

**GEORGE A.  
WARREN**

THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS  
MYSTERY

George A. Warren

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# George A. Warren

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### CHAPTER I

#### Lost

“Ken! Ken Armstrong! Dinner is ready.”

“I’m coming, Mother,” he called from his room upstairs.

Hurriedly he finished brushing his hair and raced downstairs to the dining room. His father was already at the table and waiting for the children to take their places. Mrs. Armstrong in the meanwhile was adding the finishing touches in setting the table. “Before you sit down, Ken,” his mother told him, “will you please go out and call Betty. She must be outside somewhere playing.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Ken obeyed and went outside to look for his younger sister, who was five years old. It was a day in the latter part of August, warm, clear. Stepping out on the porch, he called out, “Betty! Betty!”

There was no answer. Ken looked in the yard, then in the garage where she sometimes climbed into the back of the car and amused herself playing with her doll. But she was not there either. Ken walked across the street and rang the Smiths’ doorbell. Mrs. Smith herself answered and Ken asked, “Is Betty here, Mrs. Smith?”

She shook her head. “No,” she answered. “She was playing with my little Helen until about an hour ago, when she left.”

“Thank you,” Ken said and walked away. On the sidewalk, he paused to think of all the places where she might be. Ken walked further down the street and stopped at the Morrison home. Paul answered the doorbell. “Hello, Ken,” he called.

“Hello, Paul. Is Betty here playing with your little brother?”

“Why, no, Ken. Pete has been at the park all day and has just returned.”

“That’s strange,” muttered Ken.

“What’s strange?”

“I can’t seem to find her.”

“Oh, you’ll find her,” Paul assured his friend. “She may be playing with little Karliner across the street.”

“That’s right. I didn’t think of it. Thanks, Paul.”

“So long, Ken. Don’t forget the meeting tonight.”

“I won’t,” Ken called back over his shoulder. He went across the street to the Karliner home and rang the doorbell. Mrs. Karliner opened the door. “Is Betty here?” he asked.

“No,” answered the youthful woman. “Betty and Karl had a childish quarrel this morning and they quit playing together.”

“Until tomorrow,” remarked Ken, laughing.

“Yes, no matter how much they quarrel the children always come together again,” she said, also laughing.

“And it is a good thing they do,” added the boy.

“Yes. And in that respect, grown ups would do well to take after children.”

“You are right, Mrs. Karliner.” Ken edged away from the doorway. “You will excuse me, but I have to find Betty.”

The woman smiled and closed the door. Ken walked back toward his own house. He was puzzled and couldn't think where else his younger sister might be. Usually she was somewhere in the neighborhood. If she wasn't in her own yard, she could always be found either at the Morrisons, the Smiths or the Karliners. But today she wasn't at any one of those places. As he entered his own yard, Ken thought of one other place where she might be. Around the corner was a small park where Mrs. Armstrong very often took the child to play. Perhaps she had gone there with some other child. Ken thought he better run over there in a hurry before his mother became worried. However, there were only a few children there because it was dinner time. And no Betty. He walked through the playground twice. No sign of his sister.

For the first time, Ken became anxious. Of course, she was not lost, he thought to himself. But where could she be? Slowly he walked home without coming to any definite opinion. Stepping onto the porch noiselessly, he hesitated to enter the house. If he told his mother he could not find Betty, she might become frightened. He conceived another idea. Walking around to the side of the house, he peeked through the window into the dining room. Seeing that his mother was not there, he knocked on the window and motioned for his father to come outside. Mr. Armstrong came out onto the porch. "What's the trouble, Ken?" he asked.

The boy tried hard not to look anxious. "Dad, I can't seem to find Betty," he whispered.

Mr. Armstrong was a tall, heavy set man. He tugged at his close cropped mustache and muttered, "You can't seem to find her, eh? Did you look everywhere?"

"I did."

"At the Morrisons?"

"Yes. I was also at the Smiths, the Karliners and at the park, Dad. She was not at any one of those places."

"Hmm!" mused Mr. Armstrong. "She must be somewhere around, Ken. Let us first search the yard thoroughly."

Together they looked over the yard and then the garage. But the child was not there. Finally they stopped their search. "You say that you were to the park, at the Morrisons, the Smiths, the Karliners?" asked Mr. Armstrong.

"Yes, Dad."

"Can you think of anywhere else she might be? Do you know of any other child she occasionally plays with?"

Just then Mrs. Armstrong came out onto the porch and called, "Ken, John, what are you doing out here when you are supposed to be at the dinner table? And where is Betty?"

Mr. Armstrong walked slowly over to his wife and said, "Now, Edna, don't you become upset. It seems that Betty is nowhere where she usually plays. Do you know of any other child she sometimes plays with and with whom she might be now?"

Mrs. Armstrong became very pale. "Were you to the Karliners, Ken?" she queried anxiously.

"Yes, mother."

"Now don't you become alarmed, Edna. The child is somewhere around. But she may have walked off alone somewhere or she might be playing at some house."

"Were you to the Johnsons?" Mrs. Armstrong asked. Ken shook his head. "Then run over and see. And if she is not there, stop in at the McKinlys."

Ken was off at a run. The Johnson home was at the end of the street. Junior himself opened the door and Ken bent down to question the child. "Is Betty here?" he asked.

The little boy shook his head and muttered, "Nah." Mrs. Johnson came to the door and he asked her the same question. "Why, no," she replied. "She never comes. I would like very much for her to come and play with Junior, but she never does. I guess it is a little too far away for her."

Ken was anxious to be off. "Yes, I guess so," he answered. "Excuse me." And he was off.

The McKinly home was across the street. But she was not there either. Ken walked away deeply concerned. Returning home he found his parents awaiting him, their faces drawn and worried. At the news that the child was neither at the Johnsons nor the McKinlys, Mrs. Armstrong clenched her fingers. Her husband stood up. "She must have walked off somewhere," he said. "I'll notify the police and have them search for her."

"Wait a minute, Dad," cried Ken. "Perhaps she is in her room."

Without losing a second, he dashed up the stairs. A minute later he was coming down slowly. By the expression on his face the parents could tell that she was not in her room. Mr. Armstrong walked to the foyer where the telephone was and they could hear him calling the police and giving a detailed description of the child. She was five years old, blonde hair and blue eyes, weighed between forty-five and fifty pounds and was about twenty-six or twenty-seven inches tall. His task completed, he returned to the dining room. He put an arm around his wife's shoulder and said, "Now, don't worry, Edna. The child most likely has walked off by herself and she will be found. You will have her again in half an hour."

Ken jumped out of his chair and dashed out of the house. He ran over to the Morrison home and called Paul. Drawing his friend aside, he whispered, "Paul, call the troop together. We cannot find Betty and we have to make a search for her."

"That's too bad," replied Paul. "I'm sure no harm has come to her and we will find her."

The two boys walked off to call the boys together. Some of the Boy Scouts lived in the immediate neighborhood while the others were reached by telephone. Practically every one of them knew Betty by sight, but just to make sure a description of her was passed around. Within ten minutes the entire Stanhope Troop No. 1 was out on the streets and searching for the child. In the meanwhile the police had also sent out an alarm and were combing the town to find Betty. The news had spread and many townspeople had joined in the search.

For the next half hour every nook and corner of the town was ransacked. Many a little girl was stopped and asked if her name was Betty Armstrong. But always it was a shake of the head and the word no. Suddenly the news spread that the search was off and that the child was safely home. Ken, who was with Paul, sprinted home. The two boys burst into the house and found Betty sitting very calmly at the table having her dinner. Quite innocently she shook a finger at her big brother and scolded him. "You're late," she told him. "Mama is angry if you come late for dinner."

The two boys, hot and out of breath as they were, couldn't resist laughing at the innocent humor of the child. "Where were you?" Ken demanded.

Just then Mr. Armstrong came in. Seeing his missing child at the table, he sighed with relief. Mrs. Armstrong came in from the kitchen and said, "You men better have your dinner right away, before it gets spoiled."

Paul moved away, saying, "I will wait for you upstairs, Ken, in your room."

"Jack is also upstairs," mentioned Mrs. Armstrong. "He found the child and brought her home."

Paul walked upstairs while Mr. Armstrong turned to his wife and asked, "Where did he find her?"

"On Leonard Street."

"So far away!" exclaimed Ken. "Leonard Street is at the edge of the town."

"Yes."

"What was she doing there?" asked Mr. Armstrong.

"Who knows?" his wife exclaimed.

Ken turned to his younger sister. "What were you doing so far away from home?" he demanded.

"Don't bother the child now," asserted his mother. "Let us eat now. You can ask her all the questions you want later or tomorrow."

"Yes, Mother."

The family settled down to their meal and for the present tried to forget the anxiety and worry the child had caused them.

As soon as he could get away from the table, Ken did so and raced upstairs. Dashing into his room, he called out, "Hello, Jack."

"Hello, Ken. I hear Betty gave you a bad scare."

"And how!" added Paul. "The only ones we did not have searching for her were the marines, and only because there are none in Stanhope."

"Yes, that is just what I want to ask you about, Jack. How did you come to find her?" asked Ken.

"I was out that way visiting Bud Menninger. You know him, don't you, Ken?"

"Yes, he is the fellow who wants to join our troop, isn't he?"

"That's right," answered Jack. "Well, I was riding home on my bicycle when I happened to notice Betty walking along, all by herself. I was so surprised, I wouldn't believe my eyes at first. I couldn't imagine what she would be doing so far away from home. At any rate, I jumped off my bike and approached her and then I saw that it was really her. She was sucking a large peppermint stick."

"Sucking a peppermint stick!" exclaimed Ken. "Who gave it to her?"

"That is just the point. I asked her and she replied that a man gave it to her."

"A man!—"

Paul interrupted. "Don't interrupt, Ken," he said. "Listen to the rest of the story. It is mighty interesting."

"All right, I won't interrupt. Go on."

"Well, I questioned her a little more," continued Jack, "and she told me that she was walking home from the Smiths when a man stopped her and asked if she wanted some candy. Like a child, she couldn't refuse. So he took her by the hand and he bought her that peppermint stick she was sucking."

"Then what?" Ken asked eagerly.

"From further questioning, it seems that after he bought her the candy, they just kept on walking. I looked her over closely and saw that she was not all frightened or hurt in any way. So it seems that the man who took her walking, did not harm her in the least."

"But how come he left her at the edge of the town all by herself. A man must be crazy to do a thing like that."

"Now that is a clue," spoke up Paul. "An ordinary man would not do a thing like that."

"Clue!" exclaimed Ken, surprised. "What sort of clue? What are you talking about?"

"Let me finish," urged Jack. "As I was talking to her, I noticed that she kept one hand behind her back. I asked her why and she just shrugged her shoulders. I looked and I saw that she was clutching a card in her little fist. I asked where she got it and she told me that the man gave it to her before he left her. I asked her to give it to me and she did. Here it is."

Jack held up the white card, three inches by two inches. The boys huddled together, examining it. "Why, it is just a plain, blank, white card!" exclaimed Ken.

"That's right. But what is the meaning of it?" asked Jack.

There was no answer. The three boys were mystified. The whole story sounded very odd and the card made it all the more perplexing. "From all the evidence at hand," remarked Paul, "I am convinced that there must be something wrong with the man who walked off with the child."

"But that's just it," exploded Ken. "If there is something wrong with the man, he must be found out and put away into an asylum. He can't be permitted to roam the streets and walk away with children."

"And if Paul's suggestions are correct," added Jack, "God knows what other tricks he might be up to and what damage he may be doing."

"Now let's think this out calmly and logically," said Paul. "First did you ask Betty to describe the man?"

"I did," replied Jack. "But all she would say was that he was tall and very kind to her."

“There are many tall men in town. That is no clue,” said Ken.

Paul rose. “We certainly have to look into the matter and see what we can do.”

“What can we do?” asked Ken. “As far as I know there are no crazy people in Stanhope and only a lunatic would do a thing like that.”

“We have about an hour before the meeting,” suggested Jack. “Suppose we go down to Leonard Street and look around.”

Just then Mr. Armstrong came in. “Hello, Jack,” he greeted.

“Hello, Mr. Armstrong.”

He saw that the boys seemed to be on the verge of leaving and he said, “I hope I am not keeping you boys from going on your way.”

“Well, we were preparing to leave, but—” that from Ken.

“I merely want to ask Jack about his finding Betty.”

Jack repeated his story, leaving out the part about the white card. For a while there was silence. Mr. Armstrong mused. Finally he said, “It must have been some man who knows the family and bought her some candy.”

“But why should he leave her at the end of the town to walk back alone,” demanded Ken.

Mr. Armstrong shrugged his shoulders wearily. “I can’t understand that myself,” he said. “But the fact remains that the child was not harmed. Which leads us to the conclusion that the man must have been a friend.”

The boys had no desire to argue with the older man and so they left it at that. In the street, Ken asked, “Why did you leave out that part about the white card, Jack?”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” was the answer. “I figured that if I told him about it, he would give it over to the police, and then it would get into the newspapers and then everybody would know about it. And the guilty man, even if he is crazy, would know better than to do anything to give himself away. As it is, nobody knows, except the three of us, and by a little quiet work we may track the culprit down.”

“I think you did right,” spoke up Paul.

“That is to be seen,” added Ken skeptically.

The boys walked down to Leonard Street and Jack pointed out the exact spot where he came upon Betty. The neighborhood was one occupied mostly by the poorer people of the town. Of course, there was nothing to be found in the way of clues. They walked all around the neighborhood and noticed the various shacks and empty lots but did not come across any man that was tall and kindly looking. At last they decided to give up the search and go to a meeting of their boy scout troop, the Red Fox Patrol.

All the other boys—Nuthin’, The Carberry twins, William and Wallace, Bobolink, Bluff—were already there when the three arrived. Pressed for information, Jack for the third time re-told his story.

## CHAPTER II

### Fire!

Several days passed and although the boys had not forgotten the incident, they did nothing to look for the culprit. The only evidence they had was the white card and the information that the man was tall.

It was about five-thirty and the boys were coming from the baseball field. Paul and William, walking ahead, turned into Water Street, and the rest of the boys followed them. At about the middle of the street, they suddenly heard the weird cry, "Fire! Help! Fire!"

The boys stopped in their tracks and looked around to find where the cry was coming from. Paul began to run and the boys followed him. They came upon a two story frame house. Dense clouds of smoke came billowing out of the doorway. Paul turned to the one nearest him, who happened to be William, and ordered, "Call the Fire Department! Hurry!"

William set off at a run. Paul, followed by the other boys, ran to the back of the house. He cried, "A couple of you try to find buckets and water. The others stick around and form a water brigade until the firemen come."

Pushing open the back door, he dashed into the house. He noticed that the smoke was dense at the front door. Just as he turned to run up the stairs, tongues of flames shot out of the smoke. The thought came to him that the fire had started at the front door. But how? Why? At the front door, of all places.

He raced upstairs and threw open the first door that he came upon. No one there. He dashed for the next room. An old man and woman, in their late seventies, if not older, were rushing back and forth, picking up things and dropping them. They were so bewildered, they did not know what to do. As Paul dashed in, they rushed at him and clung to his arms. They were absolutely speechless; they did nothing but tremble. Paul shook them off and rushed to the window, threw it open and cried to the boys below, "Get a ladder! Get a ladder!"

He looked for the firemen but they had not yet arrived. Every second seemed to him an hour. He saw the boys scatter in a frantic search for a ladder. The five minutes that elapsed to procure a ladder seemed like an age. At last Bobolink came running up with a ladder and he placed it under the window. But it was too short, and Paul cried, "Get something to stand it on. A box. Anything."

Bobolink scurried to find something upon which to stand the ladder. A minute later he returned with a soap box. The ladder was stood on the box and several of the boys supported it. Paul helped the old woman through the window onto the ladder. "One of you boys climb up and help her down."

He saw the boys hesitate. Evidently they thought that the ladder would not hold. In the meanwhile, the woman, trembling and bewildered, almost fell from the ladder. Bluff raced up and directed the woman's legs, rung by rung. The old woman at last descended and collapsed in Ken's arms. Paul turned to the old man. "Is there anybody else in the house?" he asked briskly.

The old man nodded his head vigorously. "Downstairs," his trembling lips mumbled. "A baby in a crib."

"Which room?"

The old man's teeth chattered so violently that he could not speak. Again Paul demanded to know which room the child was in but the old man could not talk. He almost hurled the man through the window as he helped him to gain a footing on the ladder. Without waiting another instant, Paul dashed out of the room and down the stairs which by now were crackling with flames. The last couple of steps were so badly burned that he had to jump. He scurried about wildly and at last found

what he was searching for—a pail of water. Dipping his handkerchief into it, he clasped the wet rag over his mouth and nostrils. Layers of heavy smoke whirled all about him. He walked along the wall and listened carefully. An infant's wailing came to his ears and he searched frantically for the door. Finding it at last, he threw it open and stepped in quickly. He brought in with him a dense cloud of smoke. He moved blindly about the room, directed only by the cries of the infant. He stumbled against the crib and clasped the child to him. Smoke entered his lungs and he began to cough. He felt choked and was sure he was going to collapse before he managed to get out. He heard a shattering crash. Someone had broken the window and he ran to it. He felt someone take the child from him and direct him to the broken window. Someone lifted him almost bodily through the window and the next moment he fainted.

About fifteen or twenty minutes after the alarm had been sent in, the Volunteer Fire Brigade came clanging down the street. Immediately they pulled out the hose and set to work. Captain Bob was there. It was he who had helped Paul through the window. About a minute after Paul had been taken out of the house, there was a terrible shattering and crackling. From all sides of the house streaks of flame spurted forth, until the whole building was enveloped in a sheet of flame.

Paul came to and opened his eyes to find his father bending over him. "Are you all right, fellow?" Dr. Morrison asked.

Paul sat up and blinked his eyes. He nodded. "I'm all right, Dad. What are you doing here?" "Just happened to come along."

His father helped him to his feet and he found the boys crowding around him. "How do you feel?" asked William.

Paul nodded. Ken remarked, "Some fire eater you are."

He smiled and turned to watch the firemen fighting the blazing structure. "What happened to the old couple?" he asked.

"They are all right," answered Nuthin'. "They wouldn't have been, though, if it hadn't been for you."

Bobolink added, "The child would surely have perished if not for you, Paul."

Just then a policeman came and pushed them all back. Some moments later the front door fell in with a shattering thud. The firemen poured gallons of water into the blaze but it did not seem to help. The fire ate through the wooden house and ten minutes later one of the walls collapsed. A groan rose up from the watching crowd and some turned their heads away. As the wall collapsed tongues of flame and dense smoke came shooting out. Some of the firemen retreated and then returned to continue their struggle with the blaze.

Another wall caved in and eventually the roof of the house came crashing down. Captain Bob realized that further effort was futile and he ordered his firemen to just stand around and let the fire burn itself out. Soon the house was a heap of ashes and smoldering pieces of wood. The firemen left and the crowd dispersed.

## CHAPTER III

### Paul Looks Into the Matter

Jack was sitting on the Morrison porch. It was about eight o'clock in the evening of the same day. Ken came walking up through the yard. "Hello, Ken."

"Hello, Jack. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Paul."

Ken came onto the porch and sat down beside his friend. "Did Paul call you too?" he asked.

"That's right. He told me over the telephone that he had something important to talk over."

"He told me the same thing. I wonder what it is."

"Perhaps it is something about the fire."

"Well, let's not guess, but wait for Paul to tell us instead."

Several minutes later, Paul came out. "Hello, fellows," he called.

"Hello, Paul."

"Hello, Paul. What is it you have to tell us?" asked Jack.

"Let's go where we will have some privacy," answered Paul.

Paul led them into the garage and the three boys piled into the back of the car. "Now," said Ken, "you can tell us without anyone overhearing us. Don't keep us in suspense any longer or we will collapse of curiosity."

"First tell us how you feel," spoke up Jack. "Any after effects from the smoke?"

"I feel perfectly all right," was the answer. "Now, this is what I want to talk to you about."

"Yes, what is it all about?"—that from Ken.

"Jack," began Paul, "do you still have that white card? You know the one I mean."

"Of course. I still have it, certainly. What about it?"

"Will you show it to me?"

Jack began to look through his pockets. Finally he confessed, "I guess I don't have it with me. I must have left it home, in my other coat pocket."

"What about the card?" asked Ken.

"Only this," replied Paul gravely. And he showed them the card. "Is it the same card?" he asked.

Jack examined it very closely. "To me it appears as though it is the very self-same card. How did you get it?"

"Now listen closely," whispered Paul. The other two boys leaned over. "I rushed down the burning stairs to find the room in which the child was. Well, I was groping along the wall with my hands because I couldn't see a thing. I came upon the door and I moved my hand up and down trying to find the knob when I came upon something sticking in the doorway. Without thinking any further, I grabbed it and shoved it into my pocket." Paul paused to add emphasis to his forthcoming statement. "And that thing was this card," he concluded.

The boys gasped. "This card!" exclaimed Jack.

"Are you sure?" asked Ken.

"Absolutely positive," asserted Paul.

"But how did it get there?"

"That is something I don't know and which I would very much like to know."

For about a minute the boys sat there in silence, overcome with amazement. Jack jumped out of the car. "Come on, fellows," he called.

"Where to?" asked Paul.

“To my house. I want to find that card.”

Jack was so excited, he had difficulty in restraining himself from running. The other boys kept up with him, walking briskly. At the Stormways home, Jack rushed up the steps of the porch. “You wait here,” he called over his shoulder to his companions.

Two minutes later he came rushing out of the doorway. “Here it is,” he cried, waving the white card.

The two cards were compared; they were identical in every respect. “This is getting to be serious,” whispered Ken.

“Terribly serious,” added Ken. “We must do something about it. The man must be absolutely crazy.”

“Crazy is not the word,” said Paul. “Dangerous is more fitting. If he is permitted to roam the streets without being stopped, only God knows what damage he will do and what crimes he may commit.”

“But what can we do?” Jack questioned anxiously. “Our suspicions are only a hunch. These cards may only be an accident.”

“No,” said Paul, shaking his head. “My opinion is that this is no accident but the work of a distorted mind.”

The boys sat down on the porch. At a loss as to the meaning of it all, they remained silent. Paul whispered, “I’ll tell you what we can do, though.”

“What?”

“Let’s go over and see Captain Bob.”

“What for?” queried Ken.

“I want to ask his opinion on the origin of the fire.”

“Well, that won’t hurt any,” remarked Jack.

The three boys set off. Captain Bob himself opened the door for them and led them into the living room. Turning to Paul, the Captain said, “You are the boy that dashed into the burning building this afternoon, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it was really nothing.”

Captain Bob sat himself down and pointed the boys to seats. “Well,” he drawled, “you are a modest boy. But if it hadn’t been for you, the old folks and the child would have burned to cinders.”

“If I had not entered, one of the other boys would have,” he answered. “We were the first on the scene, you know.”

“Yes, so I understand. But what is it I can do for you boys?”

Paul leaned forward in his chair. “Captain Bob,” he said, “we came over to ask you your opinion on the origin of the fire.”

“Just what do you want to know?”

Paul hesitated, not knowing exactly how to put his question. He said, “What I want to know, Captain, is whether you think the fire was—er,—an accident, or whether you think someone started the fire.”

“You are asking very serious questions,” replied Captain, knitting his brows.

“Yes, I know, but I am very much interested and—”

“May I ask why you should be interested?” asked the old man shrewdly.

“It’s only because,—er,—when I dashed into the building, I noticed something very odd about the fire.”

“Just what do you mean?”

“Well, as we ran up to the house, we noticed smoke pouring out of the front door. I dashed inside by the back door and then I saw that most of the smoke and fire seemed to be at the threshold of the front door. Now that is very odd.”

“Yes, you are quite right, my boy,” answered Captain Bob. “As a matter of fact, the front door caved in first. However, I came to the fire a little too late to really judge the cause or origin of the fire. But it did seem to me that there was something odd about the whole thing.”

“Was there anything about the fire that would lead you to believe that it was an accident or perhaps—er,—otherwise?” asked Paul, pressing his point.

Captain Bob scratched his chin thoughtfully and said, “My dear boy, you are asking some very serious questions that may get you into trouble.”

Paul insisted. “Just the same, would you form an opinion?”

“No, I really couldn’t because, as I said before, I came to the fire too late. I had no chance to look into the cause of the fire and now that the house is a heap of ashes, the chances of finding any clue is very slight. Suppose you tell me your opinion, my boy.”

“To be quite frank, Captain, I think that the fire was started by some pyromaniac.”

The Captain sat up in his chair. “What makes you think so?” he demanded suddenly.

Paul hesitated. He did not want to give himself away. “Just a hunch,” he replied.

Captain Bob sank back into his chair. For what seemed a very long time there was absolute silence. The Captain seemed to be musing over something and the boys had nothing more to say. Paul rose and his friends did likewise. “Thank you, Captain Bob,” said Paul. “I guess we will be going now.”

Escorting them to the door, the Captain said, “Don’t thank me. I am glad you came.” He hesitated. “And,—er,—don’t you go around talking about a pyromaniac, my boy. It may get you into trouble.”

“I won’t, Captain,” promised Paul.

“Goodnight, boys.”

“Goodnight, Captain Bob.”

The boys walked along for some few steps in silence. Ken spoke up. “That talk with the captain didn’t help much, did it, Paul?”

“No, very little. But I have now become more convinced than ever that the fire was the work of a mentally distorted person.”

“You count me in on that,” added Jack. “I certainly agree with you. But what can we do about it, that is the problem.”

“Doesn’t seem as if we can do anything for the present,” muttered Ken.

“Guess you’re right,” answered Paul thoughtfully. A moment later he added, “Tomorrow let us try and obtain a better description of the man from your sister, Betty, Ken. If she can tell us a few things on how he looks and the sort of clothes he wears, that would help a lot.”

“It certainly would,” agreed Ken. “We will try it tomorrow.”

“Yes. In the meanwhile there is nothing else we can do tonight. So I am for going home,” announced Paul.

“Same here.”

“Me too.”

The boys separated and went home. The following morning, they met again at Ken’s home. Taking Betty out into the yard, the boys tried to get some information from her about the man who had taken her for a walk and then deserted her at the end of the town. But the child had already forgotten him entirely and their efforts were in vain.

## CHAPTER IV

### Detectives

That afternoon, William went to the Stanhope Free Public Library to return a book. Walking in back of the room in search of a good novel, he came upon Paul hunched over a stack of newspapers. “What are you up to now, Paul?” he asked in a whisper.

“Tell you later.”

“A mystery, huh?” William joked.

Paul smiled and waved his friend away. “Leave me alone now,” he said, “I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Very well.”

William walked away and Paul returned to his stack of newspapers. He spent almost three hours going through the papers of the past two months. Tired, he decided to stop there. Besides, he was quite satisfied with the information he had obtained. He left the library and walked home. On the way he stopped to call for Ken but did not find him in. Crossing the street to his own home he found Jack, Ken and William on the porch waiting for him. “Well, what is the secret?” cried William. “Tell us.”

Paul motioned to the boys to follow him and he led them to the garage where they would be assured of privacy. The boys found boxes on which to sit and they gathered around Paul. “Well, what is it?” asked Jack.

“I have spent about three hours in the library this afternoon,” Paul informed them “and—”

“William told us that already,” interrupted Ken.

“I have been going through the newspapers for the past weeks,” continued Paul.

“What for?” asked Jack.

“I was looking up the fire reports. In the past two months there have been four fires, one each two weeks or so.”

“What about it?” Jack wanted to know.

“Can’t you fellows see for yourselves?” asked Paul, irritated by their indifference. “Don’t you think that in a small town such as this, a fire every two weeks is very much above the average?”

“Say,” cried Ken, “you have hit upon something. Come to think of it, that is a pretty high average.”

“But what has that to do with the story?” asked Jack.

“Simply this,” answered Paul. “Under normal conditions, there would not be such frequent fires. In other words, all the fires of the past two months may or may not have been caused accidentally.”

“You don’t think yesterday’s fire was an accident?” questioned William.

“No,” was Paul’s categorical answer.

William raised his eyebrows in surprise. He was not acquainted with the facts of the case as the other boys were. “What therefore is the conclusion?” asked Jack.

“It is evident,” returned Paul. “For the past two months at least one fire, or more has been started by a maniac.”

“This thing is becoming worse and worse,” commented Ken.

“Yes,” Paul said gravely, “the situation is very serious and it is up to us to do something.”

“Why is it up to us?” asked William. But just as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew the answer.

“Because,” was Paul’s answer, “we are the only ones who seem to be acquainted with the situation and our suspicions are quite definite.”

“Don’t you think it might be wise to acquaint the police with our suspicions?” inquired Ken.

“I am against doing anything of the sort,” stated Jack. “If we do that, there will be a public scandal. It will be in every newspaper in town and the culprit, whoever he is, will become wary. As it is, we may come upon him by surprise.”

“I agree absolutely,” commented Paul.

“What is our job going to be?” asked William, eager to do something as soon as possible.

“For the present there is only one thing we can do,” said Paul. “We will talk the whole matter over with the boys of the patrol. We are all pretty close friends and we can act as a group. The thing we have to insist upon is secrecy on the part of all the boys and to be always on guard.”

“That alone is not enough,” added William. “I suggest that we also have the boys patrolling the streets, so that in case of anything, they will be Johnny-on-the-spot.”

“That is something we will have to discuss with the rest of the boys,” asserted Paul. “In the meanwhile, suppose we notify the fellows to come to a meeting tonight after supper. Do you think it is all right?”

“Yes, I think that is a very good idea,” commented William. The other boys agreed and it was decided to meet in Ken’s garage.

That evening at about seven, the boys began to congregate in Ken’s garage. They came by one’s and two’s. Fifteen minutes later they were all there except Jack. The boys were curious as to the reason for the meeting and they wanted to start without waiting for the missing member but Paul refused. He suggested that someone run over to call Jack. Bluff volunteered. They waited about five minutes and the messenger returned saying that Jack was not home. Paul remarked, “I wonder where he could have gone?”

Nuthin’ said, “He will most likely be here any minute. In the meanwhile let’s get going.”

“Yes, let’s do that,” echoed Wallace.

Urged on by the other boys, Paul finally consented and the meeting was called to order. Paul then outlined the situation for them, told them the pros and cons of the problem and in conclusion said, “There is one more thing I want to tell you. In going through the newspaper files for information on the fire reports, I noticed that there seemed to be about two weeks difference between fires. In other words, since the last fire was yesterday, we have about two weeks in which to act. The thing for us to do now is not to talk about it to anyone outside of this group and to be always on guard. If we don’t track this maniac down, God knows what damage he is liable to do.”

For a short while there was silence. Nuthin’ grinned and remarked, “What you want us to do, Paul, is for us to become detectives.”

Nuthin’ meant it as a joke but Paul took it seriously. “That is just what I want you to do,” he asserted gravely. “We must all become detectives and find this man.”

“But the information we have is so slight. We really have no clues to work on,” protested Bobolink.

“That is very true,” replied Paul, “but we must do the best we can.”

A little later, the meeting was officially adjourned, but no boy ventured to leave. Their curiosity was aroused by Jack’s not coming to the meeting and they waited around. Paul felt anxious, though he had no reason to be. To Ken, who was sitting beside him, he whispered, “I wonder what happened to Jack!”

Ken shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t imagine. He promised to be here. And he is not home either.”

“That’s just it,” countered Paul. “The fact that he is not home implied that he was on the way over here. But something must have happened on the way to keep him from coming to the meeting.”

“We can go over and see if he is home now.”

“That is a good idea. Let’s go.”

Ken and Paul rose and the other boys did likewise. In a group they walked over to Jack's house. Ken went in while all the others remained outside. A minute later he emerged and motioned that the missing boy was not home. The boys were disappointed and a few of them became worried. Bobolink commented, "This is becoming serious. We ought to look for him."

Paul turned the idea down. "You fellows better go home," he said, "and don't worry. Jack has a right to go wherever he pleases and if he did not show up at the meeting, there must be a good reason for it."

"But where could he have gone," Nuthin' asked anxiously. "After all, something may have happened to him."

Paul, though he was anxious himself, made believe that there was nothing to worry about and laughed at the suggestion that something might have happened to Jack. "Most likely he went to see someone or something like that," he remarked casually. "Nothing serious could have happened to him."

"Besides, he is the sort of fellow who can take care of himself," added Ken.

"And what's more," argued Paul again, "we don't know where to look for him. And if we spread an alarm, his folks will become worried and that is something we certainly don't want."

"No, I guess you are right, Paul," agreed Nuthin'.

Several of the other boys nodded and showed willingness to agree with Paul's idea that they all go home. They walked along as a group until one by one the boys fell out to go home. Finally only Paul and Ken were left. The two boys walked side by side and Paul seemed exceedingly quiet and preoccupied with his thoughts. Ken hesitated to break in upon his friend, but finally he asked, "What are you so quiet and thoughtful about?"

"I wasn't really thinking of anything," the other replied.

"We may as well go home, like the others," suggested Ken.

"No, let's not do that. Suppose we walk down Main Street a bit. To tell you the truth, I am a bit worried about Jack."

"Worrying won't help any," Ken wisely remarked.

The boys walked down Main Street and then retraced their steps. At Paul's house, they silently sat down on the steps of the porch and remained like that, neither one uttering a sound.

## CHAPTER V

### A Suspicious Individual

Now let us see what really happened to Jack. He left his home with the intention of going to the meeting. As he walked along, deeply occupied with his thoughts, he suddenly became conscious of a certain individual that had just passed. Jack turned on his heel and stared at the retreating back of the individual. The man was tall and thin—gaunt; he wore a cap and a jacket and pants that hung like sacks upon him. Jack tried to think what it was about the individual that attracted his attention and he concluded that it was something wild about his appearance, about his bearing. He began to follow the man, sorry that he did not get a good look at the man's face.

Jack went over the situation in his mind. He wanted to go to the meeting and if he did not come, the boys might feel badly. On the other hand, there was something very suspicious about the person he was following. The man appeared to be very excited, or anxious; he seemed to be very much on the alert, turning his head this way and that way, as though searching for something. Jack felt sorry that he could not get a good look at the man's face. Perhaps he could do it now, he thought, by walking ahead then walking back toward him; or possibly by hiding in some doorway and obtaining a close view of him as the man passed. But on second consideration, he thought it better not to do that. The man might get a good look at him and remember his face, which would put him at a disadvantage.

Jack decided merely to follow and see what would happen. Twice the man turned around and looked back; Jack decided to cross over to the other side of the street. His heart pounded and he became nervous and excited. He followed, keeping his eyes glued to the back of the suspicious character. The man kept shifting his head in all directions, staring at people, at houses, at everything; his eyes seemed to bore right into things.

The man turned into John Street, usually a deserted street with only several old houses on it. Jack quickly removed the light sweater he was wearing and formed it into a small package under his arm. If the man had noticed him, the fact that he now appeared in a white shirt, carrying a package under his arm, would make the man think him a different person. The man continued walking rapidly with Jack hot on his trail. The street was very poorly lit and Jack was forced to shorten the distance between the man and himself, though he still kept to the wrong side of the street. Coming to a lonely house set on a large plot, the man suddenly dashed behind the wall. Jack felt his excitement increase. He was only sorry that Paul or one of the boys were not with him; not that he felt afraid but for the sake of companionship. He had a weird, creepy feeling to be following a man on a deserted, dark street.

Jack kept on walking as though nothing happened. He made believe that he didn't see anything unusual. His head square on his shoulders, he kept a careful watch out of the corner of his eye. He saw a large rock on the lot he was passing and immediately he threw himself behind it. Looking from the side of his shelter, he watched the house across the street. Possibly five minutes passed and nothing happened. To him it seemed like hours. At last the man he had been following showed himself at the corner of the house. Warily, the man stuck his head out and looked in all directions. In spite of the distance between them, the man's wild appearance, his ghostly form outlined in the dark, made Jack shiver; a cold chill ran down his spine.

At last the man came forth and walked away in the direction from which he had come. Waiting until he thought it was safe for him to follow, Jack then rose and sprinted forward until he was within about five yards of his man, who no longer shifted his head back and forth wildly but, instead kept looking straight ahead of him. Jack was glad of that because it made it easier following.

At Main Street, the man turned right. Jack followed and became more convinced that his suspicions were well founded. Beyond any doubt there was either something wrong with the man or else he was a fugitive of some sort, trying to get away. The man turned into Water Street and Jack felt a cold chill break out. Instantly it flashed upon him that the suspicious fire of the previous day had occurred on Water Street. Was the man returning to the place of his crime? Or was he on his way to perpetrate another crime, perhaps set flames to another house in the same neighborhood?

His head turned straight ahead of him, the man walked on briskly. Jack followed. Closer and closer they came to the house that had burned down. When they were within about ten yards of it, the man suddenly stopped in his tracks and very slowly turned around. In the nick of time, Jack dashed into a shadow and was out of sight. The man hesitated and then very slowly approached the heap of ashes and sticks of wood that were once a house. Jack hid himself, watching him closely, wondering what he was up to. Seeing the man approach the heap of ashes, Jack's emotions got so strong that he could barely control himself. "Easy!" he mumbled to himself. "Take it easy now!"

He flattened himself out on the ground and watched his man who sat down on the bare earth as though in grief. The man's shoulders heaved and soon Jack heard sobs of genuine sorrow. Jack could not help feeling sorry for the poor chap. He wondered what was wrong with him, that might have caused him to set fire to the house. For by now, Jack was no longer in any doubt as to the man's guilt.

For some time the man sat there, hunched over, his body trembling and sobbing bitterly. At last he got on his knees and crept forward to the heap of ashes. Picking up a handful, he let the dust slide through his fingers. Five or six times he repeated this action. Finally he took out of his pocket a handkerchief, spread it out on the ground, and piled several handfuls of ashes on it; then gathering the ends together, he made a knot and put the package under his arm. Rising, he looked around and then walked off in the direction of Main Street.

Just as soon as he thought it was safe, Jack was up and following. What was the most reasonable thing to do, he tried to figure out. Should he notify the police? Should he run off and talk it over with Paul or Ken? Or should he do nothing and just follow. Unable to determine what would be his most reasonable action, he continued to follow the man and thought of nothing else.

A block before Main Street, he saw his man suddenly disappear into the side street. Becoming frantic at the thought of losing him, Jack sprinted up to the corner. He saw his man flattening out against the wall of the corner building. Jack hid behind a parked car. Was the man aware of being followed? Jack tried to think whether he had at any moment shown himself. His deliberations were cut short by the man stepping forth again and continuing on his way. Pursuer and pursued turned left on Main Street. The man increased his pace, stretching out his long legs. However, Jack had no difficulty in following. Clear across the town the two went, back to John Street into which the man turned. Jack hesitated for a second before crossing the street. There was something funny about being led back to this deserted street. Could it be possible that he was being led into a trap of some sort? Chucking his anxiety and doubt to the winds, he crossed the street to follow, but by then the man had disappeared. He walked up and down the street but the man did not return.

Jack returned to Main Street. "Whew!" He wiped the perspiration off his brow. That was some night, some chase, he thought to himself. The next moment he felt a pang of regret for having lost track of his man. However, it could not be helped and it would be useless to worry over it. Now that he had a pretty good picture of the individual—even though he had not seen the face—Jack felt certain that he would come upon him again. In the meanwhile he thought it best to go over and see Paul.

Paul and Ken were sitting on the steps of the porch. Side by side, in silence, each mused over his thoughts. Paul noticed someone approach the gate. The next moment he was on his feet and running to meet his chum. "Jack!" he cried, "where have you been?"

Ken also ran up. "Hey!" he spoke harshly, "you had us in stitches. What is the idea of disappearing like that and where have you been?"

Jack smiled. "I am sorry I had you fellows worried," he said. "But wait until I tell you what happened to me."

"What?" demanded Paul impatiently.

"Let's sit down first; I'm tired."

The boys sat down at the rear of the porch, so as not to be disturbed. Jack told his story and Paul and Ken listened gravely, interrupting every once in a while for some detailed information. They sat so closely together, listened so attentively to the narrative, that an outsider seeing them would have taken them for conspirators. In a sense they were that: they were conspiring on how to capture and rid the neighborhood of a maniac. When Jack had at last concluded, Ken let out a long whistle. Paul whispered, "That proves all my suspicions."

"Wait a minute," said Ken. "Let's re-consider the whole situation. Both of you seem to have the impression that the man is a maniac, crazy. But how do you know that he didn't contrive the whole thing just to put on a show for Jack's sake? How do you know what the man was up to? He might have realized that he was being followed and to mislead Jack, he performed a mighty interesting show. We don't know whether this man is guilty of burning down that house and before we are sure of it, let's not pass judgement."

There was silence. Those statements provided plenty of food for thought and all three of them knitted their brows. Paul said, "What you say is true, Ken. Of course, we must not pass judgement hastily. However, somehow I feel that my suspicions are correct."

Jack nodded. "I feel the same way about it," he offered as his opinion.

"At any rate," argued Ken, "let's wait and see. You say that you would recognize him if you saw him again—"

"Absolutely," asserted Jack interrupting. "I could pick him out of a million men."

"Very well, then. In that case, we will watch out for him. In the meanwhile, I suggest that the first thing tomorrow morning we go over to Water Street and examine the place. Perhaps we will find some sort of clue, his footprints if nothing else."

"It's too bad we can't go there tonight," said Jack.

"No. For one thing, it is too late. And secondly if someone noticed us there tonight, we would be under suspicion. And that would make everything perfect."

"That's settled, then," remarked Ken as he rose. "I am going home. Coming, Jack?"

"Yes. Goodnight, Paul."

"Goodnight. See you fellows tomorrow morning."

"Righto!"

## CHAPTER VI

### The Spy

The following morning, immediately after breakfast, the three boys met and set off for Water Street. At the scene of the fire, Jack pointed out the approximate spot where the man had sat and wept. Searching for footprints, they found many, most of them indistinct and smudged. They continued their search for other possible clues but found none. In the midst of their searchings, however, Paul looking up thought he saw a flitting shadow duck behind a fence across the street. Making believe that he saw nothing, he bent over and continued his investigations; however, he had his eyes glued to the spot. And sure enough, he saw a head protrude. He was amazed. Was it possible that someone was spying on them? Was it possible that the person Jack had followed the evening before had now turned around and was following them?

He called the two boys over. Pretending that he was explaining to them the outline of a footprint, he told them in a few words, of his discovery. "Don't look now," he warned his friends; "and don't both look at the same time."

Ken joked, saying, "I hope this thing hasn't got you so that you are beginning to see things."

"Don't be funny," remarked Paul seriously. "Suppose you fellows move off now. Keep an eye on the spot I pointed out to you and don't give yourselves away."

The boys separated and pretended to be absorbed in their investigations. They kept this up for about five minutes and then Paul called them and they walked away. "Well?" he asked anxiously.

Jack nodded. "You are right," he whispered. "I also saw the head protruding from behind the fence watching us."

"What about you, Ken? Did you see anything?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I am not as eagle-eyed as you two. I saw nothing suspicious."

"But I saw him watching us several times," insisted Paul.

"I saw him only once," added Jack.

"Well, you two may be right and I wrong," commented the third companion.

"Who do you think it could be?" asked Jack. "And what do you think his purpose is?"

"How should I know?"

"Do you think it is that man I followed last night?"

Paul hesitated for a moment then shook his head. "No, and I will tell you why. The person you followed last night was tall and gaunt. This individual appeared to me to be about average height and robust. I could tell that from the shadow."

"Shall I turn around and see if we are being followed?" asked Ken.

"No, don't do that," warned Paul. "He might catch on that we know we are being followed. I have a better plan."

"What?"

"When we get to Main Street, you, Ken, will turn right, wave to us, make believe as though you are saying goodbye. Jack and I will turn left and pretend that we are going home. But instead of actually walking off, Ken, you will dash into a doorway and watch to see if anyone is following us."

"And if there is?" asked Ken.

"Then you will follow him, naturally," was Paul's answer.

"And if there is not?"

"Then you will take a roundabout route and meet us in my house in about half an hour."

“All right. I’ll do that.”

At Main Street, the group parted, one boy walking off in one direction, while the other two headed in the opposite direction. Ken, just as soon as he parted from his companions, walked to the second store from the corner, a haberdashery, and stared at the window display. Actually, however, his eyes were roaming elsewhere and he was carefully watching the corner. Some people came out of Water Street, but by the look on their faces, by their general appearance and by the fact that they seemed to know exactly which way their direction lay, Ken knew that it was not any one of them. Suddenly he caught his breath. A robust man of medium height emerged from the street and paused at the corner. He wore a light jacket and a Panama hat, the brim pulled down over his forehead.

After standing hesitantly on the corner, he turned left, seemingly bent on following Paul and Jack. Ken crossed the street and followed. The chase continued for several blocks, the man increasing his pace and Ken doing likewise. The two boys were just ahead, crossing Chestnut Street. As the man came to the corner, he turned. Ken stopped at a corner store and looked at the window display. He watched the man walk to the middle of the block and then turn into the yard of a private house. Ken scratched his head and wondered.

The two boys were awaiting him. As Ken came up the walk to the porch, Paul asked, “Well?”

Ken nodded meaningfully and the two boys were re-assured of their suspicions. Joining his companions, he muttered, “This man hunt is getting me. I’m afraid that before it is all over I am going to go crazy.”

“Why? What’s the matter?” inquired Jack.

“Do you know who was following us?” Ken put the question very gravely and looked from one boy to the other.

“Who?”

“Captain Bob.”

The announcement came as a shock, almost overwhelming them. Each boy searched the face of the other for some meaning or understanding. But all of them were just as puzzled. Paul repeated the name, “Captain Bob! But why should he follow us?”

Ken shrugged his shoulders. “Are you sure it was he?” questioned Jack, his demeanor grave and serious.

“I am absolutely positive. After all, I know the man. It’s true I didn’t see his face—”

Paul jumped. “You didn’t see his face!” he exclaimed. “Then how do you know it was he? You might be mistaken.”

Ken shrugged his shoulders. “Very possible,” he said, “but I am pretty sure I am not mistaken. To begin with, I know the man and I can recognize him without seeing his face. And secondly, I watched him walk down Chestnut Street and enter a house at about the middle of the street. That is where he lives, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but are you sure he walked into his own house—that is, Captain Bob’s house?” demanded Paul.

“Well, no, I didn’t follow him all the way to his home; I watched from the corner. But just the same I am pretty sure that it was Captain Bob.”

There was silence. The boys could not understand why the Captain should follow them. “Well, I’ll be!” exclaimed Jack. “This thing is getting beyond me and I am losing my patience.”

“Now don’t get excited,” cautioned Paul. “And keep quiet for a couple of minutes. I am trying to think of something.”

“Think of what?” asked Ken.

“Of what he said to us when we were over to see him,” was the answer.

“What about it?”

Paul leaned over toward his two companions. “Now look, fellows,” he began. “There is one particular thing he told us that comes back to me now very distinctly. You remember how just as

we were leaving, he said to us, 'Don't you go around talking about a pyromaniac; it may get you into trouble.' Remember him saying that?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, I remember."

"Same here," added Ken, "now that you call our attention to it. But what about it? He meant it for our own good."

"Of course," said Paul, "I am not doubting his sincerity. But, Captain Bob is much shrewder than we give him credit for, that's the point."

"How do you mean?" inquired Jack.

"We came over to talk over with him the fire, didn't we?" continued Paul. "Well, remember that he didn't seem to have a very definite opinion though he did feel that there was something odd about the cause or origin of the fire."

"Well, what's your point?" demanded Ken, his curiosity aroused.

"Only this," said Paul, "that since we told him of our own doubts about the fire and that since we told him we suspected a pyromaniac, he immediately came to the conclusion that we knew more than we were telling him. And in order to find out what we may know about the fire, he is following us."

"Sounds logical to me," muttered Jack.

Ken shook his head. "It may sound logical," he said, "but somehow I am not convinced. How should he know we were going out to Water Street this morning? And he would have to watch the house of any one of us three all morning to follow us. And why should he pick this morning to follow us?"

Paul smiled at his friend's naive questions. "To begin with," he said, "how do we know he has not been following us since that night we spoke to him? But I am under the impression that his following us is just an accident."

"An accident!" echoed Jack. "Explain yourself."

"I will if you don't interrupt. My impression is that he was coming to Water Street this morning also to search for some clues to the fire. But when he saw us there, he naturally watched us to see what we were up to and then followed us."

Ken shook his head in a gesture of disbelief. Jake, on the other hand mused quietly, trying to untangle the whole situation, but unable to find a starting point. Finally he asked, "Do you think he will continue to follow us, Paul?"

"Can't tell. He may and he may not."

After a short time of silence, Jack rose and suggested, "Well, let's go home for lunch."

"That's a bully idea," cried Ken. "I didn't realize how hungry I am."

"All right, I'll see you boys later," said Paul.

That evening, immediately after supper, Paul went across the street to call for Ken. As the two boys walked down the street, Paul whispered, "We are being followed."

Ken gasped. "Captain Bob!" he exclaimed in a hushed tone of voice.

"Don't know. But for the last half hour I noticed that someone was hovering about the house. And as we came out and walked away, I noticed a form slink out of the shadows and follow us."

"What do you think we ought to do?"

"I have an idea." And he whispered some instructions to his friend.

Ken nodded. "And then what?" he asked.

"Leave the rest to me."

When the two boys arrived in front of Jack's home, Paul spoke up rather loudly, "I guess I'll walk down the block and call Nuthin'. I'll be back in about five minutes."

"All right," answered Ken just as loudly. "Jack and I will wait for you."

Ken entered the yard while Paul walked off straight ahead. Turning in at the end of the street, he set off at a run around the block.

Returning to the same street at the other end, he hovered close to the wall of a building and looked everywhere to detect the hiding place of the spy. Suddenly he caught his breath. He detected a slight movement behind a fence at the other side of the street, several houses below. He crossed to the other side and walked ahead. Sure enough, a man stepped out and came toward him. As they met, Paul greeted, "Hello, Captain Bob."

The man grunted and was going to pass on, but Paul instantly got into his way. The man stopped, "Huh?" he muttered. "Did you speak to me?"

"I said hello, Captain Bob."

"Hello yourself. Now let me see, your face seems to be familiar, but I can't seem to remember your name."

"Paul Morrison."

"Oh, yes, yes. You are the boy who dashed into the burning house and—"

Paul interrupted. "Yes, that's right; you know me." What a poor actor the man was, Paul thought. He certainly couldn't get away with pretending that he didn't know him. His heart pounded and perspiration gathered on his brow. He was debating with himself what his approach should be. Would it be best merely to imply that Captain Bob's spying was a known fact to them or should he put it frankly to the old man and see what he would say. Paul steeled himself. Very suddenly, trying to take the man off his guard, he said, "Captain Bob, I am very much surprised that you should be following us."

The old man straightened up. "What was that you said? Following you? What for? Why should I be following you, tell me that."

"That is something you should tell me," he replied respectfully. "But you spied on us this morning on Water Street and then followed us as far as Chestnut Street. And just now you were following us again."

It was really too dark to tell, but Paul felt that the old man had turned red and became confused. "My dear boy," he mumbled angrily, "You don't know what you are talking about."

"You shouldn't say that, Captain Bob. If I wasn't positive, I wouldn't accost you like this."

After a moment of tense silence, the captain laughed. "Well, my boy," he said, "you are right, but I promise not to do it any more."

"Thank you. But if you don't mind, I wish you would tell me why you are following us."

Captain Bob replied gravely, "You see, my boy, there have been too many fires in this town lately. And when you and your friends came and talked to me about the fire the other day, I became a little suspicious. I tried to,—er,—get as much information out of you as I could, but somehow I felt that you were not telling me everything. So I thought I would check up on you."

A feeling of relief swept over Paul. He wanted to jump into the air and shout for joy. Even though he was a modest boy, he had to pat himself on the back; thus far, all his suspicions and deductions had been correct. He would certainly make a good detective. The captain was waiting for him to say something and he commented, "But we really don't know any more than we told you, Captain Bob. If there is anything the boys and I can do to help you, such as help check up on your suspicions—that is if you have any—we would be glad to do so."

The old man chuckled. "You are a smart one, my boy. I know that you have something up your sleeve. But never mind."

Paul felt his face going red. He must not give anything away, he thought. Out loud, he said, "But really, Captain, we don't. We don't know as much as you do, if as much."

"Well, never mind. And,—er,—forget about my following you. I meant no harm."

"I'm sure of that," replied the boy. "And it is perfectly all right."

"Good night, my boy."

"Good night, Captain Bob."

Paul watched the man disappear around the corner. And just as he started to cross the street, two figures darted out toward him, “Well?” cried Ken.

Paul put a finger to his lips. “Sh!” he cautioned.

The boys retreated to Jack’s garage where Paul told his companions the story. Just as soon as the narrative was completed, Ken cried, “The sly old fox! You know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he continues to spy on us.”

“That is just what I was going to say,” agreed Paul. “He is a very shrewd man and I am positive that he suspects somehow.”

“You don’t mean to say that he suspects us of setting fire to that house?” inquired Jack seriously.

“No, not setting fire to the house,” answered Paul smiling. “That is ridiculous and we must give him more credit than that. My impression is that he suspects us of knowing something about it which we are holding back from him. And that happens to be true.”

“Providing, of course, that our suspicions are correct,” argued Ken, still a bit doubtful.

“Well, of course, under those conditions.”

“What do you think our next move should be?” questioned Jack.

“Let’s go to the movies,” suggested Ken.

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Jack.

“Why not?” reasoned Paul. “Captain Bob won’t follow us tonight any more—”

“Which makes it safe for us to go to the movies,” joked Ken.

The boys laughed. “Seriously, though,” said Paul, “there is nothing else for us to do tonight. That man was abroad last night, and it is reasonable to assume that he won’t do any more prowling around tonight.”

“I agree with that wholeheartedly,” said Ken. “Let’s go to the movies.”

## CHAPTER VII

### The Robbery

The following morning, at the breakfast table, Paul happened to glance at the front page of the *Stanhope Herald* which Dr. Morrison was reading. At the bottom of the page, boxed off, was a story with the headline PROFESSOR LINK'S HOUSE ROBBED. Paul became quite upset and found it difficult to eat his cereal. However, he controlled himself and did not show any untoward interest in the newspaper. His father finished breakfast first, and he laid down the paper and left for his office. Paul gulped down his milk, picked up the paper and went out on the porch.

The story was that someone had broken into Professor Link's home and had stolen a valuable, early edition of "Colonial History." Nothing else was taken, except that the thief had strewn many of the books on the floor. The theory was that the thief had entered by an open window in the library.

Ken came dashing across the street and up to the porch. "Hey, Paul!" he cried, "did you read the story in the morning paper?" Paul held up the paper. "So you know already?"

Jack came. "Well, what do you think of the robbery?" he asked bluntly. "I had a feeling we should not have gone to the movies last night."

"What could we have done?" asked Ken.

"We might have come upon him and possibly frustrated his plan."

"So!" exclaimed Ken. "You think that 'he' did it? Pretty soon you will have every crime under the sun charged up against him."

"I don't think we could have done anything," commented Paul. "The paper says that the robbery occurred any time after about midnight, when the professor says he left his library to go to bed."

"But we might have come across him sometime before and followed him. Then we might about have judged what he was up to." Thus argued Jack.

"Maybe yes and maybe no," was Paul's pert statement.

"Paul," demanded Ken, "you don't mean to tell me that you really believe this man, this so-called maniac, committed the robbery, do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Tell me, how do you figure it out?"

"It's very simple," was Paul's answer. "Only one book was stolen. Of course, the book was an old edition and valuable, but valuable only to a man like Professor Link. In actual money, the book is worth perhaps ten or fifteen dollars; but if the thief was going to sell it, he wouldn't get more than four or five dollars for it."

"Yes," added Jack, "there were more valuable things in the room, if the thief had been interested in stealing something valuable. That is in itself enough to show that the thief, whoever he was, was either a maniac or one who was interested in obtaining only that book and nothing else. But an ordinary, normal man, would not break into a house to steal something like that."

"Maybe," remarked Ken doubtfully, "but—"

Paul interrupted, saying, "Let's go over to Bobolink and get him to go over to Professor Link. He is Bobolink's grandfather, isn't he?"

"Yes. Let's do that."

The boys wended their way to Bobolink's home and luckily found him still in. He was glad to see them, and commented, "I was just going to call you fellows."

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