

The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories®

**THE CLUE
OF THE
HISSING SERPENT**

BY

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers • New York

A member of The Putnam & Grosset Group

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THE CLUE OF THE HISSING SERPENT

Why is a wealthy sportsman so frightened by the serpent design on a mysterious balloon that he begs Frank and Joe Hardy to protect him? And who stole the ancient, life-size chess king which is to be presented to the winner of the world chess championship?

These questions and others equally as baffling in this exciting mystery seem to defy explanations.

On the ground and in the air Frank and Joe find themselves the targets of diabolical enemies. A odd clue that they discover leads them across the Pacific to Hong Kong. There the young detectives match wits with their adversaries. How they help the police smash an international criminal organization provides an electrifying climax to one of the most challenging cases the Hardy boys have ever tackled.



To Frank's horror, both fell over!

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CHAPTER I

A Runaway Balloon

“YOUR father sounded desperate,” Aunt Gertrude said, looking worried. “He wants you to meet him at four o’clock in the lobby of the Treat Hotel at Oak Knolls. Better hurry!”

Frank and Joe Hardy had just arrived home from a swim at the Bayport pool when their agitated aunt met them at the kitchen door. The telephone message seemed innocent enough, but Aunt Gertrude always feared the worst for her famous detective brother Fenton.

“Oh, yes,” she continued, “he mentioned the word Falcon. What does that mean?”

“*Falcon!* Holy crow, Frank, let’s go!” Joe urged excitedly.

The boys bolted out the door and into their car. Joe took the wheel and they sped off.

Falcon was a secret word used by the two young detectives and their father. It meant *danger ahead*. But what was the danger Fenton Hardy had foreseen in their meeting?

They mulled it over as they hit the speed limit and arrowed along the highway due west from Bayport. Mr. Hardy had not mentioned any new case. Hence, if there was danger, it had sprung up suddenly. Frank and Joe were worried.

Dark-haired Frank, who was eighteen, glanced at his watch. “Three o’clock. We should make it in time.”

Joe, a blond seventeen-year-old, nodded. “I just hope it doesn’t rain. Might slow traffic.”

The sky, which had been bright and sunny during the morning, had turned ominously gray in the west and a chilly wind began to dissipate the late June heat.

“Looks like a storm is heading our way,” Frank said. “And traffic’s slowing already. But it can’t be because of the weather. I wonder what happened.”

“I guess there’s been an accident.” Joe craned his neck out the window for a better look. But all he could see was a line of cars moving at a snail’s pace. Horns were honking impatiently. Then traffic stopped completely.

People began stepping out of their cars, and Joe did the same. Suddenly his eyes grew wide with amazement.

“Frank! I see the trouble!”

“What is it?”

“A balloon! Flying pretty low and coming closer to the road. Everybody’s stopped to look at it.”

Frank reached into the glove compartment and grabbed binoculars which the boys kept handy. He jumped out to scan the green-and-white striped balloon. Like a giant pendulum, it whipped

dangerously back and forth.

“It must be caught in some kind of crazy wind current,” Frank said. “Here, take a look, Joe.”

Now the balloon was no more than a hundred yards away. Joe focused on the two passengers hanging desperately to the sides of the basket.

“What are they going to do?” he cried out. “Land on the highway?”

Suddenly the balloon veered to the right, coming to rest in a field beside the road not far from the Hardys.

Frank pulled the car over to the side. “Come on, Joe. Maybe we can be of some help.”

A lot of other motorists had the same idea, and soon a huge crowd raced across the pasture to where the balloon was gradually deflating.

The boys were in the forefront and reached it first. The two balloonists were just climbing out. Frank’s jaw dropped open in amazement as the younger one turned around to face them. It was no other than their staunch buddy Chet Morton!

“Hello, Frank. Hi, Joe,” Chet said.

“What in the world are you doing here?” Joe demanded.

The chunky, freckle-faced youth squinted up at the collapsing balloon and remarked casually, “I’ve been taking lessons. Didn’t want to tell you until I became a full-fledged balloonist.”

His companion walked up to the group. “Oh, fellows,” Chet said, “this is Mr. Albert Krassner. And these are my friends, Frank and Joe Hardy.”

The man seemed to be about forty, with thinning black hair and a paunch. He had a broad, fleshy face, full lips, a wide nose and slightly droopy eyelids, which made him look half asleep. Yet there was a brisk alertness in his voice as he spoke.

“Glad to meet you.” He extended a pudgy hand to the young detectives. “We really got into trouble. A sudden wind came up and we tried to land, but a faulty vent prevented us from getting down fast enough. We almost drifted onto the highway!”

“A faulty vent?” Joe asked.

Chet nodded. “You pull a cord to vent when you want to descend more rapidly than simply letting the balloon’s air cool. The vent lets the air out—the longer you hold it open, the quicker. Ten feet above the ground you rip the top if the wind is high. It pulls off the circular panel and lets the hot air out in a rush.”



“Chet, what are you doing here?” Joe demanded.

“I see,” Joe said. “But you have to be just above the spot where you want to land to do that.”

“Right,” Chet said.

Krassner went back and continued to deflate the balloon, answering questions of other onlookers.

The Hardys took Chet aside and asked him about his new friend.

“He’s a rich guy,” Chet said. “An investment banker. Belongs to the Lone Tree Balloon Club near Oak Knolls.”

“How’d you meet him?” Frank inquired.

“I used to hang around the club,” Chet said. “Krassner took a liking to me and offered these lessons free.”

“This could have been your last lesson, Chet!” Frank said. “You almost got killed!”

“And if you’re such a buddy of ours, how come you didn’t let us in on your new hobby?”

“Now don’t get sore,” said Chet. “I told you, I wanted to make it a surprise.”

“It sure was,” Frank said. Then he glanced at his watch. They had twenty minutes to reach the destination. “We’ve got to meet our dad at the Treat Hotel in Oak Knolls,” he said. “See you later.”

Traffic had started to unsnarl with the aid of two State Police men. As the boys hastened to their car, they saw a pickup truck drive across the field to retrieve the balloon. A small black sports car followed it.

“Probably Krassner’s,” Joe commented. “Looks like an Italian job.”

The Hardys crept along for a while until they could pick up speed. Joe passed dozens of cars, but eased off on the gas when the needle exceeded the speed limit. “If we get a ticket, we’ll never get there on time,” he said.

Finally they reached the exit for the small town of Oak Knolls. By now it was ten minutes past four. When they drove into the parking lot, the clock on the tower in the town square stood at four-twenty.

The boys rushed into the hotel. “Any message for Frank and Joe Hardy?” Frank asked the desk clerk.

“No, nothing. Were you expecting to meet someone?”

“Yes.” Frank looked worriedly about the lobby.

“Would you like accommodations?”

“No, thank you,” Joe replied. He noticed a meeting room off to one side with the door open. The boys walked in. The place smelled smoky and cigarette butts lay in numerous ashtrays. Printed agendas were scattered on folding chairs and long tables.

On a dais at the far end of the room stood a blackboard. Chalked on it were numbers indicating that a business meeting had taken place.

“Maybe Dad attended,” Frank mused. “It couldn’t have ended long ago.” He took a closer look at the blackboard. In one corner something was printed in small letters. “Joe,” he exclaimed, “it says *Mayday Room 211 Falcon!*”

“Dad’s in trouble!” Joe said. “In Room 211!”

Suddenly both were startled by a voice behind them.

“The world’s full of trouble!”

Frank and Joe whirled to confront Albert Krassner.

“W-what are you doing here?” Joe asked.

Krassner smiled blandly. “Chet told me where I could find you. He also told me you’re the famous Hardy detectives.”

“We’re not famous,” Frank said. “But our father is.”

Actually, Frank and Joe had become as famous as Fenton Hardy, who had retired from the New York Police Department to set up his own private practice. Starting with a mystery called The Tower Treasure, the Hardy boys had solved many baffling cases themselves. Their previous one was known as The Shattered Helmet.

Joe said, “Mr. Krassner, if you want us to join your balloon club, we can’t talk about it now.”

“No, no. It’s not that. I want you to help me!”

“How?” Frank asked.

Suddenly Krassner’s face contorted with pain. He grabbed Joe by the shoulders. Before the boys could move, both landed on the floor with a thud.

CHAPTER II

A Custom-made Rocket

JOE pushed the man away and sprang to his feet, but Krassner did not move.

“He’s out cold,” Frank said. “Must have had some kind of attack!”

The Hardys knew that ill people sometimes carry instructions on them in cases of emergency. Joe went through the man’s pockets. “Here’s a bottle,” he said. “And a note wrapped around it!”

They read it quickly. If Krassner suffered a heart seizure he was to be given one tablet under his tongue.

Frank administered the medicine. Seconds later Krassner opened his eyes. The Hardys helped him up and to a comfortable position on a sofa.

Joe ran out to get a glass of water. When he returned, some color had come back into Krassner’s pale, puffy face.

He spoke in a shaky voice. “Sorry to be such a nuisance, boys. Guess I had too much excitement for one day. And I’m sure glad you found my pills.”

“Think nothing of it,” Frank said. “Why don’t you just rest here a while? We’ll be right back.”

Krassner nodded and the two walked out of the conference room. “This is all very strange,” Frank whispered. “We’d better find Dad fast.” They hurried through the lobby and up to the second floor.

In front of Room 211 they stopped and listened quietly. At first they heard nothing. Then there was a thump and a low moan.

“Let’s break down the door,” Joe said.

“Wait,” Frank replied.

He tried the knob. It turned and he pushed the door wide open. Inside, midway between a bed and a dresser, lay Fenton Hardy. He was bound hand and foot and gagged. The boys rushed over and freed their father. Stiffly the detective sat up and rubbed the back of his head.

“I thought you’d never get here,” he murmured.

“Sorry,” Frank said. “We were delayed by a balloon.”

“What?”

“We’ll tell you later, Dad. Get up now. Easy.”

As they helped Mr. Hardy to a nearby chair, Joe noticed a piece of paper stuffed into his shirt pocket.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Hardy replied.

Joe took it and read the message. “Dad, it says, ‘Keep your mouth shut.’ ”

“Fat chance!” Frank exclaimed. “Dad’s a pretty hard man to intimidate.”

The detective smiled wryly and told his sons what had happened.

“It all started with a telephone call to Sam Radley,” he began, referring to an operative who had often helped him in his investigations. “The caller wanted Sam to bug the home of Conrad Greene on Ocean Bluffs.”

“The United States chess champion?” Frank asked.

“That’s the one.”

“But why?” Joe queried.

“The world championship is coming up soon,” Mr. Hardy said. “It might have something to do with that. Anyway, when Sam told me about it, I went in his place to see his so-called client.”

“And met with him downstairs,” Frank concluded.

“Correct. When I arrived, there were two men in the room. Obviously there must have been a group of people who had just left. I don’t know whether the two men had any connection with them or not. They told me their names were Smith and Jones.”

“Sounds as phony as a three-dollar bill,” Joe said. “What did they look like?”

“Smith was short, slender, with long pointed fingers. He had a slightly Mongolian look. The other fellow, Jones, was strictly Anglo-Saxon. Long face, typically English, I’d say. Narrow thrusting chin. Both were in their late thirties.

“What I wanted you boys for,” Mr. Hardy went on, “was to tail these men.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll find them if they’re anywhere in this area,” Frank assured him.

“Anyhow,” Joe said, “you told them it was no go on the bugging deal.”

“Right. Then they invited me to Room 211 to talk it over some more. I excused myself on the way out because I forgot my briefcase. That’s when I put the message on the blackboard.”

“Good thing you did,” Frank said.

Mr. Hardy nodded. “When I entered Room 211, a third person conked me from behind.”

“Do they still think you’re Radley?” Joe asked.

“I don’t know. In any case, this illegal wire-tapping must be stopped. If Smith and Jones find some dishonest detective to put a tap on Greene’s phone, it could lead to real trouble.”

Mr. Hardy felt better now and they went downstairs. Krassner was not in the meeting room, so they questioned the clerk at the desk.

He said that 211 had been rented as a hospitality room for a sales meeting of Eco Incorporated. “I’ve never heard of that company,” he told them. “But one of the salesmen mentioned Associate Jewelers. They’re a house-to-house operation with headquarters in Bayport.”

“Did you see the gentleman who came in after us?” Frank asked.

“Oh yes. He left a little while ago.”

The Hardys thanked the man and went outside. Frank and Joe explained about the delay on the highway and how Krassner had suffered a heart seizure.

“He sounds like an odd character,” Mr. Hardy said. “Wanted help and didn’t tell you why.”

“Maybe he changed his mind,” Frank said. “What now, Dad?”

It was decided that Frank and Joe would investigate the assault, because Mr. Hardy was occupied with a case involving Hong Kong custom tailors.

“The Association of Menswear Retailers wants me to track down this gyp operation,” the detective said. “About half a dozen men are involved. They take orders for custom-made suits from Hong Kong, request a fat down payment, and disappear. It shouldn’t take too long to crack it. Crooks like that usually aren’t too bright.”

Mr. Hardy drove out of the parking lot and the boys followed in their car. At home, Mrs. Hardy mentioned her three men, as she called them, and asked, “What’s this big mystery Gertrude was telling me about?”

Frank gave her the gist of what had happened and added, “Don’t worry, Mother. Things are under control.”

Mr. Hardy made a few phone calls, then said to his sons, “Eco Incorporated and Associated Jewelers are not listed in any trade register I can get hold of, but Associated Jewelers are in the phone book. I think Eco was just a phony cover for that company. I suggest you check it out.”

“Will do,” Frank said.

“I also called Conrad Greene’s home to warn him about the wiretap, but no one answered.”

“We’ll have to try again,” Frank said. “Let me see if I can get in touch with Chet to quiz him about Krassner.”

Chet was home and took Frank’s call. “Boy, Krassner was full of praise for you,” he reported. “I just saw him a little while ago. Said you helped him when he had an attack.”

“Do you have any idea what he wanted to talk to us about?” Frank asked.

“No. But why don’t you drop by the balloon club tomorrow and ask him? He usually comes over early. Besides, I want to show you the setup.”

“We’ll be there.”

Right after breakfast the next morning the Hardys started out for the club. Near Oak Knolls they turned off the highway at a sign announcing *Lone Tree Balloon Club*. A narrow lane led through the woods and to an open meadow. Off to one side was a frame structure no larger than a two-car garage. A single, large oak tree stood next to it.

Out in the field Chet Morton and another youth were busy unfolding the envelope of a red-striped balloon. Joe parked beside the clubhouse and the Hardys walked up to their friend.

“Hi, guys,” Chet greeted. “I’d like you to meet Ken Flippen. Just call him Fearless. That’s his

nickname.”

Frank and Joe shook hands with a slightly built boy of sixteen. A shock of black hair hung over his eyes and he tossed his head occasionally.

“Sure glad to meet you,” Fearless said with a friendly grin. “Chet’s clued me in on your detective work. Says you’re on another important case. That must be exciting!”

Frank gave Chet a slit-eyed look. “What have you been telling people?”

“Can’t I brag about my friends—a little?”

“Very little,” Joe said, and turned to Fearless. “Don’t believe everything this big panda tells you. Even the way, what are you fearless about?”

“Aw, nothing.”

“I know,” Chet said. “When he was a kid, he hung onto a rope and got pulled into the air by a balloon. Hung on for ten minutes until it came down.”

Fearless looked embarrassed, and Frank said, “There you go again, bragging about your friends!”

They all laughed and Chet said, “Fearless knows a lot about balloons. His father and two other men own this one. We’re practicing inflation.”

Fearless was pleased to tell the Hardys about his balloon. It had a two-man aluminum gondola basket, and was lifted by hot air. Two propane gas tanks lay on the floor of the basket, and from each a stainless-steel tube led to a multiple pilot-light structure mounted on a metal framework above the gondola.

“When the pilot pulls this cord,” Fearless said, “the blast valve releases propane which is ignited by the pilot light.” He demonstrated, and a roaring blast of flame shot upward.

“This goes into the open mouth of the balloon,” the boy went on, “keeping the air inside hot, heating it more if it’s cooled.”

“Hey, that’s keen!” Joe said. “You can carry your own hot-air furnace with you.”

“Right. This balloon is made of flame-resistant nylon. If by accident the flame melts a hole in the fabric, it will not burn the balloon up.”

Chet and Fearless proceeded to shoot hot air into the huge bag, and Chet said, “If you want to descend gradually, you don’t shoot any more air in and the balloon will come down.”

“There sure is a lot to know about ballooning,” Frank said. “Chet, when will you get your pilot license?”

“Maybe in a month,” Chet said proudly.

Joe changed the subject. “Where’s Krassner?”

“He didn’t show up.” Chet said. “That’s unusual. I expected him early this morning. But maybe he doesn’t feel too well. Why don’t you wait a while?”

Frank shook his head. “No, we have some work to do. We’ll catch up with him later.”

“So long, Fearless,” Joe said.

“Come back for a ride someday!”

“We will.”

The Hardys went to their car, looking back once toward the balloon which was now partially inflated.

“Chet sure does latch on to some good hobbies,” Frank said as they drove back to Bayport investigate Associated Jewelers.

Their office was near the waterfront, and turned out to be a relatively new one-story building. Across the street stood an ancient three-floor wreck of a house bearing a sign: *Danger. Building Condemned.*

The boys parked and entered the jewelry company. In an anteroom were three chairs and a writing table. The door at the far end opened and a woman appeared.

“Are you answering our ad?” she asked.

Frank hesitated, “Why—er—”

“Then come right in. Mr. Jervis will talk to you.”

The inner office contained four filing cabinets, a number of chairs, and a cluttered desk. Behind the desk sat a pale, thin man wearing thick-lensed glasses. A nameplate on the desk read: *Reginald Jervis.*

“Have a seat,” he said with an ingratiating smile. “You’re rather young, but we could use two men like you right now. What is your experience in door-to-door sales?”

Before either had a chance to reply, Jervis went on, “We have a fine line of jewelry, and if you succeed in selling it, we have another most attractive offer.”

Finally Frank interrupted. “We don’t want a job, Mr. Jervis.”

“What? Then why are you here?”

“To ask some questions.”

“About what?”

“About Smith and Jones. Who are they?”

“Never heard of them!” Jervis snapped.

“And you’ve never heard of Eco Incorporated, either, I suppose,” Joe put in.

Jervis rose from his chair and pointed a finger at the door. “Get out!” he said.

“So you don’t know Smith and Jones?” Frank said coolly. “Well, there are other ways to find out about them.”

The boy’s calm demeanor infuriated Jervis. “I said get out!” he yelled. “Or I’ll throw you out myself!”

CHAPTER III

Tricky Surveillance

THE man pushed back his chair and took a step toward Frank and Joe.

“You don’t have to get physical,” Frank said. “We’ll go.”

Back in their car, Joe said, “We sure touched a sensitive nerve. Something fishy’s going on at Associated Jewelers.”

Frank nodded. “Jervis was really on edge. Now I’m sure Smith and Jones are connected with that outfit.”

Joe suggested they visit the Bayport Better Business Bureau. “Maybe they can shed some light on Jervis’s company.”

The Hardys drove along the waterfront, past a number of Chinese-operated shops known as Little Chinatown. They stopped at a hamburger place for a quick snack, then proceeded to Main Street where the Better Business Bureau was located.

They were cordially received by the woman in charge of consumer protection. In answer to Frank’s question, she replied that she had heard of Associated Jewelers. The Bureau had received numerous complaints of high-pressure salesmanship and shoddy merchandise.

“The company is on our list,” the woman said. “So far, we haven’t enough solid evidence against them to warrant a lawsuit.”

“Has the public been warned?” Frank asked.

“There was a report in the newspaper,” the woman replied. “But I’m sure that many people did not see it.”

When the boys returned home they found that Mr. Hardy, in response to a tip from Police Chief Collig, had gone off to question several persons who had been cheated by the jewelry peddlers.

“He’ll be home later,” Mrs. Hardy said.

“I wish we could watch one of their salesmen in action,” Frank said.

“Perhaps you can,” Aunt Gertrude spoke up. “But for goodness sake, be careful. If they cheat people, there’s no telling what else they’re capable of.”

Her nephews looked perplexed. “What are you talking about?” Joe asked.

“Mrs. Snyder,” Aunt Gertrude said.

“Well, what about her?”

“Mrs. Snyder—you know, the one who lives on Lincoln Street—has arranged for an Associate

Jewelers representative to come to her house. I just spoke to her a few minutes ago. Your father has already left. She told me a very nice man phoned her and offered free earrings for letting him show their products.”

“When will he call?” Joe asked.

“I don’t know exactly when You’ll have to ask her.”

“Gee, thanks, Aunty,” Frank said. “This may be a big help in our case.”

Just then the telephone rang. Frank answered. It was Krassner, inviting the boys to his home in a suburb of Bayport that evening.

“We’ll be there,” Frank said. “How about eight-thirty?”

“Roger. See you then.”

“This sure is a big day for us,” Joe said. “Come on, Frank. We’ve got a lot to do.”

The boys had just stepped out of the house for the short walk to Mrs. Snyder’s home when Biff Hooper came along with his hound dog, Sherlock. Biff was a tall, athletic high school pal of the boys.

“Hi, Biff,” Frank said. “Is Sherlock taking you for a stroll?”

“Something like that,” Biff replied with a friendly grin. “Matter of fact, I dropped by to ask you how about some tennis after supper tonight? I’ve got Tony Prito lined up for doubles.”

“Sorry,” Joe said. “We’re busy.”

“Official business?”

“Yes. We’re interviewing one of Chet’s friends. He may have a case for us.”

“You mean Krassner, the balloon guy?”

“How’d you know that?” Frank asked in surprise.

“Chet was in town at noon. He keeps me posted on your doings.”

Frank laughed. “Good old Chet. He’s a balloon buff now.”

“It’s a good sport,” Joe said. “I’m getting interested myself.”

“Where you guys going?” Biff asked.

Frank told him.

“I’ll walk you over,” Biff offered as Sherlock strained at the leash.

The trio turned a corner and proceeded along the block to the fifth house on the right. On the front steps sat a huge, tawny cat. Sherlock lunged, nearly pulling the leash from Biff’s hand.

“Hold it, Sherlock!”

The hound let out a mournful bay and the cat raced up a mimosa tree on the front lawn. The commotion brought an elderly couple to the porch. The man looked over the top of his eyeglasses.

“Get that hound out of here!” he ordered. “He’s scaring Princess!”

“All right. No harm meant,” Biff said politely. “So long, fellows. See you later.”

As he left, Frank addressed the couple. "You're the Snyders, aren't you?"

The woman nodded with a prim smile.

"We're Gertrude Hardy's nephews Frank and Joe. May we talk to you a minute?"

"Of course."

Mrs. Snyder preceded the boys into the house while her husband went to retrieve Princess from the tree.

"You see, we love cats," the woman said. "Not that we don't like dogs, too, mind you."

It was then that the boys realized that there were cats all over the house. They seemed to blend in with the furniture. Frank counted six in the living room.

"Please be seated," Mrs. Snyder said. "But be careful of our pets."

One of them jumped off the sofa where Frank and Joe were sitting. At the same time Mr. Snyder entered, carrying Princess. He dropped down in an overstuffed chair and stroked the animal in his lap.

"We're sorry about the dog," Frank said, knowing that it was the wrong time to ask for a favor.

"Don't worry about it. Tell us what we can do for you," Mrs. Snyder said.

"We understand you're expecting a visit from an Associated Jewelers salesman," Frank began.

"Yes, he's coming tomorrow."

"Well, there have been complaints about this company. High-pressure salesmanship and shoddy merchandise. It might have something to do with a case we're investigating, and we'd like to listen to what this man has to say to you."

At that moment he felt a terrible tickle in his nose and let out a resounding sneeze. "Excuse me, please."

Mr. Snyder nodded. "How are you planning to listen in?"

"We could conceal ourselves somewhere."

"Goodness! Wouldn't that be dangerous?" Mrs. Snyder asked.

"I doubt it," Frank said. "Anyway, we'd be here to protect you."

"I don't like it," Mr. Snyder said.

"Don't be grumpy," his wife intervened. "What would Gertrude think if we turned her nephew down?"

"Then may we come?" Frank asked hopefully.

"Certainly. The salesman is due at two. Why don't you stop by at one-thirty?"

Mr. Snyder looked none too pleased but did not object. The boys expressed their thanks and left.

At home, Frank and Joe praised Aunt Gertrude for her aid. "Did you know the Snyders have a houseful of cats?" Joe asked as the family sat down to dinner.

"Oh yes. One named Princess Golden Girl of Bayport is a champion."

When the meal was over, the boys set out for Krassner's home. It was located in a wooded area about twenty miles out of town.

The sun was setting as they neared the property. Suddenly they heard a strange hissing noise.

Frank slowed down. It was not from the car, but seemed to come from overhead. Both looked up in amazement to see a weird balloon. Hot air was gently shooting into the envelope with a sound like auto tires on a wet pavement.

"Look at those crazy colors!" Joe exclaimed as the craft drifted over the woodland. It was mottled in shades of green, blue, and yellow, and its central decoration was an evil-looking, twisting serpent of the same hues.

"Someone has an artistic touch," Frank said admiringly. "Let's follow it to see where it lands. It was flying pretty low."

"Okay. We have half an hour to spare, anyway."

They turned around and a hundred yards farther on found a narrow lane leading into the deep woods.

Overhanging branches brushed past the car as it probed deeper into the forest along the rutted track. The slow going was maddening. But finally they reached a clearing.

Off to one side was a tumble-down barn, and beside it a stark blackened chimney—all the remains of a burned-out farmhouse.

"Look," Frank said. "There's the balloon. And their pickup truck got here ahead of us."

They could see why. A good blacktop road was no more than a hundred yards away on the opposite side of the clearing.

Frank and Joe parked the car and trotted toward the barn. Perhaps the serpent balloonists were from the Lone Tree Club.

Behind the old building the deflated envelope was being packed up. Three men worked with great rapidity, and the balloon and gondola were loaded onto the truck. The men jumped in.

"Hey, wait a second!" Frank called out as he and Joe ran forward.

The truck started up and the Hardys hailed it again. But instead of slowing down, the driver accelerated. Frank and Joe moved to the side of a gully, because it was coming right at them!

"Holy crow!" Joe exclaimed. "They're trying to run us down!"

"Jump!" Frank cried out.

CHAPTER IV

A Hissing Blast

DIVING headlong, Frank and Joe cleared the side of the road and landed in a bramble patch as the truck sped by.

Joe rose painfully from the thorny foliage and Frank followed him, pulling thorns from his hair and clothing.

“Did you get the license number by any chance, Joe?”

“Oh, sure, I jotted it down while flying through the air!” he quipped. “Frank, do you think those guys have something to hide or are they just nasty?”

“I’d say both.”

They brushed the weeds from their disheveled clothes and returned to their car.

“It must have taken months to decorate that balloon,” Frank said.

“Right. Maybe they’re entering a contest for the most artistic design. Anyway, whoever was driving deserves an artistic punch in the nose.”

Joe got into the driver’s seat while Frank slipped in beside him.

“Ow!”

“What’s the matter?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t get all those confounded thorns out of my britches!”

They went back by the same route and regained the main road leading toward Krassner’s home.

“I guess this is it,” Joe said finally.

Dusk had settled now and the lights from their car illuminated a bronze plaque set in a huge boulder announcing the residence of Albert Krassner. A pebbled driveway traversed an acre of lawn extending like a green velvet collar around a sumptuous gray stone mansion.

“I’ll say he’s rich,” Frank commented. “This place must be worth a small fortune.”

As the car approached, an ornamental carriage lamp was turned on, casting a pleasant yellow light over a broad band of marble stairs leading to the front door.

Joe parked and they mounted the steps. Frank pushed a button set in the masonry beside the glass and-wrought-iron door. When chimes sounded inside, a maid in a dark dress and starched white apron answered.

“You’re the Hardy boys?”

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