number of Chief Collig.

"What!" the officer exclaimed when Frank told him about Joe's probable kidnapping. "I'll call the FBI and also get some of my own men out there right away! And I'll come myself."

He and three officers arrived shortly and were given a briefing. The place was carefully examined but searchlights picked up little.

There was such a profusion of tire tracks on the main road that those of the mystery car could not be detected. Iola, the only one except Joe who had seen the suspect, could give little information other than that he was tall, heavy set, and wore gloves.

"Then we won't find any fingerprints on your car," the chief said to Frank.

Frank nodded. "He could be the man who ran from Joe and me at the airport." Frank told the police about him and gave a fuller description.

"We'll be on the lookout for him, as well as for Joe," Collig said. "There's nothing more we can do here, but I'll leave two of my men."

Solemnly the group left the barn dance and each guest expressed a hope for Joe's speedy return. The Mortons tried to comfort Frank and discussed whether or not they should call Mrs. Hardy and tell her the disturbing news.

"I don't see that anything can be gained by that," Chet's mother said. "Let's wait."

She insisted Frank try to get some sleep, but he lay wide awake, hoping the phone would ring with good news from Collig. But none came. Chet, in the same room, was restless.

Finally at five o'clock he said, "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure." Frank sighed. "We've absolutely no clue. In fact, we don't even have a description of the car we heard drive off last night."

"Joe could be miles from here by now," his chum remarked.

Frank thought for a moment. "Let's drive down the road and make some inquiries at the farmhouses along the way. There's a slim chance someone may have spotted the kidnap car."

The boys left the house quietly and jumped into the Hardys' convertible. They waved to the patrolling police guards. Frank drove along the narrow, tree-lined road. As they feared, all the inquiries were fruitless. Most of the farmers they questioned had retired long before midnight, and had neither seen nor heard anything.

"Guess we may as well go home," Chet suggested.

But Frank was not ready to give up. "Let's drive on a little farther," he said.

About six-thirty the boys spotted a farmer cutting weeds by the roadside and stopped to question him. He rubbed his chin dubiously while listening to their story.

"Quite a few cars go past my place every night," he said. "Now you come to mention it, there was an automobile come whizzin' along and stopped here right after midnight. It woke me up, what with two men in it shoutin' at each other."

"Did you see the car?" Frank asked.

"No. I didn't get up. Course my home is right beside the road, and I couldn't help but hear some of what the men were sayin'. The car come along at a mighty lively clip, but when it got in front of the house, the driver slammed on the brakes and stopped."



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