

The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories®

THE
APEMAN'S
SECRET

By
FRANKLIN W. DIXON

GROSSET & DUNLAP • NEW YORK

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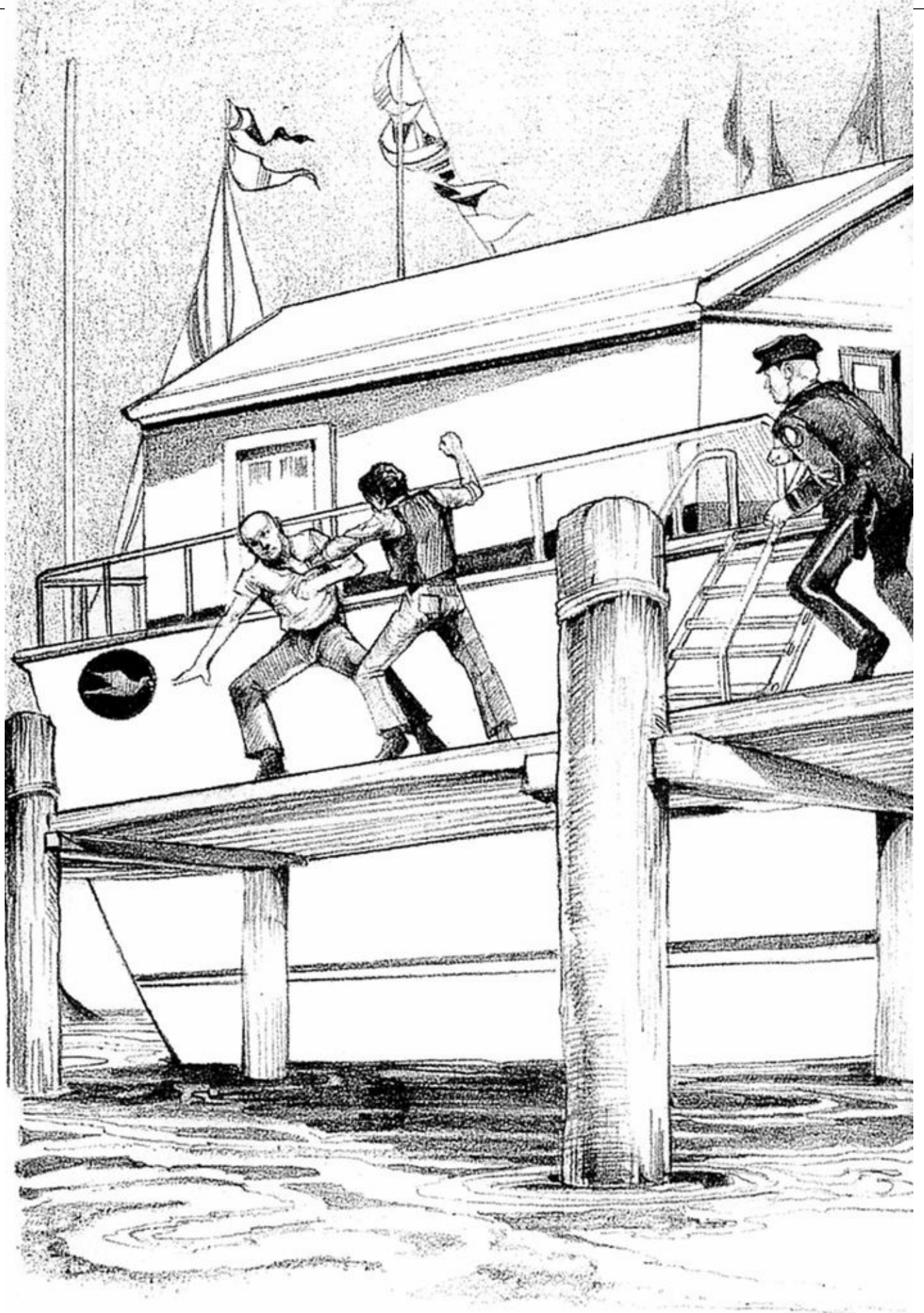
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FENTON Hardy asks his sons Frank and Joe to investigate the disappearance of an eighteen-year-old girl. He suspects that she has joined a sinister religious cult called the Children of Noah.

A few days later the boys get an offbeat assignment from a New York comic book publisher. One of his characters, Apeman, is featured in a popular TV series. However, Apeman's double, a real-life gigantic brute with bulging muscles, has been turning up everywhere—at private parties, in people's back-yards—causing considerable damage. Is this double a prankster, or is he involved in a more menacing plot?

Frank and Joe tackle both cases and uncover an intricate scheme by a clever gang of crooks. The Hardy Boys match wits with these criminals in an exciting and action-filled confrontation.



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Huge Footprints

“We’re in luck, Frank!” grinned blond, seventeen-year-old Joe Hardy one evening. “Both easy chairs empty and the TV set all to ourselves!”

“Great!” chuckled his brother. “Just in time to watch the Apeman go ape!”

Frank, who was dark-haired and a year older than Joe, switched on the right channel and the boys settled themselves to watch the exciting weekly “Apeman” program.

The hero of the show was a huge, muscular comic book character with a beetling brow and underslung jaw. Sole survivor of the Neanderthal race of cavemen, he was supposed to have been discovered by a scientist on a remote island and brought to America. Frank and Joe enjoyed the program, and tonight’s adventure promised to be a real thriller.

Moments later, both boys looked up as they heard dull clanging sounds and a weird hooting outside.

“What on earth is that?” Joe wondered aloud.

“Can’t be a foghorn. We’re not that close to the water, even assuming it’s foggy offshore.”

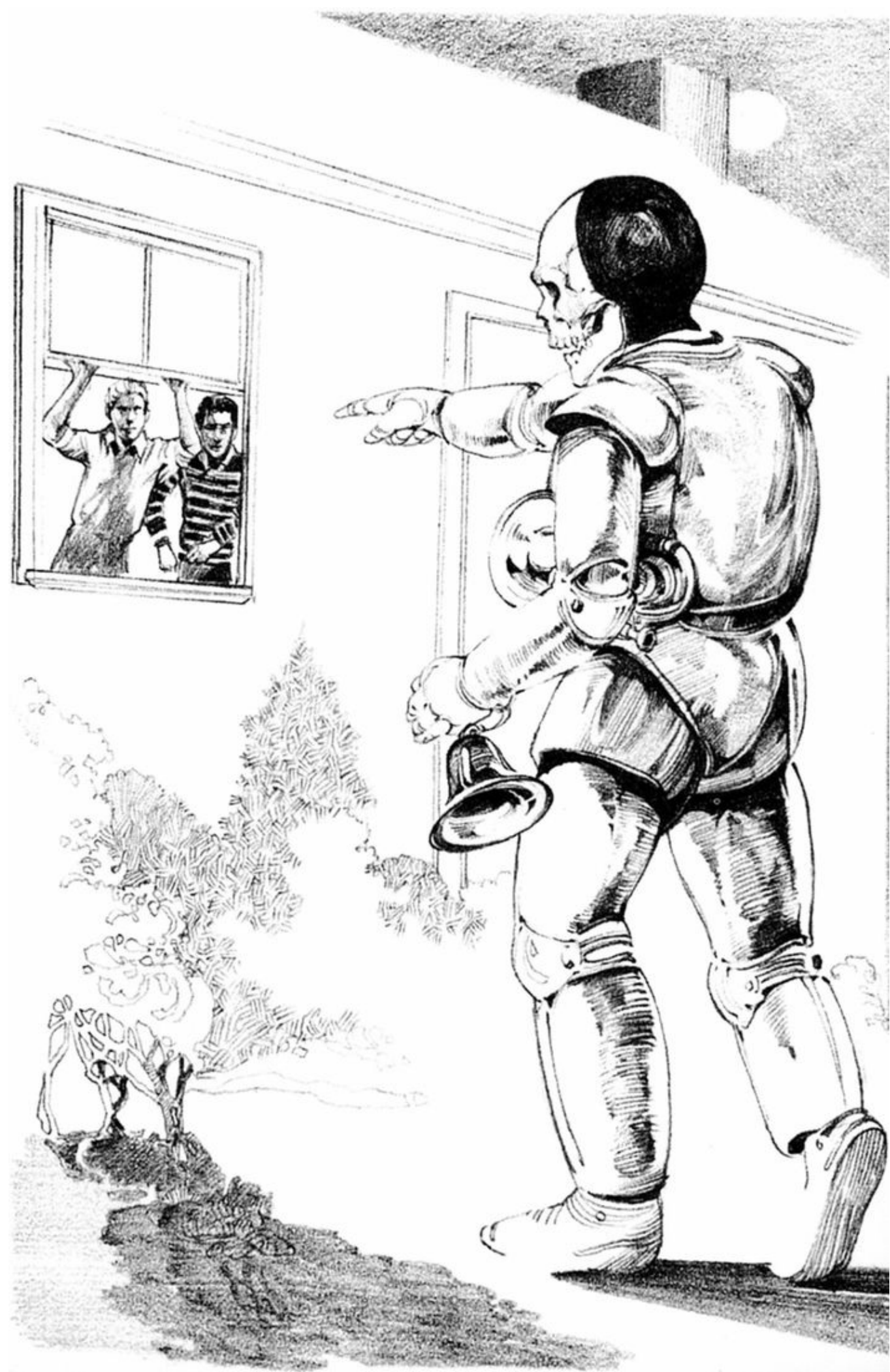
Joe, who was sitting closer to the television, turned down the volume, and the Hardys listened mystified. The strange noises seemed to be coming from one side of the house.

“Someone must be in the driveway!” Frank exclaimed. He leaped up and flung open the window. The boys peered out. Something moved in the shadows of the shrubbery at one side of the yard. As the boys strained their eyes to make out the cause, a figure took shape in the moonlit darkness.

“Sufferin’ snakes! What’s that?” Joe gasped.

The figure was clad in metal and had a skull face! A round, tubular horn like a hunting horn was slung over one shoulder. Occasionally the figure would pause long enough to blow a sinister hoot. From its left wrist hung a bell, which clanged mournfully as it swung to and fro.

“Uh-oh! If I didn’t think I was seeing things,” Frank muttered, “I’d say that was the Doom Demon



“You’re right!” his brother declared.

They were referring to another character well known to comic book fans. But unlike the Apemans the Doom Demon was a villain, who usually fought against the forces of justice led by Captain Star.

The ghastly-looking figure was coming straight toward the Hardys. Suddenly it stopped short and thrust out the fingers of both hands, as if to zap them with lightning bolts of doom!

Sparks of electricity crackled from its fingertips, and at the same moment the figure let out a yell of pain!

“Owwwww!” cried the Doom Demon, hopping up and down and flapping his hands loosely at the wrists as if he had just burned them on a hot stove.

“Hey! There’s something familiar about that voice!” said Joe.

“Just what I’m thinking,” Frank agreed. “Let’s go out and find out who’s putting us on!”

“All right, all right! Calm down!” said the weird metal specter outside. “Can’t you take a joke?”

The figure pulled off its skull mask, revealing the chubby-cheeked, double-chinned moonface of a youth their own age.

“Chet Morton!” Joe burst out laughing as the Hardys recognized the masquerader. “We might’ve known!”

“Go ahead and laugh, wise guy!” Chet retorted plaintively. “I almost got my fingers fried just then—but you think it’s funny!”

“You want to come in for some first aid?” said Frank, “or shall we send out a stretcher?”

“Who needs first aid?” Chet sniffed. “But I might go for some cookies or a piece of your Aunt Gertrude’s pie.”

“Sorry, pal. Joe and I polished it all off at dinnertime. But come on in, anyhow!”

Their stout friend waddled into the house, looking like a robot from a science fiction movie. His costume and helmet turned out to be made of cardboard covered with aluminum foil.

“What brought this on?” Joe asked, as the Hardys looked Chet over in amused astonishment.

“It’s my costume for the comic book party at the Alfresco Disco tomorrow night. Don’t tell me you guys have forgotten?”

“Hey, that’s right!” Joe snapped his fingers and shot a glance at his brother. “We’d better get cooking on *our* costumes, Frank!”

“How do I look?” said Chet, slipping on his skull mask again and turning around proudly to show himself off from all angles. The horn on which he blew his blasts of doom was made of flexible metal conduit, with a funnel stuck in one end to serve as the bell of the horn.

“The Doom Demon, eh?” said Frank, eyeing the masquerader with a twinkle. “I’d say the measurements are a little broad, but otherwise not bad.”

“What do you mean *not bad*?” Chet complained. “It’s a work of genius! I expect to win a prize with this costume!”

“What about those sparks from your fingers, when you went to zap us?” Joe put in. “What’s your secret?”

“Aw, it’s some battery-powered gadget I bought from a mail-order magic supply company.” Chet doffed his mask again and pulled back one sleeve of his costume to show the device strapped to his wrist. “But don’t ask me how it works. The thing shocked me silly!”

“You can say that again!” Joe chuckled, causing the fat boy to flush peevishly.

“Better watch it,” Frank warned. “Instead of zapping someone, you could wind up electrocuting

yourself!”

With his usual good nature, Chet Morton ended by joining in the merriment at his own expense. “Say, what show have you got on?” he added suddenly as his eyes fell on the TV set.

“The Apeman,” said Joe. “It’s pretty good, too. Come on, pull up a chair!”

“Thanks. I love the show.”

The three quickly clued in to the action on screen and were soon absorbed watching the program.

According to the story, the scientist who found the Apeman treated him with special drugs to make him look more human. He became so docile and attached to the scientist and his other friends that people often mistook him for an ordinary, timid, and rather backward person of no account.

But the Apeman hated cruelty of any kind. Whenever he saw crooks or villains do something nasty to a helpless victim, he would fly into a rage. This would change his body chemistry and cause him to revert to the savage state. Then, with bulging muscles and fearsome growls, he would beat up the villains and wreck their criminal plot, much to the delight of the audience. Viewers loved to watch him mop the floor with the “bad guys,” and the show had become an overnight hit.

“Uh-oh. Here it comes!” Chet muttered. “Those crooks are really asking for it!”

“And now they’re going to get it!” Joe added.

On the screen, the Apeman had just taken a gun away from one crook and squeezed it into scrap metal by clenching his fist. Then he proceeded to toss the villains about like beanbags and wreck the evil masterminds’ laboratory before ripping open the manacles that held their two prisoners.

“Hey! Did you hear something outside just then?” Frank murmured to his brother.

Joe shook his head. “What did it sound like?”

“More of the Apeman’s growls, but I guess it was just part of the sound effects.”

The TV show ended and was followed by a brief “News Update” just before ten o’clock. First there were two or three quick headline reports about the international situation and events in Washington. Then the newscaster went on:

“The prankster who’s been masquerading as the Apeman has just made another appearance, this time in a local movie theater.”

“Hey, we’ve been there!” Chet exclaimed as the newscaster named a theater in the town of Shoreham, near Bayport.

“Patrons were terrorized,” the reporter continued, “and the theater furnishings, glass partitions, and candy counters were extensively damaged before the culprit fled through a rear exit.”

“Some prankster!” Joe said disgustedly.

“Witnesses say the impostor looked exactly like the real Apeman in the popular television show and seemed to have equally large muscles. But both the producers of the show and network officials deny any responsibility for such acts or any suggestion that the strong man who plays the TV role may be implicated in what they call ‘such lunatic behavior,’” the newscaster concluded.

“Boy! There’s a mystery for you guys to...” Chet Morton’s voice faded as a savage growl reached their ears, followed by deep-throated and angry bellows.

“Jumpin’ Jupiter! What was that!” the chubby youth exclaimed, his eyes bugging and his jaw dropping open.

Frank leaped from his chair. “Must be the same thing I heard before, whatever *that* was!”

Joe followed as his brother hurried toward the front door and clicked on the porch light before dashing outside. Chet almost collided with the Hardys as they stopped short.

“Look!” Joe gasped, pointing downward.

There were huge, bare, muddy footprints on the porch! The prints looked semihuman, with the big

toes sticking out at an angle to the smaller toes!

~~“Whoever made these must’ve been standing in one of the flowerbeds!” Frank reasoned.~~

“Right! The ground’s still wet there from the rain this afternoon,” Joe agreed. “His feet couldn’t have gotten this muddy just from walking on grass!”

Frank darted back inside to get a flashlight. Then the boys hastily checked the flowerbeds and shrubbery around the house. Sure enough, there were similar huge footprints in the damp earth under the window that the Hardys had opened a short time earlier when they first saw Chet in his Doo Demon costume.

“This has to be a joke,” Joe said.

Frank nodded. “Maybe someone else in our gang is going to that comic book party and decided to give us a preview of his costume, like Chet did.”

As the boys started back around to the front of the house, a siren wailed in the distance. The shrubbery noise grew louder, and there was a sudden screech of wheels as the vehicle rounded a corner not far off.

“Hey! It’s coming this way!” Joe exclaimed.

Seconds later, a police scout car drew up to the curb. Its front doors flew open, and two officers leaped out. One pointed his nightstick at Chet.

“There’s the nut!” he cried, and both policemen rushed at the startled fat boy.

Scraps of Evidence

The officer seemed to expect that Chet would run away or resist arrest. But he was too surprised to do anything except stand there blinking at them with a flabbergasted expression.

“What’s this all about?” Frank intervened.

“This joker’s been scaring people around the neighborhood!” said one policeman.

His partner added, “Someone phoned headquarters about him—said he was heading over to Elm Street—a nut in a metal suit with a skull mask!”

The red-faced, roly-poly youth began stuttering nervously as he tried to explain his appearance. But the skull mask, which was now hanging loosely around his neck by its elastic cord, did nothing to help persuade the officers of his innocence.

“Wait a second!” Joe cut in. “Chet hasn’t been scaring anyone! He’s been sitting in our living room watching TV for the last half-hour or so!”

One of the policemen was about to retort suspiciously. Then his expression changed. Instead of relying on the moonlight and the glow of the nearest street lamp, he pulled out his flashlight and shined it at Frank’s and Joe’s faces.

“Say! You two are Fenton Hardy’s sons, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Frank said as they both nodded.

Mr. Hardy had once been an ace detective with the New York Police Department. He had retired to the seaside town of Bayport to operate his own agency and was now nationally famous as a private investigator. Frank and Joe seemed to have inherited their father’s sleuthing ability and had solved many mysteries on their own.

“Sorry, fellows,” the policeman told the Hardys. “If we’d recognized you right off, it would have saved all this hassle.”

“I’d like to know what your friend’s doing in that nutty getup,” his partner persisted.

“There’s going to be a party at the Alfresco Disco tomorrow night,” Joe explained. “Everyone supposed to go dressed up like a comic book character. Chet’s going as the Doom Demon, so he came over to show us his costume.”

“Couldn’t he show it to you in the house? How come you were out here in the dark with a flashlight?”

“Believe it or not, we heard some strange noises,” said Frank. “Only it wasn’t a loony in a metal suit, it was a loony with big bare feet.”

“Are you kidding?” said the first policeman, giving the Hardys another suspicious scowl.

“Come on! See for yourself,” Frank offered.

The wail of the police siren had brought lights flashing on along the street, and several neighbors were peering out of their doorways to discover the cause. One of the officers went off to deal with the situation and quiet any feelings of alarm among the neighbors, while the other examined the footprints on the Hardys’ front porch.

"They look phony to me," he commented. "Nobody's *that* flatfooted!"

"I think he's right, Frank," Joe agreed after a closer inspection.

The older Hardy boy nodded thoughtfully. "Even one of those Bigfoot critters out West would have *some* bulges on his feet and a *slight* arch. These look flat as a pancake!"

"I'll bet the same person who's responsible for these prints made that phone call to headquarters about Chet!" Joe exclaimed.

"That figures," said the policeman. "The whole thing's probably a practical joke."

The two officers soon drove off, and Chet started home to the Morton farm in his jalopy, which he had left parked down the street in order to take the Hardys by surprise.

Next morning the telephone rang while the boys were at the breakfast table. Frank answered and heard his father's voice come over the line.

"How's everything on Elm Street, Son?"

"Great, Dad! We had a little excitement last night, but I guess someone was just spoofing us."

Frank briefly described the mysterious events. Mr. Hardy, too, was inclined to ascribe them to a practical joker. But he urged his son to take no chances and to keep the alarm system on at night, in case any criminal he had sent to jail might have been released recently and was looking for an opportunity for revenge.

"Sure, Dad," Frank said. "How about your own case?"

"I can't tell you much about it over an open phone line," the detective replied, "but it's part of a major government investigation. Looks like it may keep me on the move for quite a while yet. Meantime, a friend has consulted me about a case that I'm just too busy to handle. How would you and Joe like to take over?"

"You bet! Let me get him on the other phone so we can both hear the details."

At an urgent signal from Frank, Joe hurried from the table to listen in on the upstairs extension.

"As you boys know, a lot of my investigative work is done for insurance companies," Mr. Hardy began. "One of those companies is headed by a man named Paul Linwood."

"We've heard you speak of him," said Joe. "Lives in Shoreham, doesn't he?"

"That's right. He has a pretty young daughter named Sue. Unfortunately, a few nights ago there was a bitter family quarrel. The upshot was that Sue ran away from home."

"Has Mr. Linwood heard from her since then?" Frank asked.

"Not a word. But he has a hunch she's joined this odd religious cult called the Children of Noah. Ever heard of it?"

"Sure! We've seen 'em lots of times in Bayport and other towns around here," said Joe. "They hold sidewalk demonstrations."

"They wear white robes," Frank added, "and the guys in the cult shave their heads."

"That's the outfit," Fenton Hardy confirmed. "The cult is primarily composed of young people. So I thought you and Joe might stand a better chance of getting a line on Sue than Sam Radley, my regular operative. Want to give it a whirl?"

"You bet, Dad!"

"Good! I suggest you contact Linwood either at his home or at the Argus Insurance Company, which is also in Shoreham. Call me tomorrow and let me know the score."

Frank jotted down the telephone number at which the detective said he could be reached, then the boys returned to the breakfast table to finish their bacon and eggs. Afterward, they headed out to the laboratory over the garage to finish their costumes for the disco party that evening.

"Did one of you take that cardboard box off the back porch?" their Aunt Gertrude asked as the boys

passed through the kitchen.

“No, Aunty,” said Joe.

“Well, it was there last night,” she said sharply. “I set it out there just before Laura and I went to our club meeting. Don’t try to tell me that box got up and walked away by itself.”

“We wouldn’t dare, Aunty!” Joe grinned.

“You’d better not, young man. And don’t let me catch you being funny at my expense, either, not if you want any of the devil’s food cake I’m making for dinner tonight!”

“You win. I’ll be good!”

Miss Hardy, tall, thin, and tart-tongued, was Fenton Hardy’s unmarried sister. Despite her scolding, tut-tutting manner, she was utterly devoted to her two nephews and was also, in Chet’s expert opinion, the best pastry cook in Bayport.

“The box must be around somewhere,” Frank said helpfully. “We’ll look for it.”

“I wish you would,” Aunt Gertrude said. “I was going to pack some things in it and put them up in the attic.”

The boys went outside and when they returned a minute or two later, Frank was holding the missing cardboard box.

“Is this it?”

“Well, I declare! You’ve found it!” Miss Hardy’s pleased smile gave way to a cluck of annoyance as he handed her the box and she saw what had happened to it. “Drat! Someone’s torn off the two main flaps. Now I can’t close it properly!”

Seeing the slight frown on her nephew’s face, she added, “Oh, don’t think I’m blaming you, Frank. It was good of you to find it for me. Thank you, dear. Where was it, by the way?”

“Someone tossed it over the back fence. What puzzles me is what happened to those flaps.” Frank scratched his head, then exclaimed, “Wait just a minute!”

Turning on his heel, he strode down the porch steps and out to the garbage can, which was standing by the back fence. He took off the cover.

“What in the world ...” Joe started to say, then broke off as Frank fished two rectangular pieces of brown corrugated cardboard out from among the contents of the can. Both were stained and bent.

They were obviously the missing box flaps, and from each one, somebody had cut out a large piece in the shape of a semihuman footprint with the big toe protruding at an angle!

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!” Joe gasped. “So that’s how our caller made those phony footprints last night!”

“Right.” He pressed the cutouts into the mud of the flowerbed and then used them while they were still muddy to print the tracks on the front porch.

“Smart detective work! What gave you the idea?”

“It occurred to me all of a sudden that the flaps would be about the right size for making the footprints,” Frank replied. “But what I’d like to know is whether the guy who did it was trying to be funny or trying to scare us!”

The Hardy boys continued to discuss the mystery that morning as they worked on their party costumes. Frank was going as a champion of justice called the Silver Streak, and Joe as his sidekick known as the Whippersnapper.

Immediately after lunch, they set out for Shoreham in their sleek yellow car. The Argus Insurance Company was located in a large modernistic office building in the main business section of town. The Hardys found a parking spot on a nearby side street, entered the lobby, and gave their names to the receptionist.

Is Mr. Linwood expecting you?" she asked.

"Yes, we phoned for an appointment," Frank said.

Moments later they were escorted to his office. Paul Linwood proved to be a heavysset man with slightly graying hair and handsome features. He greeted the boys with a hearty smile and hand-shake but his gnawing grief became evident as he related the events that had led his daughter to run away from home.

"I'd give anything if I could take back the harsh words that passed during our family quarrel," he confided, pacing back and forth. "I'm afraid I lost my temper, and so did Sue. Perhaps I've been too strict a parent, I don't know. She accused me of trying to run her life. The whole thing ended in a shouting match. Sue walked out and slammed the door, and that's the last we've seen of her."

"Does she have her own car?" Frank inquired.

"Yes, but it's in the repair shop for a transmission overhaul, so she was driving one of our two family cars. The police found it yesterday, parked near a warehouse in the harbor area. There was a note under the windshield wiper, asking them to return it to me."

"Does she work or go to school?"

"She just graduated from Shoreham High a few weeks ago. Her mother and I were hoping she'd go on to college in the fall, but Sue wanted no part of it. Actually, that was one of the things we quarreled about."

"Have you talked to any of the girls she goes around with?" Joe put in.

Mr. Linwood nodded glumly. "We know most of her friends, but apparently Sue hasn't been in touch with any of them."

"Does she have a boyfriend?" Frank asked.

"Yes, a nice lad named Buzz Barton. He's a year or two older than Sue. She had a spat with him too, the same day as our family quarrel. No doubt that put her in a bad mood and had something to do with her running away—but let me hasten to add, I'm not blaming Buzz for what happened, not for one moment."

"What about this Children of Noah cult?" Frank went on. "Dad said she might have joined it."

"Yes, Sue brought home some brochures and messages they handed out. She seemed to take it quite seriously. I called it a lot of nonsense, which naturally didn't help matters any."

Joe said, "Suppose you're right, sir, about Sue joining the cult. Any idea where she'd go?"

"The cult owns a converted cruise liner, which their leader, Noah, calls his *Ark*. They keep it anchored offshore, and that's where all the new members are sent."

Linwood added with a gloomy sigh, "Unfortunately the young people aren't allowed to have any contact with their parents, and since Sue's eighteen, she's old enough to do as she chooses. That's what your father thought you fellows might be able to find out more than an older detective."

"We'll certainly try, sir," Frank assured him.

The Hardys left after promising to let Mr. Linwood know immediately if they learned anything about his daughter's whereabouts.

Outside, Frank took the wheel of their car, and Joe slid in beside him.

"Any ideas on how we should tackle this case?" Joe asked as they pulled away from the curb.

His words were drowned out by a loud explosion! Almost at the same moment, their car lurched crazily out of control!

Sneak Attack

Frank grabbed the wheel tightly and slammed on the brakes. The car skidded to a noisy halt. A driver behind them honked angrily and swerved out of the way to avoid a collision. But an instant later, passing, he apologized with a wave of his hand as he saw their flat front tires.

“Blowout!” Frank called to his brother in disgust.

The engine had stalled, due to the abrupt stop. Frank revved it back to life and pulled over to the curb. Then the Hardys got out to inspect the damage.

Almost at once Joe spotted a good-sized nail protruding between the treads of the right front tire. “That’s what caused one of them,” he announced. “But would two blowouts make that loud explosion?”

“No way!” Frank declared. Frowning, he retraced their course.

In a few moments he came back, holding what looked like scraps of reddish paper. “There’s the answer.”

Joe took one of the fragments from his brother for a closer examination and immediately caught on. “A firecracker!” he blurted.

“Right. Someone stuck it in our exhaust pipe. When we started up, the hot exhaust made it explode.”

“Which means that nail in the front tire was no accident, either!”

Frank nodded gloomily. “Either someone does not like us in Shoreham, or somebody must have trailed us here from Bayport.”

“Maybe the same joker who tried to scare us with those phony growls and footprints last night.”

“Could be.”

The Hardys got a jack and lug wrench out of their car trunk and dismantled the left front wheel. They found it had been punctured by two nails exactly like the one Joe had noticed in the right front wheel.

“Neat job,” Frank said, gritting his teeth. “Whoever did it must have propped them right into place between the tire and the pavement, so the first turn of the wheel would be sure to cause a puncture.”

“And we didn’t even spot anyone keeping us under surveillance,” Joe fumed. “From now on, we better watch our step!”

Since they had only one spare tire, Joe wheeled the left flat they had just removed to a nearby garage station to have the tire repaired. Meanwhile, Frank switched the other front wheel with the spare.

Presently Joe came back with the patched and inflated tire. “Hey, the Children of Noah are putting on a demonstration in Franklin Square!” he reported. “Want to go have a look?”

“You bet! This may be a good chance to make contact with them!”

As soon as the Hardys had the wheel remounted, they locked the car and headed for Franklin Square on foot. Even from a block away, they could see the demonstration going on. The white-robed figures were chanting and clapping and rattling tambourines while several others played guitars and recorders.

“What’s that song they’re singing?” Frank wondered aloud.

“Search me,” said Joe. “I’m not even sure you’d call it singing!”

While most of the cultists, or “culties” as people often called them, were chanting, others handed out brochures and mimeographed sheets to the onlookers, including the Hardys. The brochures were about the cult and its leader, Noah. The mimeographed sheets announced that the young people who belonged to the cult could be hired for odd jobs by the day, and it also listed the hourly rate for different kinds of work.

The culties stopped chanting long enough for one shaven-headed youth to step forward and shout to the onlookers. “The old world of darkness and hate is passing away, and those who serve it will be destroyed!” he warned. “A storm of wrath shall sweep them away forever! Only the peace-loving Children of Noah will be saved to start a new world!”

He urged everyone listening to join the cult. Then the chanting and clapping and rather tuneless music began again. The culties who had passed out brochures now moved through the crowd, holding out tin cups for money offerings.

Afterward, as the demonstration ended and the crowd started to break up, Frank and Joe made their way closer to the group of white-robed cultists.

“We’d like to know more about becoming Children of Noah,” Frank said to the shaven-headed youth who had given the speech.

The boy scowled at the Hardys. “Why?”

“We were interested in what you had to say,” Joe replied. “If we’re going to join your cult, we’d like to hear more about it.”

Instead of looking pleased, the youth turned to a couple of his companions. They whispered together and shot suspicious glances at the Hardy boys.

Finally, the youth said to Frank and Joe, “Okay, we’ll be happy to tell you all about Noah and his wonderful message to the world. Our beloved leader is always happy to welcome new children into our family. We may even take you out to the Ark later. Have you heard about our *Ark*?”

“Sure,” Joe nodded. “It’s that converted cruise liner that your new members live on, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s anchored offshore. There’ll be a boat going out to it sometime after five o’clock. Do you know where Decatur and Front streets are?”

“Down by the harbor,” Frank replied.

“Right,” said the shaven-headed cultie. “On one corner is an old empty warehouse. Wait for us there. We’ll be down soon.”

The Hardys strolled off through downtown Shoreham in the direction of the waterfront. A few blocks beyond Franklin Square they glimpsed the masts of fishing boats and the smokestacks of freighters tied up at the dock. By following Decatur Street to the harbor, they had no trouble finding the warehouse. It was a ramshackle building with broken and boarded windows. Signs announced that it would soon be torn down to make space for a new shipping-office building.

One of the street-level doors was sagging wide open, evidently with a broken latch and hinges. The Hardys went inside and looked around. In the shafts of sunshine slanting through the broken panes were swirling dust motes, and the concrete floor was littered with rubbish.

“Nice waiting room,” Joe remarked sarcastically. “Wonder why they wanted us to come here?”

Frank shrugged. “Don’t ask me. Maybe the culties gather here before they go back to the Ark every evening.”

Frank’s suggestion seemed to be borne out by several wooden crates that were grouped together as if they had been used as makeshift benches, while on the floor nearby were discarded candy and gum.

wrappers and empty soda bottles.

The two boys sat down to wait.

Frank looked thoughtful. "Did you notice how they acted at first when we talked about joining the cult?"

"I'll say I did!" Joe responded. "Not exactly what you'd call real friendly. You'd almost think the Children of Noah didn't *want* any new members."

"Another thing—they're supposed to be such a sweet, kindly bunch, and they always talk about loving your fellow humans, but that guy we heard today sounded as if he was mad at the world."

"Maybe what made him mad was seeing us in the crowd."

Frank frowned and pinched his lower lip. "You know, you might just have something there, Joe."

"But what could he possibly have against *us*?" the younger Hardy boy countered.

"Good question. We'll know the answer to that when we find out why he sent us here."

Minutes later, as the Hardys sat waiting and talking, half-a-dozen white-robed figures burst into the warehouse. All were shaven-headed youths. One was the street preacher they had talked to.

"Now you're going to tell us why you *really* want to join the Children of Noah!" he blurted.

The Hardy boys sprang to their feet.

"What're you talking about?" Frank demanded boldly.

"You know what I'm talking about! You came to spy for the fuzz!"

"You're the sons of that big-shot detective, Fenton Hardy!" another shouted.

"Yeah! And now you're going to get what's coming to you!"

"Now wait a minute!" Frank started to retort.

"And watch whom you're shoving!" Joe added, stiff-arming one of the culties who tried to push them backward and make them stumble over the wooden crates.

Perhaps the blustering youths had really intended to cross-examine the Hardys. But tempers were flaring too fast. Two or three of the culties reached inside their robes and pulled out spray cans.

"Look out, Joe!" Frank warned. "They're going to squirt us!"

An instant later the Hardy boys were being splattered from all directions! Mustard, catsup, hair spray, shaving cream, and shoe polish shot through the air. Some of the Noah culties had armed themselves with more than one can.

But the Hardys had no intention of offering fixed targets to their enemies. Frank lifted the leader off his feet with a left uppercut, and Joe doubled up another one with a punch to the midriff. Fists flying, the two Bayporters fought their way out of the warehouse.

By the time they reached the doorway, both had snatched spray cans from their opponents. Pausing just long enough for a final squirt at their white-robed tormentors, the Hardys dashed outside.

In the sunshine a block away, they stopped and looked each other over.

"What a mess!" Joe grumbled. "They really did a job on us!"

Despite their anger and embarrassment, the Hardys could not help laughing at their appearance. Their clothes, faces, arms, and hair were smeared in various colors.

"No use crying over spilled milk." Frank grinned ruefully. "Come on! Let's go home and clean up."

When they pulled into the driveway on Elm Street and walked into the house, Aunt Gertrude gasped in horror. "My stars! What have you two been up to? Some harebrained club initiation?"

"Guess you could call it a 'cult initiation,'" Joe told her.

"Well, get upstairs this minute and clean up, both of you!"

"That's just where we're headed, Aunty," Frank chuckled and winked at his mother who was sitting in the living room. But he paused on the stairway, suddenly noticing the two women's odd, anxious

expressions. "Say, is anything wrong?"

"We've been getting nasty phone calls all afternoon," Mrs. Hardy replied.

"Someone on the line growls and bellows like an animal!" Aunt Gertrude added. "Then the call threatens that our house will be attacked and smashed by the Apeman!"

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