

HELD FOR RANSOM

A Skippy Dare Mystery Story

HUGH LLOYD

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[Illustration: DOUGLAS LOOKED OUT INTO THE SWIRLING
ATMOSPHERE, SICKENED AND JUMPED]

HELD FOR RANSOM

BY

HUGH LLOYD

Author of

The Hal Keen Mystery Stories

ILLUSTRATED BY

SEYMOUR FOGEL

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CONTENTS

- I [SKIPPY](#)
- II [THE RIOT SQUAD](#)
- III [MR. CONNE](#)
- IV [A TRUST](#)
- V [FAIR DISGUISE](#)
- VI [TRAILED](#)
- VII [IN HIDING](#)
- VIII [CHASE](#)
- IX [THE BRIDGE](#)
- X [HELP!](#)
- XI [A CHANCE MEETING](#)
- XII [QUESTIONING](#)
- XIII [UNDER COVER](#)
- XIV [THE GREAT DETECTIVE](#)
- XV [UNINVITED GUESTS](#)
- XVI [SOME CONVERSATION](#)
- XVII [SILVER CURLEY](#)
- XVIII [RECOGNITION?](#)
- XIX [SKIPPY KEEPS A PROMISE](#)
- XX [PALS](#)
- XXI [DESTINATION UNKNOWN](#)
- XXII [A CHILLING INCIDENT](#)
- XXIII [EN ROUTE](#)
- XXIV [A DARK ARRIVAL](#)
- XXV [AN INSPIRATION](#)
- XXVI [SPOKES IN THE WHEEL](#)
- XXVII [SOMEWHERE IN MISSOURI](#)
- XXVIII [A LONG JUMP](#)
- XXIX [A DREAM?](#)
- XXX [A DESERT DAY](#)
- XXXI [IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY](#)
- XXXII [A NEW SLATE](#)

HELD FOR RANSOM

CHAPTER I

SKIPPY

Skippy's keen young eyes noted at once the name on the card. He also noted that the dark, smiling-eyed stranger looked not at all like the newspaper pictures of the great financier, Mr. A. P. Holden. Another swift survey of the tall man at his side and his boy's mind became turbulent with suspicion.

Miss Purdy, however, seemed not to be disturbed by any such thoughts. Her pretty face was flushed with the excitement of conveying to her employer the card of so great and important a man as was Mr. A. P. Holden. And, as she rose from her neat-looking desk and walked briskly toward a door marked "Carlton Conne—President—Private," her whole attitude bespoke pleasure in her present duty.

Skippy was secretly disgusted with Miss Polly Purdy and he showed it. A look of contempt filled his bright eyes and a little twist of his mouth indicated eloquently his private opinion of such an unimaginative stenographer. That she was efficient and unusually pretty did not serve to change his harsh judgment of her—all the more reason why she should have imagination, he told himself.

Skippy tried to think fast. The man, obviously, was unaware that such intensive thinking was being done because of his presence in the thickly carpeted reception room of the International Detective Agency offices. Certainly he did not even seem to see the slim young office boy, for as he strolled about, his eyes were ever on the door leading into Mr. Conne's sanctum.

Then the door opened.

"Mr. Conne will be pleased to see you, Mr. Holden," said Miss Purdy gushingly.

The man stepped forward quickly, smiled gratefully to the young woman and bowed. In another second he had stepped out of sight and the door closed after him.

An ominous silence seemed to descend upon the reception room. Miss Purdy glanced at Skippy's scowling countenance and lifted her perfectly-arched eyebrows.

"Well, little office-boy," she said teasingly, "have you seen a ghost or something?"

Skippy snorted contemptuously. "Yeah, I saw something," he said darkly, "but it wasn't no ghost—see!" He moved with noiseless agility over

to the young lady's side and whispered, "I just saw 'Silver' Curley, that's who I saw!"

"You're crazy, Skippy Dare."

"I ain't, but you are! You must be when you don't know Mr. Holden from 'Silver' Curley."

"Now I know you're crazy. A nice smiling gentleman like that? Why any girl could tell by his nice manners he was a big man." She shook her pretty head impatiently and went over to her desk. "I guess I'm not so dumb but what I'd know 'Silver' Curley or the rest of the Curley Gang when I see them. Anyway, I'd know the difference between a man like Mr. A. P. Holden and 'Silver' Curley—what do you think I am!" Skippy sniffed. "Listen, Miss Purdy," he said in low tones, "there ain't time to argue. I remember how when I first came here and Mr. Conne started chasin' down this Curley gang for Mr. Holden, he said that he got a letter from 'Silver' Curley."

"Say, that's history, Skippy," said Miss Purdy sarcastically. She put a letterhead in her machine and tossed her short hair back in place. "I know all about 'Silver' Curley writing the boss that time and saying what he thought of the International Detective Agency. And I know he warned Mr. Conne that we'd never run them down and that he bet he could walk in this office and out again without giving us the time or chance to call the police. Is that what you were going to tell me? You're crazy to think 'Silver' Curley would really do such a thing. That was just bluff. If it wasn't, he would have come here right after he sent the letter, six months ago."

"All right! It shows you how much you know about deduction and things like that. As if he would have come right away! Anyway, there ain't time to argue—everybody's gone home in this office for the day, 'ceptin' us and Mr. Conne. I gotta hunch we couldn't use the phone. . . . I better do this myself. . . ." he added, sprinting toward the door.

"What on earth are you mumbling about?" asked Miss Purdy without taking the time or trouble to turn her head and see.

Skippy retraced his steps with one bound and was at her side again. "Listen, will you, Miss Purdy? When that guy comes out of Mr. Conne's office, talk to him . . . anything only keep him here till I get back—see! I'll be quick as anything. Will you do it?"

"Oh, all right, you pest," said the young woman with smiling impatience. "I see you've got *detectivitis* again. I suppose you're going to call the riot squad out, eh? Heaven help you though, if your imagination's got the better of you—Mr. Conne will be furious!"

Skippy was deaf to this warning, however, for he had traversed the richly-furnished reception room, raced the length of the entrance hall and

was opening the heavy door into the outer hall while Miss Purdy was still talking. He stood a moment, hesitating, his small hand on the knob.

At the far end of the hall, just this side of the elevators stood a man of medium height whose features were quite shadowed by the brim of a dark slouch hat. Three significant facts about him Skippy noted at once. One was that the man had been watching intently the entrance to the International Agency's offices. Another and ominous fact was that the man's right hand was plunged deep in his coat pocket. And lastly, he had a prominent mole under his left eye.

Skippy straightened up and brushed his thin, ink-stained fingers over the surface of his bristling pompadour. Resolve gleamed in his eyes and he took a deep breath. Then he called over his shoulder.

"I told you Miss Purdy, I just got to go down to the drugstore for a lemon fizz. I won't be long, honest," he added, his voice high pitched for the benefit of the man in the hall.

Miss Purdy leaned forward in her chair and peered questioningly toward the entrance hall. The door, however, had already shut upon the adroit and impulsive Skippy, and being a very literal person she was frankly puzzled as to what caused him to switch from the police to a lemon fizz. Consequently, she shook her head two or three times and went back to her typing, feeling that an office boy with a detective complex was quite trying.

Skippy, meanwhile, was executing a sort of ice-skating step down the length of the neatly-tiled hall and whistling hard. He knew instinctively, that he must keep up this attitude of nonchalant gaiety until he reached the elevators and was on his way to the street floor. He felt that to betray by one single gesture that he was aware of the watcher's real purpose in that hall, would be fatal—the Curley gang had a flair for that sort of thing.

Skippy slid four or five feet, landed with a sort of whirligig motion before the nearest elevator and pressed the little black button. His heart beat quite rapidly while he waited for the red light to flash on overhead, but finally he saw the welcome signal.

The man seemed to pay no attention to him for his gaze was centered upon the International's entrance. Even when the elevator stopped and its steel doors clanged noisily open to admit Skippy, he did not turn.

Skippy had not the slightest doubt of triumph now.

CHAPTER II THE RIOT SQUAD

Before the street floor was reached Skippy had come to a definite understanding with the elevator boy to have the starter order all seventh floor signals ignored until he could get back with the police. He hurried through the busy lobby of the great office building, only to halt in dismay at the sight beyond the revolving door.

A large car was parked at the curb and to Skippy's observant eyes, there was an ominous significance about its drawn curtains and the tense-looking posture of the man at the wheel.

However, he hesitated but a fraction of a second and made bold to continue his journey around the revolving door and so out of the building. The drugstore was just next door, and being his avowed objective he bravely whistled his way toward it, stealing a glance meanwhile for some welcome sign of the blue-coated law.

The police were conspicuous by their absence and Skippy reached the store without untoward incident. Past the soda fountain he hurried, oblivious of its varied assortment of fizzes and his own particular choice in the matter—all thought was centered on the nearest phone booth.

He put in a call, gave the answering sergeant a breath-taking message and slipped out the back entrance of the drugstore into the alley to await the coming of the riot squad. Then he leaned back against the sun-baked wall of the building and spent a few anxious minutes of waiting by consuming a half-eaten bar of chocolate, already reduced to a liquefied state by an afternoon's contact in his pocket.

Consequently, the riot squad arriving in the back alley regarded Skippy not a little dubiously. His chocolate smeared mouth and sticky brown fingers were hardly in keeping with the police idea of a wide-awake office boy in a world-famous detective agency. Their credulity was to receive a still further setback when he looked up at them and smiled boastfully.

"Do you say I don't know 'Silver' Curley when I see him, huh?" he asked with a swaggering motion toward the rear entrance of the building. "Even I bet he walked past other cops up to our office and they didn't know him like I did. *Hot dog!*"

The detective-sergeant winked knowingly to his fellow-officers. "All right, Hawkshaw, where is he, now that we're here?"

Skippy winked triumphantly. "I told Miss Purdy, our 'steno' to fool with him sort of—you know, kid him like girls can do an' kill some time till I got

back with you guys. He came up right in our office, gave a card that said his name was Mr. A. P. Holden—can you beat that? He wrote Mr. Conne a letter and. . . .”

“All right, kid,” smiled the detective sergeant, “let’s get at Silver Curley first.”

Skippy was in his element for the next few minutes. He felt a secret pride that because of his observance in noting the Curley car, half of the riot squad were summarily ordered to the front of the building in order to apprehend Silver Curley’s waiting henchmen. And, when he led the rest of the squad to the elevators and was told with a marked deference by the starter that all signals from the seventh floor had been disregarded, he felt that he was of some importance in the great city of New York, and not just a mere office boy in the International’s offices.

In the next second when he had crowded into an elevator with the officers, the detective-sergeant took the keen edge off his high hopes by saying, “Silver could have used the stairways if he wanted to, you realize that, eh kid?”

“Sure,” Skippy answered. He was down for only a moment, however, and bounded back confidently. “Do you think I didn’t think of that? But anyhow, he didn’t even see me go out or anything. What’s more I told Miss Purdy she shouldn’t let on but just to kid him like she really believed he was that big guy, A. P. Holden. Gee whiz, she *did* believe that he was—she didn’t believe me that it was Silver Curley. I didn’t act scared when I saw Curley’s lookout in the hall either. I walked indifferent like so he shouldn’t get wise to where I was really going.”

“All right,” said the detective-sergeant as the elevator wheezed to a stop at the seventh floor, “we’ll hope for the best and look for the worst.” Everything seemed quiet and peaceful when the heavy-footed police invaded the International’s luxurious offices. Miss Polly Purdy was so engrossed in her typing that she did not hear them until Skippy’s reedy voice fell upon her shell-like ears.

“Ain’t *he* come out of Mr. Conne’s office yet?” Skippy asked eagerly.

“Mr. Holden left about three minutes ago and I didn’t try to detain him with any of your foolish talk, Skippy Dare,” said Miss Purdy with ill-concealed annoyance. “I told you I know a gangster when I see one and I know a man like Mr. Holden when I see one. Besides,” she added, her pretty blue eyes upon the police, “I thought you thought better of your foolishness and decided to go straight down to the drugstore and get a lemon fizz as you called.”

“I said it to put Silver’s lookout off his guard,” Skippy groaned. “Gee whiz, Miss Purdy . . . gee. . . .”

“Say,” said the detective-sergeant impatiently, “where’s Mr. Conne anyway, eh?”

“In his office,” said Miss Purdy with a hint of impertinence. “He couldn’t very well walk past me without my knowing it.”

And Miss Purdy was right. Mr. Carlton Conne, world-famous detective and head of the great agency was at that moment incapable of walking anywhere at all. Skippy soon bared this fact before the astonished gaze of the riot squad when, after repeated knocks for admittance to his employer’s private inner office, he received no summons to enter and soon flung open the door.

The detective was seated at his desk bound from head to foot and securely gagged.

CHAPTER III

MR. CONNE

It was five minutes before Mr. Conne was in a condition to talk. To be sure, his small audience had to wait still longer until a fresh, black cigar was lighted and placed at a precarious angle in the corner of his mouth. Then his small bright eyes darted from Skippy to the police then back to Skippy again.

“Well, kid?” he questioned. “It’s too bad you didn’t get me some help before he got away. How did you know—he pointed a gun at me the minute he came inside that door—he didn’t give me a chance to squeak even?”

Between the detective-sergeant and Skippy Mr. Conne learned all the details. He listened intently, screwing his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other with a lightning-like rapidity that never failed to fascinate his office boy. Too, he had a deep line running from the center of his forehead to the bridge of his nose and when in a troubled mood as he was now, it became a veritable furrow that greatly attracted Skippy.

“So Miss Purdy spoiled your game, eh kid?” he asked the boy gruffly, but with a hint of pleasure in his bright eyes.

“Yeah, she *would!*” Skippy exclaimed indignantly. “And am I sore! Hot dog, but I’d have liked to see Silver Curley nabbed!”

Carlton Conne scowled, then coughed. “Well,” said he looking up at the detective-sergeant, “Silver’s farther from the trail than ever. He locked the door before he trussed me up, then he walked calm as a cucumber into the file room, hunted out all the dope we had filed against him and pocketed it as nice as pie.”

“And your Miss Purdy never got hep that anything was wrong?” asked one of the officers.

Mr. Conne shook his head. “Anyway, we ain’t paying Miss Purdy to be a detective,” he said. “She ain’t supposed to know when things are wrong or who’s Mr. A. P. Holden and who ain’t.”

“Yeah,” Skippy spoke up with evident disgust, “but she ought to use her head. Gee whiz, she should have known I meant to go for the cops and not for a lemon fizz—gee. . . .”

“That’s where you fizzed up things for yourself,” said Mr. Conne leveling his gaze upon his office-boy. “You got to understand, kid, that there’s a whole lot of people in the world who listen to what you say and not to what you’re trying to say.”

Skippy had a momentary wave of disappointment, a second's sense of failure, but by the time Mr. Conne had talked with and then dismissed the riot squad, he was certain that he had triumphed and Miss Purdy had failed.

"Do you say I kind of didn't do something when I recognized that Silver Curley wasn't Mr. A. P. Holden and then went for the coppers?" he asked.

Mr. Conne screwed his cigar about three or four times before he answered Skippy's question. "You can't do something as you call it, unless you do it well, kid. You got to keep it in the top of your head that there's always somebody who's likely to spoil your plans. When you get that fixed in the old skull and make allowances for those trip-ups, then you'll know how not to fail—see? Got your letters all out for the day?"

"Aw sure," Skippy answered, realizing that he suddenly disliked the thought of the office mail. Skimming the edge of crime and detection had been like a visit to some new and fascinating realm from which he was loath to return. Office mail was a dead, dull subject to him now and he was eager to discuss the Curley affair further.

However, the phone rang just then and Mr. Conne called brusquely into the mouthpiece, "Yes?"

Miss Purdy making the connection from the outside office, answered meekly, "Mr. A. P. Holden on the wire, sir. Mr. Holden, here's Mr. Conne."

Mr. Conne grunted noisily.

The one and only Mr. A. P. Holden called excitedly from the other end of the wire, "Conne? This is A. P. H. I've got to see you tonight! Up at my High Hills place. That scoundrel Silver Curley just phoned me here at my office. Plain extortion, Conne—that's what he's going to do now. Don't start till dark and be careful you're not followed. I don't want him to think I'm taking it seriously. You know how slippery he is, I suppose?"

"I got an idea, Mr. Holden," Mr. Conne answered grimly. "I'll be there at ten."

When he had replaced the phone, he was aware that Skippy was watching him excitedly. The boy's bright eyes gleamed with a dozen questions. But Mr. Conne gave him not a chance to ask one. Instead, he did some querying himself.

"You say that Silver Curley didn't give you a tumble at all?" he asked.

"Naw," answered Skippy. "He didn't look at me once even—he was too interested to get in and see you. That's how I got wise. . . ."

Mr. Conne rolled his cigar about twice and waved aside Skippy's eager information. Then he got up from his swivel chair and paced the thickly-carpeted floor, his capable-looking hands plunged deep into his trousers pockets. After a few minutes he stopped short, swung about and scowled down at the puzzled boy.

“Listen here, kid, I’m taking you to New Jersey with me tonight. Phone home to your aunt and tell her.”

“Then what?” Skippy asked delightedly.

“Go to the washroom and scrub that chocolate smear off your face. After that I’ll talk to you.”

Mr. Conne turned away and looked out of the window. The scowl disappeared from his round leather-like face and a deep, contented smile played about the corners of his mouth.

CHAPTER IV

A TRUST

Skippy's heart was beating with delight as the elevator bore him down to the street floor for after six months of employment in the International Detective Agency, Mr. Conne had at last entrusted him with an errand outside of the drab routine of the office. And, although the great detective had not given out the slightest hint that such was the case, Skippy felt that this trust was a sort of reward for his keen observance of Silver Curley's identity.

With his face fairly clean and his pompadour brushed and more bristling-looking than ever, Skippy circled the revolving door three times, "just for luck," he told himself. Then he darted out onto the still, warm street and squinted up and down the deserted thoroughfare, instinctively, but there wasn't a soul in sight. Nothing stirred save a few last quivering rays of the dying sun which gleamed upon the drugstore windows. The famous business district of the great city yielded gladly to the promise of coming twilight and seemed content under the growing shadows of its man-made canyons.

After a final scrutiny up and down the street, Skippy darted into the drugstore and ordered a lemon fizz. While it was being prepared he moved adroitly to the rear telephone booth and put in a call for the International Detective Agency.

Mr. Conne's gruff voice answered. "Yes? *You*, kid? I thought maybe you got so excited about the two dollars I gave you that you went off and forgot your first order."

"Naw," Skippy assured him. "I gave a good look—that's what took me so long. There ain't a soul, boss."

"I thought there wouldn't be. But I wanted to make sure to know where I stand. Hmph, I guess he's satisfied with what he got this afternoon. Now, you've got it down pat what you're to do?"

"And how!" Skippy chuckled in anticipation. "I'm to get me a good feed uptown and slip into a movie and at ten bells I'm to be at the ferry."

"Right. Don't forget to use your eyes. Watch and see if there's anybody aboard with the earmarks of the gang. And whatever you do, don't let them see you getting in my car—understand?"

"And how!" Skippy assured him joyously.

He drank an extra fizz at the soda fountain just by way of celebrating the anticipated evening and departed from the drugstore with one dollar and

ninety cents in his pocket. Five minutes later he had boarded an uptown subway train and whistled his way to a seat.

The next three hours Skippy spent in a continuous round of pleasure. He swallowed what he thought to be an excellent dinner for sixty cents, paid ten cents admission to visit a renowned flea circus on Forty-Second Street and made a two hour stay in an ornate movie palace on Broadway. Last but not least he invested twenty cents in a varied assortment of candy both sticky and otherwise despite Mr. Conne's explicit warning that his trusted office-boy was not to appear at the appointed hour with a soiled mouth.

Before he reached the ferry house, however, the last of the candy had been consumed and he made a desperate attempt to rub away with his handkerchief all trace of the forbidden sweetmeats. The attempt was only partly successful for Skippy seemed never to be able to see himself as others saw him, not even when he glanced at his slightly smeared face in the mirror above a chewing gum slot on his way out to the boat.

But then he had not time to think of himself at all, for it was already two minutes before the hour and the cars were rattling down the runway and onto the lumbering-looking boat. He had enough to do to keep his eye out for likely looking Curley adherents without thinking about a smeared face.

He strolled through both passenger cabins just after the starting whistle blew but saw no one he knew. Then when the boat was well under way he slipped through the summer night crowd on deck and hurried into the dark vehicle passageway.

The cars for the most part had been deserted by their drivers and passengers who were among the crowd on the breezy forward deck. Skippy decided that they were better off, for the passageway was not only dark and gloomy but stifling and reeking with the odor of rancid oils and gas.

He espied Mr. Conne's chauffeur, Driggs, sitting at the wheel of a dark gray sedan which was wedged in between two other nondescript cars. The curtains in the sedan were drawn despite the oppressive heat in the passageway and Skippy thrilled a little to think that his employer was waiting for him behind them to hear what his report of the boat would be.

Knowing this, Skippy made a car to car survey clear to the back of the passageway in order to assure himself that all was well up to the present time. And he was assured of this even after he stumbled over the fender of the maroon colored coupe just a little this side of Mr. Conne's own car. He limped on despite a bruised instep and had almost made his way to the rear of his employer's sedan when he heard a voice just behind him.

[Illustration: "I'D BE CAREFUL GRABBIN' A RIDE KIDDO," THE MAN SAID IN SOFT TONES.]

“I’d be careful grabbin’ a ride while you’re on this tub, kiddo,” a man said in soft tones. “You might get in a jam and it ain’t worth it. That’s what you were goin’ to do, huh?”

Skippy was nodding violently before he realized it. The man who had spoken to him was now motioning pleasantly from the maroon-colored coupe.

“Where you goin’, kiddo?” he was asking.

“I—er . . .” Skippy stammered.

“Up the line?” asked the man insistently. “Why—er. . . .”

“Hop in, kiddo—hop in!”

Skippy could only stare, for he was face to face with the man with the mole.

CHAPTER V FAIR DISGUISE

Skippy did not know what to do. For a second he felt not a little panicky and it was only the sudden rush of people back to their cars in the passageway that made him get hold of himself. He realized that he had to think and act quickly to avert suspicion. He was even suspicious himself that the man with the mole knew of Carlton Conne's presence on the ferryboat.

If he did—what then?

The boat, he was aware, had been moored. Engines were throbbing impatiently. Suddenly, the clang of the gates sounded throughout the boat. A klaxon sounded shrilly up ahead and he knew that the traffic was moving onto the New Jersey shore. Then he saw, as if in a dream, Conne's big car join the procession.

He knew he could not now join his employer without being seen by the man with the mole and he remembered Conne's orders that he must not be seen doing so by any of the Curley gang. So he ran toward the maroon-colored car and leaped inside as if some great external force had pushed him there. Somehow he felt that it was the right thing to do.

The car started almost before he had settled himself and he saw that the man with the mole was not alone. Another, rather light-complexioned man, moved over to make room for him. Skippy sensed by his drawn brows that he was not very pleased with the invited passenger.

The man with the mole, however, seemed not to notice it, but was busy guiding the powerful coupe from the boat. In the shadow Skippy thought he detected a vague smile on the man's dark face.

After a moment's silence the driver said, "Guess a cool ride's got it all over a long, hot hike on a night like this, what say kiddo?"

"Er. . . ." stammered Skippy.

The light man snorted. "Looks juss lika dumb wop kid, Mole," he mumbled in a stage whisper that Skippy did not fail to catch.

"Shut up, Sam. We been kids and we been broke. And that we wasn't dumb Wops was just luck. If I give the kid a lift that ain't your business."

Skippy leaned back against the head rest and permitted himself the luxury of a sigh. The man with the mole had not recognized him as the office boy from the International Detective Agency and the more he thought of it, the more he wondered why he did think so at all. Mole, as the man's name seemed to be, had not given him a glance that afternoon. His worry on that score had been for nothing.

He was puzzled for a few minutes as to why the light man named Sam should mistake him for a stupid Italian boy. It was only for a few minutes, however, for suddenly it dawned on him that his natural complexion had undergone a radical change since he left the movie palace on Broadway. His already tanned face stained to a vari-colored hue by a half-hour's contact with chocolate and flaming peppermint candies had been rubbed to a mellow smear by a none too clean handkerchief when he was in the New York ferry house. Then in his search through the boat's vehicle passageway, he had become very warm and found it convenient to rub away with his grimy hands the great beads of perspiration that rolled down from his forehead to his chin. Yes, he decided, it must be that his face had become very dirty during this process and consequently, it wasn't at all strange that Sam should mistake him for a Latin-skinned youngster. And, as for the man's decision that he was plain stupid, Skippy realized that his behavior was bound to have made just that impression upon the most casual observer for the sudden turn of events and his own singular predicament had seemed to leave him incapable of speech.

But Skippy was to be thankful that his plight had brought this about. To be sure, the idea was even then taking root in his active mind that this mistaken identity might not prove to be so inconvenient after all. These hard-boiled members of Silver Curley's gang might say or do something in his supposedly stupid presence that would later be of value to his beloved employer, Carlton Conne. Very well, he thought decisively, let them think of him as they would.

He would be dumb! He would be an Italian!

His next worry was about Mr. Conne—what that gruff but kindly gentleman would be thinking about him and if he was puzzled as to his failure to show up on the boat.

Skippy straightened up and leaned far out the open window at his side. Mr. Conne's car was nowhere to be seen in the traffic that was moving up the runway from the ferry. Things had happened so fast he had been unable to keep track of it after it moved off the boat. Suddenly he was aware that Mole was speaking to him. "Where 'bout's we drop you, kiddo?"

Skippy could feel the blood rushing up to his scrawny neck and it took him a full second before he could bring his head around from the window. When he did he had managed to bring to his dirty face a wide, disarming smile.

"Drop-a?" he questioned, managing an accent adroitly.

"*Whew!*" whistled Sam disgustedly. "Mole, now ain't this a swell little pal? They ain't learned him United States yet."

“Aw, cut it,” said Mole impatiently. He swerved the car out onto a dirt road and after picking up speed, leaned over and motioned to Skippy. “Your home—*where?*”

Skippy looked utterly blank and shrugged his shoulders. He was resolved to stick out the adventure and hope for Fate to play into his hands.

“Maybe he ain’t got no home,” Sam suggested facetiously.

“*Home!*” shouted Mole so vociferously that he almost lost control of the wheel. “Sleep . . . sleep-a . . . you know?”

“Ah,” said Skippy allowing himself to look a little more intelligent about the matter. He had heard an Italian barber in his aunt’s neighborhood say many profound ‘ahs’ and he rather liked the sound of it. Consequently, he again said, “Ah! *Sleep-a!*” Thereupon he shut his eyes and rested his head back of the seat to indicate that such was his understanding.

“No!” shouted Mole desperately. “No sleep-a *here.*” Then when he caught Skippy’s eye he motioned frantically westward. “Sleep-a *there!*”

Skippy found it difficult to suppress his mirth. But he kept up the fiction skilfully and he looked at Mole with wide-eyed understanding. “Sleep-a house,” he mumbled.

“Atta kid,” said Mole joyfully. “House— *where?*”

Skippy motioned ahead vaguely.

Mole was about to give up when an inspiration seized him. “House on hill-a?” he asked eagerly. “Bigga-da-hill?”

Skippy felt a little thrill running up and down his spine. He had a hunch and he answered accordingly. “House-hill-a,” he said slowly.

“Atta kid,” Mole said pleasantly. “Now we’re gettin’ somewheres. We go hill-a too.”

“Ah!” said Skippy purposely vague.

“Well, anyways,” said Mole wearily, “we can count on him pointin’ out where he oughta hop out. I got patience, but I ain’t no mind-reader. He can’t be that dumb that he won’t know that, hah?”

“Le’s hope so,” Sam said disgustedly. “But them greenhorn Eytalians sure need nurses.”

“I’ll take a chance on the kid,” said Mole grimly.

“An’ if he ain’t a 100 to 1 shot I ain’t never seen one,” said Sam. Then thoughtfully, he added, “Now wouldn’t it be hot if he blows right into High Hills with us, hah? Many Wops live down in the town, Mole?”

“How should I know, I never had business down in that town. High Hills means just one thing with me.”

“Yeah, ’at goes double!” Sam agreed.

Skippy leaned back against the cushion again and closed his eyes. He just had to think.

CHAPTER VI

TRAILED

After a few minutes' steady driving, they turned out on a brightly lighted highway and pulled up before a gas station. Neither of the men spoke until after they had driven off. Skippy lay back as still as the proverbial mouse.

"What'll we do, stick on them back roads?" Sam asked at length.

Mole nodded. "Un-hunh. Silver says we better in case Conne's got word from Holden and they got anybody snoopin' on the main stem."

"Mm! Silver's just got ideas, I'll tell th' world," Sam expostulated with a superior air. "Holden ain't goin' haywire an' yelp for Conne right off the bat. He figgers he's smart. If he ain't countin' on outsmartin' Silver I sure am a mug."

"Says you!" Mole interrupted rather testily. "But we're ridin' on Silver's orders, see?"

Skippy pursed his lips and feigned a long, drawn-out snore.

Sam snorted. "Yeah; an' now look! This dumb wop goes an' takes a count. Now, how we gonna know where he lives?"

"Aw, pipe down, Sam. Maybe he does live in High Hills and knows it'll be all right to sleep awhile. We ain't gettin' there before three-quarters of an hour yet. Not at the speed we're makin' on these back roads."

"Yeah, an' yuh better step on this can plenty, even if we hit the ceilin'," Sam said glancing back over his shoulder.

"What's up?" Mole asked quickly.

"Well," drawled Sam, "maybe I'm wrong, but I spotted a car tail us onto this road from th' main stem an' it's stickin' tighter'n glue."

"Think it's a trooper?" Mole asked nervously. "I ain't no television shark, Mole. It's stuck a hunnert feet back right along. S'pose it's a trooper—why worry? Ain't yuh gotta license?"

"Sure. But maybe this bird'll holler for an owner's card too. Silver says he's gotta keep under cover here in Jersey so we gotta lose this bird."

Skippy looked up from under half-closed lids and saw that both men were looking grimly into the mirror overhead. For a few tense seconds neither one of them spoke.

Then Sam asked: "How about th' plates?"

"I smeared 'em with grease on the ferry so that's all jake."

"He's comin' closer, Mole!" Sam's voice was keyed down almost to a whisper.

“Yeah?” Mole’s voice quivered slightly, but Skippy saw that when he shifted into high his hand was steady and he was complete master of the situation. “Here’s where we give her some juice. If they tail us then, I’ll know it ain’t just some Johnnie out with his girl.”

Mole was as good as his word, Skippy found. The high-powered car leaped forward and seemed to skim the surface of the deeply rutted road. More than once he just fell against Sam’s powerful body in order to keep from falling to the floor. However, he kept up his pretext of sleep and emitted several loud snores in the bargain.

Sam whistled his wonder. “Yuh ain’t got no doubt how dumb this prize winnin’ kid is, Mole!” he exclaimed. “He can’t even come to when he’s bein’ bounced all over the car.”

“Yeah? Well, with that trap of yours it’s good we didn’t pick up some snooty kid what could broadcast all we been sayin’ (and maybe what we’ll be doin’ before this trip’s over). Just keep a glim on that mirror an’ tell me if that car’s stickin’.”

Sam looked a moment, then: “Yep. We ain’t makin’ no getaway. They look closer’n . . .”

“How close?” Mole’s question sounded sharp. “Right on th’ ole tail.”

Even from under veiled lids, Skippy could see the dazzling gleam of the car’s headlights lighting up Sam’s blond head. And, discovering this also, Mole snarled, “Get that cap on, mugg, an’ make it snappy. We don’t wanta jam Silver’n everybody else.”

“Say’s that a trooper?” Sam asked nervously as he obeyed Mole’s order. The cap, peak and all, was pulled down almost over his eyes and when he looked up at his companion there wasn’t a sign of blond hair visible. “Yuh don’t think it’s some wise guy juss showin’ his speed?”

“Notta chance. Wise guys like good roads for showin’ their stuff. But we’ll give ’em a break. I’ll give this can some more juice an’ we’ll duck into the next side road we come to that’s fulla trees.”

“An’ then?”

“We’ll get a nice hidin’ place,” chuckled Mole, “an’ douse our lights. Then if they’re just snooty guys they won’t bother much—maybe not at all. But if it’s a bull . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Well, ain’t your rod all set?” Mole asked significantly.

Skippy felt suddenly chilled.

CHAPTER VII IN HIDING

“Just get a bead on his tires, that’s all,” said Mole firmly. “Don’t bust him up even if he shoots. Them’s Silver’s orders—lay off the bulls. No use gettin’ ’em on our trail right now.”

“O. K. Mole.” Then: “Say, they got speed an’ how! They’re comin’ up fast.”

“Don’t I know it?”

Another tense silence followed during which Skippy dared to open his eyes wide enough to take in the situation. Fortunately, for the moment, both of the men seemed to have completely forgotten about his small and supposedly stupid presence. Their minds were centered on the pursuing car, the road ahead and the probability of some convenient side road which would loom up out of the darkness.

Suddenly, such a road yawned to their left and Mole had swerved the coupe onto it.

They had backed into a thick grove of trees some fifty feet off the narrow country road, doused their lights and were nicely hidden by the time the pursuing car came racing along in the chase. Fortunately, Skippy learned afterward, it was not a fully equipped police car and carried no searchlight.

They soon discovered, however, that the lone trooper carried a small hand light which he was using even then to fairly good advantage. Skippy saw, with beating heart, that he was slowing down considerably and playing his light on the fringe of the grove.

Suddenly, he stopped, switched his lights off and for a tense second, Skippy felt that they were doomed in a dark world of silence.

A twig crackled somewhere not far distant. Once, Skippy had an insane desire to shout out to the trooper but reason whispered to him to be cautious. Sam, he felt instinctively, took life at its face value—not even the life of a boy such as himself.

Skippy’s heart beat so rapidly as the seconds wore on, that he could not even hear the quick nervous breathing of the men beside him. He stirred, discovering that one foot was asleep. Suddenly, he felt Sam’s heavy arm whip across him holding him down.

“Sh!” came the gruff whisper.

Skippy sighed softly, wriggled his foot into a more comfortable position and feigned the soft, regular breathing of a boy deep in sleep.

“Sleep?” questioned Mole eagerly.

“Yeah,” grumbled Sam. “I thought he’d be dumb enough so’s tuh jam us by wakin’ in a spot like this.”

“Sh!” Mole hissed.

Out of the darkness at that moment, the tiny gleam of the light came. It was playing about to the left, then out toward the road again. Sam sighed impatiently and Mole slid down a few inches behind the wheel scraping his shoe against the clutch. To Skippy every sound seemed to echo with a terrifying clarity.

The trooper’s shining puttees gleamed once as he switched the light about in a circle. Skippy saw them plainly. The rest of this state officer was lost in the darkness for he was careful to keep all, save the hand holding the light, out of sight.

But it had to come. Skippy felt it coming. The light suddenly gleamed on the coupe windshield. Then it was extinguished before Sam or Mole could duck their heads.

Sam’s hand fumbled in his right coat pocket.

Skippy could feel the movement and it left him feeling strangely fearful. Mole said nothing, but there was a quick gesture of his hand that must have spoken volumes to his companion. Then they heard a voice—the voice of the trooper.

“Might as well come out, buddies! I got you covered!”

Skippy saw Mole’s arm unloosen the windshield and Sam’s deep gruff voice echoed through the night. “Oh, yeah? An’ maybe you ain’t covered too, fella.”

“*Come out or I’ll shoot!*” was the peremptory command.

Almost without warning, Skippy saw Mole flash on the headlights, the car started and the trooper was not ten feet away. He raised his gun toward the opened windshield, but Sam raised his hand also and a small weapon was held steadily between the thumb and his long, thick fingers.

Skippy heard no cry, but he saw the trooper’s mouth open wide in astonishment, the gun fell from his hand, and he clutched his arm in obvious pain just as Mole swerved the car out to the road.

CHAPTER VIII

CHASE

Mole grumbled complainingly as Sam took several shots at the trooper's tires. "Now we're in for it! Didn't I say lay off that trooper?"

"Aw, I only clipped his mitt," Sam was quickly on the defensive. "Besides he mighta knocked us off if I hadn't."

"Boloney, Sam. That trigger finger of yours itches too much for everybody's good."

"Aw, lay off! He ain't got more'n a scratch."

"Yeah, and there'll be just as much noise about it as if he got the works. Silver'll yell murder over this, Sam. Just when things should be quiet."

Sam said nothing to this, Skippy noticed. He maintained a long silence born of remorse and watched the car leaping ahead with sullen, thoughtful eyes. Mole's present thoughts, it seemed, were centered on the speedometer for he cast quick, eager glances upon it from time to time when he wasn't watching the dark dirt road.

Skippy felt that he had enough of feigning sleep—he was too numb from his half-reclining position to pretend any longer.

He stirred, sat up, and as he stretched, he mumbled, "Hill-a?"

Mole looked over and there was a faint, kindly smile in his small, dark eyes. "Soon come hill-a now," he said. "Had a nice sleep, kiddo?"

"Sleep-a," Skippy smiled, feeling that in Mole he would have a friend if he needed one. Sam, he did not trust at all.

"Gotta stay on back roads now, hunh?" Sam suddenly queried.

"Yeah, thanks to you, Sam. We mighta been there by now. The way I'm goin', takes a half hour longer. And Silver's waitin'. Well, if he wants me at Holden's, it's a quick paintin' job on this car for you. It'll take all night, easy. A nice, nile green oughta cover it easy."

"Aw, don't rub it in." Then: "If we're hittin' th' shack by th' back way how about th' dummy?"

"That's soft, Sam. Silver an' me'll take him to town in another car an' see where he lives. No use lettin' him off here. If he got lost an' the bulls picked him up, he might remember how he was in a maroon-colored car with two guys, one light and the other dark. They'll grill anybody they find on these roads from now on. Good thing Silver's shack's up that trick road."

"Yeah, we oughta be there soon now, hunh?"

"What a memory you got for drivin', Sam. Four turns yet, then we retrace. Silver picked a place when he picked that."

“Yeah. How’d he get it, Mole? I ain’t never heard that story.”

“Well, he didn’ pick it exactly. A society guy hard up for cash told Silver that if he wanted a nice, quiet hideaway, he’d sell it an’ the deal would be silent. Silver grabbed it. He couldn’t picked a better joint. This society guy told him he’d built it ’cause it was a place where he could rest an’ his smart-aleck friends couldn’t find him when he wanted quiet. But since he went broke in the crash he said his friends just naturally gave him the air.”

“Yeah, that’s friends, hunh?” Sam said musingly. “But it was a break for Silver. I couldn’t find it alone an’ this is the third time I been up here. Yuh sure got it on me, Mole.”

“It took me three times. Silver learned me but he was up here with that society guy five times before he got wise himself. It’s some hideout all right, but that mile of footpath right up to the joint ain’t no joke with this heavy car. Silver was wise when he took that Ford early tonight.”

Sam chuckled. “Silver’s always a wise guy. I bet he had A. P. H. in his bean when he took this joint. If A. P. gets nasty, why it’ll be a swell place tuh park th’ kid if we gotta snatch him.”

“I hope we can duck snatchin’ A. P. H.’s kid,” Mole said. “I ain’t keen on that racket, Sam, believe me. Lay off the kids, I say. There’s other ways of grabbin’ dough.” And, as if suddenly reminded of another youngster’s presence, he leaned over to look Skippy’s way.

But Skippy had averted his head quickly and was leaning far out of the open window as if he had not had any interest in the conversation whatsoever. His cheeks burned with excitement and his eyes gleamed with anticipation. The knowledge he had already acquired of the Curley gang’s well-laid plans would be invaluable to his employer.

But when would he reach Carlton Conne to tell him? That night? He feared to think what might happen if, when they reached the secluded shack, Silver Curley might recognize him after all. These apprehensive thoughts were soon put to rout when Sam started visibly and uttered a queer, choking sound.

“*What?*” asked Mole in a small, strained voice.

“I just see three small lights down there, Mole—motorcycle lights.”

“It can’t be that bull, Sam—he wouldn’t had time to hit the highway. And what cars come along these back roads so late? I say . . .”

“Mole, I know them lights. It was that lower road they was on. They musta juss been turnin’ that bend before th’ climb starts an’ all that brush hides th’ rest of the road. An’ listen, Mole, now I think of it, I saw a car way back in th’ shadows behind that gas station when we was there. How we know it wasn’t that trooper I clipped? How we know he wasn’t leary ’bout them greased plates an’ got a hunch tuh tail us? All right, if he did that, yuh

can bet all th' tea in China he tipped off that gas station guy tuh phone for help if he got on th' spot. An' I got a hunch that's what happened, Mole. Yeah, there's been plenty time if he had help comin'."

"All right, Sam," said Mole nervously. "I never laugh at your hunches, but I ain't sayin' I think your way either. But there's no use chewin' the fat. We'll be safe anyways. First thing, we'll step on it an' lose these plates. Next, we'll turn north and run without lights till we lose 'em."

They were both out of the car by that time, apparently oblivious of Skippy's presence. Yet when the boy opened the door quietly and attempted to step out, Sam came hurrying around with the rear plate in his hand and scowling.

"Back, kid—*back!*" he was growling. "We ain't hill-a yet. Not hill-a."

Skippy sat back with a blank smile and wondered what to do next. But he hadn't time to think at all for Mole came rushing up with the front plate in his hands, pushed Sam into the car and started her up.

"There's a bridge over a lake just north of here," he said dousing his lights. "That's the only place we gotta be careful of without our glimmers. The rest of the road's pretty straight so we needn't worry."

Skippy found that he couldn't help himself. He was not only worried—he was sick with that kind of sickening dread which clutches at the heart when nameless danger threatens. He wished that Nickie Fallon, who had been with him in Devil's Bog, and after that trying experience had gone to live with his aunt, was with him. He missed Nickie in a tight spot such as this.

CHAPTER IX THE BRIDGE

Skippy did not lose that premonition even after they lost by distance the significant throbbing of distant motorcycles speeding up mountainous roads. The dread increased despite the noisy congratulations which Sam was heaping upon Mole as an expert driver.

“Yuh lost ’em even before they spotted us, Mole,” he was chuckling boisterously. “I didn’t think yuh could lose ’em ’at quick.”

“Yeah, an’ we’ll lose ’em for good when we hit that road after the bridge. It’s nothin’ more’n a cowpath an’ it’ll be hard ridin’, but it comes back onto the road we want right at the top of the mountain. Silver showed me the way the last time we was comin’ down from the shack. Lucky, too. He said I might wanta use it sometime, in case any snoops got tailin’ me.”

Mole slowed down a little indicating that they were in the neighborhood of the bridge. Skippy barely kept his balance he leaned so far out of the window. But he was determined to be on the watch when they approached the bridge for the darkness was almost impenetrable. Moreover, a fine mist held sway in the vicinity.

Suddenly, they came upon it, a narrow rickety-looking affair whose white paint was all that made it visible in that dark night. Near the approach, a part of the railing had either rotted away or had been broken away by some strong impact. In any event, it had never been replaced and stood gaping before them, an unguarded jumping off place to the black void of the lake below.

Skippy was fascinated by it for the brief second that it took for them to approach it. He had time to be fascinated—to be conscious of that thought and no more, for suddenly Mole was seized by a convulsive sneeze. It was apparent that it was entirely unexpected and that it caught him off guard for the act shook him with such force that his hands flew from the wheel. Just long enough it was for him to lose entire control of the car.

Skippy saw all that in a flashing, breathtaking second. And it was all that he did see, for he felt the car leap from under them into space and instinctively, he put his hand on the door and flung it open.

Sam screamed, Mole shouted hoarsely, and then Skippy felt his body hurtled into mid-air. He seemed to be rushing down into darkness . . . down. . . .

CHAPTER X

HELP!

A deafening roar filled Skippy's ears shutting out all other sound. Then suddenly he felt the contact of icy water and immediately reason asserted itself. The instinct to live overcame all other fears. The black night, the utterly unknown reaches of the lake no longer frightened him. He could swim—he *would* swim!

In the wake of this thought, he kicked furiously with his legs and struck out at the cold water with his trembling hands. Then a rush of sweet night air swept over his wet cheeks and his nostrils were filled with the quickening scents of throbbing life around him: the low murmur of the breeze through the trees, the hum of insects and the rasping chorus of frogs nearby.

Above these sounds, Skippy heard Sam shouting for Mole. But the gangster had evidently forgotten all about the boy or, what was more likely Skippy thought, did not care what his fate might be.

Skippy ceased his furious splashings and held his breath. He floated noiselessly and listened intently. Mole did not answer. The only sound was a distant splashing that kept up for fully five minutes. Then silence enfolded the lake once more.

Skippy waited another few moments before he began swimming again. He had gone but a few yards when he heard motorcycles coming nearer and nearer. His heart beat delightedly, hopefully, for suddenly their brilliant searchlights filled the little white bridge and he found that he had been swimming away from it.

He turned around, gauged the distance quickly and found to his disappointment that he was more than a hundred feet away from the bridge. Two of the motorcycles had already approached the structure and were thundering across. Skippy struck out and swam a few yards, then stopped, for two more, and obviously the last of the contingent, were speeding over the loose planks.

He raised his head and at the top of his voice, cried: "*Help!*"

But the sound was immediately lost in the roar of the motorcycles. They slowed down not one second but kept up their terrific speed even after they left the bridge. Obviously, they had not a suspicion that their quarry had summarily left the bridge for the dark waters of the lake.

Skippy realized this and did not spend more than a second in regretting it. After all, he decided, it was better that no one should hear about his strange experience until Mr. Conne had heard it first. He knew from

experience that his employer never told the police anything until he *had* to. He would say, quite emphatically, that “police ways were not his ways,” and that, “with the crime solved and the criminal found—the police could do the rest.” Such was Carlton Conne’s method and it seldom failed. Skippy resolved, in the face of this, that silence would be his cue.

He swam toward the bridge, paddled quietly until he touched the solid ground with his feet, then felt around in the darkness until he found some overhanging brush strong enough to hold his weight. With this he swung his lithe body up to the slippery clay bank and after getting a firm foothold, finally scrambled the rest of the way to the bridge.

[Illustration: HE SWUNG HIS LITHE BODY ON TO THE SLIPPERY CLAY BANK.]

There he stopped a moment and listened. But there was no sound save the murmuring night noises that he had been hearing right along. The noise of the motorcycles had been swallowed by distance and once he thought he heard the patter of running feet. Because of this he waited a few moments but was soon convinced it was nothing more than the breeze rustling the undergrowth.

However, he decided that caution would help rather than hinder him and he stepped noiselessly onto the bridge. Instinctively, he turned right and in the same direction that Mole would have gone.

As he reached out and felt for the railing to guide him across, it occurred to him with something of a shock, that he had unconsciously thought of Mole in the past tense. Sam’s frantic cries were evidence enough that the dark-skinned gangster had been trapped in the car when it settled in the bed of the lake. And Sam himself—what had been his fate? Skippy could not conjecture what that had been for he had heard nothing more than the cries.

He left the bridge behind and entered the narrow wood’s road thinking more about Mole than Sam. Skippy was conscious of a little pain about his heart when he thought of Mole’s tragic passing. He knew little or nothing about the man, yet it needed not a very great stretch of the imagination to guess that his life had not been laudable in any sense. Yet there was something about Mole (and Skippy had sensed it since his first meeting with him) that bespoke a kindness somewhere in his makeup. A fine kind of kindness it was too, since it had been directed at a boy whom the gangster really thought was half bereft of his faculties.

Skippy trudged on, weighted down by his wet clothing and soggy shoes. The air was cool and he was shivering in them, yet he dared not remove them, having decided that they would dry more quickly on than off.

He hadn’t the least idea where the road led to—he had only the remembrance of Mole’s confident assertion that it led to some other road at

the top of the mountain. It seemed rather vague when one was seeking a destination, but Skippy decided that it was infinitely better than no goal at all. Maybe if he had Mugs, his dead Airedale, with him he could quickly find his way, he thought.

A half hour's steady climb found him warmer and his clothes drier. The road seemed to be widening a little but the woods still hemmed him in on both sides. The darkness too seemed interminable and he longed for a ray of light.

He had long been confident that there was no one else traversing that road but himself. He was so certain of it that he laughed at caution and began to trudge noisily along the stony road and hum in his thin voice to while away the tedium of his journey.

Silver Curley would not be out looking for his absent henchmen quite yet, he told himself. And even if he was, what had he to fear from the man? In any event, no one could force him to answer a question that he did not want to answer. Moreover, no one knew of his ride with Sam and Mole except the two themselves. Therefore he needn't sneak and skulk any farther. He would act as he should act—like a boy and a human being who hadn't anything to fear.

It was true. Skippy hadn't anything to fear save the valuable information which he had learned from both Mole's and Sam's conversation, and nobody was aware that he knew it. Despite this, he *did* feel fear and the uncomfortable feeling it gave him grew greater by the moment. It reached a breath-taking climax when he heard a voice not many feet from him cry:

“Who's 'at, hunh?”

Skippy stopped, breathless and frightened. There wasn't a sound save the distant hooting of an owl. But after a tense second he was certain that he heard labored breathing. He couldn't tell how close it was—he knew only that it was too close for comfort.

He turned on his heel and tiptoed his way off among the closely-grown trees. He couldn't see a thing—he held out his hands and felt his way in. Then after he had gone about a hundred and fifty feet, he stopped behind a large tree trunk and listened. He was certain he had made no sound in his hasty retreat. The next second he was wondering whether or not he had been mistaken, for the voice broke through the silence again.

“I heard yuh an' yuh can't fool me. Who's it, hunh? An' come across fast.”

“*Sam!*” Skippy breathed softly. “It's Sam all right!” He wished Nickie Fallon was with him, or better still, Big Joe Tully, his protector in the river days after his dead father had been unjustly sent to prison.

CHAPTER XI

A CHANCE MEETING

He didn't move nor did he make a sound but listened intently while the other's footsteps crunched the stony road beyond. Twigs creaked underfoot and once he heard a muttered imprecation that was quite characteristic of Sam. Then there was a moment's silence during which time Skippy knew that the gangster was also listening.

Finally his raucous voice broke the silence. "Musta' been a rabbit or somethin'," he was saying impatiently, "or a wildcat," he added as an afterthought. "Still, I coulda' sworn I heard a voice hummin' like." He laughed aloud. "A ghost maybe . . ."

The footsteps went on up the road after that and Skippy knew that Sam must have given up the search. But his lesson was learned and he firmly resolved to be cautious. He hadn't any desire to walk open-eyed into Sam's malevolent clutches for he felt instinctively that that dubious character would not look upon him as kindly as had Mole. Consequently, he waited patiently behind the tree for a long time after Sam's heavy footsteps were lost in the distance.

When he did emerge he did not walk out in the road, but kept close to the trees and picked his every step. At frequent intervals he would stop and listen but a deep silence pervaded the mountain road.

He figured that at least three-quarters of an hour had elapsed since the time he left the bridge until he sighted an arc light up at the head of the road. Under the light he could see the figure of a man moving restlessly about and looking up and down the road that forked there. The light hair and wide, muscular shoulders told Skippy that it was Sam.

Skippy walked the rest of the way behind the protecting trees and took extra precaution as he came within range of the gangster's sharp ears that every step was measured and noiseless. Finally, he reached an excellent vantage ground where he could see the approach to all three roads and also Sam himself.

Sam had obviously forgotten all about his fright at being followed on the road below. Now his mind seemed centered on waiting and watching for some car to drive by and Skippy was puzzled at this new turn of events. However, he was determined to see it through even if it took hours for he had planned to take the fork to the east and he could not do so until Sam had gone his way for good and all.

Minutes passed—how many minutes Skippy had no way of knowing. They seemed like long hours to him and he felt certain that it was almost dawning. Sam too, seemed to be tiring, for his steps dragged more and more as he paced to and fro under the light.

Then just about when Skippy was beginning to tire of his long vigil the distant hum of a high-powered car reached his ears and presently two brilliant headlights lighted up the road running west. Sam stepped out a few paces and stood watching the oncoming car.

As it came nearer, he put up his hands and waved frantically and the car slowed down immediately. It rolled the rest of the way and came to a full stop just abreast of Sam.

“*Sam!*” came the muffled exclamation from within the light-colored roadster. “Where . . .”

“*Silver!*” Sam shouted, his surprise quite evident. “As I live—*Silver!* What luck!”

“Where did you—what are you doing here?” Silver Curley asked gruffly, opening the door of the roadster and leaning halfway out. “What’s the matter with your clothes . . . so wet. . . .”

“Boss,” Sam answered with a hint of servility in his tones, “it was like this: we picked up a kid at th’ ferry—a dumb wop wot fell asleep. Mole’s soft about women an’ kids . . . well, we got outa this kid that he lived somewheres up here so Mole lets him sleep. But a trooper tails us, see? And we gives him th’ slip and goes down a side road about thirty miles below here . . .”

“But he trailed you and you gave him the works, eh, Sam?” asked Silver Curley ominously.

Sam cringed a little but squared his shoulders and answered, “Nah, I just clipped his mitt, at’s all.”

“*That’s all!*” Curley’s voice was cold. He reached out and grasping Sam by the collar, shook him. “What did I tell you about that trigger linger of yours—*what did I tell you?*” he asked, his voice trembling with anger.

“*Now, boss!*” Sam pleaded fearfully. “That trooper had th’ bee on us! He was gonna shoot at th’ tank so I hadda’ clip him first so’s we could get away. If Mole was here he’d tell yuh.”

“*Mole?* Of course—*where is Mole?*”

“After a half hour we hear more troopers tailin’ us,” Sam evaded. “Mole says give ’em th’ slip an’ let ’em chase us north over a little white bridge an’ that we’d hit this road here an’ it would take us back tuh the road toward your joint. But we didn’t get no further than the bridge, boss. Mole sneezed,

lost control an' off we went where the railin' was busted. The kid jumped an' I jumped but Mole, he musta' got caught behind th' wheel."

"And he didn't come up?" Silver Curley asked anxiously.

"Not a sign of him, boss. Nor the kid, neither. I called for Mole but there wasn't no answer. It was too dark tuh see."

"Mole didn't come up!" Curley said softly. "Poor soft-hearted Mole, the one guy I could trust anywhere, with anything."

"Yeah," Sam sighed, "I stuck around thinkin' maybe I could find him or the kid but there wasn't no sound. Finally I hit th' bridge an' ducked four coppers who beat it across right past me. After they was gone I started up th' road. Onct, I thought I heard somethin' behind me." He laughed nervously. "I thought maybe it was Mole's ghost or the kid's, but when I walked back an' looked around as good as I could, I didn't find nothin'. Guess it was a rabbit."

Silver Curley straightened up. "I'll get one of the boys to go down to that lake first thing in the morning and watch for the bodies. It's bad enough that you started something with that trooper without having them recognize Mole's body at that lake. It wouldn't help me a darn bit right now for them to find my car at the bottom."

Sam fidgeted around first on one foot and then on the other. Suddenly Curley looked straight at him and there was a menacing look in his eye.

"What were you intending to do if it hadn't been me who came along here first, eh?"

"Oh, I had my story fixed up, boss. I was gonna tell whoever came that I wanted a lift tuh High Hills village on account of I had a bad accident an' ran my car in th' lake an' just escaped with my neck. Then when I hit town I was gonna call your joint an' ask somebody tuh page me.

"Yeah?" Curley retorted sarcastically. "Well, it's nothing but dumb luck that nobody else happened along but myself, Sam. Of all the stupid guys, you're one. What a story you had fixed up! It would have been a story that would have fixed me up with the police—fixed me up for a long stretch—do you realize that? *You fool!* And calling my place from High Hills village! That would have been another nice morsel, all right. Another thing, I'm just leaving the outskirts of High Hills—the village is four miles behind me—I'm on my way to my place now."

"Boss, I ain't good on direction. Mole always knew. . . ."

"Yeah, and you ought to be in the bottom of that lake instead of Mole!" said Curley with some heat. "A lot of good you are to me! Hereafter, I'm not letting you out of my sight. You're likely to send some of your reports to the State coppers by mistake. You're sticking with me night and day—understand?"

“Sure, Boss—*sure!*”

“It’s not because you deserve it, Sam—I just don’t trust you out of my sight. I got worries enough without worrying what you’re going to do next. So I want you where I can keep an eye on you!”

“Get in touch with Holden yet, Boss?” Sam asked with the hint of a smile.

“I just got through talking to him on the phone down in the village. He’s not going to be as easy as I thought. It looks as if it’ll take his kid to make him come across. That kid is the apple of his eye so we’ve got something to work on right there.”

“An’ how!” Sam grinned malevolently. “How long did yuh give Holden?”

“Till tomorrow. If there’s nothing doing, we’ll see what we can do with the kid by tomorrow night.”

“O. K., Boss,” Sam agreed and walked around the car and got in.

Silver Curley settled himself behind the wheel also and made ready to start his car. Suddenly, however, he glanced at his henchman questioningly. “You’re certain this dumb Italian kid never came up, eh?”

“Sure,” Sam assured him. “He never made no sound. Besides he didn’ see nothin’ or hear nothin’, Boss. He slept all th’ time!”

“Just the same, I feel safer to hear you say he never came up. If he had, he would have cried for help. Yes, it’s just as well. I *know* he can’t talk at the bottom of Mirror Lake.”

He started the car after that and soon the roadster was lost in the distance. Skippy pinched himself to make sure that he really wasn’t at the bottom of the lake. He laughed, then grew sober at the thought of Silver Curley’s great satisfaction that he was drowned—dead. It would seem that the man had a sort of premonition about him, in any case—a sort of fear that perhaps he might still have new worries from that source. It was then that Skippy grinned triumphantly.

Silver Curley, he told himself, didn’t know the half of it.

CHAPTER XII QUESTIONING

Skippy hurried off in the opposite direction, his mind in a whirl. Brought up as he had been at the city's waterfront, he was used to dubious characters and their crude way of taking life at its face value. Silver Curley and his henchmen, he realized with a jolt, seemed not to recognize that there was any face value to life at all. That they did not mourn his supposed passing, was of no surprise, but that they should pass over so lightly, the tragic passing of such a companion as Mole, gave him a queer, heavy feeling in his heart.

He gave a lot of thought to Silver Curley and his suave manners. How much malevolence underlay that graciousness, Skippy could easily guess since he had witnessed that short but decidedly enlightening interview between Curley and Sam. For some reason, however, the knowledge he was carrying of the Curley gang's plans, made him feel uneasy.

He hurried along the dimly lighted road, anxious to get this knowledge off his mind. It seemed an awful weight and he was suddenly aware of the fact that a detective's life was not an easy one. Not that he hesitated to compare his present experience with his employer's harried existence—he was just beginning to realize that it was something more than the thrill of a chase and the capture of a dangerous criminal.

Skippy's feet were sore and tired and he was so sleepy that he couldn't feel thrilled about anything but the promise of sleep. Tomorrow he would feel more like being thrilled by his triumphs and indulge these glories to his heart's content.

He had not walked very far along the road when he came to a crossroads. He looked up and down and was just about to walk on when he heard motorcycles. Presently, the road was lighted up with one headlight, then another came into view and soon four of them roared up to him and stopped.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" exclaimed a natty looking trooper. "Just a kid!"

"Just a kid!" three brother officers echoed.

Skippy was conscious of a curious shiver running up and down his spine. But he smiled broadly at all four men and did some fast thinking. These troopers, he told himself, were not exactly allies according to Carlton Conne, therefore he must talk to them accordingly.

"Where you goin' at this hour, kid?" one of them was asking.

"Aw," said Skippy with a studied nonchalance, "I'm lookin' for an uncle an' I hitch-hiked an' a guy took me the wrong way. . . ."

“You look as if you got soaked or something.”

“An’ how!” Skippy ejaculated. “He let me out way on another road. Seems like I been walking a million miles because I’m so tired an’ besides I fell in a brook an’ . . .”

“Remember what road you was on?” asked one.

Suddenly another asked, “Yeah, and what car you got a lift in? Was it dark red?”

Skippy blinked, but caught hold of himself in an instant. “Aw, I been lost in woods an’ everything since so how can I remember! Besides the car was black and mostly it didn’t have no paint an’ it was so old it shook all the way.”

“This can’t be the kid,” said the one who had asked about the color of the car. “They said they were sure there was a kid in that red coupe.”

Skippy had himself well in hand by that time and glanced from one to the other with a puzzled countenance.

“S’all right, kid,” said the first spokesman, “we been looking all over these roads for a dark red coupe that had two men and a kid in it. The kid looked like a wop or a mulatto—anyway, his face looked kind of dark to one of our men.” Skippy felt a sudden relief and thanked his stars that his experience in the lake had washed off the coating of chocolate and grime that had gathered on his face during the early evening.

“Well,” said one, “we might as well take you to your uncle. No kid your age should be hiking the mountain roads at this hour. Where’s this uncle live and what’s his name?”

“He lives in High Hills,” Skippy answered steadily, “an’ his name’s A. P. Holden.”

“*What?*” came the unanimous question. “*Not A. P. Holden?*”

“Sure,” answered Skippy with studied indifference, “I’m a poor relation and maybe he won’t be very glad to see me but just the same I’m goin’!”

“Atta boy,” said the first spokesman. “We’ll take you there, kid.”

Fifteen minutes later, Skippy, hanging on to one motorcycle and escorted by the other three, was admitted through the high grilled gates of the vast Holden estate. After a few questions the superintendent, sleepy-eyed and startled, allowed them to proceed along the long avenue which led to the ornate house of the financier.

Trees arched and interlaced overhead and the heavy scent of dew-laden flowers filled the still air. Skippy held on for dear life to the trooper with whom he was riding and his mind raced with ideas as to how he was going to convince the great Mr. Holden that he was a poor relation while the troopers looked on. It would be simple enough if Mr. Conne was present, but he felt certain that his employer had long since returned to the city.

And Skippy was right.

Mr. Holden was the only one up and about in the big house, having sat up unusually late to do some work in his library. Consequently, he opened the massive front door after ascertaining through a small grilled aperture just who his visitors were. Skippy managed to be standing right before the financier as soon as the door was opened.

“You say this boy is a relative of mine?” Mr. Holden asked the troopers. He was wide-eyed and incredulous.

“So he’s told us,” said one of the men. “Why . . .”

“Don’t you remember me, *Unk*—don’t you!” Skippy interposed desperately. “I—my mother is dead and my father, and he was your cousin, *C. C.*” he added hopefully.

A sudden gleam of understanding lighted Holden’s kindly eyes for Skippy winked quickly, significantly.

“Sure, you know who I am—*Skippy Dare!*” the boy almost cried. Then suddenly, he winked again.

A smile illumined Holden’s face and suddenly he put out his hand. “Why, of course,” he was saying effusively. “*Skippy Dare!* Why, of course!”

Skippy sighed with relief, then smiled brilliantly also.

CHAPTER XIII UNDER COVER

The sound of the motorcycles was scarcely audible when Holden shut the door and with an understanding smile, put his arm about Skippy's shoulders and led him into his library. The big room was in shadow save for the area surrounding the financier's fine satinwood desk which was lighted by a large bronze lamp nearby.

As soon as the man had shut the door behind them, Skippy sought the nearest armchair and whistled his relief.

"Gee, Mr. Holden!" he ejaculated. "Gee, that was a close shave! Was I scared that you wouldn't catch on—gee!" Then he added: "Anyway, you or Mr. Conne can't say I didn't do that as good and maybe even better than a real detective!" Suddenly, he gripped the arms of the chair and looked straight at Holden. "Say, I got so much to tell the boss an' I bet he couldn't wait for me, huh?"

Mr. Holden smiled and sat down in his desk chair with a hint of weariness. "He waited until after midnight for you, young fellow. Naturally, he was concerned about your safety since you failed to meet him at the boat. But he felt certain that some of Silver Curley's men were there and that you hesitated to enter his car for fear of attracting their attention to it."

"Gee, that is about like it happened, Mr. Holden, only . . ."

The man interposed, smilingly. "Save your story a few minutes, Skippy, my boy. I've promised to call Mr. Conne the moment I heard from you. You see, he rather expected that you would get out here to High Hills or get in touch with me in some way. Mr. Conne said he never knew you to do other than accomplish what you were told to do, even if it took a great deal of time."

"You said it!" Skippy breathed wonderingly. He felt flattered that his employer had thus spoken of his accomplishments. Now he was certain that he was born to be a sleuth and his boyish conceit took a decided leap, for he said, "You tell Mr. Conne that maybe even I'll capture the Curley gang on account of what I heard tonight."

Mr. Holden, with a grave face, assured Skippy that he would tell Mr. Conne just that and he kept his promise. He got the great detective's apartment without trouble.

Evidently, Mr. Conne was fully prepared for the call as he answered immediately. "Yes? Holden? What news of the kid?" he queried in his gruff yet kindly way.

“Good news,” answered the financier smiling into the transmitter. “He’s here with me now—in the library. Looks as if he could do with plenty of sleep and his clothes aren’t what they once were. But that’s the least of our troubles, eh? He’s just about Douglas’ size so we can outfit him excellently. He seems to be brimming over with good news for you.”

“Tell him to hold on to it until tomorrow.”

Skippy jumped up and running across the room, put his mouth close to the transmitter also. “I was in a car that jumped off a bridge into a lake,” he called with some pride.

Mr. Conne chuckled audibly. “All right, kid. The main thing is—you’re safe and sound.”

“Sure, I did some deduction too. You’d be surprised what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Nothing surprises me, kid. Holden will listen to you, but don’t do any talking to anyone else—understand? Now let me talk to Holden.”

“O. K., Boss,” Skippy grinned sheepishly.

“Right here,” interposed Holden immediately. Skippy, meanwhile, walked back to his chair feeling no longer an insignificant office boy of the International Detective Agency. He felt too important now to think of a little thing like sleep.

Sleep, however, was the very thing which his employer thought he must have immediately. “Don’t let him sit up and entertain you, Holden,” Carlton Conne said with a ring of real feeling in his voice. “I know that kid when he gets excited and feels important. Nothing can stop him. He may be strong, but he doesn’t look it. There’s no use letting him get overtired.”

“No, of course not,” said Mr. Holden sympathetically. “I’m going to let him take a warm bath and get some of that lake mud off that he’s talking about. He can slip into Douglas’ pajamas and sleep with him. All the bedrooms except the boy’s and mine are torn up for repairs, so it’s the best I can offer.”

“He’ll think it’s swell, poor kid,” Conne said in unusually soft tones. “Where he lives with his aunt on the lower east side, he bunks on a bumpy couch every night. I guess he’s never known what a real comfortable bed is like.” There was an apologetic chuckle and he added, “No use getting sentimental about that kid, though. Some angel perches on his skinny shoulders every time. Besides, he has the luck to be just conceited enough so’s he doesn’t feel the breaks either way. Well, get him to tell you what’s what in a hurry then rush him upstairs.”

“That I will,” Holden promised and said, “Goodnight!”

He turned to Skippy then, questioningly. “Tell me,” he said with mock severity, “what you were doing between the hours of ten thirty last night and

two thirty o'clock this morning?"

Skippy grinned and slid forward in the big chair. Meanwhile the idea was growing in his prolific young mind that to be important enough to have a great man like A. P. Holden talking to one on equal terms was nothing short of a triumph. His aunt would gasp with amazement he thought, could she see him sitting there telling the rich man his strange adventurous evening.

And tell it he did. He omitted no hair-raising detail and found for the first time in his young life that he supremely enjoyed the role of narrator. His account of Sam's coincidental meeting with Silver and the ensuing conversation which took place between them, caused Mr. Holden to pale perceptibly. But he did not interrupt and listened intently, notwithstanding that Skippy wound up his narrative quite characteristically.

"Do you say it wasn't Fate that made me eat all that candy so's my face would get black so's Mole and Sam took me for a wop kid and so's I could hear afterward how Silver is planning to kidnap your son Doug tomorrow night if you don't come across with the money . . . do you say . . ."

Worried as he was, Mr. Holden could not suppress the smile that Skippy's breathless chatter brought to his pale face. But it was gone in a moment and he rose from his chair restlessly, nodding to Skippy the assurance that nothing but Fate could have guided him through that chaotic evening.

Suddenly he stopped, thoughtfully. "I must get out right after daylight and tell Conne all about this," he said more to himself than to Skippy. "No telephoning, no telegraphing now. . . . I've got a hunch that I must do nothing of that sort now. I'll get into the city and see Conne before six o'clock. Then he can do what he likes about that Mirror Lake angle. And as for Douglas, I'll see that he and I get away by noon tomorrow—do a little traveling until this thing blows over. I needn't ask you not to breathe a word of this to anybody, Skippy. Not one of my employees in this house is aware that this terrible evil in the form of Silver Curley and his gang threatens us."

Skippy was duly impressed, but practical. He asked, "They want a whole lot of money, huh?"

"Fifty thousand, my boy. Blood money! A brother of mine who has run the gamut of crime and is now in State's prison, revealed to Silver Curley our relationship. That was Curley's calling card into my house—that knowledge. When I failed to be moved by his promise that that sum of money would insure his silence, he implied that he did not for an instant forget that my son was the source of happiness to me. He was gone before I realized that he meant in some way to use Douglas if all else failed. And

since hearing your story, I'm convinced just how he means to do that—*kidnapping!*”

Skippy could not help feeling the force of Mr. Holden's fear, yet neither could he keep from blinking his sleepy eyes. Consequently, it was with some relief that he saw the rich man beckon him to follow and in a second they were mounting the great circular staircase to Douglas' room.

Mr. Holden led the way and showed him into a vast but comfortably furnished room which he had just illumined by means of an emergency light just inside the heavy door. He walked quietly past a large dark bed in which Douglas lay still and peaceful. For a moment he glanced at his son's curly light hair and round flushed cheeks, then stepped on into the bathroom just opposite.

“I'll start the water for your bath and rummage around for a pair of Doug's pajamas,” he said to Skippy. “Then in the morning Doug can attend to you.”

Skippy glanced at the comfortable bed, longingly. Douglas moved his full red lips ever so slightly and showed his strong, even teeth in a prolonged sigh.

“Man, can he sleep!” Skippy grinned, strolling into the bathroom and gazing with wonderment at the luxury he was seeing on all sides.

“It takes an awful lot to wake him,” smiled Mr. Holden. “Even in the morning. But I fancy he'll stir a little after you crawl in beside him. He's not used to sleeping with anyone. If he wakes, you can explain who you are and tell him the rest in the morning.”

Skippy followed the rich man out into the bedroom again and stood looking on as he opened and closed bureau drawers in the search for the pajamas. But at last they were found, handsome silk ones that seemed to be almost too luxurious to be worn in the privacy of a bedroom.

That's what Skippy was thinking of for a few moments after Mr. Holden said goodnight and left for his own room directly across the hall. When he had finally decided that he was getting nowhere with such thoughts, he divested himself of his rumpled and sorry looking garments and promptly deposited them in a tall porcelain receptacle which stood in the bathroom and was marked WASTE in large white letters.

That done, he came stealing out and into Douglas' well-stocked clothes-closet where he did some considerable snooping. Not that he had the slightest idea of poking into places where he had not the right to look. He just couldn't resist, now that he had the chance, to see if the rich boy possessed one of those shining dressing gowns that he had seen on so many of the rich boys in the talkies. And having found one, Skippy couldn't resist the temptation to put it on.

He strutted out presently and circled the room, viewing himself the while in a large wall mirror. His feet were bare and though he realized it detracted from his present splendor, he was forced to be content with the luxury of the silken dressing gown. He had no way of knowing that Douglas Holden kept his slippers and shoes in a specially built wardrobe on the far side of the room. It would not have occurred to him that there could be more than one closet in any bedroom.

Brought up as he had been from the squalor of a barge squatters' colony to the brief interlude of a roadside stand, where his father had died, and thence to his aunt's simple flat on the lower east side of New York, Skippy could not but be impressed by the splendor in which Douglas Holden lived. And there was not a doubt that Douglas slept splendidly—as yet, he had not flickered either eyelid despite the fact that Skippy had all the lights shining straight down upon his upturned face.

But Skippy was not thinking of this—he was too intent upon the fact that he was experiencing a delight in this splendor even though it was but for a fleeting moment. Then he thought of the steaming water in the gleaming tile tub and hurried into the bathroom. Sleep was quite forgotten now. His mind still reveled in these soul-warming reflections and he thought how much Nickie Fallon would enjoy an experience like this. It was with something of a shock that he realized that a bumping sound had emanated from outdoors—presumably outside one of the southwest windows in the bedroom.

Another sound came then, a sound that was different, like a stifled cough or sneeze.

CHAPTER XIV THE GREAT DETECTIVE

There were four large windows in Douglas Holden's bedroom. The window at the extreme southwest corner was all but screened from the rest of the house and the grounds by a giant elm tree, whose wide, drooping branches moved gently in the breeze and rustled against the copper screening. It was to this window that Skippy hurried, wondering but not scared.

He peered out into the dark, sweet-smelling foliage that embowered the window, but saw nothing. The brilliantly illuminated bedroom seemed but to accentuate the black night outside and without bothering to throw open the screen he turned on his bare feet and pattered across the room and so on into the bathroom.

He splashed to his heart's content but rubbed down with tired arms and was glad enough to slip into his borrowed pajamas. A moment later he had the lights extinguished and was crawling in alongside the sleeping Douglas.

The rich boy, unused to having a sleeping companion, stirred. Skippy tried to lie as still as he could but Douglas had come out of his heavy slumber gradually and with groping hands he reached over and touched Skippy's arm.

"S all right, D-Douglas," Skippy whispered. "I had a lot of experiences tonight I did and I got here to your father's house an' he told me to take a bath an' then he brought me up here to sleep with you on account of the other rooms being all torn up."

"Who—who are you, anyhow?" Douglas whispered, his voice quivering slightly. "Smokes, I certainly got scared when I felt somebody in the bed."

"Gee, I bet. I tried to make a noise an' I put on all the lights, but it was like your father said—you sleep like you're dead almost. But you needn't be scared, honest. I'm Skippy Dare that works for Carlton Conne. I *was* office boy for him," he said stressing the past tense. "Since tonight I bet he'll make me a regular detective." And then in a stage whisper, he confided, "Even I did some swell deduction since ten o'clock."

"*Smokes!*" whispered Douglas in breathless awe. "I know who you are. I heard Mr. Conne tell my father you had brains and could use 'em if you only didn't waste so much time talking about yourself."

"Oh yeah!" Skippy was flushed to his temples for the moment and there was a little sting of resentment somewhere inside him, but in a second it had passed. Soon his warm, generous heart felt nothing but admiration and

gratitude for his gruff but kindly employer and he had entirely forgotten the criticism. And it was ever thus—his great opinion of himself soon took precedence over everything else for presently he was mumbling to the spellbound Douglas of his exploits during the evening. Now and then, where his narrative seemed to be attenuating he would unconsciously reanimate it with some highly colored incident drawn wholly from his own vivid imagination, until when the story was brought to a close, Douglas was gasping with sheer admiration.

“You really hit that Sam fellow with a blackjack when he heard you walking behind him in the woods?” he was asking Skippy incredulously.

“Sure,” Skippy answered, by that time convinced that that was exactly what had happened. “I cracked him in the dark an’ he fell like nobody’s business. When he come to I was in a good hidin’ place at the head of the road off in the woods like where I could see all that he did. Gee, he was frightened an’ how! He picked himself up, ran up the road an’ under the light where he waited like I told you until Silver come along.”

“May I see that blackjack, Skip, huh?” came the almost inaudible question.

But Skippy was not to be stumped by anything as trifling as a blackjack. He sighed luxuriously and rested a freckled cheek in the crook of his right arm. Then he whispered, “Hot dog—you don’t suppose detectives keep in-insinuating evidence so’s it can be found, do you?”

“*Incriminating evidence* you mean?” asked Douglas who was nothing if not studious.

“Aw, it don’t make no difference—you know what I mean.” And without taking the time to feel abashed, he added: “I pitched that blackjack off into the woods, I did. Big gangsters like Silver an’ Sam would do that, too. Only when they do it, it’s what us detectives call, destroyin’ evidence.”

“Boy, but you know a lot about detectives and gangsters and all that.”

“Sure, I do. Even on account of what I know you’ll be safe from gettin’ kidnapped tomorrow night. Your old—your father says he’ll take you away from here or somethin’ and Silver and his gang won’t get you. That’s ’cause I was good an’ observant an’ listened to Sam and Silver talk about it. So now your father’ll know what to do about you if he ain’t goin’ to pay them the dough.”

“Smokes, you’re smart that way, no matter what Mr. Conne says. I wish I could get into his office like you did and have the fun out of it that you’re having. Do you always have excitement like today and tonight?”

“Sure!” Skippy assured him, after making a mental scowl at the accusing finger of memory which reminded him that his tasks in the great detective’s office for the past six months had boasted nothing more exciting than

pasting stamps, sending off mail, opening mail and running various errands. But he heeded not these small but terribly vivid truths—tonight he was going to soar into the dizzy heights of his imagination. And he gloried in the fact that Douglas Holden was a splendid and wholly appreciative audience.

The final and most soothing balm to his erstwhile praise-starved soul was when Douglas said, “Smokes, I wish I was you all right, all right.”

“Aw, never mind, Doug,” Skippy returned in the grand manner. “It can’t be helped, it can’t. I guess a guy like me is just born to be a detective an’ that’s all there’s to it.”

And that’s all there was to it, for in less than two minutes their whispering young voices were stilled by sleep.

CHAPTER XV UNINVITED GUESTS

Skippy thought that he had been asleep for hours, whereas he had been dozing only fifteen minutes. He had heard no noise and yet he wakened suddenly, distinctly conscious that there was someone moving about in the room. However, he was not startled, for he was used to nocturnal disturbers as his aunt ever made it a point during the wee hours to tiptoe in to see that he was comfortable and protected from draughts. Douglas' father, he thought, was no doubt doing the same thing now, he looked to be the kind of man whose heart was always with his motherless son.

And with this comforting thought, Skippy turned over to again settle himself in slumber. But before he had time to move, a searchlight was suddenly flashed on his face. He blinked and clutched the covers tightly while little shivers ran up and down his spine. At the same time the light was traveling over Douglas' slight form.

He opened his mouth to yell when suddenly a man's large hand came down and pressed hard against it. Then a voice, sounding surprisingly like Sam's, whispered gruffly.

"Keep that trap shut, kid, or it'll be just too bad."

"So there's two of them, eh?" mumbled another voice who Skippy immediately placed as Silver Curley's. "This *is* a surprise!"

Douglas was awake by that time and clutched Skippy's arm fearfully. He, too, was prompted to cry for help but was silenced by Curley's forceful palm.

"If there's a sound," the dapper gangster whispered, "we'll have to put you to sleep quickly. That goes for you both." He leaned across the bed toward Sam's bulky figure and added: "You better gag 'em anyway—it's safer."

Sam proceeded to bind Douglas' mouth first while Silver Curley kept watch over Skippy. A deep silence pervaded the house; the servants and the master must have been sound asleep. Both boys were praying secretly that something, somehow would rouse them now while it was time.

Curley held the light and while Skippy waited he noted out of the corner of his eye that all the window shades had been pulled down with the exception of the one at the extreme southwest window. That one had been used, he reasoned, because of the complete protection which the elm tree's foliage provided. It was obviously the way they had entered, for as Curley

shifted the light to his other hand, a wandering ray momentarily revealed that the copper screening had been cut away.

Curley looked down at Skippy and smiled in his usual suave manner. "Who are you, kid—a relative?" he whispered.

Skippy felt Douglas' warm hand tighten on his arm and instinctively he answered, "Yep—sure! His cousin, Skippy Dare."

Sam was looking straight at him too, thoughtfully, it seemed to Skippy. He was growing ice-cold by the minute for fear the tough gangster had recognized him as the dark Italian kid.

"Well, if that ain't a hot one!" Sam was mumbling. Skippy felt actually sunk, but suddenly the man said, "It's luck, Silver—it's luck! In-stead-a takin' Holden's kid alone, we got his nephew right here in th' bag too. Holden'll sure kick in now with us snatchin' a pair of 'em. Maybe we oughta raise th' ante."

"*Hmph!*" Silver Curley was whispering. "*Hmph!*"

Frightened as he was, Skippy felt a deep sense of relief to think that Sam had failed to recognize him. It occurred to him then that the tough gangster had not looked at him very closely in the coupe. And he remembered also that since that time, his candy blackened face had been completely transformed, first, by the waters of Mirror Lake and then by the warm, cleansing bath in Douglas Holden's luxurious bathtub. And last but not least, his hair had been neatly brushed and combed before he slipped into his borrowed handsome pajamas. Indeed, now that he thought of it, he doubted if his own dear aunt would recognize him lying there as he was in his present splendor.

He let his hand steal slowly over to Douglas' arm under the covers and gave him a reassuring pinch. The rich boy, now securely gagged, gave him a frightened questioning look, but Skippy smiled out of his eyes as if to say that he had gotten out from under so far and that with his constant good luck, they would continue to do so.

"I don't know about taking this kid too," Curley was musing. "I don't know—I got a hunch somehow that he'll be a bother—give us trouble. He's got that look."

"Say, listen, Boss," Sam argued. "He's a clue, ain't he? We're here now because we got wind that Conne is on th' case. And yuh know as well as me that Conne only needs a clue like this kid tuh gum the works. This kid'll talk an' we won't be here tuh stop him. Take him along an' we know he ain't gonna squawk to Conne's outfit. We gotta hurry—it'll be daylight 'fore we hit th' joint."

"O. K.," said Curley grudgingly. "I'm listening to you, but I hope I won't be sorry. Get this Skippy kid fixed and then we'll beat it. We won't be

wasting time for them to dress. I'm not taking any chances on their clothes lying around where they can be recognized."

"Right, boss," Sam whispered as he gave a final twist to Skippy's gag. Then he ordered the boys to sit up and added, as he bound their hands, "These pajamas they're wearin' oughta be burned when we get back."

Curley nodded and tiptoed to the window. He made a hissing sound as he leaned out, evidently to one of his henchmen acting as lookout below. Then he turned and motioned significantly to Sam.

"Comin', Boss, comin'," said Sam as he motioned to the two frightened boys. "Out kids, an' step on it, see? Don't make no funny moves. There's a ladder an' go down careful one by one. We ain't keen about havin' no busted necks on this party, 'cause we can't cash in that way. Get goin'!"

Curley led the way and Sam shoved Douglas over the ledge next. Then as he stood guard, gun in hand, he gave Skippy a rough push toward the window sill.

"Step on it, kid, *step on it!*" he whispered impatiently. "I ain't so sure I didn't hear a door openin'."

Sam's push was forceful indeed and Skippy was over the sill in a jiffy. Curley was up the ladder again, ready to give him a helping hand, as he had done for Douglas. If he had not done so their progress would have been painfully slow with their hands tied.

Skippy had gone a few steps, with Sam waiting impatiently up at the window-sill, when the sound of a door opening arrested their flight for a tense second.

Mr. Holden's voice came to them and he sounded concerned. "Douglas? Skippy? Are you boys all right?"

An ominous silence followed these questions— a silence that caused Skippy to shiver.

CHAPTER XVI SOME CONVERSATION

Suddenly Curley grasped Skippy and carried him bodily down the ladder. Sam came hurrying after them, folded up the device and with the help of the lookout whom they called Jake all five were scurrying across the vast lawns in less than two seconds.

The boys were hurried on ahead, down into a series of hollows, all part of the Holden golf course. A few glimmerings of light could be seen in the east but none of it penetrated this part of the vast estate. Darkness and eerie shadows hemmed them in on all sides and when they finally broke through the high hedge and came out onto the narrow country lane even Skippy was relieved.

But the relief was only momentary for he soon saw a waiting car parked under the shadow of the trees just where the road curved around and through the woods. He glanced at Douglas as Sam curtly ordered them to "get over and inside," and his blinking eyes seemed to say that they were in for it.

Be that as it may, they were prodded into the shining sedan and guided toward the back seat by a rotund gangster called Jake by Curley. As Jake made haste to lower the curtains Curley got behind the wheel and Sam spread himself next to him, and then they were off.

"Wotta night!" Sam said, tucking his thumbs under either armpit and slapping his fingers soundly on his hard chest. "Man, I don't crave no excitement like that regular. I hope that's the last 'till we grab off some sleep."

"I hope it's the last until we start negotiations with Holden—that's what I hope," Curley answered tartly.

"W-w-w-when's th-th-that, Boss?" asked Jake who had a noticeable impediment in his speech. Curley called him Twist at times, quite appropriately, for he seldom spoke without getting all mixed up.

"I'm going to give Holden at least twenty-four hours of steady thinking where his kid and this nephew of his are," Curley answered musingly. "Then he'll get a friendly letter through the mail and if he knows what's good for him, he'll come clean without squawking. Of course," he added with a chuckle, "he'll get in touch with Conne right away if I know how his mind works. But that won't cut any ice with me. Conne don't know from Adam where I'm hiding out these days. And I'm not going to lose any sleep over the bulls. Holden's sopped up too much pride along with his money to let the newspapers get hold of that story about that cheap crook brother of his,

Maurice Holden. You should have seen him kind of shrink when I told him what I knew about Maurie!”

“What’s he doin’ a stretch for, Boss?” Sam asked curiously. “Mole was gonna tell me, but he forgot.”

“Pickpocket and shoplifting when he couldn’t do anything else,” answered Silver contemptuously. “Guess he hasn’t brains to go after the big money so he’s got what’s coming to him. He’s doin’ fifteen years now for cheap money jobs.”

“Hah!” Sam commented. “No wonder A. P. don’t want no cheap guy like that broadcast as his brother.”

“Oh it’s not Maurie Holden alone that he’s worrying about,” Curley told them with something of a triumphant note in his voice. “He’s dead scared that I might spill the beans that A. P. Holden, Senior, was a cheap crook too and died while he was on a long stretch in the big house.”

“No foolin’!” gasped Jake. “*Their old man!*”

Sam whistled.

“Oh, I expect to squeeze A. P. into a corner all right. Specially that we got the apple of his eye where he can’t reach him. That’ll bring him to time, if I know anything. I’m only worrying that this Skippy kid won’t crab our plans any. He looks like the kind that might get noisy and put the bulls wise that something is funny.”

“Yeah? Let him try it, Boss!” Sam said turning his head and frowning ominously at Skippy. “An’ let that other one try it too! They ain’t gonna get no love taps neither!”

Curley laughed. “That’s your job, Sam.” Then thoughtfully, “I wonder if this Skippy kid belongs to Maurie—I never heard about A. P. having any other brother and I know he didn’t have a sister! Wouldn’t it be a hot one if he was Maurie’s kid?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “We’ll ask him when we take his choker off.”

They all laughed at that and the car climbed the steep mountain road. In the midst of the mirth, Douglas managed to edge his slim shoulder against Skippy’s in a gesture of consolation. But Skippy at the moment was inconsolable.

For some strange reason he was overwhelmed by a longing for Mole’s presence.

CHAPTER XVII SILVER CURLEY

It was an uncomfortable ride in every way. It reminded Skippy somewhat of the trip to Devil's Bog, his first job for his employer. The road which was nothing more than a lane was bumpy and steep and having the added discomfort of bound hands, the boys found it impossible to sit in a comfortable position. Also, their mouths ached and with the shades closely drawn they could catch flashing glimpses of the road only through the windshield. And now and then, through an opening in the trees it was possible to see daylight filtering into the woods.

Suddenly Sam said, "It's rainin'."

"Good thing," said Curley. "It'll wash away our tracks. I'm beginning to feel hopeful."

"Yuh was a little worried, hah Boss?" Sam asked.

Skippy thought he sensed a little scorn in that question for he remembered Sam's significant opinions to Mole not so many hours before.

Silver Curley, however, seemed not to sense anything of that kind for he answered, "Worried nothing! I was annoyed, that's all. And who wouldn't be! We had so many interruptions before we got that ladder up. First, it bumped against the screen and then Jake had to go and cough and then we had to lay low on account of that fool of a superintendent who came snooping around. I don't like interruptions when I'm starting out on a risky job like this."

A silence followed in which Skippy secretly berated himself for his failure to investigate those sounds which he had heard below that southwest window. If he had, he told himself, all this might have been prevented. And to admit that he could fail at anything, was unusual for Skippy.

However, these regrets were fleeting things, for the next second he was certain that it had all happened for the better. To be sure, he was terribly sorry for Douglas having been dragged away from his father so summarily, but on the other hand, he reasoned, this adventure (he liked to think of it as that) might prove to be a lot of fun for a boy who was weighted down by the propriety of riches and denied the pleasure and thrill of a harmless and occasional misadventure.

Skippy was honest, therefore he could not deny the fact that their present plight was indeed a misadventure. But he had too much faith in himself, too great an opinion of his inventive faculties to believe for a moment that his

ingenuity would not bring them safely back to Mr. Holden's great house where he would be feted for rounding up the dangerous Curley gang.

He, Skippy Dare, would be Douglas Holden's saviour, the saviour of the public at large, for by that time they would have the comfort of knowing that the entire Curley gang was safely behind the bars.

Despite the growing discomfort of his bindings, he felt a delicious warmth in his veins because of this satisfying thought. He was determined to confide this news to Douglas as soon as they were alone and free to talk. And as he made a mental plan of this pleasant confidence the conviction grew in him that it was now but a matter of time when Carlton Conne would admit that he had striking Pinkerton qualities.

They went downhill for a time and made several turns. Then, after what seemed an interminable time, they entered what seemed to the boys a mere footpath through a thick woods. Limbs of trees scraped and knocked against the car windows on either side and the car wheels rumbled along in deep ruts the entire distance.

Soon Sam stirred. Jake stretched and Curley slowed down the car to almost a snail's pace. Beyond the windshield, Skippy could see an enormous cliff jutting way out, its thick, overhanging foliage seeming to almost meet the tree-tops where the wood's road ended.

But they made another short turn after that, traversing for not more than five hundred feet a brush enclosed path. At the end of that they pushed out, surprisingly enough, into a unique grassy clearing which snuggled invitingly under the protection of the cliff and boasted withal four picturesque buildings of the rustic type. A main log cabin there was, two lesser cabins and a large four car garage.

"Well, boys, here we are," Curley chuckled. "Safe and sound!"

Skippy uttered an inarticulate sound under his gag. They were safe from the police, yes. Also, they were still sound. But for how long? he wondered. Silver Curley was cynical and utterly without principle. Sam was the tough gangster with a strain of the malicious that would some day become malignant. Jake too, was tough—the strong-arm man personified. Skippy could only wonder with dismay what other persons were under Silver Curley's dominion and what were their respective duties. Curley was reputed to be master over many, but as far as Skippy was concerned, Sam and Jake were representative.

The boys were lifted out and hurried toward the big cabin. A wide, screened porch opened into a vast living room that ran the length of the building and boasted two fireplaces. There was a confusion of furniture in the place that Skippy's alert mind likened to the confusion that seemed ever to prevail among Curley and his henchmen. One naturally expected a

profusion of furniture sprawling all over the place and it was not a surprise to find it.

There were three stiff, uneasy-looking divans placed at dim-cornered intervals and it was to the nearest of these that Jake led the boys and soon relieved them of their distressing bandages. They clapped their hands and made grimaces with their mouths in the joy of freedom, but kept skeptical eyes on Curley and Sam conversing in low tones out on the porch.

Skippy counted four men who had entered the room by means of a swinging door at the extreme end of the large room. They were all flashily dressed, all coatless and in their vests wearing that demeanor of having just left a successful card game.

They all nodded to Jake in turn and their red-rimmed glittering eyes seemed to smile sardonically as their glances rested on the frightened, pajama-clad boys. One of them stopped and consulted Jake in a low voice.

“How come, two-in-one, hah?”

“H-h-h-had t-t-tuh,” Jake answered in his twisted way.

“If you’ve got any questions, boys,” Curley said, coming into the room with Sam, “I’m the one to ask. Private, too. Besides, there’s a pitcher here that’s got big ears, I’m thinking.”

“*Says you!*” Skippy growled. “Who cares what who says, huh? Don’t kid yourself that I care cause I don’t an’ besides I know what I’m thinkin’ anyhow, all right, all right.”

“Oh, a fresh little guy, hah?” Sam said, stepping across the room, menacingly.

A ghost of a smile rested on Curley’s bloodless lips and he put a detaining hand on Sam. “I can handle my own affairs, fella,” he said quietly. Suddenly he shot a cold look at Skippy. “All I say to you, kid,” he murmured threateningly, “is that you’ll be a whole lot safer watching your step and being careful what you think. I don’t need to give orders more’n once. That’s all.”

After a moment’s tense silence, one of the coatless men spoke. “Got a surprise for you, Boss,” he said ingratiatingly. He waved a well-manicured hand toward a spiral stairway near the end of the room. “Someone come bustin’ in on us an hour ago lookin’ kinda cracked up, but nothin’ serious. He’s in that first bedroom up on the balcony.”

Curley’s hard, glittering eyes wandered up the fine tapestry which overhung his broad balcony and finally rested on the first doorway nearest the stair. Suddenly he looked at his informant, his lips forming a question.

“*Not . . . ?*”

“Yeah. It’s *Mole—Mole himself!*”

“Gee whiz!” Skippy shouted impulsively, joyously.
All eyes were suddenly turned upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII RECOGNITION?

Douglas, too was staring and it was to him that Skippy turned, suddenly conscious of the surprise which his impulsive exclamation had created. His face was flushed and his mind was in a turmoil yet he managed to grasp at one definite thought and carried it out admirably.

“Hot dog!” he said in a sort of giggling way. “I never heard a name like that before—*Mole!*” He turned from Douglas and his gaze traveled up to the balcony where Mole was looking on with interest. “Gee whiz, mister,” Skippy said apologetically, “I didn’t mean nothin’, honest! When that feller said that name I thought maybe it was an animal—ain’t there a kind called a mole, huh? I thought it was a pet he was talking about. Gee whiz, people make pets out of all kinds of animals these days—even I heard of a lady that keeps pet fleas so . . .”

“Aw, pipe down!” Sam interposed impatiently.

“Seems to me,” Mole’s kindly voice cut in, “that all you guys forget you was kids not so long ago. Which one of you wouldn’ gone off the handle hearin’ the name of Mole the first time, hunh? Don’t make me laugh—there ain’t one of you that wouldn’t hollered louder than the kid there. Now if you’ll lay off him, tell me who he is an’ who’s the other nice kid too. . . .”

“Mole,” Sam interposed apologetically, “yuh sure took me by surprise, all right, all right. Honest, guy, I was mournin’ yuh—all the boys was mournin’ yuh. . . .”

“Yeah, let that run for Sweeney!” Mole said not without a little sarcasm. “I take it you snatched the Holden kid, like big brave guys.”

“Yes, we had to do it, Mole!” Curley said, lighting a cigarette and looking up at the balcony thoughtfully. His tone was almost conciliatory. “I’ll tell you about that later. The chatty kid is Douglas Holden’s cousin, Skippy Dare. You know Holden’s having his place fixed over so the two kids were doubling up in the one bed and we couldn’t take one without the other. Sam and I were thinking maybe it was Maurie’s kid. Maurie’s had a dozen names since I first knew him. He could just as well have hooked onto Dare sometime or other. But come on, Mole, tell us what brought you back from the dead?”

“Don’t ask me!” Mole exclaimed reminiscently. “It was like a bad nightmare. I s’pose Sam told how I sneezed an’ lost control? I seemed to see everything at once like. First, I saw the kid push open the door as the car jumped the bridge. He went out and then Sam. The coupe struck against

somethin'—don't ask me what it was 'cause I don't know. All I know is, that when I woke up I was in the brush and up to my ears in mud."

"I called yuh," Sam said. "But nobody answered."

"I was out—I don't know how long!" Mole said, leaning wearily on the balcony rail. "But the kid," he said with a decidedly mournful tone, "he *didn't* . . ."

"Nope," Sam said hastily, "there wasn't no squeak outa him. I didn't hear or see nothin', ceptin' when I walked up that woods road I coulda sworn I heard footsteps behind me." Mole paled noticeably.

"Aw, it was just my imagination I guess, Mole. I was wet an' shivery an' I was feelin' low on accounta' you. Oh, I felt bad th' kid had tuh get it, but I kinda didn't take such a likin' tuh his dumb pan, like you did. An'—an', I thought maybe it was because I felt like that that it was his ghost or somethin' follerin' me. But it wasn't!" he added with a sigh of relief. "I'm sure it was a rabbit now."

Mole clutched the railing and sighed. "There's a lot I could see in that kid's pan that you couldn't, Sam. And it's your own dumb pan that couldn't see it. But that ain't what I'm thinkin' now—I'm thinkin' he's got a mother—somebody, somewhere, that's waitin' an' worryin' for him right now."

"Could I help it!" Sam growled. "Did I sneeze an' jam that car? Who asked that kid tuh ride with us anyhow?"

"Who's sayin' you could help it! If you listened, you could tell I'm blamin' myself! That's what's hurtin' me. I liked that kid—he had eyes that were bright and . . ."

"Cut out thinking what can't be helped, Mole," Curley said tersely. "We'll watch the papers and see if anybody advertises for him. Maybe when things quiet down we can send his people a small bankroll. That'll kind of make up for things, eh?"

"Aw, it ain't any use tryin' to make you birds understand how I feel about kids. But I'll dope it out myself. Anyways, it's up to me."

"That's the talk, Mole," Curley said, smiling cynically. "We won't get anywhere hashing over what can't be helped. Especially when we've got a job on our hands like this Holden business, there isn't time for any sob-stuff. Feel like coming down into the den and talking things over with us, Mole?"

"Yeah," Mole said, not at all enthusiastic. "I'll sleep and think things out afterward." Curley nodded and led the way down the room and his henchmen followed in single file. Soon they had all disappeared beyond the swinging door with the exception of Jake and Mole who had then reached the bottom of the stairway.

"You stayin' here with the kids?" he asked, walking over to the divan where the boys were.

“N-n-no,” Jake answered. “B-b-boss s-s-say lock ’em up in his room, th-th-then c-c-come down an’ talk t-t-turkey.”

Mole made a grimace, then turned to the boys. He smiled at Douglas, a nice wide smile that brought a smile to the rich boy’s frightened eyes. Then he looked at Skippy, a nice smile also, but one that was searching. Suddenly he put out his hand and ruffled the boy’s tumbled hair, then turned on his heel and hurried down the room.

Skippy watched him go, pleased, yet not a little bit puzzled.

CHAPTER XIX

SKIPPY KEEPS A PROMISE

The sound of Jake's footsteps was gone from the stairs and then they listened as he walked the length of the living room on his way to join Curley and his gang in the den. Finally, they heard nothing but the sound of their own tense breathing and presently they each sought a deep lounging chair in the luxurious suite that Curley had selected as his own.

The boys were in the sitting room and Skippy was looking through the opened doorway into the boss gangster's bedroom and thence into the ornate bathroom beyond. A lot of luxury for a man who lived by his wits, he was thinking. Douglas Holden was too used to luxury to see anything extraordinary in it. He took it for granted that no one really lived in the poverty and the squalor that the talkies depicted—that was merely theatrical. However, he was much too preoccupied with another and more important thought and he wasted no time in sharing it with Skippy.

"Say," he said, shaking his curly head worriedly, "maybe I'm crazy, but I thought that Mole gave you a kind of funny look."

Skippy came back to earth that instant. "Hot dog!" he said with a low whistle. "I had that thought too—downstairs. For a minute I thought he did, then again I thought he didn't. Gee whiz, Doug, you really . . ."

"Sure. If he hasn't recognized you straight off, he will before long—you see! Didn't he talk about remembering your bright eyes? Well, that's what makes me think he sort of half placed you when he looked at you downstairs. Smokes, Skippy, I'd remember your eyes on account of they're so bright so why wouldn't Mole!"

"My face was so black and everything—gee, I bet even Mr. Conne wouldn't know me now that my face is clean. He even said that one time. He said he wondered what I really would look like if my face was clean."

"Mr. Conne and Mole aren't like that blockheaded Sam, Skippy. Mr. Conne's a real detective and Mole should have been one instead of a gangster for that smart-aleck Curley. I'll bet you anything that Mr. Conne and Mole could tell your eyes even if the rest of your face was covered."

"Gee whiz, Doug, maybe you're right. Gee, even I got a hunch you are. So what do you think Mole will do?"

"I bet nothing, Skippy. I can tell by his face that he wouldn't do anything mean to kids. He's got those nice kind of dark eyes that look as if they've full of tears and yet they're not! And that big dark mole on his face makes him look piratish, sort of."

“And he’s got swell dark curly hair too, ain’t he?” Skippy said, for his secret wish was to have dark curly hair. He sighed. “Hot dog, but I’m glad you don’t think he’ll spill the beans on me.”

“I bet anything he won’t.”

“You like him like nobody’s business, don’t you, Doug?”

“Sure, so do you, don’t you? If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have yelled as if you were going to jump out of your skin when you heard his name that time. Smokes, but you nearly made a break!”

“But I didn’t, did I? Didn’t I get away with it swell about his name? Just the same I feel better since he’s here—see? I don’t feel as if Sam can act so smart with us any more, do you?”

“No,” Douglas answered, but with ever a practical turn of mind, he asked, “What are we going to do about this though? No matter who acts smart and no matter who takes our part, Curley isn’t going to let us go until he gets the money from my father. And that might be a week—it might be two weeks, because Dad will listen to Mr. Conne and you know he’s for getting the goods on Curley at last with this (that’s what I heard him tell Dad). He wants to nab Curley right.”

“Don’t I know that!” bragged Skippy. And then because his detective ability had seemed to be questioned, he lied magnificently. “Even Mr. Conne asked me what I thought he oughta do about it.”

“What did you tell him, huh?” Douglas had an insatiable appetite for detail.

“I told him he should wait for Silver Curley to kidnap you like Curley first said he’d do tonight instead of last night,” Skippy said with a magnificent gesture. “I told him he should have his five hundred dicks (Mr. Conne employed but one hundred first class detectives and they were scattered at odd times in every part of the universe—out of these he kept but ten for service between New York and Chicago) surround your father’s place. Then when they snatched you, he and his men could nail Silver and his gang cold.”

It wasn’t humor, but a very literal mind that prompted Douglas to ask, “How is it you could talk it over with Mr. Conne like that when it was only before midnight last night that Dad got a phone call from Curley saying he would kidnap me tomorrow night? Besides, you said yourself that you heard Curley tell that Sam how he was coming after me tomorrow night so you couldn’t . . .”

Skippy interposed with superb disdain. “Ain’t you got no idea how detectives sort of see things ahead—like fortune tellers?” And never being at a loss for an alibi, he explained, “Mr. Conne and me just doped it out that

that's the way Silver would work. First, when he couldn't get his money from your father with that extradition business . . .”

“You mean *extortion*?” Douglas hastened to ask.

“Ain't you smart enough to know what I mean anyway?” Skippy said indignantly. “Gee whiz, anybody ought to know. . . .”

“You started to tell me how Mr. Conne and you figured Silver would work?”

“Sure, we could see what he was gonna do right off the bat. We knew if everything else went phooey he'd start that kidnapping talk. Then, that's how we were set to bring out the five hundred dicks and grab the whole gang.”

“Smokes!” Douglas exclaimed admiringly. “I'd like to be able to see ahead like that. Maybe you can tell me how we're going to get out of here and when, huh? Boy, I don't like to think of how my Dad is sitting home worrying about me—and even you, right now. He'll *feel* responsible for you, Skippy, and I don't mean maybe.”

Skippy felt a momentary sense of alarm that he had been called upon to prognosticate the outcome of their puzzling situation. But that alarm soon gave place to a warm feeling of confidence, for he felt that at last he was being given the chance to show his detective prowess. He looked across the room at Douglas and smiled broadly.

“What'll you bet I wouldn't call Mr. Conne if I had a phone in here?” he boasted.

“A man like Curley would have a phone in his bedroom,” Douglas answered, calmly efficient. “Come on in, we'll look!”

Skippy chided himself for not having thought of that angle. But he said nothing and followed Douglas into Curley's handsome bedroom where they espied a telephone on Silver's nightstand, beside the dark mahogany bed.

“I'll go into the sitting room and listen at the door,” Douglas said in a hushed voice. “If I hear anybody coming I'll let you know right away.”

“Gee whiz, you better,” said Skippy, not so reckless but what his safety was still dear to him. He took up the phone and knowing Carlton Conne's apartment number by heart, called it in low, clear tones. Then while he waited, he looked around the room, thinking it strange that there was only one entrance to the suite which the suave Curley occupied. But if the bedroom lacked a door onto the balcony, it certainly did not lack closet space for there were two large closet doors just opposite where Skippy was standing. He determined to look into them when he had finished speaking to Mr. Conne, particularly the one on the right side, for it looked large enough to house the clothing of an entire household.

Skippy was fascinated and naturally so, for he had never more than two suits at a time and they always occupied small home-made wardrobes.

But Skippy's musings on the profound subject of closets was cut short by the gruff voice of Mr. Conne. "Yes?" he was saying.

Skippy's heart pounded so overjoyed was he. "It's *me—Skippy!*" he said joyously.

"*Why, kid!*" came Mr. Conne's voice, ringing deep with emotion. And as if a little ashamed of this display, he was a little gruff when he asked. "Where you calling from?"

"Doug and me are in Silver Curley's bedroom—that is, Doug is listening at the sitting room door. All the guys including Silver are down in the den chewin' the rag, so I took a chance an' phoned."

Douglas came sneaking on tiptoe as far as the threshold of the bedroom. "Tell Mr. Conne to call up Dad and tell him not to worry, that you'll get us away from here somehow."

Skippy sighed that he would be unable to relay that message literally. Consequently, he said, "Doug just called in that you should call up Mr. Holden and tell him not to worry. They ain't been mean to us yet, Mr. Conne. Silver's sarcastic and there's a guy named Sam who'd get nasty if I'd let him. But there's another guy—a swell guy named Mole. Doug thinks he'll watch that they don't get too smart with us."

"I'm sure glad, kid. Maybe we can give Mole a break when we round up the gang. And we'll do it! Just don't give them any trouble. Try and give me the directions the best you can—I suppose they took you there in a closed car."

"Yeah, and how!" Skippy said looking toward the sitting room to assure himself that Douglas was on duty.

"All right, kid. Talk fast and be sure that no one is coming. If you hear anything—hang right up!"

"O. K., Boss. Nobody's coming now cause Doug's still on the job. Anyway, they took us down the ladder—they said they might as well take me. . . ."

"I understand, kid. Which way did they take you after you got to the ground?"

"Across Mr. Holden's golf course. Then, on that road the other side of the hedge a car was parked and they pushed us in. I can't tell exactly how we rode, but I kinda feel we went southwest, then north for a little while and finally south. I tried to tell Mr. Holden how I . . ."

"Yes, I know, kid. He came right here as soon as he discovered you both were gone. He told me all you said. Now go on. . . ."

“Just before we got here the car pushed through a lot of brush like and all beyond that was a narrow lane. Finally we came out to a clearing.”

“Can you give me anything definite, kid—any landmarks that stand out?”

“Yeah, you bet I can!” Skippy answered. “For one thing there’s a great big cliff that hangs over the house and the buildings here. Gee whiz, I bet it’s the biggest cliff around here because you can hardly see the sky the way the trees hang down from it and shade it like. Watch for a great big cliff—I bet you could find it better from above. I bet . . .”

Skippy’s bright eyes were suddenly drawn to the larger closet door. It was with a sort of fascination and then a distinct dread that he became slowly aware that the door was opening slowly, ever so slowly. . . .

CHAPTER XX

PALS

The door was ajar and Sam stood looking at him with a strange expression in his staring, light eyes. Looking over his shoulder was Silver Curley, his smooth-shaven face dark with rage. Skippy let the phone slip from his skinny hands mechanically.

Sam rushed out into the room at this juncture and with a muttered curse picked up the phone and set it quickly back in place. Then without warning he shot out his powerful fist aiming it at Skippy's jaw.

But Skippy ducked just in time and in saving himself from Sam's blow he stumbled and fell, hitting his head against the wall. Douglas had come rushing in from the sitting room by that time, aghast.

He rushed over to Skippy and stood over him as if to protect him, staring at Sam meanwhile with a challenging gleam in his eye. "Smokes!" he said with obvious disgust. "You're about the cheapest kind of a sport I ever heard of. Aiming for a kid like Skippy. Can't you find somebody your own size? I've heard a gangster can't be sporting and be a gangster, so I guess it's true all right, all right!"

"Aw, pipe down yuh fresh . . ."

"That's enough, Sam," Silver Curley said, his voice quivering with anger and his dark eyes flashing. "We'll talk this over later. Meanwhile," he added, turning toward the boys, "both you kids get in that sitting room. I'll lock you in myself so that I'll be sure you can't get to a phone. And you're to stay there until I decide what's to be done about this."

Curley's voice was biting, as he pointed a thin finger at Skippy huddled against the wall. "I'm not saying Sam was right and I'm not saying he was wrong. But I'll tell you this much, kid, the very next time you pull anything like this to make trouble for me, you're going to get something you deserve!"

Skippy hardly heard him, for in his advantageous position he was witness to something that solved the problem of where and how Sam and Curley had emerged from the closet. For even as the boss-gangster was still speaking, he could see a side of the closet wall slowly pushing out and presently Mole stepped into the closet itself. Douglas, too, had seen it and he glanced at his new-found friend Skippy and nodded.

A hidden stairway!

Mole hurried into the room and Skippy noticed at once the anxiety on his bandaged face and in his bloodshot eyes. His hairy fists were clenched

tightly and there was something ominous in his posture as he stood before Curley and Sam.

“Well?” Silver asked sarcastically. “Where’s Jake—I got a bone to pick with him and how!”

“Jake’s downstairs,” answered Mole in a measured voice. “He come down an’ give me the lowdown—he was listenin’ on the stairs an’ didn’t hang around for a shellackin’. There ain’t one of you guys—and that rides for you too, Silver—that ain’t made worse mistakes than Jake did by not lockin’ the kids in the sittin’ room. It’s a sign there’s a jinx on this job an’ we oughta get out while the gettin’s good. I’ve knowed gangs before that got crazy for the dough an’ snatched kids, an’ I ain’t knowed one that ain’t wound up behind th’ eight ball.”

“Mole,” said Curley angrily, “I take a lot from you because you’re an old friend and got a good head. But I won’t take advice unless I ask for it—see? Besides, while I’m running things in a business like this, I won’t stand for preaching, nohow. I know it’s an accident that Jake put them in the sitting room and left this bedroom door unlocked and I know we’ve made plenty of mistakes but on this job no one’s going to make a mistake and get away with it. That goes for me, too! Now what you got to say, eh?”

“Silver, I’m licked far’s this job’s concerned,” Mole said, his kindly dark eyes aflame with resolve. “I’m licked on any job because I only get paid because I work your jobs an’ I ain’t done no other kinda work in years. But that don’t say I can’t see these kids are treated like kids should be treated—see!” He turned to Sam defiantly then and shook his fist in the other’s face. “Just lemme hear or see you try gettin’ tough with these kids—an’ that goes for everybody in th’ joint because I’ll . . .”

The anger had not died out of Curley’s face but he managed to smile successfully and put out a soothing hand on Mole’s broad shoulders. “Listen, Mole, cut out the hysterics! You can spill anything you want afterward. Right now, we haven’t time to argue or anything. We came up those closet stairs just in time to hear this Skippy telling Conne that my place was under a great big cliff . . . just the kind of a cliff that Conne only needs to be told about to find. He eats up a clue like that. Besides, he knows by now that someone surprised the kid in the act and now he may forfeit the kick that he’d get out of pinching me alone and notify the bulls. He’ll be expecting us to skip pronto.”

The fear of being hunted was deeply rooted in Mole’s veins; years of evading the law was responsible. And, as he couldn’t change in such a short time, he stared at Curley questioningly.

“We better blow right away then, hunh? An’ leave the kids?”

“Yeah, we’re beating it right away—the kids too! What kind of a fool do you think I am to give ’em back when I took such a chance snatching ’em? Nix on that, Mole, and nix on that talk! Now beat it down stairs and tell Jake to see that the black coupe has plenty of gas, air in the tires and oil. Then, get one of the boys to fix up enough grub for five, thermos bottles with coffee and all that. We’re not taking chances on any of these slick lunchroom guys around here—I know who’s safe and who isn’t. All right, everybody’s got to step on it. You, too, Mole! Hurry back up here and pack up a few of your things. That’s what Sam and I are going to do.”

Mole went away looking crestfallen, but when he reached the secret stair in the closet, he looked back and smiled reassuringly to the boys. “I’ll be seein’ yuh,” he said, then disappeared around the closet wall.

Skippy was on his feet by that time, and smiled too, but his attention was soon drawn to Sam’s scowling face.

“Now, scam into that sittin’ room, kids!” he was saying gruffly.

“Yes, I’ll lock you in myself,” Curley informed them. “When I open that door it’ll mean you’re about to go on a long, long journey.”

“In these pajamas?” Douglas asked incredulously.

“You’re lucky you’ve got that much on,” Curley said impatiently. “We don’t keep a boys’ clothing supply on hand here and I’m not stopping anywhere around here to buy you anything. You’ll have to wait and like it.”

“Well, if you ask me,” said Skippy soberly, “if you’re in on kidnapping in a big way, why you oughta lay in kids’ stuff. I’ll leave it to Doug!” With that remark, Silver Curley pushed Skippy summarily into the sitting room on Doug’s heels. Then, before either of them could protest, the door was slammed in their faces.

“Say, *you!*” Douglas shouted against the door. “You’d better look out who you’re pushing, when you push Skip. He’s my cousin and I don’t mean maybe! You better look out because I’ll push you back—you big crook!”

Skippy stared for a minute, realizing that the credulous, complacent, easy-going Douglas he had known for a few hours, also had some spirit. And that such spirit had been displayed on his behalf by a boy as rich and important in the world as Douglas Holden seemed to be, left Skippy speechless for a moment.

It was only for a moment, however. He was holding his hand out to Douglas the next second, his bright eyes gleaming and his straight white teeth flashing in a smile.

“Hot dawg—*my pal!*” he said with feeling. “*Smokes!*” Douglas said, returning the clasp with equal gusto. “*My pal too!*”

And from that simple admission of gratitude, there sprung up between the two boys a friendship that was destined to be lasting. Then and there Skippy added Douglas to his list of unforgetables which included his father, Big Joe Tully and Nickie Fallon. He wasn't forgetting Carlton Conne or Mugs either but they both seemed far away at the time.

CHAPTER XXI DESTINATION UNKNOWN

They had had hardly time to discuss the secret stairway when they were aware of a key turning in the lock in the door on the balcony side. Douglas looked worried and sleepy, but Skippy seemed wide-eyed and expectant, despite the sullen aspect which Jake presented as he stood at the opened door and nodded for them to come out.

“M-m-m-make it s-s-snappy!” he ordered. Then, frowning at Skippy, he added: “D-d-d-don’t m-m-make n-no tr-tr-trouble, s-s-see?”

Skippy hurried down in the lead, and the only emotion he was experiencing was a disappointment that they had not been permitted to use the secret stairs. Ever since he had been able to read, the occasional mention of some secret stairway in his beloved detective stories had thrilled him to the core. And now that he had really seen one with his own eyes, or rather the entrance to one, he had been hoping against hope that he and Douglas would be able to run up and down it once or twice in order that they might give their relatives and friends a first hand account of the experience. In this category he was including newspaper men for he hadn’t the slightest doubt but that he and Douglas would return as conquering heroes—particularly himself. Perhaps even that day.

But even that pregnant idea was destined to take its place among the vague ambitions of the future for Skippy received a jolt the moment Jake showed them their place in the coupe. In point of fact, the conquering hero in himself vanished completely and a feeling of hopelessness seemed to overwhelm him.

Curley and Mole were sitting in the front seat and Sam was already in the rumble seat, scowling as usual. At his feet were piled a few bags and blankets and a basket that looked as if it contained some lunch.

“There’s a blanket spread under the rest of them blankets,” he said. “Crawl under an’ *keep under*—see!”

“There’s plenty room,” Sam muttered, when Douglas made a grimace as he stepped in. “Me an’ Jake’ll only put our feet over yuh if we’re stopped. Mostly we’ll keep ’em on th’ bags.”

“You’ll have your feet in some hick caboose if you don’t shut up and let me get going!” Curley shouted angrily. “Push that Skippy kid in and get in yourself, Jake—we’re *going!*” he added as he started the car.

And they did go, their motor so soft that it was practically noiseless. Skippy stretched and Douglas stretched, and they both agreed that their leg

room was sufficient but they could see nothing of their journey but cloudy sky and waving treetops.

The rain had stopped and the air was cool and both boys came to the conclusion that as long as they had to be as they were, their present situation could have been far worse. In the thin sleeping-apparel that they were still wearing, they would have felt decidedly uncomfortable if they weren't under blankets.

They were speeding and all four men seemed to be tense. No one spoke and except for an occasional muttering between Sam and Jake, it was pretty still. Douglas whispered that he was certain they were doing at least seventy-five miles an hour. Also, he was certain that their hurried escape was being made on back roads, sequestered mountain roads, anywhere but the traveled highways.

Between the rolling of the car and the silence, Douglas was soon asleep. Skippy was overcome with sleep and fatigue too, but he was blessed (or, perhaps cursed) with an almost monstrous appetite and he could not down the wistful thoughts of food that flitted to and fro in his mind. But finally his weary body and mind succumbed to the power of sleep and he was soon deep in a pleasant dream of returning to New York as the conquering hero and riding down Fifth Avenue in a bunting-bedecked car amidst the shouts and acclaim of the public.

He awakened while bowing his gratitude to the joyous multitude to find that he had knocked Douglas' curly head a resounding smack. And, as the rich boy sat up dismayed and questioning, the coupe rolled to an easy stop somewhere in a woods.

Skippy, too, sat up, apologetic to Douglas but wondering about their surroundings. Except for the extremely narrow road, they were in a dense woods and there was not a sound until Curley got out, stretched his slim, graceful figure and spoke.

"Well, boys," he said pleasantly, "we've done fine." He spread out his dark, well-shaped hand with an affected flourish that Skippy was beginning to notice, and he glanced at the watch upon his wrist. "It's just twelve thirty. We've been traveling since five-thirty on rotten roads all the way and yet we've done a little better than two hundred and fifty miles."

"Wh-wh-where a-are w-w-we?" Jake asked. "Pennsylvania, you sap. Didn't I tell you that's where we were headed for? Anyway," he added, grinning around at his men, "we're here and we're going to stay until it's pretty nearly dark. We'll have some grub and then we're going to have a snooze. You, Jake, will stay on guard—understand? You had a good sleep yesterday and up to the time I got you out of bed at three this morning. You've had more sleep than the rest of us. Tonight, you'll get yours."

“O-o-oke b-b-b-boss,” Jake answered with still a trace of his former sullenness. “B-b-but f-f-first I-I g-got-gotta w-w-walk a-a bit.”

“Who says you can’t!” Curley retorted. “After we eat we’ll all walk and you’ll be nursemaid to the kids.”

Jake grunted but said nothing and after stretching his cramped legs, he fell to with the rest and spread a large khaki blanket under the trees. Douglas and Skippy got out and jumped around, thankful for this bit of freedom but ever mindful that Curley, Sam and Jake kept a watchful eye upon them. Mole, on the contrary, seemed deliberately to avoid their gaze but kept looking into space with a desolate expression on his face.

They had a simple but hearty lunch of chicken sandwiches, fruit and large draughts of piping hot coffee, which Curley poured deftly into tall paper cups. Mole seemed less desolate during that repast for he delved into the lunch-basket time and again for the sandwiches and fruit, eagerly offering them to the boys as if he were fearful that their hunger would not be satisfied.

But Skippy, being in some respects master of his soul, usually saw to it, by fair means or foul, that he didn’t lose out where food was concerned. He usually got more than anybody else on the excuse that he couldn’t eat fast. In any event, he did his full share at this odd luncheon-gathering, and as he and Douglas strolled away through the trees under Jake’s critical eye, he felt not so ill-at-ease.

Sam had strolled on up the road while Curley and Mole sat smoking. Mole was deep in thought again and Skippy looked back once or twice wondering just what he was thinking, but he was soon forced to dismiss even that thought and keep his mind on where he was walking. Thus far they had been provided with no foot covering whatsoever and Douglas was disgruntled about it. Skippy was far from enjoying his interval of exercise too, for though he was used to running barefoot on the sandy waterfronts and age-smoothed wharves, he did not like stepping into the prickly underbrush.

Consequently, they were both glad enough to turn back to the car and rest their twig-scarred feet.

They had hardly settled themselves for their promised rest when they heard the heavy pattering sound of someone running. Looking up the narrow road, they saw Sam rounding the curve breathlessly and waving his thick arms excitedly.

“Boss,” he said, lowering his voice as he approached, “there’s a guy comin’ down this road. I piped him through th’ trees around that bend. He’s about a quarter mile away yet, so there’s time. I gotta hunch it’s a game warden.”

“A bull under another name!” hissed Curley. Then, “Game warden or anybody else, Sam—they mustn’t get down this far to see any of us—understand? Jake’ll go with you and both of you hide behind one of those broad trees at least a hundred feet the other side of the bend. Don’t give him any warning. Sam, you better do the job yourself! Jake can hide farther back in among the trees. Be sure you get a broad tree and one where you can reach out and get him as slick as you know how. *Now scam!*”

Douglas paled and Skippy shivered. Mole glanced after Sam and Jake like one in a trance. Silver Curley, however, was smiling a satisfied smile. He stretched his long, slim legs and stood up against the trunk of the tree where he had been sitting. Then, with a sort of mechanical motion, his graceful hand slipped into his right coat pocket and stayed there.

Skippy and Douglas exchanged significant glances—they were beginning to understand the meaning of the word, *gangster!*

CHAPTER XXII

A CHILLING INCIDENT

It was an interminable wait. Curley standing motionless until his smile seemed fixed and his hand not leaving for an instant his right hand pocket, and Mole still sitting on the blanket staring into space. Skippy and Douglas sat huddled together in the wide rumble seat of the black coupe.

They were waiting, but they knew not for what. There were intervals during which Skippy's vivid imagination drew horrible pictures of what lay in wait for the unsuspecting pedestrian. He had no difficulty in seeing through his mind's eye Sam gloating and laughing over the dead man's bullet-ridden body. He was beginning to hear in every crackling twig the whine of those bullets and when a bluejay nearby suddenly called in raucous tones, he threw himself bodily on Douglas, fearing that it might be the man's pitiful cries for help.

But none of those scenes materialized. The silence seemed only to deepen and the minutes dragged by. Douglas moved closer instinctively, and little by little put his arm through Skippy's. They felt better after that, for in union there was strength.

After what seemed an eternity, they heard the distant sound of footsteps. These came nearer and nearer, then suddenly ceased. A heavy thud sounded and after a moment's silence there came to their waiting ears the sudden tramping of heavy feet around the curve.

Skippy could not resist looking—he was drawn to the sight by a dread fascination and he noticed out the corner of his eye that Douglas seemed to be having the same difficulty. Mole had not changed his position one bit, and it seemed to the boys that Curley had become transfixed so still was he.

But on they came, Jake and Sam, and between them they were carrying the body of a man. No one spoke, no one moved, and the tramping feet of the two men resounded dully up and down the narrow road. Then, when they had got within a few feet of the car, Curley moved out to meet them.

He glanced at his henchmen questioningly.

They nodded.

Curley turned like a flash and motioned the two boys out of the rumble seat, putting a finger to his lips for silence. With that done, he directed in a flash of pantomime to hasten, and that their next duty was to convey the man as silently and as carefully as possible to the rumble seat. Sam, he explicitly gestured, was to keep guard.

It was soon done, done so quickly moreover, that Skippy had no chance to see the face of the unfortunate man. And he was just as glad for the whole thing had unnerved him as it was and Douglas shook like an aged man with the palsy.

Curley leaped lightly into the front seat and with a deft manipulation of the big coupe, he turned it completely around and went in the direction that they had so lately come. Sam's heavy, bloated face grinning back at them left its mark on Skippy's mind—a dreadful thing that could never be erased.

When they were out of sight, Skippy was suddenly aware of Mole, sitting there watching them with a look of deep anxiety in his eyes. Jake had already stretched himself out on the blanket, his heavily lined face upturned to the cloudy skies.

“W-w-well,” said he, lighting a cigarette, “a-a s-s-s-soft j-job! N-n-nothin' t-to it. One c-c-crack an' h-he's out. S-S-Sam's g-got a-a w-w-way w-w-with h-him!” He laughed quietly.

“Shut up, dumbbell!” Mole growled. “Ain't it bad enough, that these kids seen it most, without tellin' how it worked! Ain't it bad enough without laffin'? You're the dumbest guy Curley's got!”

Jake sat up, his rotund form shaking with indignation.

“S-s-say, th-th-that h-h-hick ain't d-d-dead,” he defended. “S-S-Sam only t-t-tapped h-him on th'-th' c-c-conk.”

“Well, I ain't standin' by seein' two nice kids wised up on this rotten game,” Mole retorted. “Just so an innocent farmer don't see Curley snatchin' two kids, he's gotta be slugged and brought here where th' kids see how Silver runs his racket. I'll never turn yella, but I see now why some guys gets fed up on this game.”

Jake stared but said nothing and continued to puff on his cigarette. Mole seemed oblivious of him for he looked at Skippy and Douglas and smiled sadly. “Believe it or not, but I ain't had no hand in this snatchin' of you kids,” he said earnestly. “I ain't that low.”

“Sure, gee whiz, *sure!*” Skippy agreed. “Gee, Doug and me never did think anything but what you were swell—honest. Didn't we, Doug?”

“*Smokes!*” Douglas chimed in. “Sure! You looked on the level and I was even going to bet that you were strong for Skip, only I fell asleep.” Mole smiled gratefully. “That's all I want to know, kids. That's all.”

Jake continued to stare as if he doubted Mole's sanity. Then, as his attention was drawn down the road he stuttered to his companion: “H-h-h-here's th'-th' b-boss, M-M-Mole. D-d-don't l-l-let him g-g-get w-w-wise h-how s-s-sour y-y-yuh're on th-th-this k-k-kid r-r-rack-racket or h-he'll b-b-burn up.”

“Since when did I care whether the boss burns up or not? I done jobs for Silver, plenty of ’em and he ain’t got no kick comin’. But I ain’t in on this play with Silver or any snatchin’ jobs.”

Skippy wasn’t certain what Mole was driving at. Silver Curley’s black coupe slid up to them too soon to think much about anything. The dapper gangster and Sam alighted from the car, both looking very well pleased with themselves.

“Well,” Silver Curley almost cooed, “that’s a job well done. Old guy game-warden’ll wake up in an hour or so because Sam had to tap him once or twice to give him a good sound sleep. We put him four miles down below where the road and the whole location look so much like it does up around here that he won’t know the difference. And when he wakes up, he’ll find a good-sized rock under his head—clear evidence that that’s what he hit his head on. He may be puzzled as to how he got so near to the town when he thought he was still four miles back up the mountain and he may be puzzled as to how he fell and hit his head on a rock when he hadn’t seen any rock, but that’s his funeral, eh, Sam?”

“You told it, Boss!” Sam agreed vigorously. “So now,” said Mole glancing slowly upon the dapper Curley, “I take it we’ll be moving on fifty miles or so over this mountain, hah?”

“Sure,” Curley answered. “We better, in case . . .”

But he stopped there, transfixed by Mole’s straightforward look. Suddenly a tinge of color crept up his cheeks toward his temples and he looked away quickly, nervously.

Mole meant what he said, Skippy was thinking. Silver Curley and his long-trusted henchman just didn’t see each other any more.

CHAPTER XXIII

EN ROUTE

They moved on, up hill and down dale and did not stop until mid-afternoon. Skippy and Douglas were thoroughly weary by that time and had just about enough exertion to eat another sandwich and drink some more coffee before they again fell to sleep.

The skies had cleared and pleasant, warm sunshine filtered down into the dell which effectually hid their presence from the road. Curley had found just the right hiding place this time for the coupe had been backed through some bushes and the men quickly and artfully replaced them so that no chance pedestrian could spy upon them.

All but Jake were sleeping soundly and quietly and he sat through the remaining afternoon and early evening hours, smoking one cigarette after the other. No sound escaped him—no flitting bird or insect escaped his small, blinking eyes.

He waited until the red rimmed horizon had faded into a pastel-colored mist. Then he went around the sleeping group and shook them roughly. Mole and Sam and Curley sat right up, but it was twilight before Skippy and Douglas awakened and they were then well on their way.

They were bumping along down a mountain road and Skippy rose up on his elbow and peeked out to see that the flickering lights of a town were just below them. He gave Douglas a gentle prodding so that he too might see this heartening sight, for somehow a town seemed to be the promise of help and gave them a false sense of hope. It was better than nothing this hope, for it served to soften the dread certainty that Silver Curley would stop at nothing now in order to get his price.

Sam leaned over toward the front seat during the course of their descent. "Boss," he said, in that ingratiating way that the boys were beginning to hate, "I s'pose you're fixin' tuh get them punks some clothes?"

"Sure," Curley answered shortly. "You don't suppose I'm going to carry them around in those pajamas much longer, do you? I might as well tie a sign to the car and tell who I am. But if you mean am I going to stop at this hick village below us—no! We've got a through car to a certain city in case you're wondering. We'll get there in two hours. We're on our way to Danny's and he'll fix us up swell. I'm not trusting you goops to go out shopping for those two kids. An alarm is out now, if I know my hunches. A lady'll get all the clothes that the kids need."

"H-h-his w-w-w-wife?" Jake inquired politely.

“Sure,” Curley answered. “And what’s more, my friend Danny will take care of this car so that the bulls won’t ever know it had a coat of black. He’ll take it off my hands and how!”

“So we’re not comin’ back in it?” Mole queried, anxiously.

“I’m not such a fool, Mole,” answered Curley tersely.

There was silence again for a while, a silence that bespoke much serious thinking among the little group. Skippy and Douglas had received strict orders to keep well under cover as they were entering a back but occasionally traveled road that ran to the outskirts of the city. But the fact that they were under cover did not prevent them from learning something of importance.

“Mole ain’t hisself since this kid business come up,” Sam confided to Jake, presently.

“Y-y-yeah. H-he’s t-t-turnin’ st-st-straight m-m-maybe on th-this j-j-job.”

“Yeah, just because he’s sappy about a coupla fresh kids, especially that Skippy. Jake, it ain’t worth it.” His voice lowered at this point, but Skippy caught what he said just the same. “The boss told me he ain’t tellin’ Mole nothin’ about this whole trip,” Sam confided triumphantly. “He’s takin’ him along because he ain’t trustin’ him behind. An’ between you an’ me, he ain’t trustin’ him a whole lot now he’s along. He told me on the quiet we shouldn’t let Mole be with them kids alone a second.”

“S-s-say d-d-don’t M-M-Mole know th’ l-l-lay?”

“Naw. If that guy knew that Silver’s headin’ for Mexico with them kids he’d blow up!” Skippy reached out instinctively, and grasped Douglas’ arm.

“*Mexico!*” Douglas whispered aghast. “Skip, Curley can’t take us way down there—he *can’t* take me so far from Dad, *he can’t!*”

“Gee whiz!” Skippy murmured, not knowing whether he was frightened or thrilled. “Mexico’s a long way from New York, huh?”

“Too long to walk it,” Douglas answered dolefully. He was thoughtful for a moment, then brightened up and said, “Maybe we can escape, huh?”

“From Mexico?” Skippy asked dismayed.

“No. Before we get there. Maybe even tonight—from whatever city it is we’re coming to.”

“With Sam and Jake ready to step on our necks? Hot dawg, Doug, you know it ain’t so easy as it sounds.” Suddenly Skippy’s cramped legs gave him the dismal thought of what they would feel like if they had to ride to Mexico under cover as they had been doing. “Do you suppose,” he asked wonderingly, “that Silver means he’s going to swap this car for a larger one to ride to Mexico in?”

“I suppose so,” came the listless answer. “He isn’t so stupid that he’d take us in a train where everyone would see us.”

“Gee whiz, that’s right,” Skippy agreed dejectedly. “I was hopin’ it would be a train. I always wanted to ride on a Pullman.”

“Smokes,” said Doug, disgustedly, “you talk as if you’re glad that Curley’s kidnapped us.”

“Don’t be a sap,” Skippy said trying to act indignant. “I’m only glad of the excitement, but when I think of what a skunk Curley is, I’m mad. Besides, if I ain’t got a father like you have to miss me and all that, I got Mr. Conne and he’s almost like a father to me; do you say he ain’t? And my aunt, gee whiz I bet she worries about me as much as your father does about you!”

“Sh!” waned Douglas. “First thing you know they’ll hear us. If you want to get excited, get excited over how we’re going to escape. You said that you and Mr. Conne planned out clever tricks together so can’t you do it alone?”

“Did I say I couldn’t!” Skippy felt that his sleuthing abilities were being questioned, even challenged, and that was all he needed to put him on his mettle. “Even it takes Mr. Conne sometimes days to think out how to catch crooks, so do you say I can’t think out how we’ll escape while we’re in this Danny feller’s house?”

“Well,” said Douglas viewing the thing practically, “if you don’t think of it there, then it’ll be too late!”

“It’s only too late when the crook escapes or when you’re dead—that’s what Mr. Conne always says. So if I tell you what I’ve got in my head and we even don’t get a chance to try it out before we get to Texas or whichever way we’re going, why do you bet that’s too late?” Skippy challenged and at the same time giving himself a wide margin.

“Nope,” Douglas murmured, his eyes fixed on the stars overhead, “not if we escape for certain.” Douglas had not much faith in chance.

CHAPTER XXIV A DARK ARRIVAL

Without untoward incident they came to the end of the road and in full view of the city's lights. Danny, it seemed, lived on the outskirts and Curley announced with a satisfied air that they would soon be at their destination. How the boss gangster had found his way, considering the devious route which they had been forced to take to conceal themselves from the public eye, was a mystery to Skippy.

Douglas suggested, as the coupe darted down a dark, tree-lined road, that perhaps Silver Curley had so often flown this way because of official pressure, that it became a habit. In any event, he seemed to be able to drive straight to his destination without the aid of anyone and after speeding down a sort of lane they came to a high board fence and suddenly stopped in front of a large metal door on which was painted the word, WELDING.

Curley jumped out and pushed a bell-button, then jumped back into his seat. After a moment's wait, a little glass window in the topmost part of the door slid back and a man's eyes squinted down at the coupe's headlights.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Silver," Curley said in a low voice. "Sam, Jake and Mole's with me."

"Fa cryin' out loud!" came the inelegant welcome. "Blamed if I wasn't kinda expectin' it. C'mon in!"

The doors slid open in an instant and with no more than a throb, the car had rolled in and the doors had closed upon them. Skippy and Douglas were sitting up by that time, eager to see and hear everything. But, as it happened, Curley did not mean for them to hear much and certainly he was determined that they should see less.

They got but a momentary glimpse of the man called Danny who was tall and robust and had squinting brown eyes. He appeared in the full glare of the headlights for only a second and when Curley doused them at his request he produced a flashlight, but was careful to stand well in the shadow.

"Sorta dark," he murmured. "But I ain't takin' no chances on havin' a rookie bust in here, tryin' for his first pinch. There's a new bunch that they let loose all bustin' for a record. I ain't got acquainted with the ones in this district so I gotta be careful. There's a new bunch in office."

"Yeah, and maybe you'll be out of luck even if you could talk to 'em, Danny," Curley said, gathering up the luggage he had in front with him. "Nowadays, a guy don't know who to depend on," he added, glancing significantly at Mole. "Anyway, we're only here to say hello and goodbye.

We'll talk about that in private. Meanwhile, get the boys busy on this black body and the coupe's yours. But be sure and fix things so that they don't trail it to me."

"Say listen, Silver, cars I fix never slip back to the bulls. If I get a hunch I can't fix 'em, I strip 'em and pick me out a nice deep lake or river for the chassis. You boys grab your stuff and beat it into the house. Put the kids up in my room and lock the door."

"Oh!" Curley said slowly. "I was wondering why you said you were expecting me. It's in the papers then, eh?"

"You said it, Silver! You didn't know?"

"I wasn't sure Conne would give it out yet. He must feel like killing me or he wouldn't have given it out to the bulls." Curley laughed lightly. "Now I know we've got to get away."

"Well, not that you ain't welcome, Silver," Danny said, walking toward a rear door, "but the way politics is right now . . . anyways, I'll be glad to seein' your dust."

"Now I'm sure you will!" Curley laughed. "Say, another thing," said this impostor proprietor of the welding shop, "I read in the paper—the evening paper, how a game warden had a funny thing happen to him up in the mountains this noon. He crawled into a little town about one hundred miles below here and took the count. The paper said it looked as if he'd been slugged or slipped and hit his head. Anyways, he's a hospital case. I was wonderin' . . ."

"Yeah?" Curley asked.

"Sam once did jobs like that when makin' a getaway and somebody mixed in."

Sam leaped heavily from the rumble seat and roared. "So yuh think it looked like my work, hah, Danny?" He seemed actually pleased with himself when he said, "What a rep I got when yuh know my stuff just by readin' th' papers! I hadda' tag that hick, Danny, so's he wouldn't gum th' works after th' hard ridin' we done. Besides, it was th' boss' orders," he added, pridefully.

"Well, you put the slug on him good," Danny said, laying down the flashlight on a bench near the door. "You'll be safe from that game-warden, and how! The paper says if he don't die, he'll be a nut the rest of his life. He's got a double fracture, Sam, my boy, an' he'll never be able ta tell how come."

Douglas gulped audibly and Skippy, sickened to the point of nausea, saw Mole's hand grip the back of the seat as if he, too, had had too much.

CHAPTER XXV AN INSPIRATION

Danny's welding shop, of course, was but a mask for an unlawful and dangerous livelihood. Just what was the nature of it, neither Douglas nor Skippy ever found out. But it had all the earmarks of the modern day *racket* and these modern day boys were quick to sense it.

Danny had taken his departure with the excuse that he was going to "start the boys on the coupe." Just where and how these "boys" accomplish their business of disguising a hunted car was something which piqued Skippy's curiosity. There was nothing in the shadowy shop to indicate that such work was done there. And, as they followed Curley out of the rear door, they could see nothing save a few shadowy buildings all nestling safely behind the high fence.

It was to one of these buildings that they hurried. Curley knocked and after four short taps they were admitted into a small, dark lobby. Another four taps gave them an open-sesame past another and heavy oaken door which led into a dimly lighted hall. Some man with whom Silver seemed to have a nodding acquaintance admitted them without conversation and swiftly departed on slippered feet.

Mole, Jake and Sam lingered in the hall while Curley motioned the boys to follow him up a long flight of stairs. After that they walked the length of a long hall and finally stopped before a door which the gangster opened briskly.

"Now you two kids will be here until we're ready to beat it," he said, switching the light on in a tastefully furnished bedroom. "You'll get some grub in a few minutes and then you can take a shower or do whatever you want." He pointed to a bathroom opening off the bedroom and glanced down at their bare feet. "Guess you'll want to give them a good scrubbing after being like that all day. When you get your clothes and shoes and things I'll be up here five minutes afterward, so don't linger over putting 'em on." He slammed the door and they heard the click of a key in the lock.

There were twin beds in the room, neatly made and each one boasting a light silken spread. Skippy and Douglas looked at them longingly and after each had picked one for his own, they made a leap and were presently rolling about them from head to foot, heedless of silken spreads or anything else.

"We got to get back at them some way—gee whiz!" Skippy said, pausing for a moment. "Riding all day like we've been in our pajamas and

bare feet—gee whiz!”

“Smokes,” said Douglas, quizzically, “my stiff legs and sore back remind me that we were riding on the floor of the rumble seat in Curley’s black coupe all day.”

“Aw, don’t be funny,” Skippy said, smiling for the first time that long day, “you know what I meant. Shoes! Did you hear Silver say we were going to have *shoes*? Hot dawg! Are my feet burning and funny feeling!”

“And mine!”

“Gee, once I never wore shoes only in cold weather. Then shoes hurt my feet. Now I go a day in my bare feet . . . boy, maybe my feet are getting hoity-toity like you and other rich kids, huh, Doug?”

“Maybe,” Douglas smiled. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re like you are and not like the kids of my father’s friends. Boy, if they had happened to be in my bed last night and were dragged along instead of you!”

“What about it?” Skippy queried.

“Would they have been whining all day! Riding like we’ve been? Smokes, Sam would have knocked somebody else out besides that poor game-warden. So I’m glad it happened this way even if it is rotten for you, Skip. I’d have been doggone lonesome if they had taken me all alone.” Skippy was lying flat on his stomach, his elbows propped and his chin resting on his skinny hands. “I’m glad it happened like it did, too,” he mused, “but it’s a different kind of bein’ glad than what I said when we were on our way here. Because now I’ll be able to tell Mr. Conne how Silver Curley rides all the back roads when he’s beatin’ it away. And I’ll tell the boss how he has this gangster friend Danny who keeps a fake welding shop in . . . say, Doug, where are we, huh?”

“A hot detective you are!” Douglas said, sitting up with his knees under his chin. “You don’t even know where we are and you said you could see things like. If you don’t know, I don’t either. Curley is taking care we don’t know, if you notice. Besides, how are you going to tell Mr. Conne anything when you haven’t even thought of a way to escape yet?”

“Did I say I wasn’t!” Skippy roared.

Douglas put up his hand. “For heaven’s sake—sh!”

“Anyway, I’m *going* to think of something!” Skippy whispered. “Right now we better take a bath and a shower or something.”

They took all three immediately, the “something” being a goodly portion of water which had risen to three inches over the bathroom floor as a result of an aquatic boxing match which they performed under the shower. Not having their full measure of fun as yet, they rubbed soap all over the tile and

made a skating pond of it, much to the anger of Sam who entered the bedroom at that juncture with their dinner trays.

The time being short, he was forced to go below and get a mop to repair the damage while the boys giggled secretly at his wrath and proceeded to enjoy the hearty dinner steaming on their trays.

When he had finished his unwelcome task, he strode past the boys with an angry gleam in his eye. "One of youse kids thought up that trick and it must be th' kid who thought up that other trick in Joisey," he said, turning when he reached the door and leveling his gaze upon Skippy. "There ain't time tuh do nothin', but I'm tellin' the world I'm gonna fix yuh before this thing is through—see! Kid or no kid, I'll fix yuh good!"

"*Says you!*" Skippy said contemptuously. "Says," Douglas said, hesitant, but finally mastering, "*Says I, too!*"

Sam cursed, then slammed the door and locked it, still muttering to himself. Skippy got up and tiptoed softly across the room and put his ear against the door, winking mischievously to Douglas and putting up a finger to his lips for silence.

Suddenly, however, Skippy was arrested by the sound of Jake's voice who had evidently just come up in the hall.

"G-g-give them k-kids g-g-grub?" he was asking.

"Yeah, and with the boss rushin' me around, I hadda grab a mop an' push it around Danny's bathroom like a janitor. That Skippy kid rubbed soap all over the floor an' then poured water on it an' cause the boss give me orders that they eat their chow right away, I hadda play porter while they sat eatin' an' laffin' at me."

"W-w-why didn' you s-s-slap him d-down?"

"Cause Mole's got a nasty temper even when things is goin' good with him. Right now he'd . . . anyways, he's soft about that fresh kid for some nutty reason. Me, I feel like punchin' him down every time I look at him. If it wasn't that it was me what suggested bringin' him along, I'd tell the boss that th' kid's got a look that he'll jinx this job. But I can't say nothin' now, 'cause Silver's greedy for double ransom. He told me just before, he's gonna hold tighter to them kids than ever. An' what burns me up, I can't say that I got a hunch that that kid'll be the means of us doin' a nice, long stretch—he's got an eye that don't miss nothin'."

"Y-y-you g-g-got a-a h-h-hunch he w-w-will?" Jake asked not a little fearfully.

"Sure, an' my hunches is straight. But the boss'd be sore now if I told him. If it wasn't for that when we hit that airport, I'd hide back one of them

parachutes so's that kid wouldn't have none an' when the boss wasn't lookin', I'd push him out th' door."

"I-I-I'd help S-Sam on-only it's n-no use. M-M-Mole'd th-then g-g-give th' k-kid h-h-his P-P-P-P-"

"Yeah, I guess you're right, all right," Sam mumbled. "Just the same I'll find a way, I'll find a way . . ."

Their voices trailed down the hall and Skippy turned away from the door, his bright eyes shining triumphantly. "I got it, Doug!" he said excitedly.

"What have you got?" Douglas asked, his mouth full of huckleberry pie.

"Gee whiz, what *would* I have, huh? How we're going to escape, that's what I've got, and it's in my head, *good!*"

"*Smokes!*" Douglas said breathlessly.

"Listen," Skippy whispered, "we're going to Mexico in a airplane! I just heard Sam talking to Jake about it in the hall. And we're going to wear parachutes! And we're going to try and sit near the back door! So do you say now I wouldn't think of a good way, huh?"

Douglas nodded slowly.

CHAPTER XXVI SPOKES IN THE WHEEL

Curley brought them clothing which fitted them after a fashion and shoes which they did not have to untie to step out of. But everything he had bought for them was cool and comfortable and they felt more like human beings when he curtly ordered them to follow him downstairs.

They had each been given a small handbag into which had been packed two extra changes of clothing, stockings and shoes. Also, there were pajamas, their own having been left for Danny to destroy. And last but not least, all the necessary toilet articles that a boy would be likely to use were stuffed inside a convenient pocket of the bag.

"I'd like to sneak out the toothbrush and the soap," Douglas whispered into Skippy's ear as they walked behind Curley through the silent, dark yard. "If we land in the desert or on some mountain it won't be so bad if we can at least clean our teeth and wash up with soap."

"Gee whiz, you would think of something like 'at!" Skippy retorted, scarcely able to subdue his squeaky voice. "Gee whiz, we're lucky to take ourselves, without thinking about toothbrushes and soap. Did the Indians have soap and toothbrushes? And they lived to be a couple of hundred years old some of them and that's a fact."

They were nearing the welding shop at that juncture and all conversation had to cease. Skippy was not sorry for the subject was not one which was dear to his heart. He himself was aware that the argument was in favor of Douglas, for even in the natural course of events, he never let a little detail like soap or a toothbrush ruffle the placidity of his care-free existence.

Inside the welding shop, Curley flashed a spotlight and boosted them into the back seat of a large sedan where Jake was already seated. Mole and Sam slid in next, taking their places in the little extra seats on the side. The back door closed and presently a man whose face Skippy never saw opened the front door and got in behind the wheel. Silver took his place beside him and without a word the welding shop doors opened and they rolled out to the road.

Skippy turned to look back, but in vain. The curtains were drawn and Jake was watching closely that they stayed down. He looked at the boy with a smile of satisfaction.

In revenge, Skippy deliberately leaned toward Douglas and pressed his mouth against his ear. "No matter how long we have to wait after we're in

that plane,” he whispered, “you watch my face. When I think it’s time, I’ll say yes to you soft and easy. I’ll go first!”

Douglas nodded and gave him a nudge. Jake’s face red with anger could be discerned even in that near-darkness of the car.

“W-w-what’s that wh-wh-whisperin’ about?” he demanded.

Skippy grinned. “Who wants to know, huh?” he returned.

“I-I-I d-d-do.”

“Aw, Jake,” Skippy teased, “is that nice?”

“W-w-what—?” Jake was white with anger.

“Ask me no questions an’ I’ll tell you no lies,” replied Skippy complacently.

“Jake!” Curley’s voice cut in sharply. “Sit in between those kids and shut up!”

Jake did as he was told, but Skippy did not mind. He and Douglas exchanged smiles of confidence and of hope. The freedom of the air would soon be theirs to escape in—what had they to fear from Jake’s hated guardianship now?

It was evident by the dark streets through which they rode that they would not pass through the city proper. After fifteen minutes of steady riding they swung onto a bumpy country road and suddenly the tension was broken.

“Almost due, Boss?” Sam asked in his ingratiating way.

“Yes, and I’m glad of it!”

Mole sighed and lighted a cigarette, but said nothing.

The man behind the wheel said in a guttural voice, “Just on time-a.”

Skippy bethought himself of his own successful attempt in Italian accents and chuckled aloud before he realized it. Jake scowled and Sam growled some unintelligible rebuke, but Skippy was aware only of Mole who had turned suddenly and was staring at him with that same strange smile in his kindly eyes that he had had back in Silver Curley’s hideout early that morning.

They turned into a well-lighted road that was devoid of traffic and continued along this until a broad gateway loomed up before them. An arc of electric letters beneath it spelled out the name, ALLISON AIRPORT.

As they drove in past the gate, the airport’s great searchlight swept over the hood of the sedan and up across the dark heavens. Silver Curley ducked instinctively and Mole chuckled softly.

Silver Curley straightened up when it had passed and glared back at his former trusty. Sam coughed uncomfortably and the driver swung the car around to a large hangar where two feeble lights were burning. Then they all scrambled out.

A man of medium build glided up to them out of the shadow. He had on a white duck coverall that aviation mechanics wear and a cap which he had pulled down effectively over one eye. The driver saluted him and he returned it immediately.

“These the people Danny sent?” he asked succinctly.

“Yeah,” the driver answered. “O. K.?”

“O. K.,” came the simple reply.

Silver and Sam set about immediately to gather their baggage from the car. When they were finished, the driver nodded to them and without ceremony started his car and drove away. Skippy and Douglas stood close together not a little awed by the mystery which was attending their departure. Skippy had a sinking sort of sensation in the pit of his stomach and for the moment his plans for escape seemed to vanish into the thin mist which hung about the airport.

“We’re all set, buddy,” Curley said to the man.

“O. K.,” the man murmured. “We ran the ship down to the far end of the field in case . . .”

“That’s right.” Curley seemed pleased. He turned and said, “Come on, follow us.”

They walked along under the field lights and then veered off into the shadowy lane which ran alongside the field itself. Presently, the throbbing whirr of a waiting plane reached their ears and soon a tail light was visible.

Despite his fear and growing doubts about a parachute escape, Skippy could not restrain the thrill that he got upon seeing the plane. He knew enough about them to see that it was the latest model, a powerful tri-motored ship with all the modern conveniences. So far, he had to admit, Silver Curley had not stinted in his effort to escape.

The pilot saw them coming and greeted Curley at the fuselage door. “Good evening,” he said, pleasantly. “You’re still certain you want to take off tonight?”

“We’re here,” Curley answered tersely. “I can’t see it means anything but.”

“Up to you,” said the pilot. “As I told you over the phone, the weather’s getting thick. Low ceiling and storms reported all east of the Mississippi.”

“Yeah,” said Curley reverting to the vernacular as he sometimes did when distressed, “an’ I’ll be in ’em if I stay. Got plenty gas?”

“Sure. Enough to last till we get to Missouri. You see with eight people and baggage I can’t buck the wind as well.”

“That’s all right,” Curley said wiping his white, perspiring forehead. “Everything jake in Missouri? Who you know there?”

“Some people on a farm. It’s thirty miles from Joplin and fifteen miles from their nearest neighbor. They never read the papers, but then they don’t ask questions either. They’re too glad to sell the gas to me. I stop there often for the whole day when I happen to have a passenger that would rather fly over the border when it’s dark.”

“O. K., Buddy,” Curley smiled. “We’ll stop at the farm. Or rather away from the farm. If it’s just the same to you my party will stay in the ship all day—shades drawn—understand? I won’t let them sleep tonight, so’s that they’ll be sure to want to sleep tomorrow.”

“How ’b-b-bout me, B-Boss?” Jake asked anxiously. “D-didn’ I . . .”

“It’s understood you’ll sleep tonight, Jake.” Then to the pilot he said, “As long as we’re going to be with you awhile, we might as well know your name.”

“Sigsbee,” came the reply. “Silent Sigsbee.”

“*Silent*, eh?” Curley chuckled. “Well now, that’s not half bad. Mm. Before we start, though—you’re sure we’ll be safe in this Missouri farm place—out of sight of the road and all that?”

“Everything. Danny could tell you no passenger of mine ever failed to get across the border as long as they could pay the price. And believe me,” he laughed, “you’re paying me the price!”

“That’s the talk, Silent,” Curley said rubbing his hands. He was again the dapper gangster, this suave creature who found it difficult at times to talk and act the gentleman. “Everything’s ready, I guess.”

The mechanic stepped aboard and went forward, acting as if he had not seen or heard anything unusual. Sam followed him with the luggage and Mole was next. Curley nodded to the two boys and as they passed Sigsbee gave them a look of interest. Skippy turned and looked at him over his shoulder, interested too.

The young man had a rather striking face, open and honest and smiling. His eyes, too, seemed to look straightforward and kind. Skippy felt distinctly puzzled, for into his young brain a lot of strange thoughts were filtering and though he could not put it into words he likened it to a ferris-wheel this gangster-racketeer business. It seemed an endless chain as it revolved, always gathering up another young man, sometimes a nice young man like Sigsbee seemed to be and like Mole must certainly have been once. The pity of it was, Carlton Conne had said, that they went into it for a price, but the price was what really trapped them in the end.

Silent Sigsbee had admitted that Silver Curley was paying him the price. Would that price trap him in the end? Skippy dismissed the thought and walked down the narrow aisle to where Douglas was sitting, expectantly.

CHAPTER XXVII SOMEWHERE IN MISSOURI

Silver Curley took a seat nearest the door and right behind the two boys. Whether he did that intentionally or not, Skippy was at a loss to know. In any event, he seemed not to pay any attention to them, but sat quite alone, centered wholly on his own thoughts.

They had taken off without incident and climbed the mist easily. The mechanic peered from the cockpit down the length of the cozy cabin, then shut the door and they were left to themselves. But there was little for the boys to do. It was uncomfortable sitting in their “chutes,” yet they had a happy feeling of expectancy because of this discomfort. Silver would certainly tire of sitting there alone, their eyes seemed to say to each other. Then would be their big chance!

But their big chance did not materialize that night. Silver did not stir except for an occasional visit to the water cooler which stood just outside the rest room door. He would always come sauntering back and take the same seat, despite the fact that Sam was sitting alone up near the cockpit, his eyes fixed upon the drawn shade at his elbow and looking as if he wanted company.

With his parachute beside him, Jake was stretched out on a seat just ahead of the boys, sound asleep and snoring comfortably. Mole sat opposite, playing a profound game of solitaire upon the folding wall table. Skippy and Douglas began to regard one another questioningly and then they could feel the big ship rocking as it ran into a storm.

“Would you want to take a chance jumping into that—by golly!” Douglas whispered in answer to an accusing look from Skippy. “We might fall into a river or something and then where would we be! Didn’t you ever hear that if you fall into a river with a parachute on, you’ll drown?”

This argument was being set forth during an interval when Silver was making a trip to the water cooler. Douglas glanced at his back, anxiously. Skippy shrugged his narrow shoulders.

“*Gee-ee!* It’s goin’ to be a chance any way you look at it, Doug! Even if it’s a nice sunshiny day, how do you know where we’d land and besides we might get stuck in a tree or something! Even we might get lost from each other—gee whiz!”

Douglas was adamant. “Just the same we better wait, Skip.” He raised the shade at his elbow and peeked out. Rain and hail beat against the window pane. “See how awful? Listen, Skip, I know we could make it even

if Silver comes back and sits there again. We could go to the water cooler too, together. They haven't an idea in their heads that we're thinking of escape in these 'chutes.' Tomorrow night may be nice and clear and . . . Smokes, Skip, it isn't 'cause I'm afraid—I don't want to be separated from you if it can be helped. We could never see each other on a night like this—there wouldn't be a chance! The wind would blow us apart tonight.”

Skippy looked into Douglas' honest blue eyes and was convinced. “All right, Doug,” he said, giving his friend a playful punch. “Whenever you say. But we'll stick together and how!”

They flew out of one storm and into another all night, and landed in a driving rain at the Missouri farm just at dawn. No one but Jake had slept—no one was able to, for it had been anything but smooth going and the boys particularly had been too excited even to read the magazines that Mole had proffered them so kindly.

Following his rule of isolation, Curley allowed only Jake and Sam to accompany Sigsbee and his mechanic to the farmhouse where they were going to order breakfast for eight. Mole, Skippy was beginning to realize, was as much a prisoner as themselves. His continuous silence, his avoidance of Silver, everything pointed toward that fact.

When the four men returned they each bore a tray for those confined in the plane. Each one contained a steaming, hearty breakfast. This method was carried out at noon and again at night, after which time, Silver asked Mole to accompany himself and the boys out for a little exercise in the drizzle.

Mole consented by nodding his head and they walked off into a little stretch of woods away from the farmhouse. During the intervals when they weren't sleeping during the dark day, both Skippy and Douglas took turns at pulling back the drawn shades and peeking toward the silent farmhouse.

They saw a cow and a horse grazing in a strip of pasture near the rickety looking house and once they saw a man walk out toward the barn. And now, as they strolled off toward the woods under the surveillance of Curley, they saw four men walk from the barn to the house quickly.

“Gee whiz!” said Skippy impulsively. “I bet that's a still they got in there; what do you bet?” Douglas grinned. “Sure, I bet it is,” he said gathering courage from Skippy's frank assertion.

“It looks mysterious—do you say it don't look mysterious?” Skippy asked, winking significantly at his friend as if to say that he was intent upon raising a little mischief in their ranks that moment.

“Say,” said Curley sharply, “be careful what you look at—get me, kid? Never mind how it looks or what you bet! It's not your business or mine either!”

“Did I say it was!” Skippy retorted with a grin. “I don’t care only I was just thinking how funny you guys are . . .”

“What do you mean—*us guys*?” Silver scowled.

“I mean how it’s funny that you guys all sort of meet together sometime or other. Jake and Sam and all those others that you had in your hideout. You all seem to click like. Then that Danny, and that guy that drove us to the airport. You click with them too. Then that Sigsbee, and his mechanic—they know people on this farm that act like all the rest of you guys do—you know—sneak back and forth in the daylight as if somebody’s going to pop something at you. The only time any of you act like other people is at night. Gee whiz, I wouldn’t wanna be a gangster! Boy, like my father said, ‘birds of a feather . . .’”

“Shut up, you fresh kid—*you!*” Curley looked black with wrath.

Skippy giggled and waited his chance for Silver to look away. Then he winked at Mole significantly. Mole winked back, smiling understanding, notwithstanding the fact that he seemed steeped in despair.

When they returned to the plane, twilight was approaching and the drizzle had stopped. Sigsbee announced that the gas had been replenished in their absence and that they would start as soon as it was dusk. No further stop would be required.

“With luck and no storms to buck,” he told Curley, “we ought to be crossing the border by two o’clock.”

“Fine,” Curley almost cooed.

“And if you people don’t mind,” Sigsbee concluded, “we’ll have to travel without lights if I spot any army planes. My friends here tell me that they got a tip there’s a patrol out looking for reported booze runners. They’re covering northwest Oklahoma and New Mexico. I’m going over through Kansas and Colorado and so on through Arizona. But to be on the safe side, we’ll ride in the dark. Better to have a little discomfort than have them trail us and force us to land for questioning. You see, I know them. Before a fellow knows it, they’ve got you to tell where you were born.”

“Mm,” Curley mused. “Do what you think’s best, Silent. We can’t afford to see anybody now, much less have them question us. Go whatever way you think you’ll beat ’em, as long as we get over the border before daylight. We can stop on the other side no matter how light it is—the danger’ll be over then. We can take our time after that.”

“O. K.,” Sigsbee said, smiling. “We’ll have pretty fair weather for a while I guess. If any of you people want to leave off your ‘chutes’ you can do it—you’ll be more comfortable. I guess you realize that after last night.”

“All right—sure!” said Curley affably. He turned to the boys. “Listen kids, don’t think that because you leave them off and it’s dark that you can fool and punch each other around and maybe knock each other out a window or something. Sam told me how you fooled in Danny’s bathroom. Now . . .”

Skippy felt crushed but grinned about it bravely. He looked at Curley, his wide, bright eyes appealing. “Gee whiz—gee,” he said trying to make his voice sound fearful, “I’m scared to ride without a parachute, I am. Honest, if I have one on I don’t think about storms or anything so can’t I please have mine on?”

“Smokes, me too!” Douglas said, trying hard to sound not so eager. “It’s lucky for me to ride in one ’cause once when I didn’t wear one, Dad and me ran into a bad storm on our way to Washing . . .”

“All right, all right,” Curley said impatiently. “Put ’em on; I don’t care!” He leveled his gaze at Skippy and his thin lips smiled sardonically. “It’s a good thing you’re scared of something, kid! Believe me, it’s a good thing.”

A fitting retort buzzed on Skippy’s lips, but that was as far as he let it go. He was only too thankful that Curley had not refused them and he gladly allowed the mechanic to help him into his parachute. Sigsbee was helping Douglas into his and they were getting their share of teasing from the airmen for being air superstitious.

But Skippy did not mind in the least—he grinned back every time and kept his opinions strictly to himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A LONG JUMP

True to Silent Sigsbee's promise, they had very fair weather for a few hours. There was but little wind and a high ceiling, and the sky was radiant with stars. Off to the east, a full moon was riding the edge of a fleecy cloud. Someone called that it was just the midnight hour.

There was a broad, divan-like seat opposite the rest room door and Silver and Sam had chosen this to sit on, unfortunately for the boys. Mole and Jake were sitting up ahead, seemingly engaged in serious conversation. Skippy was furious, but Douglas was taking it with fatalistic complacency.

"Maybe we're not meant to go?" he said, heaping live coals on Skippy's burning head. "Maybe we'd get killed if we go now and that's the reason Fate . . ."

"Fate my eye!" Skippy screeched in Douglas' ear. "If you'd complicate a lot that something should happen so's Sam and Curley would get away from there and give us chance to sneak to that door and get out, then something *would* happen!"

"Is that what you're doing—*complicating*?" Douglas asked, trying hard not to smile.

"Is this the time for English or grammar or something!" Skippy demanded. Suddenly he leaned toward Douglas. "You know all the time what I mean, huh?"

"Sure," Douglas said good-naturedly. "I'm only kidding you, Skip. I knew you meant I should *concentrate* and I will! I guess I'm not as good a sport as I thought I was. Smokes, here you've never been on a plane before and you're willing to jump it when you don't know the altitude, where we are, or anything else. Believe me, Skip, you're a sport and I don't mean maybe!"

"Aw, forget it!" Skippy said modestly.

"Come on, let's c-c-con—, anyway, let's do what you said the word was!"

And they did.

Fate seemed to sit up and take notice, despite Skippy's scorn of that strange maker of destinies. Or, perhaps he felt the same compelling force in concentration and did not recognize it as the same fair goddess whom Douglas respected. In any event, they struck, at that juncture, an air pocket, as the mechanic reported to them presently, when the ship went out of keel.

“Think everything will be all right, soon?” Curley asked the mechanic who was standing nearby.

“Not for a while,” the man answered. “We’re running into stiff head winds and Sigsbee’s going to push straight west to get out of em.

“Wow!” Sam growled, turning to his boss. “I bet that’ll set us back.”

“Will it?” Curley asked the mechanic.

“Of course—some. But why don’t you go up and talk to Sigsbee about it?”

“Not a bad idea,” Curley answered getting up and hurrying forward.

Sam, to the astonishment of the boys, got up also and followed his boss the length of the dark cabin. Skippy grasped one leg of Douglas’ linen knickers and pulled it with joy.

“Now’s our chance, Doug—*now!*”

“Skip, you’re crazy! Didn’t you hear the mechanic say we were running into head winds!” There was an icy note of fear in Douglas’ voice as he grasped Skippy’s shoulder. “Feel this ship? He’s taking a drop—we can’t go while he’s doing that. The ship would hit us—maybe tear the ‘chutes’ before they’re even open!”

“Even if he’s dropping—if there’s head winds won’t it blow us away from the plane?” Skippy reasoned.

“Oh, it might, it might!” Douglas said with a groan. “Skip, I guess I just haven’t got your nerve, that’s all.”

“*My eye!*” Skippy said, patting his friend consolingly. “Don’t you s’pose I haven’t read up on how you’re supposed to jump? Gee whiz, Doug! Keep thinking we won’t be parted and we won’t! There’s a moon and it’s as bright as anything. Keep throwing your body like, the way you see me going and we won’t get far from each other. Throw yourself away from the plane—that’s what I read to do. And count like I told you before you pull. Now, come on! We’ll crawl in the aisle till we get to the door.”

Douglas moved like an automaton, but he followed. When they reached the door, Skippy looked back down the dark aisle. Jake seemed half asleep and Mole’s face was pressed heavily against the window, apparently oblivious of all but his own sad thoughts. Sam and Curley were still talking up in the cockpit and the door was shut.

Skippy touched Douglas’ sleeve and they both rose to their feet with one movement.

“You come right after me, Doug—soon’s you see me get clear, huh?” he whispered.

Douglas nodded, his cheeks looking wan but a smile on his lips. “I’m afraid, Skip,” his teeth chattered, “but you’re so great, I won’t let you get

anything on me for spite!”

“Atta Doug!” Skippy wasn’t so sure but that his stomach felt a little queer also, but he grinned at his friend and said, “I’ll be seeing you!”

He pushed open the door, closed his eyes, brought his teeth down grimly over his lower lip, and threw his poor skinny little body to the mercy of the elements.

Douglas looked out into the swirling atmosphere, sickened and almost on the point of shutting the door and running back to his seat, when he heard Sam’s voice.

He jumped.

CHAPTER XXIX A DREAM?

Douglas' tremor left him as soon as his "chute" opened. He had cleared the ship nicely and dropped below the rushing winds into a warmer atmosphere and saw with joy that the wind at his back was pushing him in Skippy's direction. Even the moon seemed to be smiling down upon them.

Skippy, meanwhile, felt a completely new elation. The thrill of parachute jumping had overwhelmed him. Here he was, part of the very air, battling the elements, yet knowing all the while that he would be the conqueror, because of this silken, umbrella-like device from which his skinny body dangled.

He laughed and tried to shake his head encouragingly at Douglas even though he knew that it wouldn't be seen. But he was happy and shouted with joy to see the moon shining gayly on something that looked like sand.

The farther down he was blown the more was he convinced that it was sand for, with the moon gleaming on it, it reminded him of a huge pit that he used to visit not far from the barge which had been his home not so long ago. At least, he assured himself, he couldn't have had any softer spot to land on than a sand pit, provided, of course, that it contained no water.

Skippy was soon flung face downward on sand—warm, choking sand that seemed to stifle him. He picked himself up, dazed and rather blinded, and fumbled around until he had loosed himself from the parachute. With that done, he just let himself drop back on the sand so queer did his body feel.

His head seemed to swim and there was a pounding in his ears. His eyes were so blurred that it made him feel dizzy and he buried his face in his hands. Then for a full half hour he slept, not moving nor even dreaming.

But he awakened suddenly and sat up to find that his eyes were no longer blurred. His head too, felt clear and the pounding had gone from his ears. It was as if he was seeing, hearing and thinking for the first time in his life. Then in a flash he thought of Douglas.

He got to his feet, full of remorse. How long had he been sleeping? What made him sleep like that when he should have been looking for Douglas? He stepped forward a few steps then stopped at the sight of a dwarfed cactus with its knife-like tentacles casting elongated shadows across the moonlit sand.

He felt bewildered—brushed his hands across his eyes to be certain that he was now wide awake. His aunt had a little cactus, a spiny thing no larger

than his fist. It was embedded in a pot of rocks which she called her rock garden and set out on the kitchen window-sill. Aside from that, the only other cactus he had ever noticed was in the talkies . . . a desert scene.

He shrugged his shoulders, mystified, then walked a few feet more. Instinctively, he was looking for water—a lake, a river . . . certainly they could not have flown so far as to be near any ocean. He laughed at the absurdity of the thought.

Everything was so still. Not a breath of air, not a zephyr ruffled the spines projecting from the grinning cactus. Skippy unloosened his collar and opened his blouse half-way down the front. He suddenly felt desperate, hopeless. Where was he? Where was Douglas? There was not a house, not a welcoming voice—nothing but heat and the gleaming sand!

[Illustration: BY NOON THEY WERE AT THE POINT OF EXHAUSTION.]

Skippy clutched at his throat, wondering where to go and what to do. Who was it but *he* that had talked of escape! *Escape!* He laughed aloud at the ridiculous idea that had prompted him to do such a thing and urge Douglas to accompany him besides! Far better would they have been to trust to the menace of Silver Curley.

His laugh died away and its echo seemed to leave strange hollow sounds dangling in the hot air. Or was it his echo? He listened, then slowly convinced that it was a cry, he turned around trying to place it and saw a familiar figure half running, half crying with joy as it came toward him.

Douglas!

CHAPTER XXX A DESERT DAY

They stood looking at each other too overwhelmed to speak. Douglas' blue eyes were misty but he laughed. Skippy put out his hand and touched his arm as if to make certain it was he in the flesh.

"Was I scared, Doug?" He hesitated, then confessed. "I didn't see where you went to or anything. When I landed, I felt so blamed queer—gee whiz, I didn't mean to, Doug, but I fell to sleep and when I woke up just a few minutes ago I all of a sudden thought of you. Gee, I felt crazy like—honest! After I promised you and . . ."

"Forget it, Skip!" Douglas interposed. He sat down on the sand, exhausted. "I know how it is when you're rushing down so fast. But I stared my eyes out of my head and sort of figured just about where you'd be landing. I kept it in my head—*hard*, even when I was being pulled along with that 'chute.' So as soon as my head stopped pounding and my eyes felt better I came right in this direction and told myself all the time that I'd find you. And I did!"

"Gee, you got that in your head too, huh?" Skippy said, so pleased to see Douglas that he was embarrassed by the emotion welling up in him. "Were your eyes like you couldn't see, huh? Gee, so were mine. I felt all dizzy. I couldn't do nothing else but sleep!"

"I think I'm stronger than you, Skip. That's why I didn't feel it so. I guess we traveled from some altitude and my father said it affects people sometimes so that they faint."

"Boy, just like I felt. But, just the same I'm glad you kept it hard in your head where I was, Doug. Honest, when I saw how spooky the moon looked on the sand and it was so quiet and all . . . say, Doug, where the heck are we, huh?"

"Just what I'd like to know, Skip. It's hot enough to choke a guy." He lay back wearily and sighed.

"Well, there must be some water somewheres around, huh? With so much sand . . ."

Douglas turned over on his stomach and pointed to the cactus. "Skip, you don't find water where you see those things. I know my botany that much. I know what we're in, but I don't know where."

"Gee whiz, is it a riddle?"

Douglas laughed. "No, I wish it was. Don't you know a desert when you see one?"

“Desert!” Skippy scratched his head. “How could we be in a desert?”

“Easy. We started from Missouri, almost on the Oklahoma border, at dusk. By midnight with Sigsbee going straight west we could have been blown hundreds of miles still farther. Sure, we could be in a desert. What’s more—we are! But I don’t know whether it’s in Arizona or California.”

“Hot dog!” Skippy sighed, and sat down beside his friend. “Does that mean we’re lost—that we’ll die of thirst like they show in the talkies?”

Douglas laughed. “This isn’t the Sahara, I’m sure of that,” he said soberly. “I’ve read where lots of people have been lost out here but it’s because they get panicky. We’ll sleep now and we’ll follow the sun in the morning. People ride right through the desert on their way to Los Angeles. Dad said he took me that way once when I was a baby, but I don’t remember it. So there must be roads somewhere.”

“Gee whiz, that’s good,” Skippy said brightening. “I didn’t know they could make a road through sand. Now I’m not sorry we escaped, are you?”

“Sorry!” Douglas looked straight at his friend. “Skip, when I tell Dad how you gave me the nerve to jump—smokes, I was nervous! But when I saw you and even then felt sort of sick . . . anyway, Sam’s voice coming back into the cabin did the trick. I yelled I was so happy when my ‘chute’ opened and I saw I was blowing your way.”

Their voices were joyous and the boyish echo of it seemed to lighten for the moment the oppressive atmosphere. They had the inspiration to use the soft silken parachute to lie on for the night as the heat of the sand was unbearable. Douglas had left his behind but they soon agreed that one parachute was quite enough for two boys of their slim build.

And so they slept through a desert night, or rather through the early hours of the morning. Dawn spread its roseate hand over the horizon and soon the whole eastern sky was aglow with myriad lights and shadows. Slowly, too, the dwarfed cactus nearby lost its supernatural look and in the light of a new-born day, looked just what it was, a desolate, ugly thing that seemed always parched although it never knew thirst.

The sun rising on the desert is a monster of remarkable speed. There seems to be but a space between the cool of early morning and the burning heat of a day that is still in its infancy. The sun shone mercilessly down upon the two sleeping boys and routed them from their silken bed on the sands.

Water was their first thought, for as they awakened and yawned, they realized the parched condition of their throats. Skippy got up and shading his face with his hands, looked all about for some sign of a stream. Douglas joined him, pointing joyously to the cool surrounding mountains, so near and yet so far.

“We might as well walk, Skip,” he said, looking at the sun’s direction. “I’m thirsty as the dickens too, but right now it’s better for us to find people who can ride us to it. If we find water, so much the better. But we want to find people anyhow! Sleeping on the sand is too hot and besides I feel kind of itchy.”

“Yeah, I know,” Skippy said with characteristic naivete. “Fleas. We always used to have them when I lived on a barge once. Gee whiz, they were awful in the summer. They came from the sandpit. A guy couldn’t hardly sleep in summer—honest!”

“I believe you,” Douglas said whimsically. He put his arm through Skippy’s and they started off. “Mr. Conne likes you a whole lot. He told my father that.”

“Aw, I guess he likes me all right. But he bawls me out terrible sometimes,” Skippy admitted, forgetting for a moment that he had given himself some prestige in Douglas’ eyes.

Douglas evidently forgot that too, for he said, “Never mind. He’s like that. He told Dad, if you pay attention and don’t get a swell-head he’ll make something of you some day.”

This affront to Skippy’s dignity had not such a lasting effect. He soon forgot it in the remembrance of how much he had learned and seen of Silver Curley and his gang. Now that he was away from them, it occurred to him that he could have better served Carlton Conne by making an effort to round them up instead of continually thinking of escape. He told this to Douglas, unconsciously flying his own colors so as to reestablish before his friend the glory of his own achievements.

“But I did it for you—you’d tell Mr. Conne that, huh?” Skippy asked anxiously. “‘Cause, gee whiz, I wouldn’t want him to think I’d be so afraid to stay kidnapped by Silver that I forgot how much the boss would like to catch him and see him sent up the river. Gee whiz, the boss would be disappointed if I came home without Curley after I was so close to him so long. But he won’t be mad if he knows I did it to get you back to your father, so you’ll tell him, huh?”

“And how!” Douglas said, grateful and serious. “But we’ll wait till we get to New York first. Smokes, it gets hotter by the minute.”

“And there’s nothin’ in sight but sand and cactus. And mountains that seem to move farther away the farther we walk!”

They stopped a moment to wipe their perspiring foreheads. But it seemed warmer standing still on the hot sand than to trudge on. A glaring silence ruled supreme and the sound of their voices was at least a respite from that, even though they seemed to be able to talk of nothing but heat, sand and a drink of water.

By noon, with the sun still pouring a merciless stream of fire down upon them, they were at the point of exhaustion. Douglas suggested that they tie their handkerchiefs around their heads.

It was a little help and kept Skippy from feeling as dizzy as he had been. Pangs of hunger had come and gone by mid-afternoon and by late afternoon they suddenly became aware that the chief topic of their conversation had been about water, swimming in it, drinking of it and feeling the cool breath of it blowing over their hot faces.

“Gee whiz, I bet right now I could drink a gallon of it,” Skippy said, feeling as if his tongue was cracking when he spoke.

They had espied a giant cactus and were sitting on the small, square patch of shadow which it made upon the blinding sands. Gnats flew about them in droves and far to the east they saw a dark streak circling about on the horizon.

“Buzzards,” Douglas said. “I’ve seen them fly like that when I was down south with my father in the swamps.”

“Gee, you’ve been lots of places, huh?” Then, musingly, “Say, Doug, they’re the birds that eat people, ain’t they?”

Douglas shook his head. “Not until you’re good and dead. And, smokes, we’re a heck of a ways from being dead.” He looked toward the horizon a little uneasily, and was relieved to see that these vultures of the air had gone their death-like way. He nudged Skippy joyfully. “See! They’ve gone after somebody who really is dead!”

Skippy tried to laugh but the attempt was pathetic. His eyes had a peculiar glitter in them, hopeful and yet hopeless. He kicked at the white sand and a rat scurried out and scampered away. For the thousandth time that day, perhaps, he looked toward the mountains.

“We walk but we don’t seem to get anywhere, Doug.”

“I know it, Skip. We’ll wait until the sun sets and it gets a little cooler. Then we’ll scam as Sam says.”

And so they followed that plan. They did not have long to wait; the sun sets quickly in the desert, and before the last scarlet gleam had dipped behind the cool looking mountains they were on their way.

It was like a new start for them. They had resolved to forget their thirst and the fact that they had given way to such a pessimistic thought that perhaps they had been lost that day. It was solemnly agreed that they were to talk and act just as if they had a destination and were certain that they were on the right course.

“In other words we must *complicate* on it!” Douglas said soberly.

Skippy grinned. “Aw right—laugh!” he said. “Anyways, it’s not like you couldn’t understand what I mean the way some people talk and you don’t

know what they mean, huh? I get near to the word anyhow!”

“*And how!*” Douglas applauded. “I’m for you, whatever you say, Skip!”

In this spirit, they continued their search for a road, for some sight of a human being. The silence was beginning to get on their nerves, so much so, that they almost welcomed the rattle of a snake as it wriggled toward its hole not ten feet away from where they were walking.

The western horizon spread before them, a molten curtain of soft purples and rose tipped clouds. And then twilight descended upon the desert, stealing around them in silent, eerie shadows that grew and grew until a still black night surrounded them.

But neither one of them spoke of this, nor seemed to notice it. They plunged ahead instinctively, sometimes arm in arm, sometimes not, but always kept up a pace where they could put out their hands and touch each other in the event of danger.

Sometimes they caught faint sounds in the distance, sounds that they later thought must have been a jack-rabbit scurrying from danger for they spied two or three soon afterward that almost frightened them out of their wits when they sprang out of the darkness and over their feet.

How long they walked in the darkness, they hadn’t the slightest idea. It seemed an eternity, for they were footsore and both secretly deliberating whether or not it would be wise to suggest a little rest when they suddenly caught the sound of a human voice in the distance.

Sand dunes rose up on all sides of them like ghostly sentinels of the darkness. Skippy hurried forward hunting around them and making a thorough search of it. Douglas, helped too, of course, and just when they were both about to despair of finding anyone, he pointed ahead.

“*A light, Skip!*” he cried joyously. “*A light!*”

They called, running as they called and caught a welcome answer. Then soon, as the light seemed to brighten they saw the dark figure of a man coming toward them. Skippy shrieked with delight and Douglas whooped like a wild Indian. Presently, they saw a group of men pass in front of the lighted area as if they too were making ready to welcome them.

Suddenly Skippy and Douglas saw the man advance. They pressed forward using every last effort and scarcely avoided colliding with him, so happy were they.

“*Well!*” said he.

Skippy and Douglas backed away a few feet, staring all the while. The man smiled pleasantly as if he were enjoying the situation immensely. Skippy choked.

“*Silver!*” he groaned. “*Silver Curley!*”

CHAPTER XXXI IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

“I know you kids must be tickled to see me!” He laughed in that soft way that Skippy hated. “Still, it’s better to be with us than die of thirst in this devil’s desert, eh?”

“What a break for us if they did kick off,” Sam’s grumbling voice came out of the darkness. Suddenly he loomed up, looking over Curley’s shoulder. “That Skippy I’d leave anyhow. He’s nothin’ but trouble, Boss. We don’t need them kids for the pay-off. Let Danny advertise like we planned in them personals column, that he’ll deliver the kids the day after the dough’s on the line. After Holden’s kicked in we should worry about turnin’ back these punks.”

“Shut up, Sam!” Curley said tersely. “I ain’t leaving them where they’ve got a chance to escape and tell what they know! In case you don’t know it, this devil’s desert is thirty-five miles wide and fifty miles long. Lots get lost on it—yeah, but more people don’t. It’s a hundred to one almost. Tourists, moving picture people—too many of ’em moving along here to suit me. Lady Luck has run these kids right into my hands again and I’ll do as I started out to do. Danny’ll get me the money and that’s all I care about. I should run the risk of delivering ’em and getting caught after all this trouble. The kids’ll be in a place where they won’t be my worry—Mexico!”

Sigsbee, the mechanic, and Jake had all come up and stood around Curley during this discussion. Only Mole stood apart from the group and had edged up nearer and nearer to the boys until he was looking directly into Skippy’s face.

“You need water?” he asked solicitously.

“*And how!*” Skippy said.

He nodded to both of them. “Come on to the ship. We come down in the wind last night, too. Sigsbee and the mechanic’s been fixin’ the tail all day. Just finished it now.” He swept past the open-mouthed Jake, the scowling Sam and his angry boss as if they did not exist.

Once in the plane, he gave water to Douglas and Skippy with all the solicitude of a woman. He helped them off with their sand-filled shoes so that they might rest their sore and burning feet. Moreover, he made apologies that there would be no food until after they crossed the border.

“We ain’t had a mouthful, either,” he explained. “Been stuck here all day. Lucky we had water.”

He seemed to want to say more, but Curley and the others appeared sullen and watchful and sat nearby. Sigsbee strolled in after the mechanic and announced that they were ready to start.

“The boys will have to put ‘chutes’ on for when we cross the border,” he said to Curley, pointedly. “I’ve a couple more, fortunately, stored away back in the tail.”

“Do they *have* to have ’em on?” Curley asked irritably.

“I’ve forgotten a lot of things,” Sigsbee said almost wistfully, “but I haven’t forgotten that my passengers are my first and last responsibility. Especially when they’re just kids!”

Curley’s face was dark. “If the army planes tail us and we have to bail out, it’s just the time I’d rather see them without . . . it would be their luck . . . oh, well, I’ll take a chance!”

Sam growled. “Lissen, Boss . . .”

Sigsbee coughed significantly. “Every passenger on this ship must wear a ‘chute’! I haven’t the time and I won’t take the time to argue that. It’s settled. I won’t run the risk of being fired on and having someone without a ‘chute.’ Mr. Curley here has paid me sufficiently so that the loss of this ship would not be a loss. But a passenger lost would mean a lifetime of regret.” He looked straight at Sam, then. “Your boss has given me strict orders not to answer the challenge of the patrol, even if it means that we’re fired on.”

He stalked back to the rest room and Skippy followed him aimlessly. When they came out a few minutes later the boy had his parachute on and held one out for Douglas. Sigsbee looked thoughtful and without any further talk, went straight up into the cockpit.

Mole followed him, much to Curley’s dismay. They all seemed on edge, until he reappeared, shutting the cockpit door carefully behind him.

“Well, we’re off,” he said, ambling down into the cabin.

“What’s the big idea—telling Sigsbee how to run his ship, too?” Curley asked.

“Why no, Boss!” Mole answered, smiling. “I was just snoopin’—seein’ how Silent started them gadgets what makes a plane take off.” Still smiling, he turned his back upon them and took a seat up forward.

The plane took off at that juncture and almost immediately the tension among them seemed to relax. Too, there was a circulation of air and they all lay back with a common purpose—to cool off and forget the blistering desert which had tormented them for so many hours. Skippy and Douglas were particularly grateful, and for the first time since they had run into the hands of the enemy, they found it convenient to talk to each other.

Douglas said, “It had to be, that’s all.”

“Aw, nothing *has* to be!” Skippy countered with his eyes on space.

Douglas started. “Curley means to murder us!” he whispered.

“Murder us my eye!”

“But he as good as said . . .”

“He thinks he’s goin’ to, but that don’t say he will!” Skippy interposed.

“But the way he’s got it planned,” Douglas argued. “That Danny’ll bring him the money and where will we be—not in Dad’s house all right, all right.”

“Listen, Doug,” Skippy said seriously. “I heard Sam say himself that I’m a jinx to them, so maybe I am. Anyway, I got the feeling that I’m going to beat Curley and beat him good! I mean that I’m not going to let that crook murder us while I got my eyes open. And he won’t. Besides I got an angel perched on my shoulder my aunt says and even I bet she’s praying for us now. So we’ll be safe!”

Douglas was hopeful. “But Mole,” he asked, “what do you suppose Mole went in to talk to Sigsbee about?”

“Gee whiz, don’t ask me,” Skippy said yawning. “I like Mole. I like Sigsbee too.”

Douglas yawned. “So do I,” he agreed. “I have the hunch that Sigsbee kind of feels sorry for us.”

“That’s what I think. He’s a real guy—not like Curley. Underneath, Sigsbee and Mole are kind of alike I bet. Kind!”

Douglas agreed in a sleepy voice and after a moment, both he and Skippy were sound asleep. They were sprawling all over each other oblivious of the watchful eyes of Curley behind them. Neither life nor death held any terrors for them now.

Curley was keeping awake, despite an overpowering desire to sleep. He was taking no chances for he had been seized with a strange premonition since Mole had smiled at him in that odd fashion after his prolonged silence. And, since Silver’s mind could think of little but evil, he had a suspicion that his now hated trusty had been trying to bribe Sigsbee in favor of the boys. But then, he told himself, with a smile of satisfaction on his thin lips, Mole had nothing to bribe Sigsbee with. Had he not paid the pilot a handsome price for taking them safely over the border? The thought so aroused him that he awakened Sam and confided in him.

Sam scoffed at the idea, sleepily. “What could he do, Boss? He could land, Sigsbee could, if the patrol challenged him, but he’d do a stretch himself! Sigsbee’s bein’ watched by them.”

“Yeah, I forgot that, Sam. But something’s up. Mole’s been burning up since I nabbed the kids. I’ll have to watch him like a cat. I wonder what he went into Sigsbee about.”

At that juncture, Mole got up from his seat and sauntered back to the water cooler. Curley eyed him every second and when he caught the other's eye he glared. Then without warning the ship went into a nose dive.

Skippy was alert, back in his seat and quite wide-awake for a boy who was supposed to be sleeping soundly. Everyone else was sliding and struggling around on the dark cabin floor. Douglas had not gone very far when his friend reached down and grabbed him.

Suddenly, the cockpit door opened and the mechanic rushed down the aisle. "Bail out—*everybody!*" he roared. "*Ship's cracking up! Wing's gone!*"

Skippy and Douglas were out of their seats in a flash and almost collided with Mole who continued to drink complacently and smile. Curley jumped up and reached out toward the boys.

"No, you don't, you kids!" he shouted. "There's some trick in this." His hand went into his coat pocket menacingly.

"*I tell you it's real!*" Sigsbee shouted from the cockpit door. "I dove too fast—I . . . *hurry. . .*"

Skippy and Douglas heard the poignancy of his cry, realized the seriousness of the situation. Mole also seemed suddenly to sense the impending tragedy, but Curley stood where he was, smiling ominously.

Skippy's mind raced, but he acted while he thought and reaching out with his foot, tripped Curley. He flung open the door and fairly pushed Mole out, then saw Douglas go next before he jumped himself.

The moon came out at this juncture, shedding its silvery light over a silent earth. But suddenly a muffled roar echoed through the still air and presently Skippy saw a fiery mass shooting earthward.

The ship!

CHAPTER XXXII

A NEW SLATE

They fell not far apart those three and all landed safe, but weary. Not a half-mile away they could see on the same grassy plain the remains of the still burning plane. Skippy, first to free himself from his parachute, was all for running toward it.

“There’s no use, kid,” Mole said, coming up and putting a detaining hand on his shoulder. “If any of ’em were alive now, they wouldn’t be when we got there. In that bonfire, a guy would roast in two seconds. That’s where I should be right now, too.”

“Aw,” said Skippy. “Aw, no. I can’t believe you were meant to do that—gee, you’ve tried to do what you could for us. I’m terrible sorry about Sigsbee and his mechanic, though. He was such a nice guy and he right away said yes when I followed him in the rest room and asked him if he’d let the ship dive so that Curley and the rest . . . well, you tell Doug how it was, Mole.”

Douglas had flopped in the grass almost too dazed to speak. But he finally managed to say, “How *what was?*”

“Skippy,” Mole answered, lighting a cigarette and glancing ruefully toward the still burning wreckage. “He went into the rest room that time to ask Sigsbee wouldn’t he be human and let you two escape. That’s all Sigsbee needed—he didn’t like it no more than I did that Curley had no heart for you kids. So he says yes, he’ll do it. What’s more, he even promised the kid that he’d turn the plane back and head for Texas and give them all up to the bulls. But Skippy here says first that it’s only fair to ask me, so when Sigsbee passes me in the aisle he gives me the wink and I follows him in.”

Douglas was beginning to understand. “I remember I thought it was funny you went in too.”

“Sure, so did Curley and Sam and Jake,” Mole answered, thoughtfully. “Anyway, Sigsbee tells me how all of a sudden it come to him what a rotten guy he was to sink so low to take Curley’s money when it looks as if you kids wouldn’t live to tell it. He says how Skippy put it up and he couldn’t stand it, and that he was going back to Texas and come clean. Meantime, Skippy was to wire the bulls in Texas so that they’d surprise Curley and the rest. So Sigsbee asks me what I think.”

“And that’s what I didn’t find out yet?” Skippy asked curiously.

"I tells him we'll be fair. I says go ahead with the nose dive so the kids can escape. But I plans it with him that I'll smile so as to make Silver suspicious that it's a trick so he won't dive too."

"That worked all right," Douglas said.

"Yeah, but different than I thought. I planned it with Sigsbee that after you kids made a getaway, I'd tell 'em what's what and keep 'em covered. But what's the use . . . see what happened. . ." He waved toward the wreckage. "Anyways, I'll do my stretch so maybe it's just as well."

Skippy pointed to a light just south of them, not more than a quarter of a mile away. "There's a house—gee whiz! Maybe we can phone or something? Anyway, Mole, don't be sad any more. When I tell Mr. Conne . . ."

"Oh, Conne knows I never knocked nobody off—he knows I helped Curley pull his strings, but I never did that," Mole said, straightening up and walking briskly beside them. "I feel better, cleaner like—you know, kids? Sure, you do—nice, clean kids like you are! Say," he said, looking up and down the grassy fields, "maybe it's because Texas is so nice an' clean lookin'? When I come out, maybe I'll grab me a job somewhere in this man's state. I'm through with the racket—I was right when I knew Curley snatched you kids, but I went along so's Curley wouldn't get too suspicious and I figured I might spring you outa the jam. I always been strong for kids."

"Sure thing," Skippy answered. "You were wise to me, too, weren't you?"

"Sure, the *dumb wop kid!*" He laughed. "That's why I liked you," he said, putting his arm on Skippy's shoulder. "You was smart enough to put it over on Sam and on Curley, too. Just Conne's office boy, huh? Well, you were good, I'll say that!"

"One thing," Skippy said, more to himself than to his listeners, "Mr. Conne can't ever say a dirty face don't help sometimes."

They reached the house after a few moments and were admitted by an aged couple who welcomed them cordially. Living all alone as they did, guests like this were an innovation. Also, they had a phone and were only too happy to let a nice boy like Skippy use it when it meant getting in touch with a dear friend.

Skippy reversed the charges and waited with a rapidly beating heart until he heard Mr. Conne's voice. Then he told his amazing story while Douglas and Mole kept the aged couple company in the parlor.

Mr. Conne sounded breathless when he answered finally, "Kid, you've saved Mr. Holden a lot of money by thinking of that nose dive business! We were going to pay it to that rascal Danny tomorrow afternoon."

“That’s swell. Say, boss, can’t you give Mole a break somehow? He knows he’s got a stretch to do, but if it hadn’t been for him I don’t know what we’d have done. He’s a white guy.”

“Wait a minute, kid!” Mr. Conne called. “Let me have Mole on the wire. Then you talk to me again and I’ll tell you my plans for meeting both you kids.”

“O. K. Boss,” Skippy answered.

Mole was called to the wire and after a mysterious conversation during which time he gave odd figures and facts, Skippy waited, wondering. Then Mole nodded that he was finished and he came away from the phone smiling.

“Yes, Boss?” Skippy asked, watching Mole as he walked lightly back to the parlor. “My aunt ain’t worried?”

“No, she *isn’t*,” Mr. Conne laughed. “She said the devil wasn’t ready for you yet. She said, too, that an angel perched on your shoulder and that I’d hear tonight. And I did! I believe what she said about the devil . . . now, are you listening, kid?”

“Sure.”

“You say that this Silent Sigsbee, his mechanic, Silver Curley, Sam and Jake and *Mole* were all destroyed in that plane?”

“Not M— . . .”

“Moles’ can be destroyed by fire—by an electric needle,” Conne said ambiguously. “I got all the dope I need to round up that gang—what’s left of it. I really haven’t any more use for Mole—understand. He says he likes Texas. I know a doctor there who’s a wonder at taking off moles. I gave him the address. You can stay where you are tonight and hike into town tomorrow morning. Mole says he found out it was only a half mile. Then he’ll part from you—forever, I guess, kid—he’s starting a new slate and I’m for it. I’ve watched that fellow. You’re to tell the reporters that just you and Douglas escaped. Get me, kid?”

“I get you, Boss,” Skippy answered joyfully.

“Ill be getting Mr. Holden on the wire right away. We’ll take the best plane that we can get and you’ll see us in that man’s town before noon tomorrow.” Mr. Conne rolled his inevitable cigar to the other side of his mouth and added, “And listen, kid!”

“Yeah?”

“Have your face clean!”

“Aw, gee whiz, Mr. Conne!” Skippy pleaded earnestly. Then he suddenly brightened. “Gee whiz, it would be like a disappointment to you if I had my face too clean, Mr. Conne—honest!”

“Why?” came the laughing query.

Skippy grinned into the transmitter. “Cause you wouldn’t recognize me. And if Mole was still going to be Mole, I’d leave it to him because he could tell you, it’s true!”

THE END

[The end of *Held for Ransom* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh (as Hugh Lloyd)]