

The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories®

THE VANISHING THIEVES

By
FRANKLIN W. DIXON

GROSSET & DUNLAP • NEW YORK

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CHET Morton's cousin, Vern, is on his way to California to find a rare and valuable coin mysteriously missing from his uncle's bank vault. When he stops in Bayport, his brand-new car is stolen.

The Hardys and their friends take on a double mystery—and double danger. They head for the West Coast to investigate, and encounter a host of strange and sinister characters, including a madman who thinks he is the maharaja of Kashmir and a mysterious blonde woman who unwittingly leads the young detectives to the ring of thieves.



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1 The Stolen Car

“Quick, eat the rest of the pizza!” Frank Hardy urged. “Here comes Chet!”

It was Saturday afternoon and Frank and his younger brother Joe were seated at a table in the Bayport Diner with Callie Shaw and Iola Morton. Iola’s tubby brother Chet, who was known for his voracious appetite, and a slender boy of about eighteen had just walked in.

Frank’s warning was too late. Chet had already spotted them, and was headed their way with his gaze fixed on the half-eaten pizza. His companion followed close behind.

Picking up a piece of pie, Chet said, “Umm, pepperoni and cheese, my favorite.”

“You’re welcome,” Joe said with good-humored sarcasm.

After taking a bite, Chet turned to the other boy, and in a generous tone offered, “Have some pizza, Vern.”

“No, thanks,” Vern said, embarrassed.

“Chet, you might at least introduce Vern before eating up everything in sight,” Iola admonished her brother.

“Oh, sure,” Chet said. “This is our cousin, Vern Nelson, from Canada.” He used his slice of pizza as a pointer. “Callie Shaw, Frank and Joe Hardy.”

“Vern is visiting us at the farm,” Iola explained.

Finishing his piece of pizza, Chet took another. “The matinee today is a monster movie,” he announced. “Why don’t we all go?”

The others agreed, and a few minutes later the six left the diner. As they emerged onto the parking lot, Vern Nelson suddenly stopped short. “Somebody’s stealing my car!” he cried out.

A brand-new blue sedan was being driven out of the lot by a red-haired man. “Let’s go after him!” Chet cried.

The young people raced to the Hardys’ sports sedan and jumped in. Frank, Callie, and Vern sat in front, while the others squeezed into the back. Seconds later, Frank began following the blue sedan.

The thief had a head start of a block, but was not driving fast. Frank soon reduced the distance between them to a quarter of a block. However, intervening traffic kept him from getting any closer.

The red-haired man obviously was unaware that he was being followed, because he kept well within the speed limit. He headed for the downtown section of Bayport. Frank gradually narrowed the distance between them until he was only fifty feet behind. At that moment, the thief seemed to realize he was being tailed. Suddenly he

floored the accelerator!

There was a red light ahead. The man drove through it with a blasting horn, barely missing another car. Frank had to brake to a halt, and though the light changed a moment later, the stolen car was already more than a block away.

Frank saw the thief turn left into an alley. He went after him, but when he emerged at the next cross street, there was no sign of the blue sedan.

A huge eighteen-wheel truck was parked on the right, and the driver was closing the back door. Joe called out to him, "Did you see a blue sedan speed by here?"

The driver turned around. He was a squat, powerfully built man wearing a short-sleeved sport shirt that revealed tattooed arms.

"Zoomed by like an express train," he said. He pointed east. "Went that way."



“Thanks,” Joe said, as Frank turned the car in that direction.

The thief, however, was nowhere to be found. They cruised up and down side streets for a time, then drove to the Hardy home on Elm Street. All thoughts of a movie matinee were now abandoned.

Aunt Gertrude was in the kitchen when the six young people trooped in the back door. Miss Hardy, sister of the boys’ father, was a tall, angular, peppery woman, who was just taking a pie from the oven.

“Umm, smells like cherry,” Chet said, moving towards the pastry.

“This is no time to think about food,” Joe told him. “We have to call the police.”

“The police!” Aunt Gertrude repeated. “Are you boys involved with criminals again?”

“Tell you all about it later,” Frank promised, heading into the front hall.

He used the front hall extension to call Chief of Police Ezra Collig. Fenton Hardy came down the stairs as he was talking. The tall, middle-aged detective had once been with the New York City police force, but was now a world-famous private investigator.

“What’s going on?” he asked Frank as his oldest son hung up.

Frank introduced Vern Nelson to his father and then explained about the car theft.

“That’s quite a coincidence,” Mr. Hardy said. “I happen to be investigating a car-theft ring, but not in this area.”

“Where are they operating?” Joe asked.

“Mainly in New York City.”

Chet said, “The funny thing is the way the car disappeared. Course that red light slowed us down, but we were only a little over a block behind when the thief turned into the alley. He should have still been in sight when we came out the other end.”

“Particularly since that tattooed fellow told us which way he went,” Vern Nelson said.

“Tattooed fellow?” Fenton Hardy asked, raising his eyebrows.

“A truck driver,” Frank explained. “He was closing up the back of his truck when we drove up.”

“What did he look like?”

“Sort of squat, but well-built.”

“Did you happen to notice the design of his tattoos?”

The four boys and Iola had not paid any attention, but Callie Shaw said, “I saw the one on his right arm as we went by. It was a dagger with a snake wrapped around it. ”

“Crafty Kraft!” the detective exclaimed. “The car-theft ring must be spreading, because he’s one of its chief lieutenants!”

“You mean that driver’s in cahoots with the gang you’re investigating?” Joe asked in surprise.

Mr. Hardy nodded. “I’ve a feeling Vern’s car disappeared into Kraft’s truck. It’s probably the type whose rear door lowers to form a driving ramp. ”

“Oh!” Vern said in exasperation. “I wish I could lay my hands on him and that redheaded thief who drove off in my new car!”

“The car thief was red-haired?” Fenton Hardy asked.

“Yes. ”

“Now I’m positive it was the gang I’m after,” the detective said. “Red Sluice, one of the slickest car-heist artists in the country, works with Crafty Kraft. ”

Mr. Hardy listened to the group’s description of the truck, and phoned the information to Chief Collig. When he hung up, Vern asked whether he thought there was a chance his car would be found.

“I doubt it,” the detective said frankly. “So far not a single vehicle suspected of being stolen by this ring has been recovered. The theory is that they’re either being repainted and sold in other states under fake registrations, or being stripped for spare parts. ”

“But the police have the truck’s description.”

The detective nodded. “But no license number, and there are hundreds of similar trucks on the highways. ”

Aunt Gertrude walked in from the kitchen and invited the boys’ friends for dinner. They all accepted, and, after calling their parents, went into the dining room.

With Mrs. Hardy, there were nine around the table. Laura Hardy was a slim, attractive woman with sparkling blue eyes. She quickly put Vern at ease by warmly asking about his family and plans for his stay in Bayport.

Vern explained that he was an orphan who lived with an older sister in Montreal. An uncle on his father’s side—no relation to the Mortons—had died in California and had left him a rare coin, a 1913 Liberty Head nickel. Only five of those were known to be in existence, and his Uncle Gregg, who had bought his eight years ago, had paid \$100,000 for it. However, the coin had disappeared under mysterious circumstances before the will could be probated. Vern was on his way to California to look into the matter, and had stopped en route to visit the Mortons.

“Was the coin stolen?” Fenton Hardy asked.

“That’s the mystery,” Vern replied. “According to the will, it was supposed to be in a safe-deposit box in Los Angeles. But when the box was opened, it was not there. Only Uncle Gregg had a key, and the vault record showed that he had not visited it since the day he placed the coin in it eight years ago. ”

“That sounds like a case for the Hardy boys,” Chet said. “Why don’t the three of us go to California with you?”

“I no longer have a car to get there,” Vern remarked.

“Maybe we could fly,” Frank suggested.

“You’re going to get involved with criminals again?” Aunt Gertrude asked in a worried tone. “Must you?”

“Don’t worry about it, Aunt Gertrude,” Joe said cheerfully. “We can take care of ourselves. ”

“So far. But someday you may get in more trouble than you can handle.”

“We’ll be careful,” Frank assured her.

Laura Hardy asked, “Why are there only five of these coins in existence, Vern? Nineteen-thirteen isn’t that long ago. I think I have a 1910 nickel in a drawer somewhere myself.”

“They were not a regular issue and were never placed in circulation,” the boy replied. “The story is that a group of VIPs was visiting the mint, and to show them how it operated, 1913 Liberty Head nickels were cast. As the government switched from the Liberty Head to the Indian Head nickel that year, no other Liberty Heads were ever minted. The coins were supposed to be destroyed after the demonstration, but half of them disappeared while the visitors were examining them.”

“You mean they were stolen!” Mrs. Hardy exclaimed. “Who were these visitors?”

“All reputable men,” Vern said with a grin. “They included a senator, a cabinet officer, and a general. Years later, five coins showed up in the estate of a well-known millionaire. Those five were sold by the estate, and eventually my uncle bought one.”

A loud thud sounded, seeming to come from the front hall. Frank went to investigate. When he saw nothing amiss, he opened the front door.

The point of a large dagger was buried in the heavy oak, pinning a note to the wood. Penned in block letters was: IF YOU WANT YOUR FAMILY TO STAY HEALTHY, DROP YOUR INVESTIGATION, HARDY.

2 Hijacked!

When Frank shouted in surprise, everyone at the dinner table rushed into the front hall to see what was going on.

“I’ll bet that was left by the car-theft gang,” Joe remarked, after reading the note.

“Not necessarily,” Mr. Hardy said. “That isn’t the only case I’m working on. Let’s see if the culprit left his fingerprints.”

Using a handkerchief, the detective pulled the dagger from the door and carried it to his laboratory. The four boys followed, while the girls stayed to help Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude clear the table.

Holding the dagger with forceps, Mr. Hardy used a camel’s hair brush to dust it lightly with a fine, dark powder. A set of prints appeared on the haft. He lifted them off with inch-wide transparent tape and transferred them onto a white card.

Then he took a number of case folders from a filing cabinet and compared fingerprint cards in them to the prints taken from the dagger. After checking the first folder, he shook his head.

“It isn’t any known member of the car-theft gang,” he said.

He examined several other folders without success. Finally he exclaimed triumphantly, “Anton Jivaro! I didn’t even know he was still in the States. He was supposed to have fled to Canada.”

“Who’s Anton Jivaro?” Frank asked.

“An escaped mental patient. A clever man, but insane. Thinks he is the Maharaja of Kashmir, and has a nasty habit of hijacking planes to take him to India. I caught him once, that’s why I have his prints on file.”

“Maybe you’d better turn on the outside lights and the burglar alarm tonight,” Joe suggested. “Just in case Jivaro decides to come back with another dagger.”

“Good idea,” Mr. Hardy said.

When they returned to the kitchen, Aunt Gertrude was horrified to learn that the dagger had been left by a madman.

“We’ll all be murdered in our sleep,” she declared. “Why do you take such cases, Fenton?”

“I’ll turn the alarm and the outside lights on,” her brother assured her. “Don’t worry, nothing will happen.”

While Mr. Hardy and the boys had been busy in the laboratory, Laura Hardy had hunted up the 1910 Liberty Head nickel she owned. She showed it to Vern.

After examining it, he said, “It isn’t worth very much, Mrs. Hardy. Maybe fifty

cents or a dollar. I could tell you exactly if I had my bible with me.”

“Your bible?”

“The annual Guide Book of United States Coins. Coin collectors call it the bible. ”

“It’s at our house,” Chet said. “If we fly to Los Angeles, put it in your hand luggage. That way we can check our pocket change on the plane.”

After some discussion, it was decided that Frank, Joe, Chet, and Vern would go to Los Angeles the next day. Everyone was very exhausted from the excitement of the day, and Frank and Joe drove all of their guests home. Filled with anticipation, both boys had trouble sleeping.

The following morning, as they waited in line at Bayport Airport, Chet called attention to a dark, furtive-looking little man who had bought a ticket.

“Hope they check that fellow for guns,” he said forebodingly. “He looks like a hijacker to me.”

“You watch too many movies,” Frank scoffed.

Walking over to the security checkpoint, they found themselves standing right behind the dark little man. When he passed through without causing the electronic metal detector to buzz, Chet was relieved. “I guess he doesn’t have a gun on him after all,” he said.

Then Chet passed through. A bulb lit up and there was a loud buzz. Immediately two security officers grabbed him. While one gripped him firmly from behind, the other patted his pants pockets, then reached into the left one. He drew out a metal box.

“Open it!” he commanded.

Sheepishly Chet obeyed. Inside was a large collection of nickels.

“Why are you carrying your change in a metal box?” the guard demanded.

“It’s kind of my piggy bank,” Chet replied with wounded dignity.

The guard shook his head, handed back the box, and passed the boy through. As the four friends moved toward the gate, Vern inquired why his cousin was loaded down with nickels.

“I didn’t have time to check them last night, so I thought I’d do it on the plane. Did you bring your bible?”

“Sure. But what do you expect to find?”

“Maybe a 1913 Liberty Head nickel!”

On the plane Frank, Joe, and Vern sat in one row, while Chet’s seat was across the aisle, next to an attractive, platinum blond woman of about thirty. Beside her, in the window seat, was the dark little man Chet had suspected of being a hijacker.

When they were airborne, Chet took out a handful of nickels and began checking their dates. After a while the platinum blonde asked curiously, “Do you mind telling me what you’re doing?”

“Looking for a particular coin, ma’am.”

“Oh.”

Frank, who was on the aisle seat across from Chet, leaned forward with a grin and said, “He’s a little odd, ma’am, but harmless. Don’t mind him.”

She smiled. “You four all together?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Well then, let’s get acquainted. It’s a long flight. I’m Cylvia Nash.”

“How do you do?” Frank said. “I’m Frank Hardy, and our friend next to you is Chet Morton. On my left are my brother Joe, and Vern Nelson.”

“Glad to meet you,” Cylvia Nash said. “You boys on vacation?”

“Not exactly,” Chet said, dropping the nickels into an empty pocket and taking another handful out of his “piggy bank.” “Didn’t you recognize the names Frank and Joe Hardy?”

The woman shook her head, puzzled, while the man next to her openly stared at them.

“Fenton Hardy’s sons,” Chet explained.

“Oh, the famous private detective.” She looked at Frank and Joe admiringly. “You often help your father, don’t you? Are you on a case now?”

“We are,” Chet replied. “You see, this valuable coin disappeared—”

“It’s really not a case at all,” Frank interrupted, giving Chet a sharp glance. “A relative lost something and we’re going to try and find it. Since we haven’t been to California in a long time, we’re really looking forward to it.”

“Yes, we want to get some sightseeing in,” Joe added.

“You’ll like it,” Cylvia said. “Are you planning to visit the northern part of the state, too?”

“We don’t know yet,” Frank said. “Do you live near there?”

“No, L.A. I’m returning from vacation.”

The dark little man on her right said, “Excuse me, madam, but do you know how to work this?” He held up his earphone for recorded music.

As Cylvia Nash showed him how to plug it in, Chet resumed examining nickels.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “I found a 1901 Liberty Head!” Leaning across the aisle, he said to his cousin, “That worth anything, Vern?”

“Let’s see it,” Vern requested.

Chet passed the coin across the aisle to Frank, who handed it to Vern. After studying the nickel, Vern took a small red book from his pocket and opened it.

“Twenty-six-and-a-half million of those coins were minted,” he stated. “If it were a

proof coin, it would be worth a hundred and thirty-five dollars. If you could find a buyer, that is, which is unlikely unless you're a dealer. A dealer would probably give you about half that. "

"I'll settle for sixty-five dollars," Chet said eagerly. "Is it a proof coin?"

Vern shook his head. "The next grade down is uncirculated. That's worth seventy-two-fifty, again about half that from a dealer."

"Is it uncirculated?"

"No. Now extra-fine grade would bring about six dollars from a dealer."

"What grade is it?" Chet asked meekly.

Studying it again, Vern said, "It has some worn spots, so it can't be rated very fine, or even fine. Very good is the next rating down, but I don't think it's even that. I'd say it rates only as good."

"So what's that worth?"

"You might get thirty cents for it."

Chet made a face. "Big deal!" He took the nickel and dropped all of the coins into his metal box.

Cylvia Nash, who had been listening, leaned forward to Vern. "You seem to know a lot about coins, young man."

"My uncle was a collector, and he taught me. Are you interested in numismatics?"

She shook her head. "I know nothing about the subject."

Just then the little man next to her unplugged his earphone. "Thanks again for showing me how to use this," he said.

"You're welcome," she replied. "We haven't introduced ourselves. I'm Cylvia Nash."

"How do you do?" he said formally. "I am the Maharaja of Kashmir."

Chet stiffened. Trying not to show his excitement, he signaled Frank to meet him at the back of the plane.

Both boys pretended to go toward the restroom. As soon as they were beyond earshot of the others, Chet whispered, "That little guy is Anton Jivaro, the hijacker! I heard him tell Miss Nash he was the Maharaja of Kashmir!"

Frank stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Then we better get word to the captain that there is a mental patient aboard," Frank decided.

"Well, at least he doesn't have a gun," Chet said. "He couldn't have sneaked it past that detector."

Jivaro had risen from his seat and stepped past Cylvia Nash into the aisle. In a loud voice, he said, "May I have everyone's attention?"

Most conversation stopped and all the passengers looked at him questioningly. He opened his coat, then slowly made a complete turn so that everyone could see the six long, brownish-colored tubes strapped to his waist.

"These are sticks of dynamite," he announced. He took hold of the loop at the end of a short lanyard attached to his belt and wrapped it around his hand. "If I pull this, the explosives will go off."

There was dead silence in the plane.

"If everyone behaves, I will not have to use them," he continued. "I don't wish to harm you. I only want to be flown to my native land. You see, I am the Maharaja of Kashmir."

Silence continued. The hijacker's gaze fixed on the flight attendant who had just emerged from the small galley at the rear of the plane.

"Stewardess!" he demanded. "Take me to your captain!" Turning to the passengers, he gently raised his hand with the lanyard wrapped around it. "Remember, don't anybody try anything. I can pull this in a second ... and I'll blow us all up if I have to!"