

The Trail of the Green Doll

Margaret Sutton

A JUDY BOLTON MYSTERY



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THE DISCOVERY AT THE DRAGON'S MOUTH

The flashlight sent a weird circle of light ahead of him

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A Judy Bolton Mystery

THE TRAIL OF THE GREEN DOLL

By
Margaret Sutton

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*To My Granddaughter Tina
On Her Tenth Birthday
With the Gift of the Green Doll*

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The Trail of the Green Doll

CHAPTER I

“Tourists Welcome”

“It looks nice, doesn’t it, Judy?”

Honey was surveying with pride the sign she had just finished lettering. “TOURISTS WELCOME,” it said. That was all. But the sign was in the shape of an arrow. It pointed toward the private road that crossed Dry Brook and continued on through the beech grove and up a little hill to the house Judy had inherited from her grandparents. It was a simple farmhouse with a wide front porch. Never, until this moment, had it been known as a tourist home.

“It looks beautiful,” Judy agreed. “I wonder who our first tourist will be. This is going to be exciting. Wait till Peter hears—”

“Haven’t you told him?” Peter’s sister questioned in surprise.

“How could I?” Judy laughed. “He wasn’t here when I thought of it. I was walking through all those spare rooms we have, and the house seemed sort of empty. Then you came, and I thought of asking you to letter the sign. It ought to attract someone. There aren’t any other tourist places along this road.”

“That’s true,” agreed Honey, “but isn’t it a little—well, dangerous?”

“To take in tourists? Lots of people do it,” declared Judy.

“I know,” Honey objected, “but I can’t help suspecting you of some secret motive. This isn’t a trap for an escaped federal prisoner, is it? What did you do? Peek at the FBI files?”

“Of course not!” Judy was indignant at the suggestion. Like most redheads, she was quick to flare up. But she cooled down just as quickly. “I couldn’t look at them even if I wanted to,” she now informed Honey. “They’re kept at the agency in the Farringdon courthouse. Peter is supposed to work there instead of at home for some reason.”

“You couldn’t be the reason, could you?” teased Honey.

“Because I’ve helped him solve a few mysteries? Why shouldn’t I?” Judy retorted. “What are FBI wives supposed to do if not help their husbands?”

“They help them in other ways,” Honey began. “They stay home and take care of their families. They do secretarial work—”

“Not according to Peter,” Judy interrupted. “Oh, I know he calls me his secretary, but I’m not really in the employ of the government the way he is. Sometimes he asks me to type reports on things I already know about, or write a letter. As for taking care of the family, we haven’t any unless you count Blackberry, and cats take care of themselves.”

“You do have the house—”

“Yes, and I may as well make use of it,” Judy broke in. “This may be exciting —”

“Judy,” Honey interrupted, “do you see what I see?”

“A car with three men in it! Oh dear! I hadn’t counted on so many!” Judy exclaimed as the car came to a stop beside them.

At first both girls were dismayed. Gray eyes met blue ones in a moment of panic. Then Honey recognized one of the men as a customer who had ordered signs to be lettered at the studio in Farringdon where she worked as an artist.

“That one won’t want a room,” she whispered. “He lives around here. His name’s Montrose, I think.”

“What about the others?” Judy whispered back.

For some reason that she could not name, she was suddenly suspicious of them. None of the men introduced themselves. After inquiring briefly about the sign, they piled out of the expensive car they were driving and asked Judy and Honey to show them the house. The two girls started down the road, hardly knowing what to expect. They had crossed Dry Brook and were passing through the beech grove when a sudden rustling of the wind in the trees overhead made them look up. The sky had darkened although it was still early in the day.

“It’s weird,” Judy whispered. “See that pinkish haze over there? It makes the sun look red. And the wind sounds—strange.”

“It is sort of spooky,” Honey replied. “I think a storm is blowing up.”

“We need it,” Judy said. “The ground is too dry. Maybe it’s just dust that makes the sky look pink.”

“Pink!” exclaimed Honey. “It looks green in the other direction, and I don’t like it. There’s something unnatural about the weather lately. Haven’t you noticed it yourself?”

“I haven’t thought much about it,” replied Judy.

She could tell Honey was chattering because she was nervous, and said no more. The three men were now exploring the grove, spreading out in all directions.

“That a barn over there?” one man inquired.

Before Judy could answer, another of the men, who had a white scar across his cheek, said, “Anything in it?”

“Just a saddle horse and one cow,” Judy began. “We like fresh milk.”

A stout man, the shortest of the three, chuckled.

“Your dad ain’t much of a farmer, is he?”

“My dad doesn’t live here,” Judy said. “There’s just my husband and myself—”

“Your husband? Now you are kidding. You girls don’t either one of you look more than sixteen. Who’s this other girl if you’re the lady of the house?”

“I’m her sister-in-law,” Honey said. “I don’t live here in Dry Brook Hollow. I live in Farringdon.”

“You work there, too, don’t you?” inquired the man she knew as Mr. Montrose. “Weren’t you the girl who took my order for signs?”

“I was,” Honey admitted. “I lettered them, too. But I’m not working today, because it’s Saturday.”

“I see. You’re just here on a visit—”

“Anybody else visit?” one of the other men interrupted.

“Of course,” Judy replied a little impatiently. “Lots of people do. My friends, my parents, my brother—”

“Anybody else today?”

“Oh, you mean tourists. Not yet. We just put up the sign.”

“Perhaps the young lady would like to show us what she’s advertising,” the man Honey recognized suggested.

“Why, certainly,” Judy began, but the short, stout man interrupted.

“It ain’t secluded enough for what we want,” he said to the driver. “What we had in mind was a place in the upper price brackets, not a tourist home.”

“We’ll have a look, anyway.”

But Judy had changed her mind about showing them the house and said so.

“I think you’ve made a mistake. My house isn’t for sale,” she informed them.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of the wind. It was almost moaning. Judy had never heard it make such a strange noise before.

“The place ain’t ha’nted, is it?” the stout man asked.

“It might be,” the third man said, and Judy couldn’t tell whether or not he was serious.

“Maybe we can find another place farther out in the country,” the short man suggested.

“You’re headed for a town right now,” Honey told them. “Roulsville is just a few miles below here. Then comes a long stretch of state forest land—”

“National forest,” Judy corrected her.

The tallest man in the group looked at her sharply.

“Does it make any difference?”

“Why, n-no,” she stammered, feeling suddenly uncomfortable under his scrutiny. “There are both state and national forest reserves just west of here. I don’t know where one ends and the other begins, really. I didn’t mean—”

Judy stopped abruptly. A voice that seemed to come from the trees themselves had said, with unmistakable urgency:

“Don’t look for it!”

CHAPTER II

The Talking Tree

“Don’t look for what? Who said that? Where—”

Judy’s voice trailed off in bewilderment. She moved closer to Honey, whose startled expression showed that she had heard something, too. The men had started hurriedly toward their car.

“We may be back,” the driver called as they climbed in and drove on toward Roulsville.

Judy gazed after them, her thoughts in a whirl. She was a sensible girl, not easily frightened. Before she and Peter Dobbs were married, she used to spend part of every summer with her grandparents in this very house. She knew every tree in the grove of beeches where the two girls were now standing in puzzled silence.

Judy’s voice trailed off in bewilderment

Judy’s voice trailed off in bewilderment

“Grandma used to tell me those trees could talk,” Judy said at last.

“But how?” asked Honey. “Those men didn’t do it. They were frightened, too.”

“They did seem to be,” agreed Judy, “but maybe it was a trick of some kind. I don’t believe they wanted rooms at all.”

“I don’t either. They acted more as if they were looking for something—”

“And then the—the trees warned them not to! That’s it!” exclaimed Judy.

All of a sudden she remembered an old family legend that when danger threatened, the trees would sound a warning. She had laughed at the superstition when she first heard it from her grandparents. Later, after the old couple died and

willed the house to her, she remembered it only in her more fanciful moments, never mentioning it to anyone.

As she stood pondering, Honey put a sympathetic arm around her.

“Our sign accomplished something, anyway,” she said reassuringly. “It gave us a mystery to solve.”

“Just the same, it *was* a foolish thing to do. Let’s walk back to the main road and take it down before anyone else sees it,” Judy suggested.

“Do we have to,” Honey said plaintively, “after all my work?”

“I’m afraid we do, Honey. We’ve invited trouble, not tourists. How do we know those men weren’t criminals trying to find out something about Peter?”

“But Judy, you said yourself there was no danger,” Honey protested, hurrying to keep up with her. They had crossed Dry Brook and were climbing the slope toward the main road where they had posted the sign. “One of those men was Mr. Montrose. At least, he had signs lettered for the Montrose Moving Company, and they’re well known in Farringdon.”

“But the others? Who were they and why were they so interested in exploring our property? No, I think that sign will have to come down. I only hope it comes down easier than it went up. You’ll have to help me with it, Honey.”

“I will. I wish—”

Honey’s wish was never expressed, as a two-toned convertible the color of coffee and cream, and rather the worse for hard use, slowed to a stop beside them. At the wheel of the car sat Judy’s brother Horace, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“So my sister is running a tourist camp,” he said to Honey, observing the sign which she and Judy were now struggling to remove from the post where they had nailed it.

“We need a hammer,” Judy remarked, ignoring him.

“Here’s the one we were using before. We forgot it and left it here. But where is

the paint?”

“Didn’t you take it?”

“No, I thought you did.”

“That’s odd,” declared Judy. “It really looks as if someone’s stolen it. I’m glad they left the hammer, anyway.”

“What,” asked Horace, “are you trying to do? I suppose I’ll find you building a little row of cottages next. If you’re going to take in tourists it wouldn’t be a bad idea. Cottages would look quite cozy nestled in among the trees in the haunted grove.”

“Why do you call it that?” demanded Judy.

“The name just came back to me,” Horace laughed. “Grandpa called it that, and he told me once that the trees talked. I heard them myself when I was just a little fellow. It scared me nearly out of my wits.”

“It scared quite a lot of us today,” said Honey.

Judy nudged her to keep quiet, but it was too late.

“You don’t mean to tell me the trees still talk!” Horace exclaimed. “That’s news! If we can find out why—”

“We don’t mean to tell you anything we don’t wish to see printed in the *Farringdon Daily Herald*,” Judy interrupted. “The story would look pretty ridiculous, anyway, without an explanation. ‘TREES TALK. SCARE TOURISTS AWAY.’ Seriously,” she continued, “some rather peculiar tourists did stop here. That’s why we’re taking down the sign.”

“I don’t get it,” Horace said. “If you didn’t want them to stop, why did you put the sign up in the first place?”

“We did, only we didn’t. Oh, bother!” Judy exclaimed. “I’m not explaining anything, am I? It’s a good thing you don’t write the way I talk. By the way, did the *Herald*’s star reporter bring along a copy of today’s paper?”

“He’s sitting on it,” giggled Honey.

“Ouch!” exclaimed Horace as Judy pulled the paper out from under him and then seated herself at his side to read it. “That news is hot off the press. I might have burned myself. It was my own story I was messing up, too.”

Judy glanced at the headlines—THIEVES LOOT MILLIONAIRE’S HOME—and quickly read Horace’s story about the mysterious looting of a secluded old mansion not far from the national forest.

“The national forest!” she exclaimed. “Honey, do you remember the look that man gave me when I mentioned it? The other men acted funny, too. Maybe *they* were the thieves. Horace, could they have been escaping over this road?”

“I wouldn’t think they’d still be around. The robbery was pulled Thursday night, and this is Saturday,” Horace replied. “I haven’t the remotest idea what men you’re talking about, though. Everything I know about the robbery is right there in the paper.”

“I see it is. It has your by-line on it. Where did you get your information, Horace?”

“From the police and other sources,” he replied a little vaguely. “I’d like to interview the caretaker of the estate, even though the police have already. That robbery was carefully planned. He may have had a hand in it. What do you think, Judy?”

“Heavens!” she exclaimed. “I don’t know what to think!”

CHAPTER III

A Puzzling Robbery

“Honey, see what you make of it,” said Judy, and handed her the paper. “You say in the *Herald*, Horace, that the caretaker swears no one passed his cottage on Dark Hill Road for two days. Is it a private road?”

“Yes,” he replied. “But the police think the robbers could have sneaked in from the national forest which borders the estate. But the forest rangers keep pretty close watch of anyone who enters it. They have to now, with the weather so dry and windy. A forest fire would get out of control fast.”

“Some of them are already out of control, aren’t they?” asked Honey. “I saw something about it on the back of the paper while Judy was reading the front.”

“Aha!” laughed Horace. “Now I know where to put the news I want peeping females to see. Perhaps the Woman’s Page should be the back page so that hubby can enjoy the headlines while wifey ponders the recipes.”

“Speaking from wifey’s point of view,” Judy retorted, “she is just as interested in the headlines as he is. She might even want to know the story behind them. You’ve only told half of it, Horace.”

“The paper had to go to press. Papers do, you know,” Horace reminded her. “The other half of the story is probably happening right now. This forest fire on the back page was spreading. It may get around to the front page. It may even get as far as the Paul Riker estate, where the robbery took place. I’ve never seen the main house, but I’ve been told it’s an immense wooden structure with a cupola on top.”

“Like some of the mansions in Farringdon?” asked Honey.

“No doubt. They were all built around 1880 and if you ask me they weren’t beautiful, even then. Most of them ought to be torn down. They’re regular firetraps besides being so hideous that nobody wants to live in them. Modern

houses like the new ones going up in Roulsville are more to my taste.”

“Mine, too,” Honey whispered, and a look passed between them that made Judy wonder if Honey might not be forgetting her employer’s handsome young son for Judy’s own not so handsome but lovable brother.

Honey was having a hard time choosing between her two suitors and seemed in no great hurry to make up her mind. Judy knew how it was. She had once faced the same problem. If she had married handsome Arthur Farrington-Pett instead of Peter Dobbs, her home might have been one of the mansions they were talking about. Judy did not consider them hideous.

“I like old houses,” she told her brother. “I guess Grandma knew it when she left me her house and gave you the land. You can build your modern house on it whenever you’re ready. I like all houses, both old and new, if they’re real homes and not built just for show.”

“The Riker mansion used to be called a show-place. I’m sure I don’t know who would look at it way back there in the woods,” Horace said, “but I’m told that before the robbery it was filled with art treasures, including a world-famous collection of jade.”

“A museum of Oriental art, according to your article,” quoted Judy. “I don’t see the sense of keeping such valuable things in a private home.”

“For once,” Horace said, “we agree on something. Paul Riker needed a flock of servants just to take care of all the stuff he collected. The police estimate the loot as being worth a quarter of a million dollars and maybe more. An actual evaluation can’t be made until Mr. Riker returns from his travels. The police are trying to get in touch with him, but nobody seems to know where he is.”

“That must have made it convenient for the robbers,” Judy commented. “Do you really think the caretaker might be involved?”

“I’ll have to talk with him before I know what to think,” replied Horace. “How would you girls like to drive out there with me this afternoon? We might pick up a few clues, maybe run into Peter—”

“If he’s investigating it,” Judy interrupted, “I don’t think we should. I’ve dashed off after him before—to my sorrow. Once a bullet barely missed me, and he

made me promise not to run headlong into danger again. Besides, the kids are coming here today.”

“What kids?” Honey asked.

“You remember them,” Judy said. “They used to call themselves the Junior FBI. They meet here every Saturday. Peter suggested that they change their name. He’s afraid they’ll get themselves involved in something dangerous. I think he’s wrong, though. The club doesn’t get them into trouble. It keeps them out of it. Their latest project is a magic show.”

“Magic! That’s it!” exclaimed Honey.

“What do you mean?” asked Judy.

“The voice from the tree. It must have been one of their tricks.”

“I doubt it,” Horace objected. “I heard the talking trees before some of those kids were born. Grandpa used to call it a freak of nature. I always meant to investigate it, but never got around to it. Maybe it’s an echo thrown back from the barn.”

“We could find out easily enough by standing opposite the barn and calling,” Judy suggested eagerly.

“Wouldn’t we feel a little foolish, Judy?” asked Honey, holding back a little.

“I wouldn’t,” Judy declared. “Come on! I’d like to try it.”

CHAPTER IV

A Startling Experiment

The driveway, or Little Road, as Judy called it, went down a steep slope from the main road. Then it crossed Dry Brook, went through the grove and up another slope, where it took a half-turn, like a half-circle, in front of the house and ended at the barn. Horace stopped his car on the downward slope and they all got out.

“Well, here we are opposite the barn. Now for the experiment. Who wants to yell?” Judy asked.

“Let’s all do it together,” Honey suggested. “Do you remember our old school yell?”

“Boom ta! Boom ta! Boom! Boom! Boom!
Farrington Girls’ High School, give us room!”

“Oh, Honey, let’s not give that one,” Judy objected. “It always makes me think of when the old high school burned down.”

“We had a better one at Boys’ High—”

“And a still better one back in Roulsville before the flood,” Judy interrupted. “Horace, do you remember how it went? It meant, ‘*This is where we’re hiding,*’ and if you tried hard you could pick the word *hiding* out of the jumble of nonsense.”

“I didn’t decode it. I just yelled it,” Horace chuckled. “*Hip deminiga folliga sock de hump de lolliga yoo hoo!*” he yelled.

“Good heavens!” Honey said, holding her ears.

But Judy was listening for the echo. It was a very ordinary one, not half as startling as the yell itself. Horace suggested they try it from a different angle, but just then Judy’s cat Blackberry appeared from around the corner of the barn and

yowled, as if he were trying to say, “Please, people, don’t scare away my mice!”

The chickens were cackling, and even Ginger, in a far corner of the pasture, gave a startled whinny. Daisy, munching grass a little nearer by, looked up in the docile manner of cows and continued to regard Judy with a disconcerting stare.

“I don’t really think,” Honey said when their laughter had subsided, “that we ought to try that yell again. I hope it didn’t curdle Daisy’s milk.”

“She reminded me of you, sis, the way she ignored us!”

“Now that I won’t take, being compared to a cow,” cried Judy as she went for Horace.

They chased each other as far as the big barn door where they stopped to read the sign that was posted there.

HEADQUARTERS OF THE BLACK SPOT
Moved to Wally’s house. Meeting at 2 o’clock

“We’ve solved one mystery, at least,” Horace said as Honey came closer to admire the lettering. “Now you know what became of your left-over paint.”

“Ricky must have borrowed it. He’s the new president of the Junior FBI—excuse me, I mean the Black Spot,” declared Judy. “I don’t think I like their new name. I wonder who dreamed up that one.”

“Blackberry doesn’t seem to care for it, either,” observed Honey. “Just look at the way he’s acting. What’s the matter with him?”

The cat was circling around them as if he wanted to tell them something.

“Shall I take him with us in the car?” asked Horace. “You don’t have to stay home for the children if they’re meeting somewhere else.”

“That’s true,” Judy admitted. “I didn’t tell them, but I planned refreshments. Now we’ll have all that left-over food.”

“What a pity!” Horace said, smacking his lips.

“It’s just cookies and chocolate milk. Hardly a treat for anyone with your appetite,” Judy told him. “The children may be back, anyway, in case Wally’s mother doesn’t approve of their plan. Most of the mothers didn’t want the meetings in their immaculate new houses. That’s why I told them they could meet in our barn. I like having them.”

“If I were you,” Honey said, “I’d like having them somewhere else this afternoon. If we’re looking for whatever we weren’t supposed to look for—”

“What kind of double-talk is this?” Horace interrupted.

“Oh, didn’t we tell you?” Judy knew she hadn’t, but she was still tempted, at times, to tease her brother. It was sort of a game between them.

“You told me very little,” he answered. “You were afraid I’d get a story out of it, but never fear! We’ve printed enough of that spooky stuff.”

“This was spooky, all right,” Judy said with a shiver. “The trees warned us or the men, I’m not sure which, not to look for it.”

“You see,” Honey pointed out, “since we have no idea what *it* is, the whole thing is rather hard to explain. But you should know, Horace. You said you heard the trees talk before. What did they say? Can you remember?”

He thought about it for a minute.

“I’ve forgotten a lot of it, but once they told me to keep still, and I didn’t dare open my mouth all day. They really frightened me. I was something of a sissy then,” he confessed, “but Judy cured me of it. I didn’t tell her anything about it when it happened, for fear she would laugh at me.”

“You see what a meanie I was?” Judy asked. “Where were you, Horace? I mean when you heard all this.”

“I don’t remember exactly. There was a hollow tree not far from where I was standing, and the voice seemed to come from there. The hole in the tree was small. I remember thinking how much it looked like an open mouth.”

“I know that tree. I used to use the hole to get a toehold when I climbed it. You can see the top of it from here. It’s that big spreading tree beyond the barn.

Unless it was an echo,” Judy went on in a puzzled tone, “I don’t see how it could have happened—unless a radio or something of the kind was hidden there.”

“No, there was nothing,” Horace said. “I got up courage enough to look. Nothing larger than a doll could have squeezed inside.”

“One of my dolls, maybe. I used to play with them in the grove.”

“But your dolls didn’t talk.”

“I pretended they did. All little girls pretend their dolls can talk,” declared Judy.

“I didn’t,” Honey said. “I never played with dolls. But then I didn’t grow up in my own home the way you and Horace did. I try not to remember my childhood.”

“I know.” Judy gave the friend and sister she had found a quick kiss. Then, suddenly, Honey remembered something else.

“That tourist sign!” she exclaimed. “We never took it down.”

“Too late,” Horace commented as a small voice spoke almost at his elbow.

“Please,” it said, “may we stay here for the night?”

CHAPTER V

An Urgent Request

Judy whirled around to see a tiny girl with short brown curls and an older boy who might be her brother. Both of them were out of breath, as if they had been running. It was the boy who had spoken. But now the little girl asked, “Were you talking about a doll?”

“Were we, Honey?” Judy said.

“We certainly were,” Honey replied. “Yours, when you were little.”

“Oh, I thought—” the little girl began.

“Quit thinking about it, Penny. It won’t help,” the boy interrupted.

“Who are you?” Judy asked the children. “And where did you come from?”

“I’m Paul and she’s Penny. We came from the car,” the boy explained. “Mom can’t get it started. She needs someone to push her.”

“I’m her man,” Horace said.

He turned his car around and invited the children to come with him.

“Do we have to?” Penny asked shyly. “I want to stay here and play. I’m tired of riding.”

“Me, too. You’ll find Mom all right. Our car’s stalled just a little way beyond your sign. It’s an old beat-up green car,” Paul explained.

“I’ll find it.”

“I hope he can start it,” the little boy said as Horace drove off to assist his mother. “We were on our way to Uncle Paul’s house. We expected to get there this afternoon, but Mom says she’s so tired she can’t drive another mile. That’s

why I asked if we could stay overnight. Mom said maybe you would let us stay until she figures out what to do next. We saw your sign just before we had the accident.”

“Accident!” exclaimed Judy and Honey in one breath.

“Well, we were sort of shoved off the road,” Paul told them.

“They did it on purpose,” the little girl said. “Then they emptied out all our suitcases and went off with Mommy’s pocketbook.”

“Keep still about that, Penny!” the boy said severely. “We weren’t supposed to tell.”

“But she had the green doll—”

At this, the boy clapped his hand over his sister’s mouth with such violence that the child began to cry.

“You shouldn’t have done that. You’ve hurt her!” cried Honey.

“She talks too much,” was the boy’s brief explanation.

“I like little girls who talk too much,” Judy said, taking Penny to a more secluded part of the grove to comfort her and find out what the real trouble was.

“Paul didn’t mean it,” Penny defended her brother. “He’s just scared, and so is Mommy.”

“I should think she would be! Are you sure those men caused the accident on purpose to steal her pocketbook?”

The boy clapped his hand over his sister’s mouth

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“No-o,” the little girl said slowly. “They wanted something else. They talked as if they’d been to Uncle Paul’s house looking for it and couldn’t find it. It was a —a *correction*.”

“A correction?”

“Yes, but it’s a secret. I mustn’t tell anyone about it because it will get us into trouble.”

“Then why are you telling me?” asked Judy.

“Because,” Penny explained quickly, “you get into trouble sometimes when you don’t tell things. Mommy did. I’d never, never steal anything after what she told me. Only bad people steal.”

“That’s right,” agreed Judy.

Maybe she had agreed too quickly. Her answer seemed to disturb the little girl.

“Sometimes,” Penny said, “when you’re little, you make mistakes. That’s different, isn’t it?”

“Quite different,” agreed Judy, wondering what all this was leading up to.

“Why?” Penny asked unexpectedly.

“Well, I suppose it’s because you can learn from your mistakes.”

“What mistake was Penny talking about?” asked Paul.

He had been exploring the grove with Honey, who had discovered the hollow tree and pointed out the hole that looked like an open mouth.

“I don’t really know,” Judy confessed. “Your little sister didn’t make herself very clear.”

“She hadn’t better,” Paul said threateningly. “I’ll never tell her any of my secrets after this. What made you spill all that about Mom’s pocketbook, Penny? Those kids said they’d trail the thieves and make them give it back.”

“But they didn’t,” Penny said. “They let the robbers get away.”

“Maybe we can pick up their trail again if you will tell us about it,” Judy suggested. “Were the thieves in a car?”

“Yes,” Paul replied. “They came alongside and crowded Mom off the road. She got out to see how much damage she’d done when she hit the bank. That was when they pointed the gun at her and went through all our luggage. They didn’t take anything except her pocketbook. They grabbed it and ran back to their car and drove away. If we can’t get our car started I guess we’ll have to stay here. Uncle Paul will pay for us. He has lots of money,” the boy finished proudly.

“What is your uncle’s whole name, Paul?” asked Judy.

“He’s my great-uncle really. It’s Paul Riker, the same as mine.”

“That’s the man who was robbed! I remember it from the newspaper account,” Judy whispered excitedly to Honey. “Wait till Horace hears about this!”

“I like it here,” announced Penny. “Do you allow children to climb the trees?”

“If they’re careful—”

But they were both off to the hollow tree. Paul started at once to climb it, but Judy saw Penny stop and put her hand inside the hollow place.

“What’s she found?” Honey whispered.

“Maybe she’s discovered the secret of the voice,” Judy whispered back.

“Look!” Penny cried as they both came over to see. “Is this a fairy bed? Do you think fairies live in here? I heard them whispering.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“No, just whispers.” Penny turned a solemn little face to Judy. “Did you hear them, too?”

“The fairies? Perhaps,” Judy said thoughtfully. “What have you in your hand, Penny?”

Penny was glad to show her. It was a soft little cushion of moss she had picked from inside the tree. There was nothing else to be found in the hollow except bits of decayed wood. Judy put her hand in to see.

“Do you feel anything?” asked Penny.

“Just the moss.”

“Isn’t it soft?” the little girl said, stroking the piece she was holding. “You can pet it like a kitten. It’s a pretty green, too—almost the color of the doll. Please, will you help us find it?”

CHAPTER VI

An Empty Pocketbook

“Don’t look for it!” the voice from the tree had said. And now a request, equally urgent, had come from a real live little girl: “Please, will you help us find it?”

Once more the strange warning flashed through Judy’s mind. Just what it was she was supposed to find—or not to find—still puzzled her. But she had found the explanation for unearthly things before and could do it again. A little uneasily, she replied that she would do what she could.

It was hard to get a description of the doll. All Penny could tell her was that its hair, its face—everything about it—was green.

“Its clothes, too?” Honey asked.

Penny nodded solemnly.

“Yes, everything. It came from the Land of Oz, I think. My mother read me the story once. Everything was green there, too, and she was a princess.”

“Your doll?” asked Judy.

“She wasn’t *my* doll. Sometimes Mommy would let me look at her. She told me her name, too, but I’ve forgotten it.”

“Was it Dorothy?” questioned Honey.

Penny shook her head.

“Ozma?”

“No, that isn’t right, either. Mommy knows it, but you mustn’t tell her I told you.”

“We won’t say a word, will we, Judy?”

“Is that your name?” asked the little girl. “Mine’s Penelope, but people call me Penny for short. May I call you Judy?”

“Yes, you may both call me Judy,” she replied as Paul descended from the tree. “This is Grace Dobbs, but I named her Honey before I knew who she was. Now we’re sisters—”

Penny’s eyes widened.

“Real sisters?”

“Well, I married Honey’s brother Peter. My brother is Horace—”

“Here he comes now with the children’s mother,” Honey interrupted as the convertible came roaring down the road and stopped almost beside them.

“Back so soon?” asked Judy. “The children were telling me—”

“We didn’t tell her anything,” Paul protested, looking frightened.

“The children only said you’ve been having trouble, Mrs. Riker,” Judy explained. “I hope we can be of some help.”

“You’re very kind,” the woman sitting beside Horace said, “but I’m afraid nobody can help me very much. I did have plans, but now everything has changed. I’m so nervous and upset, I don’t even want to talk about it.”

“Then don’t talk about it until you’re rested. Come into the house,” Judy offered, “and I’ll make you a cup of hot tea. There are cookies and chocolate milk for the children—”

“Did you hear that, Penny?” asked Paul. “I’ll race you!”

They were off before their mother could stop them. On the porch they found Blackberry and called back to Judy.

“Is this your cat? Is it all right if we pet him?”

“Ask Blackberry. He’s the one to decide.”

“He likes us,” Paul announced as the others came up onto the porch. They were

just in time, as it was beginning to rain. Mrs. Riker hesitated.

“I’m not sure we ought to accept your hospitality,” she said to Judy. “You see, I can’t pay for the rooms until later. My pocketbook was stolen.”

“I know. The children told me.”

“Penny did,” Paul put in quickly. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“That’s all right. I’m glad you understand. I’m not going to report the theft and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention it, either. I don’t want any more trouble —”

“But Mommy, you said—” Penny began.

“Penny, *will* you keep still?” her brother exclaimed.

“Let her go on. This interests me.”

Apparently Horace was hearing about the stolen pocketbook for the first time. Judy smiled and invited everybody in. Blackberry politely refused.

“There he goes, off toward the barn!” Paul exclaimed. “Come on, Penny! Let’s follow him.”

Suddenly Judy had an idea.

“Honey, will you take Mrs. Riker inside?” she asked. “I’d like to see what Blackberry’s up to. He’s helped us solve mysteries before. There must be something in the barn he wants to show us.”

“Mice, probably. But go ahead,” Honey told her. “I know where everything is. I’ll have refreshments ready for the rest of us by the time you get back.”

Judy intended to take only a few minutes. But when they reached the barn Penny and Paul wanted to climb to the hayloft. There they found three of the club members, two girls and a boy, apparently searching for something in the hay.

“Hi, there!” Judy greeted them. “Be careful, Black Spots, or someone will rub you out. And if you’ve lost anything, don’t look for it. We’ve been warned.”

Ricky, the club president, looked at her with a baffled expression on his face.

“You are joking?” he said in what Judy considered a charming accent. “The Americans make the jokes I do not understand.”

“There was a big fight,” spoke up Muriel Blade. “The rest of the kids went to Wally’s house, but Anne and me, we stuck by Ricky.”

Anne, the youngest of the club members, was solemnly regarding the two Riker children. She was standing in a shaft of light that came in through a small window overlooking the grove.

“We know them,” she told Judy. “We tried to trail the bad men for them.”

“Did you see the men’s faces?” asked Judy. “What did they look like?”

Interrupting each other as they talked, the children quickly described them. The descriptions fitted. There had been three men, and one of them had a long scar right across his cheek. Paul was certain they were right about that, because he remembered that it had been the scar-faced man who held the gun.

“Did you find out where they went?” Paul asked eagerly.

“No,” Ricky admitted. “But we did find this.”

“Mom’s pocketbook!” yelled both the Riker children as he held it up. “How did you get it back?”

“It was easy,” he said. “They threw it away.”

“Ricky found it in the road,” Anne put in, and Muriel hastily added, “It’s empty. They took out everything that was in it except a lipstick and handkerchief. Oh, yes, and an empty box.”

“Are you sure it’s empty?” asked Penny, reaching for the small blue box they had found in her mother’s pocketbook.

“Quite sure,” Muriel said. “We just looked.”

“Oh,” Penny exclaimed with a disappointed little sigh. “That was the box—”

She stopped at a look from Paul, but Judy almost knew she had been about to say it was the box that had held the green doll. At least, Judy knew now how big it was. Or rather, how small. The box was only about four inches long. Inside was a soft lining of satin and an impression as if something had rested there a long time without being disturbed.

“We’re on the trail of it now, whatever it is,” Judy thought.

Aloud she asked, “Is anybody hungry?”

“We’re starved!” yelled the children in a resounding chorus.

A moment later they were following Judy down the ladder from the hayloft. Outside it was raining harder than ever.

“Come on then, back to the house!” she called. “We’ll have refreshments just the way I planned, but we’ll have to make a dash for them through the rain.”

CHAPTER VII

More Puzzles

Judy was halfway to the house with the excited children when they bumped into Horace, who had been out on some mysterious errand of his own. He grinned at them as if he knew a secret. Like Judy and the children, he had been caught in the sudden downpour.

“Come in! Come in!” Honey invited them. She led them through the living room and into Judy’s spacious kitchen which served as a dining room as well. “Join Blackberry and dry yourselves before the fire. He didn’t wait for an invitation. He scooted in ahead of you. Everything’s ready,” she announced. “Judy made the cookies herself. Try one. They’re delicious.”

Mrs. Riker seemed more willing to talk and joined the children around the table in the kitchen. She could not help exclaiming over the beauty of the room with its huge stone fireplace and beamed ceiling.

“It reminds me of our kitchen when I was a little girl,” she told the children. “I did want you to see it, but now I don’t know what we’ll do.”

“Maybe we can help,” Judy offered again.

But Mrs. Riker protested that she had been too kind already.

“I don’t deserve anybody’s kindness,” she added. “My troubles are all my own fault.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Judy objected. “If your pocketbook was stolen from you I would say the thieves were to blame. Do you mind if I tell Peter—”

“Your husband?” Mrs. Riker inquired.

“We help him solve mysteries,” Ricky began, but at a look from Judy, he suddenly fell silent.

“I’m afraid, instead of helping to solve them, you’re making them today,” declared Horace. “You didn’t hear any trees talking, did you, Ricky?”

“Me?” Ricky asked in surprise. “You are making jokes again?”

Muriel turned to Horace wide-eyed through the glasses that always seemed too large for her small face.

“I heard the trees talking,” she said. “I wasn’t going to say anything about it, because I didn’t think you’d believe me. They told us to run—”

“And so,” little Anne put in solemnly, “we ran back along the shortcut and Ricky caught up with us, and all three of us met Penny and Paul and ran after the bad men. Is the magician one of them?”

“I wish I knew,” declared Judy. “There’s a whole lot I wish I knew.”

“I don’t want to meet him,” Anne finished. “He can make things disappear.”

“So can I,” Horace chuckled, helping himself to another cookie.

He passed the cookies around and they rapidly disappeared from the plate. Afterwards there was silence. Each one seemed busy with his own thoughts, even Blackberry on his rug before the fireplace.

Judy liked her big kitchen. It was a good place for thoughts. Usually they were pleasant ones inspired by the view from the picture window. Judy had placed the table in front of it so that she and Peter could look out on the trees that bordered Dry Brook while they were eating. They had been lovely in the summer and early fall. But now with the rain beating against the bare branches, there was something eerie about them.

“The trees are still whispering,” Penny said to Anne, whose other name turned out to be Black. It seemed a misnomer to Judy since Anne was a tiny blonde. The little girl shivered as she watched the trees.

“Look at that big one with its arms spread out over the barn. It scares me,” she confided to Penny. “That was the tree that told us to run.”

“When did it tell you?” asked Horace, overhearing Anne’s remark.

He had what Judy called that “eager beaver” look in his eye. “I may as well warn you, Mrs. Riker,” she said, “that my brother is a newspaper reporter. He’s good at finding out things.”

“And *I* may as well warn you,” Horace retorted, “that my sister is known as quite a detective. She’s good at finding out things, too.”

“Secrets?” asked Penny.

“You’d be surprised,” Honey said with a reassuring smile, for the little girl seemed suddenly frightened, “how many she’s kept and is still keeping.”

“More than even you know,” declared Judy.

“Are you keeping a secret about the talking trees?” asked Muriel. “Was it the magician? Magicians can do anything.”

“Was it a trick, Horace?” asked Judy. “Ventriloquism, maybe?”

She thought he might have guessed the answer. But he only shook his head and said, “A trick of the wind, perhaps.”

“It could have been magic,” Muriel insisted.

“It could have been anything!” exclaimed Honey, giving up. “A magic trick or the wind or fairies or the voice of a doll—”

“The one we’re supposed to find!” Judy broke in excitedly, forgetting her promise of secrecy. “That may be it, Honey! If we find the doll we may find out what the voice is, too. May I tell Peter about it?” she whispered to Penny. “He may be able to help us find it.”

“Find what? I didn’t tell you anything,” the little girl said loud enough for the others to hear. “I was just making it up.”

“Of course she was,” Paul agreed. “Penny is always making up things. Who ever heard of a green doll?”

CHAPTER VIII

The Wonders of Magic

Judy didn't for a minute believe Penny had made up the story she had told her. The empty box proved there had been something of value in her mother's pocketbook. But it was obvious the little girl was afraid to talk about it except when she and Judy were alone.

"Why?" Judy asked herself. "What is she afraid of?"

The trees were frightening, but Penny claimed she had heard nothing but whispers from them. Had a voice really told Muriel and Anne to run? Judy questioned them some more, and they still insisted the voice had come right out of that hollow tree.

"It has a mouth," Muriel said, "and arms that it waves in the wind. It's alive, Judy. We're afraid to go home for fear it will catch us."

"That I would like to see," declared Horace, and everybody laughed.

But Muriel really believed the magician had been there.

"He's going to be at Wally's house. He could make a tree talk if he wanted to," she insisted.

"Maybe he could trick you into thinking he could," Horace admitted. "Somebody is playing tricks, that's for certain. It may be this magician."

"I'm afraid of him," Anne confessed. "Wally says he will pick me to disappear because I'm the littlest—"

"You won't be if I join the club," Penny spoke up. "Could I, Mommy?"

"We'll see," she replied. "Who is this magician?"

"We don't know his name," Ricky said. "Even Wally doesn't know it. The Dran

boys will introduce him.”

“He’s going to do tricks for us if we sell enough tickets,” Muriel put in. “I don’t want to sell them. Wally said I couldn’t keep the money—”

“Of course not. It goes into the club treasury, probably. By the way, who is the treasurer?” Horace wanted to know.

“I was,” Muriel said with a pout, “but they’re going to have an election, so I guess I won’t be any more.”

“Today?” asked Judy.

“Yes, but I won’t go. Wally said they’d elect all new officers—”

“Wait a minute,” Horace stopped her. “It isn’t all up to Wally. If this is an election they’ll need your votes. I think you kids are making a big mistake. You ought to be at that meeting. I’ll take you there if you say the word.”

“May we go too?” asked Penny.

Paul objected before their mother could answer. “I’d rather go on to Uncle Paul’s house this afternoon,” he said. “Is the car fixed, Mom? Can’t we get started?”

She looked at Horace and both of them sighed.

“It’s in a garage in Roulsville,” Horace said. “I had to push it all the way there. I’m afraid it’s pretty much of a mess. But I leave the whole problem to you, Judy.”

“Well,” said Judy, “you want to interview the caretaker, Horace. Penny wants to attend the election and Mrs. Riker and Paul want to visit her uncle. Wouldn’t it be simpler if we just went to all three places and killed two birds with one stone? Or do I mean three birds?”

“What do you say, Mrs. Riker?” Horace asked.

There wasn’t very much Mrs. Riker could say except yes, and yet she hesitated as if she dreaded the visit and wished to put it off as long as she could.

“Don’t let your great-uncle Paul frighten you,” she warned the children. “Remember, he’s used to having his own way. You must do whatever he says.”

“We will!” they chorused.

Blackberry wanted to go along. He had a favorite spot on top of the back seat by the rear window of Peter’s car. Now he found a similar place in Horace’s convertible, and the children scrambled in after him.

“This car needs a good washing. The rain won’t stop us,” Horace announced cheerfully as they started off.

He seemed a little too cheerful, but Judy knew his motives. More than ever now he wanted to get the other half of the robbery story. Nobody had mentioned it to Mrs. Riker. Unless she had seen a paper or heard the news on the radio, she still didn’t know that in the absence of the uncle she was about to visit, he had been robbed of valuable art treasures. Why hadn’t Horace told her about it, Judy wondered. Did he think he would find out more if he kept quiet? If those men had questioned her before the robbery it might make sense. But afterwards—

“The magician could have been one of those men who stopped here,” she said aloud, as Horace pulled up to remove the sign from the post by the main road. “I’d like to meet him and find out for sure.”

“You may have the opportunity very soon,” Horace said as he gave the sign a last tug and then threw it in the rear compartment of his car.

“Be careful,” Honey warned him. “The paint isn’t dry.”

“Neither am I,” he complained as he returned to the driver’s seat.

Soon they reached the home of Wally Brown, a chubby blond boy who showed them to the downstairs recreation room.

“The magician is here to pick the children he wants in his act. Would you kids like to meet him?” he asked.

Honey and Mrs. Riker had remained in the car, but Penny and Paul had come in with Judy and Horace. Their yes was so enthusiastic that Judy held her ears. The club members were in time for the election. The first part of the meeting, Wally

explained, had been taken up with plans for the magic show.

Soon they were all under the magician's spell. They had been asked to close their eyes and make a wish just before he appeared on the stage.

"Close your eyes quick," a strange little girl whispered to Penny. "He's going to make our wishes come true."

Presently the magician stood before them on a stage that was still in the process of being constructed. He was quite an ordinary-looking man, but there was something about his voice that seemed to give him authority.

"Have you all made your wishes?" he asked. "Perhaps I can't make all of them come true, but I shall certainly do my best."

"Make mine come true now, please, Mr. Magician, because we have to go," Penny pleaded.

"Open your eyes, little girl. All of you open your eyes. Did I forget to tell you?"

Several children laughed, but Penny let out a startled and long-drawn-out "Ooooo!" as her eyes snapped open.

The children were crowding so close, Judy couldn't see what trick the magician was doing. But he was not one of the men she had seen in the car. She doubted if she had ever seen him before.

"Come on, children!" she whispered. "Your mother and Honey are waiting in the car. We all want to get started."

Penny backed out, unable to take her eyes away from the stage. One of the boys had wished for a puppy, and the magician was pulling it right out of a hat.

Penny and Paul stared at him as if he had performed a miracle instead of a simple magic trick. Whispers of, "He's magic all right. He can bring anything to life," went on between them. When they were back in the car the children told their mother Muriel was right. Magicians could do anything.

"That's a house I intend to haunt," announced Horace as they drove away. "Maybe I can give their magic show a little publicity. There's room down there

for quite a crowd and I certainly intend to be in it.”

“So do I,” declared Judy. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“What about us?” asked Penny and Paul.

“We’ll see,” their mother promised.

CHAPTER IX

A Strange Mistake

Excited squeals and whispers came from the back seat. Everything was suddenly magic, even the rain. It was really coming down now. The children could hardly see the ruins of the big dam as they passed it. Judy said something about it, but they were no longer interested in anything but the magic that now had them in its spell.

Judy and Mrs. Riker and the children were all in the back seat. It had grown a little uncomfortable with Penny and Paul bouncing from one window to the other and finding magic in everything.

Both children now took it for granted that the magician had made the trees talk. The matter was all settled in their minds, but not in Judy's.

"There are two kinds of magic," she told them. "I like the natural kind best. Even that voice you're talking about could have been the wind. Sometimes it does make a funny moaning noise when the trees are bare and the branches swing against each other."

"Now, Judy, you know it wasn't," Honey objected from her place in front beside Horace. "The wind wasn't blowing as hard as it is now, and these trees aren't talking—"

"So they aren't!" Horace commented as if the whole thing was nothing but a big joke.

They were driving through a thickly wooded section. A rabbit ran across the road, and the children squealed and nearly let Blackberry leap out of the car after it. Then Paul said something about how clever the magician had been to make a puppy jump out of his hat.

"I didn't get my wish yet," Paul added, "but I can wait for it."

“I got mine,” Penny whispered, “but I’m not telling what it was.”

Still deeper in the woods they came suddenly into a cleared place where a number of deer had taken shelter under a big pine tree. They stood motionless for a moment and then vanished into a thicket.

“That’s what I mean about natural magic,” Judy pointed out. “Those deer vanished under their own power—no tricks!”

“I never saw deer except in the zoo,” Paul said gravely. “I’ll bet that magician couldn’t make a deer jump out of his hat.”

“You’re funny,” giggled Penny.

She and Paul were city children. Judy was seeing sights that were commonplace to her through their wondering eyes. If they did return with her, she’d have to let them ride Ginger and watch as she milked Daisy. That would seem like magic to them.

“The talking tree was magic,” Penny insisted. “Anne says it told her and Muriel to run, but I only heard it whisper. If I listen again, maybe it will tell me a secret.”

“I heard nothing but the wind,” Paul said. “Is this the road to Uncle Paul’s house? It doesn’t look like a millionaire’s estate.”

“It hasn’t been very well cared for,” Mrs. Riker agreed. “You used to be able to see the top of the house from here. And where’s the gate?”

“I just drove through it,” Horace replied. “It was standing wide open.”

“Uncle Paul never allowed it to be left open. Something must be wrong,” Mrs. Riker exclaimed.

“Something is wrong!” exclaimed Judy. “That forest fire did spread. The grounds are all burned over. What a shame!”

“It may not be as bad as you think. There seems to be something up ahead,” observed Horace, peering through the windshield. “You can hardly see it for the rain. Or is it smoke that makes everything so hazy?”

“I smell wood burning,” Honey began. But Paul interrupted with a shout.

“That must be the house! I can see the steps going up to it. Oh, please, stop the car and let me run up first and tell Uncle Paul who we are!”

“Wait, Paul, wait!” cried his mother, as Horace pulled up at the side of the road.

But the boy was already out of the car with Penny after him. Blackberry ran ahead of them up the steps at the top of which was a stout oak door with stonework all around it and a tall, grim statue looming up beside the entrance. Suddenly Judy recognized it from a picture she had seen of the Hindu god, Shiva. But before she could tell Paul it was not a house but a vault that he had discovered, he was knocking loudly on the door.

Paul knocked loudly on the door

Paul knocked loudly on the door

“I don’t really think anyone will answer you,” Judy called. And for some reason it seemed suddenly funny.

“Good heavens!” Honey exclaimed when she saw what it was.

“My sentiments exactly,” agreed Horace. “What a weird place to build a tomb!”

“That’s Shiva, the Destroyer, beside the entrance. And look!” Judy gasped. “There’s been plenty of destruction. You can see that a house once stood over there, but it’s been burned to the ground!”

CHAPTER X

Another Voice?

Everybody piled out of the car to look and exclaim over what had happened. The fire, apparently, had swept down from the national forest, making a path of destruction as far as the vault and no farther. The vault itself had not been touched. It was built into the hillside, and the laurel and ivy growing up and around the statue were as green as ever.

“Even the fire was afraid of that statue,” Honey said with a shiver. “Judy! Judy! Did you hear it—speak?”

“What? The statue?”

“More likely it was a ghost,” declared Horace. “Those children did knock loud enough to wake the dead.”

“Stop it!” Judy scolded him. “Can’t you see you’re frightening them?”

She had overcome her first impulse to laugh at the children’s mistake. Now she wanted to cry for sympathy. They had been so eager to meet their uncle. Now only the blackened ruins of his home were left. Not even a chimney remained standing.

Mrs. Riker was shocked into silence at first. But soon she was trying to tell the children how she remembered the house. She hadn’t seen it for many years, she said. Perhaps it hadn’t been as large as she had pictured it in her imagination. Her main concern now was for the man they had come to visit.

“Can it be he’s dead?” she wondered.

The name on the vault was plain. It was simply *Paul Riker* with the date of his birth and then a blank. The stone tablet bearing the inscription was just below the figure of Shiva, the Destroyer.

Penny and Paul were gazing up at the statue almost as if it were alive.

“I’m scared,” Penny whispered.

“No wonder,” her brother answered. “I ought to have known better than to run up to an old tomb. It was a dumb mistake.”

“But a logical one,” Judy consoled him. “I might have thought it was a little house myself if I hadn’t recognized that statue from a picture I saw in a magazine. In India there are temples to Shiva, or Siva. I’m not sure of the name.”

“I remember!” cried Penny, brightening up as she thought of it. “It was Sita. Oh, no, that’s the name of the—”

“You know nothing about it,” her mother told her severely. “I know nothing myself except that Mr. Riker was fond of collecting things. It is like him to have a Hindu idol on his tomb. Years ago he was converted, as he called it, to mysticism. I remember some of the things he used to say. He and my husband’s father used to have long conversations about the journey a spirit must take before it reached nirvana, whatever that is. Well, perhaps he has taken it. Life was the journey, Uncle Paul used to say, and death the reward.”

She sighed, and added, “I only hope his nephew hasn’t followed in his footsteps.”

“His nephew?” asked Judy.

“Mom means *my* uncle,” Paul explained. “There’s old Uncle Paul and young Uncle Paul.”

“Perhaps I should have told you about my husband’s brother,” Mrs. Riker continued. “He and my husband were boys when they quarreled—”

“What was that?” Honey whispered suddenly, moving closer to Horace. “Did you hear a footstep?” She shivered and he put his coat around her. The rain seemed to be turning to snow. Unmindful of it, the children continued to gaze up at the statue.

“Did it move?” Judy heard Paul whisper.

“It’s the light, Paul,” his mother said. “It’s really made of cement.”

“The same as sidewalks?”

“I think so. Anyway, it isn’t alive. It didn’t move, and it couldn’t have spoken to us.”

“Something did.”

Judy looked suspiciously at Horace. Had he learned to throw his voice? That could be the answer to the talking trees as well—except that Horace hadn’t been there.

“Oh dear!” thought Judy. “I’m off on the wrong trail again.”

“Let’s go,” Honey suggested. “I’m cold.”

But Horace had an idea.

“The caretaker’s cottage must be back down the road. I think we passed it without seeing it. Maybe he can explain it.”

“What is there to explain?” asked Mrs. Riker sadly, starting down the steps. “Tombs aren’t built for the living.”

“Sometimes they are. Sometimes people prefer to choose their own monuments while they’re still alive, and it looks as if that’s the way your uncle felt about it. There’s no death date under his name,” Horace observed. “I think the vault is empty.”

Judy hoped it was.

“Come on, let’s go back to the car,” Honey urged. “If a voice spoke to us now, I really would run.”

“The children thought they heard one,” Judy called after her teasingly.

“It scared us,” Penny confessed. “We thought it was Uncle Paul’s ghost. It said, ‘Go away.’”

“You know, dead people do come back,” Paul put in gravely. “It’s magic, I think.

We know, on account of Daddy.”

“We saw him,” Penny added.

“When was this?” asked Judy.

“Just a little while ago,” Penny said serenely, and she and Paul ran down the steps to join their mother and Honey in the car.

Judy would have questioned them further, but now as she idly tried the heavy oaken door of the vault, to her amazement, she found it unlocked.

“What have we here?” she exclaimed as she swung the door open upon a concrete floor surrounded by four stone walls. In one swift movement she stooped and picked up a tiny green object that lay on the bare concrete.

“Is *this* the green doll Penny was talking about?” Judy wondered.

“Could be,” Horace said. “The thieves may be planning on storing the loot from other robberies here. Let me have a look at it.”

“Later,” Judy whispered, slipping the little green object into her pocket. “There’s something strange going on around here, and I need time to think about it.”

She swung the heavy door closed. Open, it would be a temptation to small boys and girls who, like herself, were fond of shivery adventures.

“Come on,” Horace urged her. “The vault is empty, and you’re just scaring yourself and getting all wet standing there. I want to interview that caretaker and find out what’s up.”

“I doubt if you will,” Judy said, turning reluctantly to follow him down the long steps back to the car.

The vault, somehow, had a strange attraction for her as it did for Blackberry. The cat was climbing around it, exploring the statue, and the roof, and Judy longed to join him. If the bushes weren’t so wet she knew she could scramble up there, too.

“We’ll come back, won’t we, Horace?” Judy asked.

“It depends on what the caretaker has to say. The sky’s cleared a little and I can see the top of his cottage. We did pass it,” he observed. “The fire didn’t touch it or the trees around it.”

“I hope it’s warm inside,” Judy said. “The air is getting colder by the minute.”

CHAPTER XI

At the Caretaker's Cottage

Judy found the caretaker's cottage cold in more ways than one. They had approached it eagerly. It did seem the logical place to inquire about the mysterious Mr. Paul Riker.

"We'll question the caretaker," Horace declared. "He'll tell us plenty."

But would he? At first the wizened little old man who came to the door of the cottage refused to admit them.

"I've had enough people here," he barked. "Go away!"

"I'm Paul Riker," little Paul piped up unexpectedly. "You have to let us in."

"Well, I'll be hanged," the caretaker said, "if you don't sound just like your uncle Paul. So I have to let you in, eh?"

"Paul! Be quiet," Mrs. Riker admonished the boy. "I am Mrs. Philip Riker," she told the caretaker. "Do you know where I can reach Mr. Paul Riker?"

"I'm Abner Post," the caretaker said, and added reluctantly, "Come in, Mrs. Riker."

Judy and Horace introduced themselves and got a cold stare for their trouble. Abner Post led them into his kitchen which was at the front of the house, and they were offered straight-backed chairs.

The kitchen, Judy noticed, was a little like her own. It had a fireplace in it, but there was no fire. The house seemed without warmth or comfort.

"So you've come to find out what's become of Mr. Riker, have you?" the caretaker said to Mrs. Riker after she had told him about seeing the vault. "Well, there's plenty would like to know. Some of the neighbors hereabouts say he's

dead and his ghost walks up and down them steps at midnight. But I ain't seen it."

"Just how long has Mr. Riker been away, Mr. Post?" Horace asked.

"Now look here, young feller," the caretaker turned on Horace belligerently, "I've done nothing but answer questions all day—police, insurance men, fire department—they all got nothing better to do than come and bother me. So don't you start in."

"But Mr. Post, please," Mrs. Riker said pleadingly. "I wrote to Mr. Riker over two weeks ago, telling him I was driving here with the children. I even told him the route we were taking. Surely, when he was expecting us, he wouldn't just disappear. Something must have happened."

The caretaker shrugged. "I dunno, ma'am," he said, and added grudgingly, "All I know is, a couple of weeks ago he suddenly got rid of all the help in the house, closed it up, and told me he was off on a trip to India. He said I was to stay on to look after things, and he'd be back when he got back. Some folks say," he lowered his voice, "Paul Riker's locked himself up in that vault."

"But the door was open and the vault is empty," Judy protested. "What did he build it for, anyway?"

"He had it built about two years ago," Abner Post replied. "Said he might as well get some good out of all the money he made when he sold the business."

"What was his business?"

Judy had asked the question simply out of curiosity. She was quite unprepared for the answer.

"This'll tell you," Abner Post replied shortly, handing her a card.

Judy stared at it. Then she passed it around. The room buzzed with comments. It was startling, to say the least. On the card was lettered:

RIKER MEMORIALS
Monuments, Mausoleums
Designers and Builders for Four Generations

Underneath was the name, Paul Riker, an address and phone number, as well as a notation in very small print: "Exhibit Open Every Day."

"An exhibit!" exclaimed Honey, handing the card back to Judy, who asked if she might keep it. "So that's what it was."

"This is his own monument on the card, the very same statue and everything," observed Horace.

"And there were four generations of them," Judy added. "But you say he sold the business?"

"Talk did it," the caretaker explained. "All those heathen statues and pictures he filled the house with. Folks began calling him a heathen too. It got even worse after he put up that monument. I told him he was making a big mistake. 'What good is a big tombstone to a man after he's dead?' I asked him. 'Let others build it if they think you're worth it.' And would you believe it, he told me he had no friends or kinfolks who thought he was worth a visit, let alone a monument. He and his nephew had quarreled over the business, and the rest of the family let him pretty much alone."

He turned to Helen Riker. "If you're Philip's wife, why didn't you ever come to visit?"

"I have come," Mrs. Riker said, very low.

"Well, you've come too late. I keep bachelor's quarters. It's no fit place for a woman, and you can see for yourself the big house is burned down."

"When did the fire start?" Judy asked.

"Last night," Abner Post answered shortly. "And I *don't* know how it started," he added defensively.

"Could that be because you weren't here?" Judy asked sweetly.

"Certainly I was here," the caretaker exclaimed. "I'm always here."

"You couldn't have been here when the house was looted Thursday night," Judy pointed out reasonably. "From what the paper said, the thieves must have had to

bring a van to remove all those art treasures, and you would have seen it.”

“Now look here, miss,” the caretaker exclaimed furiously. “Are you trying to say I was mixed up in the robbery?”

“Robbery!” Mrs. Riker gasped. “Uncle Paul’s beautiful treasures were stolen? Oh, how dreadful!” Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. “I suppose his jade collection was stolen too. Yes,” she added in a whisper, “I have come too late.”

Judy’s hand closed around the tiny object in her pocket.

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Mrs. Riker,” she said mysteriously.

CHAPTER XII

The Game of Secrets

Horace made good time coming home. He was really driving too fast, Judy thought, but she didn't say anything. She was too busy thinking about the caretaker, who had stood watching them sullenly as they drove away.

"Horace," she said suddenly, "either that man *was* involved in the robbery, or else he was away at the time and is trying to keep it secret."

"It's no good trying to keep secrets like that," Honey said. "I tried it once, and it didn't work. I only got myself tangled in a web of lies. It was when I told the truth that everything came clear."

"I'm glad you said that," declared Judy. "I think the truth would solve most of our problems. Don't you, Mrs. Riker?"

"Nothing," she replied, "will solve my problems now. I wish I had never come back. At least I could have kept the memory of the place the way it used to be."

"Was it such a pleasant memory?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "It was anything but pleasant except for one happy summer. That summer stood out so clearly in my memory that it made me forget all the dreary hours that followed. It all comes back to me now. The house was filled with heavy, carved furniture. There was one chair with snakes curling over the back. You couldn't sit in it. A statue sat there. You had to be quiet when you went near it. There were so many statues! But I think I remember the quiet most of all. I wasn't allowed to interrupt if anyone spoke, but nobody ever said anything much except, 'Don't touch!' And there were so many beautiful things I wanted to touch. Now where are they?"

"At least they didn't go up in smoke when the house burned," Horace pointed out.

“It is a strange thing,” agreed Judy. “The thieves didn’t know they were saving them. Your uncle should be grateful.”

Mrs. Riker smiled, as if the thought of his gratitude amused her. Then she said, “What really distresses me is the condition of the caretaker’s cottage. You wouldn’t think it to look at it now, but that kitchen was once almost as pleasant as yours, Judy, if I may call you that. Do call me Helen.”

Honey turned around and smiled at Judy, remembering a secret between them. She had been called Helen for a little while before Judy found out that her real name was Grace Dobbs and that she was Peter’s sister.

“You like that name, don’t you?” Honey asked.

“Yes, and I like Helen Riker,” Judy declared warmly. “I think we are going to be good friends.”

“I hope so. I’m like Uncle Paul,” Mrs. Riker admitted. “I need friends as I never needed them before. My husband is dead, as you must have guessed. He was a reckless driver, especially when he was alone. He was killed in an accident.”

“What was that?” asked Horace, cutting down on his speed.

“You heard it. You might take it as a warning,” Judy told him. “You have plenty of time to write up this story. The *Herald* doesn’t go to press until tomorrow morning. ‘Slow down and live,’ as the road signs say.”

“Thanks, I will,” he replied. “I was just trying to get you home in time for supper.”

“I’ll get supper better if I’m all in one piece. I haven’t decided what we’ll have, but you’re all invited,” Judy told them.

But Horace said he had other plans—which included Honey.

“Anyway,” Judy said, “we want you and the children to stay, Helen.”

Mrs. Riker smiled as if the use of her first name cemented their friendship. She was a beautiful woman when she forgot to be worried and frightened. Judy guessed she was still in her early thirties.

“You must have married very young,” she commented a little later.

“Too young,” Helen Riker replied. “I hadn’t learned to do my own thinking.”

What did she mean? Apparently she still didn’t want to think about her problems, but the children did. Penny seemed bursting with things she wanted to say. They had passed the dam and were just coming to the place where the North Hollow road turned off at an angle, when the little girl suddenly cried out, “Here’s where we were when the bad men went off with Mommy’s pocketbook.”

“Did they go down that road?” asked Horace.

“No,” said Paul. “They drove off down the main road. That’s where we met those kids who are having the magic show. But Wally Brown wasn’t with the kids who found Mom’s pocketbook—”

“Maybe he didn’t want them to look for it! Maybe it was his voice we heard!” exclaimed Judy.

“It’s a good theory and basically sound,” Horace pointed out, “but your timing’s wrong. The voice said ‘Don’t look for it!’ *before* Mrs. Riker lost her pocketbook—not afterwards. I figure the robbery happened in a matter of minutes after those men left you.”

“I don’t understand it,” Honey put in. “It was in the paper this morning.”

“Horace is talking about the theft of the pocketbook, not the big robbery. But I have a feeling they’re related in some way,” Judy said thoughtfully.

“Maybe one is the uncle of the other,” Horace teased her. “Seriously,” he continued, “I agree that there may be some connection. If this magician had been with them—”

“He isn’t a robber,” Penny interrupted. “I know he isn’t. His magic is real. You’ll see at the magic show. We can go to it, now that we’re coming back to live with you, can’t we, Judy?”

“What’s this?” Horace asked in surprise. “So you’re going to live with Judy, are you? Don’t you think Peter may have something to say about that?”

“He didn’t even know about the tourist sign,” Judy confessed. “We put it up this morning as a sort of a lark. We might have trapped the robbers, but it looks as if we caught the victims instead.”

“You may have caught them both. The robbers who stole my pocketbook asked if I knew where Uncle Paul’s jade collection is,” Mrs. Riker confessed, “but if the house was robbed two days ago, they’d have been there already.”

“That would be a story: ‘THIEVES OVERLOOK VALUABLE JADE COLLECTION,’” Horace commented.

“But did they?” Judy asked. “My theory is that they only overlooked one piece —”

She stopped suddenly, deciding not to mention the tiny green object in her pocket until she had shown it to Peter and discussed the whole thing with him. Quickly she changed the subject to ask, “Could the police have known about the fire when they gave you the news of the robbery, Horace?”

“Who knows?” he replied. “Everybody seems to be playing the game of secrets. The theft of your pocketbook should have been reported, Mrs. Riker. You’re protecting the thieves when you hold back information from the police.”

“Oh dear!” she said, becoming suddenly flustered. “I didn’t mean to do that. I suppose they should know what happened, but please keep my name out of it. I don’t want to become involved. Maybe you could tell them I have my pocketbook back—”

“Empty,” Horace reminded her.

“They didn’t want it,” Penny spoke up. “They only wanted what was inside.”

“What *was* inside?” asked Judy, hoping her new friend had taken Honey’s little speech about truth-telling to heart.

“There’s a light inside,” observed Honey

“There’s a light inside,” observed Honey

“Not much,” Mrs. Riker replied quickly. “I only had a few dollars left, just about enough to get us to Uncle Paul’s. There was nothing else of any consequence.”

“No green doll?” Judy wanted to ask. But would Helen Riker admit it? They were nearly home now, but the game of secrets was not over. Even Horace acted as if he knew one.

“What does consequence mean?” Penny was asking.

“The dictionary says it’s the natural result of an act,” Judy began.

She had read the dictionary once in order to win a spelling bee, and often quoted definitions from it.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I’m so confused I don’t know what I mean,” Mrs. Riker confessed. “I didn’t tell those horrible men where anything was. I couldn’t have. I didn’t know!”

“They must have overlooked something or they wouldn’t have stopped you. How did they know who you were?” asked Judy.

“A voice from the trees told them, no doubt,” Horace said dryly.

Her brother was joking, Judy knew. But he had certainly found out something. They were just passing the tree that had “talked,” but there was no voice from it now. The rain had turned to snow which clung to the branches, frosting them with white. The house had a white roof.

“There’s a light inside,” observed Honey as Horace drove up the snowy slope to stop before the door.

CHAPTER XIII

Too Many Clues

“What are you going to do with this?” asked Horace as he brought in the tourist sign.

“Maybe you ought to hide it,” laughed Honey, taking it from him and standing it behind the kitchen door.

Usually the door into the combined kitchen and dining room was left open. It swung against the living-room wall. From within the kitchen came the odor of something cooking.

“Peter has given me up for lost and is cooking his own supper,” Judy exclaimed. “Come in, Helen. Mrs. Riker, I want you to meet my husband, Peter Dobbs.”

Peter looked more like a coal miner than a G-man as he turned from the stove to regard the group in the doorway. A boyish grin spread slowly over his face.

“I’m happy to know you,” he said. “If I had been warned that Judy was bringing company home I would have dressed for the occasion and prepared something more elaborate than canned soup. You’ll have to excuse my appearance,” he added after a quick introduction to the children, “but fighting forest fires is dirty work.”

“Forest fires!” exclaimed Judy.

“Are you a forest ranger?” Paul wanted to know. “Did you help put out the fire that burned Uncle Paul’s house down?”

“I’m afraid I was too late for that,” replied Peter, “but I did volunteer to help the chief deputy and his forest rangers. They had to keep the forest fire from spreading. The control of forest fires,” he continued, “is everybody’s business. Even boys and girls can help by reporting any brush fires they see.”

“We didn’t see the fire. We just saw the Destroyer,” Paul said.

“Paul means the statue on his uncle’s tomb,” Judy put in quickly. “I recognized it and told him what it was.”

“You recognized it? Were you there?”

Peter had abandoned his soup-making to listen.

“We all were,” Honey answered. “Mrs. Riker was on the way to visit her uncle —”

“He is my husband’s uncle, not mine,” Helen Riker pointed out. “That makes him the children’s great-uncle.”

Judy laughed. “Little Paul ran up to the vault and knocked, and he thinks he heard someone say ‘Go away!’ And, honestly, Peter, there was no one inside. We looked, and it was empty.”

“The voice must have been carried from somewhere,” Horace concluded. “It could have been a trick of the wind, like the talking tree.”

“Is that what you think it was?” asked Judy. “I don’t see how a trick of the wind could make a tree talk, do you, Peter?”

“If the trees I saw today could have talked,” he replied, “they would have all screamed, ‘Save us!’ We did our best, but it was the rain that finally put the fire out, after the wind changed.”

“That was just about the time those men stopped here, wasn’t it, Judy?” asked Honey.

“What men?” asked Peter. “I still don’t get it.”

“No wonder,” Judy told him. “We took the sign down and hid it behind the door. Here it is,” she added, dragging it out. “You might call it Exhibit A. Isn’t it a beauty? Honey lettered it herself.”

“Tourists Welcome,” he read aloud, the puzzled frown on his forehead deepening. “What was the idea?” he questioned. “Are we suddenly in the tourist

business?”

“I’m afraid we were,” Judy admitted, “and we’re also deep in another mystery.”

Eagerly the children began telling him about it, but their mother stopped their chatter by offering them some of the soup Judy was dishing out, and telling them to keep quiet while they ate it.

“Don’t dish out any for us, Judy,” Horace told her. “I promised Honey I’d take her out to dinner, and I mean to keep my word if all the restaurants aren’t closed —”

“We’ll be back if they are. ‘Bye, all!” Honey said as she followed him out into the snow.

The ground was covered now. What a day it had been! First the dry weather with forest fires raging, then rain, and now snow!

“It’s just too much for me,” sighed Judy.

Peter had had a word privately with Horace before he left. Afterwards Judy brought out what she called Exhibit B—the empty pocketbook. Peter whistled in surprise when he saw it. But Mrs. Riker seemed unwilling to talk about it. She soon pleaded a headache and asked that she and the children be shown to their rooms.

Judy made them as comfortable as she could in the two spare bedrooms and then returned to the kitchen to prepare a little more supper for Peter. She gave him the kiss she had been saving for him and said, “I thought you might like to follow the soup course with another one of meat and potatoes. I’ll have them on your plate in a jiffy.”

“What about your own plate?” he asked.

“I’m not hungry,” she admitted. “I had enough to eat with Mrs. Riker and the children. For once we have a mystery with too many clues and I’d rather sort them out in my mind and talk. Peter,” she asked abruptly, “did you ever hear of a green dolly?”

He looked puzzled. “A green dollar? Who hasn’t? They’re all green except the

silver and gold ones.”

“I didn’t say *dollar*. I said *dolly*. You know, one of those things that children play with.” She spelled it, “D-o-l-l,” and Peter laughed.

“Turn off the advertising, Angel. I get it. Are you speaking of a talking doll?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Penny asked me to help her find a green doll she said her mother had in the pocketbook that was stolen from her. But Helen Riker won’t tell me. She said there was nothing of any consequence in her pocketbook, but there was certainly something worth stealing. Those men must have been looking for her when they stopped here. I took the license number of their car.”

“Good girl,” approved Peter. “I knew you would. Now, if you can describe them —”

Judy described them in detail, answering a few more questions Peter asked her about them.

“They stopped short in front of Helen Riker and crowded her car into the ditch. Then the men jumped out and questioned her about her uncle’s jade collection at the point of a gun. She told me that much. But she won’t admit she had anything of value in the pocketbook they drove off with. What do you think was in it, Peter? Why do I get mixed up in such fantastic adventures?”

“Perhaps,” he replied mysteriously, “it’s because you’re married to me. I’m on the trail of a green doll myself. In fact, quite a number of them. These clues you speak of may be just the ones I need.”

“Peter! Really? Then maybe I *can* help you. Take a look at Exhibit C!” And Judy drew the tiny green jade figure from her pocket and laid it down before him.

CHAPTER XIV

The Missing Jade

Peter gave a long, low whistle of surprise. Then he asked Judy exactly where she had found the little idol.

She told him and added, "It isn't quite the way Penny described it. This looks more like a hunter than a doll."

"It may be a clue when we start hunting for the rest of the jade collection," declared Peter. "Have you any more clues as good as this one?"

Judy laughed. "I'm afraid not, but it won't do any harm to list the clues I do have."

"First of all," Peter said, "is that tourist sign. I'll never understand how you get these sudden impulses, but it certainly led Mrs. Riker and the children to the right place."

"That's true," Judy admitted, and sighed. "Naturally they were looking forward to meeting their uncle. It must have been a terrible shock to them to find his house destroyed."

"What about their other uncle?" asked Peter. "Doesn't he have a house?"

"I don't know," Judy replied. "Helen wouldn't let the children talk about him. Penny acted as if she'd never heard of him before. It was the old uncle they were expecting to visit, not the young one."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm not sure of anything," confessed Judy. "There's a big secret of some kind. Helen's trained Paul to keep it, but not Penny. The trouble is, I don't think Penny knows all of it. And she has such an imagination! I actually feel sorry for her, the way they stop her every time she wants to talk. But it may be necessary. Helen

Riker may be in danger.”

“What about you?” asked Peter. “You’ve really handed yourself a problem, sweetheart. If she’s in danger, I’m afraid you are, too.”

“I know, Peter.” Impulsively she kissed away the worried frown on his forehead, nearly stabbing him with the pencil she was holding. “But why should I be any safer than you are?” she asked. “You’re nearly always in danger—”

“From pencils? Only when I’m with you,” he returned, laughing. “Actually, pencils are about the only weapons I’ll be using for the next few weeks. Most of the time I will be sitting at an office desk doing very undangerous routine work.”

“You weren’t today,” she reminded him. “You were fighting forest fires.”

“Today,” he said, “was a little unusual. But let’s talk about your day. I want to get the facts straightened out in my mind.”

“My day?” Judy questioned, thinking back. “For me it always begins when I first open my eyes and say to myself, ‘Here is another mystery to solve.’ Every day is a mystery, Peter, because you never know one minute what wonderful, beautiful, or even terrible thing will happen the next. That’s what makes life so exciting and—and wonderful.”

“It takes a pretty wonderful person to see it that way,” declared Peter.

“You’re wonderful, too,” she told him. “How foolish I was to worry for fear you might not understand. You see, we put up the tourist sign before Horace came with the news of the robbery. At first it was just for fun. We didn’t really think anyone would stop. And then, just after we put up the sign, those three men came along. They didn’t drive down our road. Maybe it looked too steep or something. They just parked their car by the mailbox and started to explore the grounds and ask questions. One of the men asked about the house, but I told him it wasn’t for sale. It’s *our* house, Peter. Nothing in the world could make me want to sell it.”

“But it is a little lonesome, is that it?”

“A little,” she admitted, “when you’re at work. But today Honey was with me, and then of course Helen and the children came. Oh!” she exclaimed suddenly.

“What now, Angel?”

“An idea I had. Penny did say something about getting into trouble when you didn’t tell things,” Judy remembered. “She was talking about her mother. And then she said, ‘I’d never, never steal anything after what she told me. Only bad people steal.’ I agreed with her and it seemed to bother her, and then she said something about it’s being different for children. What do you suppose she meant by that?”

“Obviously some child she cared about had stolen something. I doubt if it was Penny herself.”

“Was it Paul?”

“Not if I’m any judge of character,” Peter said. “What else can you remember?”

“A lot of things. I’ll write them down. There were still more clues in the paper if we only had it. I think Helen must have taken it upstairs with her.”

“We don’t need it,” Peter told her. “I’m familiar with every word in it. You see, our office released the news. Horace didn’t tell you, but he got it from me.”

“He did? Then you know more about it than he does! Can you tell me who the thieves were?” Judy asked. “Was it the caretaker?”

“Possibly, although it was he who reported the robbery.”

“And what about the jade collection? If this green doll was part of it—Peter! It must have been. But why was Helen taking it there unless—” Judy kept interrupting herself as more ideas flashed through her brain. Then, suddenly, she knew.

“It was!” she exclaimed. “I remember it now! It said in the paper that a priceless Oriental jade collection had been stolen—”

“Was believed to have been stolen,” Peter corrected her. “It makes quite a difference.”

“Not in what I’m trying to say,” she continued. “I don’t remember it word for word, but it went on to say that the valuable jade pieces had been collected

during Paul Riker's travels through the Far East. They were little statues of gods and goddesses! I had forgotten that until this very minute. And there was something else about their value being even greater if they were matched pairs. Does that mean there's a goddess for every god? Then, if one happened to be missing, it would be worth a lot of money, wouldn't it? And if the burglars knew where it was, they'd try to steal it, wouldn't they? And they'd try to find out about the rest of the collection. Oh, Peter! That was what you meant when you said you were on the trail of quite a number of green dolls, wasn't it? And this one I found may lead us to all the others."

"It may," Peter replied soberly. "On the other hand, it may lead us into more trouble. If Mr. Riker himself dropped it in the vault—"

"I give up," Judy interrupted. "But this green 'doll' is jade, isn't it, and it was stolen from Mr. Riker's collection, don't you think, Peter?"

"Yes, I do," Peter agreed, "but if anyone stole it I'm afraid you're the guilty one, Angel. You'd better let me have it before it gets you into more trouble. It may be the mate to the one Mrs. Riker had stolen from her."

"Oh dear!" Judy began. "I hadn't thought of that. I didn't mean—"

"Of course you didn't," Peter reassured her. "I know your motives were good when you took it, and a great deal of good may come out of it, so don't worry."

"I won't," Judy promised, inspiration suddenly erasing all worry from her mind. "Oh, Peter!" she cried. "I have a wonderful idea. Come up to the attic with me. There's something up there I want to show you."

CHAPTER XV

Secrets of the East

Judy and Peter climbed to the third floor, tiptoeing so as not to disturb their sleeping guests. All was quiet on the second floor. The stairway went right on up to what was not a cobwebby old attic, but three neat little rooms at the top of the house.

The room in the middle had dormer windows that gave enough light for sewing. Here Judy had placed her sewing machine. Opposite it was a large chest of drawers, a chair, and a bookcase filled with things she treasured.

In one of the other rooms her grandmother's things were stored. Judy had never got around to sorting all of them.

In the third room were things she had saved herself. The wall was lined with books she had loved and didn't want to part with. She had taken them all to her grandmother's house the summer before the flood. Her old dolls were there too.

It was in this room that Judy found what she was looking for—a stack of old magazines.

"It must be in this pile here somewhere," she told Peter, rapidly going through the stack. "It was an article in an old issue of *Life*, and it had lots of pictures in color of Hindu gods and goddesses. I'll know it by its cover—a Hindu girl with some kind of an ornament on her forehead. Do you remember it, Peter?"

"I believe I do," he replied. "There were pictures of gods and goddesses on a big fold-out page. Some of them were in the Riker collection. They were hardly what you'd call dolls, although some of them were green. To the more educated Hindus they have become symbolic."

"You mean like our sandman?" asked Judy with a yawn.

Peter laughed. "I never thought of it that way, but I guess the sandman is a

symbol of sleep, and you and I could use some of it. We can look through the rest of these old magazines another time.”

“It’s no use. It isn’t here. We’d better go down.”

Judy picked up Buttercup, her favorite doll. “I’m going to tuck her in bed with Penny,” she told Peter, “so she’ll find her when she wakes up.”

She laughed at Peter’s objections as she carried the doll down to the children’s bedroom on the second floor and placed her in Penny’s arms.

“You see, I didn’t wake Penny,” she whispered to Peter. “Isn’t she an angel? I wish—”

The wish went unexpressed as Judy pounced upon the very magazine she had been hunting for. It was on the little night table right by Penny’s bed, and it was open to the big fold-out page covered with pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses.

“Go ahead! You can take it,” Paul said so suddenly that he startled Judy and nearly made her drop the magazine.

He was wide awake in the other bed.

“Where did you find it?” Judy whispered.

“In the closet. I was showing Penny the pictures. Is it almost morning?”

“Almost,” Judy told him. “Now go back to sleep. I’d better follow my own advice,” she said to Peter when they were in their own room.

“Are you going to take that magazine to bed with you?” he asked.

Judy still had it in her arms.

“Why not?” she retorted, making a face at him. “It contains all the mysterious secrets of the mysterious East and if I want to solve this mysterious—”

“Darling,” Peter interrupted, “if I hear that word again I shall place a blindfold over your mysterious gray eyes—”

“Try it!” she challenged him.

Judy won the scuffle. In spite of Peter’s protests, she began to read the article, though not from the beginning. She had opened the magazine to a huge picture of Shiva.

“This,” she pointed out, “is Shiva or Siva, the death god or the Destroyer. I recognized the figure on the tomb from this picture. But Penny mentioned the name Sita, and that seems to ring a bell, too.”

“It should.” Peter turned the page and spread it out before her. “Here they are,” he said. “Rama and Sita are the ideal man and woman in India. They should never be separated, and no marriage is complete without their blessing—”

“That’s rather sweet, don’t you think? Oh!” Judy gasped, pointing to one of the two little idols pictured. “Look, Peter. This is the one I found in the vault. Our green doll is Rama!”

CHAPTER XVI

The Missing Children

“Rama!” Peter exclaimed with satisfaction. “Now we’re getting somewhere, Angel. If we can just make sure this is not the ‘green doll’ that was stolen from Mrs. Riker—”

“I’m almost sure it isn’t,” Judy exclaimed. “When Penny was talking about it, she kept referring to the dolly as ‘she,’ and this little idol is the figure of a young man. Besides, Peter,” she added excitedly, “when I was trying to think of the name of the Destroyer, Penny said the name was Sita. Then she said, ‘Oh, no, that was the name of the—’ and her mother made her be quiet. Oh dear,” she finished mournfully, “we found Rama and lost Sita, and they should always be together.”

“Perhaps they will be, Angel, soon,” Peter promised mysteriously.

Judy eyed him curiously. “Don’t answer this if it’s confidential information,” she began carefully, “but I’m just dying to know why it makes a difference whether this green doll is the one Helen Riker had, or not.”

“I can’t answer your question specifically, Angel,” Peter said slowly. “But I can tell you one thing, because it will be released to the papers tomorrow anyway. There may not have been a robbery at all.”

“Peter!” Judy stared. “What do you mean? The art treasures are gone, aren’t they?”

“They were,” Peter said. “But we learned today that the Montrose Moving and Storage Company received an order to move the stuff to their warehouse on Thursday evening. The order is supposed to have come from Paul Riker. My theory is that the old man saw the forest fire spreading in the direction of his house, and wanted to save his treasures. However, the insurance people take a different view. They point out that although the house did burn down, the forest fire was not the cause. In fact, the burned area around the site of the Riker

mansion was what stopped the spread of the forest fire in that direction. They think Mr. Riker wanted to 'have his cake and eat it too,' as the saying goes."

"Peter!" Judy's eyes were snapping with excitement. "Do you mean to tell me all those things have been sitting in a warehouse while everyone has been trying to catch the robbers? But you yourself said only this evening that you are on the trail of a number of green dolls. Oh," she gasped, as the thought struck her, "that must mean the jade collection isn't—"

She stopped suddenly as Peter put a gentle hand over her mouth.

"I wouldn't have been able to answer your next question, Angel," he said, laughing at her startled expression, "so let's change the subject."

"All right, Peter," Judy laughed too, "at least we have one real robbery left—those men who held up Helen Riker. Peter, they must have been the moving men! Honey recognized one of them."

"There's undoubtedly some connection, and we'll investigate it," Peter said. "But I don't think it's quite as simple as it sounds."

"You mean, there's Helen Riker herself? I told her I was afraid I'd caught the victim instead of the robbers. And do you know what she said, Peter? She said, 'You may have caught them both.' But she couldn't be involved in a robbery that didn't happen."

"If that was a piece of stolen jade she was carrying around with her, she's going to have a hard time proving her innocence," declared Peter.

"Somehow, I can't believe she's really guilty," Judy murmured.

"Perhaps not," Peter said, "but we both know she's holding something back. And if her husband was this millionaire's nephew, why was she driving a fifteen-year-old car hardly fit for the road?"

"Horace told you about the car, didn't he?"

"Yes, and I mean to have a look at it. There's still a lot we don't know."

"And a lot I'm too sleepy to think about. There was one more thing I wanted to

tell you.”

“Good night, maybe?” Peter laughed. “I’m ready to turn in myself as soon as I run downstairs and make a couple of telephone calls.”

“At this hour?”

Peter laughed. “I won’t wake anybody up. I’ll put out Blackberry and lock up. By then you may have thought of it.”

He returned a few minutes later. Judy was still awake. She said a little drowsily, “I know what it was. I wanted to tell you how she described her uncle’s house, the quiet and everything, almost as if she used to live there, but how could that be? Paul Riker was her husband’s uncle, not hers.”

“You knew my grandparents when I was a little boy,” Peter reminded her.

“That’s true. She must have lived near them. But there are no other houses near by except the caretaker’s cottage. Could she have been the caretaker’s little girl?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Peter suggested.

Judy said she would first thing in the morning. But morning brought new problems. Mrs. Riker woke everybody up screaming that the children were missing.

“I found a doll in Penny’s bed,” she wailed. “It was put there as a warning—”

“It was put there as a surprise,” Judy told her. “I tiptoed in and put it there myself. It’s my old doll, Buttercup, and there’s nothing mysterious about her. The children were all right then.”

“They aren’t now. This is too much!” Helen Riker cried, becoming hysterical. “If those robbers entered the house during the night and stole them, I’ll never forgive myself. Maybe they think I lied to them when I said I didn’t know where Uncle Paul kept his jade collection. They may think if they hold the children they can force me to tell—”

“Wait a minute!” Peter stopped her. “Before you jump to any such conclusions,

tell me when you last saw the children.”

“Why, when I put them to bed.”

Peter made a quick investigation, and reported that no one had entered the children’s room except Judy and himself.

“What about their clothes?” he asked. “Are any of them missing?”

“They must be wearing their snow suits,” their mother began.

“And why not, on a nice snowy morning?” asked Peter. “It looks to me as if they just got up early and ran out to play.”

But Helen Riker still wouldn’t believe they hadn’t met with some disaster.

“If they’ve decided to track those robbers down by themselves,” she wailed, “some real harm may come to them.”

“I’ll see that it doesn’t,” promised Peter.

Judy made three phone calls. Then she and Peter put on coats and boots and began an exploration of the neighborhood. The new snow helped, and they soon discovered that Penny and Paul had left a path from the house to the barn and then across the shortcut to the North Hollow road.

Judy’s friend and nearest neighbor, Holly Potter, reported that she had seen the children a half hour or so earlier. They were on their way toward the new housing development, she thought.

“Muriel’s house is on the corner. They could have been on their way there,” she added as Judy hurried off with Peter.

“I called Ricky and Muriel and Anne before we came out. They hadn’t seen them,” she called back.

“That leaves Wally, doesn’t it?” asked Peter. “Did you think of calling him? That’s where they were planning to have this magic show, wasn’t it?”

“Of course. Why didn’t I think of it? That’s where they naturally would go. Let’s

go back to the house and telephone.”

“I’ll get the car out and drive over and pick them up if you like,” Peter offered.

“All right, and in the meantime I’ll get breakfast started,” Judy decided. “What do you fancy this morning?”

“Pancakes would do very nicely. I’ve worked up quite an appetite.”

“Pancakes it is!”

They returned to the house hand in hand and enjoying the crisp morning air. Overnight it had changed from fall to winter. As Peter drove off along the snowy road Judy waved to him and then turned to Mrs. Riker.

“He’ll find them. Don’t worry. Let’s go inside and have a nice hot breakfast ready for them when they do come back.”

Church bells were ringing, reminding them that it was Sunday morning. For Judy and Peter this was never a day for sleeping. Usually they drove to Farringdon and attended church with Judy’s parents and Peter’s grandparents. Horace never missed a Sunday.

“Honey will be there, too. And Lois and Lorraine and all the other girls I knew in high school,” thought Judy.

But when she suggested church to Mrs. Riker the young woman protested that she didn’t want to meet people.

“Not here,” she said. “Not yet.”

What did she mean? Judy had suggested the little white church in Dry Brook Hollow, as it was already too late to drive to Farringdon, and the children had not yet returned.

“We might look for them in Sunday school if Peter isn’t back by ten o’clock.”

Judy felt sure some of the neighborhood children might have invited them. She didn’t know why, but she just couldn’t share Mrs. Riker’s anxiety, although she could sympathize with her. The pancake batter was ready. Ten o’clock came and

still no children. Mrs. Riker was the first one to suggest walking over to the Sunday school.

They arrived just as all the children were singing:

*“Come, ye thankful people, come,
Raise the song of harvest-home.
All is safely gathered in,
Ere the winter storms begin.”*

“It’s Thanksgiving Sunday!” Judy whispered.

But Mrs. Riker was looking into the faces of the children and finding nothing to be thankful for. Her own were not there.

CHAPTER XVII

More Secrets

They waited until the hymn was over and then tiptoed quietly out of the big Sunday school room. A moment later the quiet was shattered as the children rushed off to their individual classrooms. The Dran boys hurried in through the outside door. They were both out of breath.

“Are we late?” the older boy asked Judy.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Oh dear!” the younger one lamented. “We missed the singing and that’s the best part. We wanted Penny and Paul to come with us, but Peter said their mother would worry—”

“Thank the Lord,” gasped Mrs. Riker.

She looked about ready to faint. The Dran boys stared at her.

“She’s their mother,” Judy explained. “She’s been worried sick. But it’s all right now. We can all be thankful they’re safe. But where were they?”

“At our house,” the boys said matter-of-factly.

“They wanted to sign up for the magic show,” Timothy, the older of the two, explained. “Didn’t they tell you where they were going, Mrs. Riker?”

“No,” she replied rather uncertainly as if she wanted to say more. She looked at Judy, who should have introduced them. In the excitement she had forgotten to do so.

“It’s all right. Peter brought them back and gave us a ride,” Timothy said.

“He didn’t wait for you. I guess he didn’t know you were here,” Barry, the little one, added.

Having explained everything, the Dran boys ran off to their classes which were somewhere in the basement rooms of the church.

“Penny and Paul would have enjoyed this. Maybe I’ll let them come next Sunday,” Helen Riker remarked as they left to walk home.

“Next Sunday?” Judy questioned.

Was Mrs. Riker planning to stay all winter? What were her plans? Judy knew she couldn’t ask her new friend to leave when she didn’t have anywhere to go, or any money, but she hadn’t counted on taking in a whole family.

“If I’m here,” Mrs. Riker replied. “I haven’t decided anything. But at least I have something to be thankful for. The children are all right.”

When they reached Judy’s home they found Penny and Paul helping Peter make pancakes. He had discovered the batter and the griddle ready, and had appointed himself chef in Judy’s absence.

“Pancakes coming up!” he announced. “Pitch right in, everybody. Know where we’re going as soon as we finish, Angel?”

“No, where?” Judy asked.

But before Peter could tell her, Mrs. Riker said what she wanted to know was where the children had been and why they hadn’t told her they were going out.

The answer to the last question was simple enough. She had been asleep when they left.

“It was very early,” Paul explained. “We had to wake everybody up. Mr. Brown didn’t like it, but when we went to Timmy Dran’s house the magician didn’t mind.”

“The magician!” their mother said in shocked surprise.

“Is that where you were?” asked Judy. “I might have known it! Where does this magician live?”

“With Barry and Timothy Dran. He’s the nicest man, just like Daddy, only he

isn't. It's all right if we go there," Paul hurried on. "Peter knows him. They got real well acquainted, and we joined the club and Penny has a part in the magic show. She and Anne changed places because now she's the littlest. Wally said it was all right."

"I disappear," Penny announced proudly.

"Not again," her mother protested.

"It's all right. I'll come back."

Mrs. Riker sighed.

"Well, I hope so. At least you're safe now. The next time you leave the house you must tell me, so I won't worry," she continued. "You know how much I've had on my mind."

"I wish I did," Judy thought.

"We know. But it's going to be different now, isn't it, Penny?" Paul asked.

"Oooh, yes!" she squealed.

"More secrets!" Judy said, holding up her hands in mock despair. "Haven't we enough already!"

She still had Mrs. Riker's problems to solve and they weren't easy. As they did the dishes together she encouraged the young woman to talk. The truth came out unexpectedly when Mrs. Riker commented that their kitchen used to be almost as nice as Judy's.

"You'd never think it to look at it now, but when we lived in the caretaker's cottage on the Riker estate, it was the coziest, warmest little place you ever saw. The boys used to come down whenever Mother made cookies—"

"The boys?" Judy questioned.

"My husband Philip, and his brother Paul. I liked Paul best then," she continued in a voice that told Judy she had decided to take her into her confidence. "We were children, of course, but I used to think it was Paul I would marry. And then,

suddenly, everything changed. After we left the caretaker's cottage and went to live in the city, it was Philip who wrote to me."

"But what happened to Paul?" Judy asked.

"I never saw him again," Helen said, "but Philip came to New York and looked me up. He said he and Paul had quarreled and that he, Philip, had been disinherited. Their money never mattered to me, anyway. I loved them both—"

She stopped, but Judy made no comment. She was afraid of breaking the spell. It was almost as if Helen Riker were reliving her past.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but it's true!" she declared. "It used to break my heart when they quarreled. Philip was jealous of Paul because their uncle favored him and called Philip a little thief. He did take things to give away. Uncle Paul had so much, Phil thought it didn't matter. They were only there on a visit, but it was the happiest summer in my whole life. Afterwards—but why talk about it? It's all in the past and I have the future to think about."

"Could there be a link?" asked Judy, thinking fast.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean if one of the presents Philip gave you happened to be in the pocketbook that was stolen—"

Mrs. Riker's face went white.

"How did you know?" she questioned.

Judy smiled, taking the dish the other had nearly dropped.

"It was just a guess. Your little daughter Penny is like her mother. She isn't very good at keeping secrets. A green doll would be a green goddess, wouldn't it? Possibly a jade goddess worth quite a bit to a thief who had the mate—"

"Rama!" Helen gasped. "Paul always said it was bad luck to separate them!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Sita Speaks

“Bad luck?” Judy asked, turning from the corner cupboard where she had just placed a stack of five plates, the last of the breakfast dishes. Or were they lunch dishes? Their pancake feast had waited so long that it was nearly lunchtime before they had finished.

“You don’t believe in it, do you?” Mrs. Riker questioned anxiously. “I guess you think we make our own luck, good or bad, and maybe you’re right.”

“But if that’s true,” Judy said, “we can change it. You’ve made a good start, telling me all about it.”

“I didn’t tell you quite all,” Helen admitted. “I didn’t tell you how we used to act out the story of Rama and Sita. Do you know it, Judy?”

“Only a little of it,” Judy answered. “I know they are the ideal man and woman, but was Sita a princess? Penny said the green doll was a princess, but I guess she got the story mixed up with the Oz books. Did you read them to her?”

“I read her the Oz books, not the ‘Ramayana.’ There isn’t a translation of it that a child Penny’s age could understand. We heard the story told and made up our own play. I would call, ‘Rama! Rama! Rama! I seek thee within me and my senses are sealed.’”

“Did Rama answer?”

“No, it was always the demon Ravana. He was the many-headed monster who stole Sita and kept her a prisoner for seven years. The boys would take turns being Ravana. The other one was always Rama.”

“And you were Sita? Did you take the statues to act out the play?”

“At first,” she said. “Then Uncle Paul discovered us and forbade us to touch

them. After that we thought of him as the many-headed demon. When he roared at us we'd exchange glances and know each other's thoughts. I've seen you and Peter do it. I think two people can when they love each other very much, but it didn't last with us. When Sita was stolen everything changed. Paul didn't want to play any more."

"How do you mean?" asked Judy. "Was it Philip who took the statue?"

"Yes," she said. "He gave it to me and told me to keep it for seven years and then he would bring me its mate. He did find me just seven years later, but neither of us ever mentioned Rama and Sita. We were married, I often told myself, without their blessing. Paul didn't come to the wedding. None of his family did. My mother and some of my friends from New York were there. But I never saw Paul again."

"If you did see him—" Judy began.

But Helen Riker was crying now.

"I'd still love him, I guess. Little Paul is really named for him, not for Mr. Riker. I was always a little afraid of old Uncle Paul. And now I'm afraid of meeting either of them. Can you guess why?"

"Because you kept the green goddess?"

"Yes, but it's more than that. I'm afraid of what may have happened during the years I didn't know him. If he's grown up to be bitter and cruel like his uncle, with no understanding of children— And if he hasn't—why, then he's probably married to someone else. I'd pretend I didn't care any more if I found out Paul was happily married."

"I see," Judy said, and there were tears in her eyes.

"You really do, don't you?" Mrs. Riker spoke as if she wasn't used to having people understand her feelings. But now that someone did, she was ready to pour out her heart.

"That was what made it so hard," she went on with her story. "I loved the green doll, as I called her, and didn't want to part with her, because Philip had given her to me. After he was killed in the accident two years ago, it seemed even

harder to part with her, and I didn't, even though we needed money desperately. She reminded me of those happy days when the three of us played together and took turns and I didn't have to choose between them. They were twins—"

"Wait a minute!" Judy stopped her. "Did I hear you correctly? Did you say they were twins?"

"Identical twins," she replied. "Some people couldn't tell one from the other, but I could. Philip laughed more than Paul did. He was more reckless, too. When we played follow-the-leader, he would lead us places that Paul and I were afraid to go."

"What sort of places?" asked Judy.

"Well, there was a cave in the side of the mountain. I don't remember exactly where it was. It was a natural cave," she remembered. "I don't imagine it's there any more. It seems to me it was about where that monument stood."

"Could the monument have been built over it? That might explain the voice that told the children to go away. It would explain the footprint, too!"

"Then he was there!" Helen Riker exclaimed.

"Who?" asked Judy.

"Old Uncle Paul," she replied with a shiver. "He knew about the cave. He chased us out and took possession of it for himself just as he took possession of everything he wanted. I hated him for his selfishness. I wanted to hurt him. I knew it was wrong to keep the statue, but it was my way of paying him back. He must have turned queer to build a tomb and hide in a cave underneath it to scare people. I wonder if he knew who we were."

"How could he know? Do you think he was peeking out from somewhere? But how could he know you even if he was? You were a little girl then—"

"I know," she interrupted, "but I'm like my mother. I thought perhaps I could keep house for him like my mother did. Our one hope was that he would welcome us and forgive me when I gave him back the little jade statue of Sita. But now it's stolen and he didn't want to see us. Philip's insurance money is all gone. We used the last of it coming here. I'll have to go to work, I guess, and put

the children in a foster home. I don't suppose you'd consider letting them stay on here with you? I'd pay you out of my wages. Maybe I could wait on tables or find work in a store. Do you mind looking after the children if I begin hunting for something tomorrow?"

"Not at all," Judy replied.

"Judy, you're kind and thoughtful and understanding—"

"Please," Judy stopped her. "Peter calls me Angel, and the next thing, you'll be doing it. I have a lot of faults. I lose my temper and expect too much of people and make hasty judgments, and sometimes I'm rude. I was annoyed with you for not telling the truth—"

"And well you should have been," Helen Riker said. "For a girl who was once called Sita, I have fallen far short of the Hindu ideal of perfect womanhood. Perhaps I was fooled by Ravana, the evil one. I should have called, 'Rama! Rama! Rama!' more often."

"Do you think he would have answered you?" asked Judy, still a little baffled by the mystic tale.

"Perhaps," Helen replied, "but I waited too long. Life does not wait for indecision, Judy. As the demon said in the story, 'It is too late!' Each of his many heads, pierced by Rama's arrows, cried it to heaven until there was only one left to speak and it spoke wisely, 'Learn by my example. Do selfless deeds at once. Those that are selfish put them off till they cease to trouble thy mind.' But, you see, I put off the deeds I should have done. I intended to visit Uncle Paul and give him back his precious Sita and tell him how Philip took it for me when we were both children and didn't know its value. I dreaded going there and it was even worse than I imagined. I don't ever want to go again."

"Well, I do," declared Judy, "more than ever now that you've told me. Peter!" she called. "Where was it you said we were going?"

CHAPTER XIX

More Revelations

Peter had been in the next room making plans with the children. Judy knew, even before she asked him, that they were going to explore the ruins of the Riker mansion. It did surprise her, though, when he said the magician was going with them.

“For goodness sake, why?” she wanted to know. “Does he think he can wave his wand over it and make it rise up out of the ashes?”

Peter just grinned in that impish way Judy loved. He had found out something important, but so had she.

“I can hardly wait to tell you,” she said, “but first you must tell me. Are we really on the trail of the real green doll? It *was* Sita. I’m sure of it now. And more than ever I want to bring Rama and Sita together. It may not be bad luck to separate two statues, but it surely is to separate two people who love each other.”

“I know what you mean,” Peter said. “I heard you and Helen Riker talking. She’s told you something important. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Yes, Peter, she has.” Judy was still too filled with the hypnotic story of Rama and Sita to tell Peter much about it, but she did say, “She told me Philip and Paul Riker were twins and that she loved them both. It was Philip who took the statue of Sita and gave it to her. She knew it was stolen, but it was hard for her to gather up enough courage to bring it back. She was afraid of old Mr. Riker, and no wonder! Now she thinks he was hiding in a cave under the vault on purpose to scare people. She’s afraid of meeting him or anyone—”

“She’ll have to meet the magician,” Peter broke in. “I told you he is going with us.”

“If you don’t mind,” Helen Riker said, coming into the room just then, “I’d rather not go. Why don’t you take the children and let them explore? I’d rather

stay here and rest.”

“We could do that. What do you say, Angel?”

“You mean me?” Judy asked.

She had been off on a flight of fancy. If Peter could have known her thoughts he might have called her Cupid instead of Angel. “If we could only find Paul Riker and patch up the old romance,” she was thinking. Aloud, she said to Peter, “There must be some way of finding out what we want to know without resorting to magic. I’m not at all sure I approve of inviting the magician to go with us.”

“Penny and Paul approve, don’t you think?”

Their approval was almost too enthusiastic.

“He can do anything,” Penny insisted.

“You ought to tell them this magician, whoever he is, can’t work miracles,” their mother said a little impatiently.

“Maybe he can,” Peter replied, his eyes twinkling.

“I’m afraid I don’t like this sudden power he has over the children,” Mrs. Riker said. “Why did you go there, Paul? Tell me the truth, now!”

“I had to, Mom,” he replied. “I wanted him to pick Penny for the magic show. We’re going to join the club and wear black spots on our foreheads—”

“But that’s the sign of the Destroyer,” Judy said.

“We know,” Paul said, “and it was the Destroyer on Uncle Paul’s tomb. Are we going back there? When are we going to start?”

“Right now,” Peter told them, “with your mother’s permission, of course. Better wrap up good and warm. It’s going to be a cold climb up those steps to the vault. The cave underneath, if we can find it, may be even colder.”

“Is Blackberry going?” Paul wanted to know, when they were ready to start.

“It looks that way,” replied Peter. “Judy has him in the car. He’s waiting for you on top of the back seat. Come along now, and keep him company.”

Judy felt a little uneasy about leaving Mrs. Riker by herself, and telephoned her mother before she left. Mrs. Bolton agreed to come over and meet her and keep her company while the doctor went out on his calls.

“Is it all right if Horace and Honey come along with me?” Judy’s mother asked. “They’re here now. We all went to church together.”

“I went to Sunday school, but only long enough to listen to one hymn. Mrs. Riker will tell you about it. That is, if she feels like talking. If she doesn’t, don’t urge her. She may just want to rest. We’re leaving right now, Mom, and much as I love him, I don’t want Horace with us. We’ll give him another stick full of news. Tell him that and bless you, Motherkins, for doing a good deed and being my guardian angel.”

Mrs. Bolton sounded a little baffled as she hung up. Judy could hear a protesting noise over the telephone.

“Mom should be used to me by now,” she told Peter as she climbed in the car beside him. “I think she rather enjoys being mystified. Seriously, though, I don’t think it’s fair to make children believe in magic. They should be told a little about how stage tricks are performed—”

“The trouble is,” Peter said, “I don’t know myself how they’re performed, do you?”

“No,” she replied, giggling.

“Well, here we are,” Peter announced, a little later, stopping before a rambling ranch house.

It was one of the more expensive homes in the new suburban development. Judy was surprised to find the Drans living in such luxury. The boys always spoke of their parents as if they were in modest circumstances.

“Is the magician Mr. Dran?” Judy wondered.

Then the thought came to her that the boys’ mother might have married a second

time. Before she could explore this possibility the magician himself appeared at the door. A moment later he entered the car like anyone else, without tricks. The door stuck a little and Peter had to help him open it. He was not introduced. Judy thought he seemed a little uncomfortable at first, but the children's enthusiasm was contagious. Soon he was answering all sorts of questions.

It developed that he had studied magic in India and had learned some of the tricks discovered by ancient Hindu fakirs. He was telling the children that he could place a living head on a table and make it talk to them, when Judy interrupted.

"Magic is all right in its place," she said, "but don't you think you're carrying things a little too far? You've made the children believe you can do practically anything."

"Aha!" he said. "Is that what they told you? I must be like the many-headed demon Ravana in the story. Is that what you think, you young rajah?"

Paul grinned as if he liked being called a rajah and said, "Mom knows that story, too. She told it to me because my name is Paul Riker for my uncle Paul, not the old uncle that built the tomb, but the young uncle she used to play with. She didn't tell Penny about young Uncle Paul, because Penny can't keep secrets."

"Was it a secret?" the magician asked.

"Oh, yes, Mom never told anyone but me. When you love two people and can only marry one of them you have to keep it a secret that you still love the other. Besides, Mom meant to give back the statue of Sita, because it belonged in the collection. But now she can't, because those bad men stole it."

"Where did she get it? Do you know?"

"My father gave it to her when she was just a little girl," Paul replied. "I can tell it now, because I heard her telling Judy. I still don't get it, though. In the story Ravana told Sita he could change himself into Rama at will. But he wouldn't do it, because he wanted her to love him for himself. Sita knew that would mean loving evil instead of good, and so she kept repeating, 'Rama! Rama! Rama! I seek thee within me and my senses are sealed.'"

"I know that part," squealed Penny. "The name, Rama, magicked her so she

could see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. We have the three little monkeys. They aren't green like Sita. They're on a desk blotter Mommy bought in the ten-cent store."

"I've seen those three little monkeys on desk blotters lots of times!" exclaimed Judy. "Horace used to have them on his desk. I never knew where the idea came from, though."

The magician laughed.

"Well, now you know. They were part of the monkey band who rescued Sita from the demon's cave. You've taught us something, Penny."

Judy, turning around, could see a puzzled expression on the little girl's face as she replied, "But you already knew."

Peter had appeared to be concentrating on his driving, but Judy could tell he was listening with interest to the conversation that was going on behind him. When Judy told how the children's mother remembered playing the story of the "Ramayana," the magician said, in an oddly different voice, "Ask her to write it down just as she remembers it, please. We may have time to put it on as an extra attraction."

"That's a wonderful idea!" exclaimed Judy. "I'd love to see it. But who will take the parts? Do you think the children will have time to learn them?"

"A narrator can read them," he replied, "but without the little idols the play may not have much meaning. We must all look for them."

There it was again! They were supposed to look for things in spite of the warning. Judy was determined to find out the truth.

"We were warned not to," she said. "Did you warn us?"

Now the magician seemed puzzled.

"Not to *what*?"

"Not to look for it. We weren't told what *it* was we weren't to look for. The voice came from the trees," Judy told him.

“The trees on your place?” he asked.

They had reached their destination, but the conversation held them as they started walking toward the ruined mansion.

“Yes,” Judy replied. “I thought maybe you could throw your voice or something. Were you ever there?”

“I can’t say that I’ve had the pleasure,” he replied. “The children were talking among themselves about having a magic show in some barn or other, but I don’t remember throwing my voice for them. And we were near no barn. Mr. Brown offered his home for the magic show, because it does have a large recreation room. I told him I would need a stage and he promised to build one. Some of my tricks are rather elaborate. They need props. But everything is there.”

“Then it is just an ordinary magic show. Nothing unusual?”

“I hope,” he replied, and Judy was sure he and Peter exchanged a glance, “there will be something very unusual. Something very unusual indeed!”

CHAPTER XX

The Statue Commands

Judy was beginning to understand. But something was wrong somewhere. She puzzled over it as they walked on toward the ruined mansion.

When they finally reached it, the scene before them appeared even more desolate than she remembered it. The snow that had fallen the day before was melting fast, so that only patches of it remained in shady places. There was none left around the burned house and very little under the blackened trees. But the vault was covered with it as if the cold from within had penetrated the cold without.

“Look!” Penny cried out as they climbed the steps toward the statue. “His face is just like the face in the magazine!”

“I don’t like him,” Paul said. “Why is he looking like that?”

“He’s meditating,” the magician explained.

“He isn’t alive, is he?” asked Penny. “What does that—that big word mean?”

“It means to think hard about the same thing over and over the way Sita did when she thought about Rama. It’s a little like wishing. You don’t always get your wishes, but you do feel quiet and peaceful inside so that outside things don’t hurt you any more. It’s hard for a little girl to understand,” the magician continued, “but the meditation of Sita kept all evil from her so that she was returned to Rama as pure and lovely as when the demon first snatched her away. It was the magic of her lover’s name that did it. When she called, ‘Rama! Rama! ___’”

“Quiet!” a voice commanded.

They all stopped dead still to stare at the concrete face above them. The lips had not moved. There had not been a sign of life and yet the voice stopped them so still that Judy could hear her heart beating.

“I should have told you we would be protected,” Peter said from behind them.

“If this is protection,” Judy retorted, “I’d rather be thrown to the lions. Where did that voice come from? It even startled Blackberry. There he goes, up to the top of the statue to explore!”

“I doubt if he will find anything. The voice you heard was probably that of the chief deputy, and I believe it came from inside the vault. He and his rangers are determined to find out who set that fire, if it was set, and how it happened that the mansion was so conveniently emptied just before the blaze. I knew they’d be there,” Peter explained. “They’re on the lookout for the thieves—”

“But you said there weren’t any thieves,” Judy reminded him.

Again the magician and Peter exchanged glances.

“That remains to be seen. Anyway, the magician believes something strange is going on here, and he is in a position to know.”

“How *can* he know?” gasped Judy, and added, laughing, “Has he mystical knowledge from the mysterious East?”

But Peter was serious when he said, “Our plans went wrong somewhere. They may have been too obvious. At any rate, we know the police are somewhere in the vicinity. It should be perfectly safe to explore.”

“Do you think this mystical knowledge of yours will help us find the cave?” asked Judy. “I’m like Blackberry. I prefer to look in high places. I think I’ll climb up on top of the vault and see what’s there.”

“Blackberry sure looks as if he’s trying to show you something,” agreed Peter. “Be careful, though. It may be slippery.”

Judy was halfway up when she thought she heard a noise from the statue. It sounded like *breathing*. Then suddenly it sneezed!

Startled, Judy lost her footing. She grabbed for one of the bushes growing on top of the vault, missed it, and began to slide. A moment later she landed, dazed but unhurt, in the ivy where the others were searching.

They were all pulling away ivy leaves like so many excited terriers looking for a bone. By the time Judy realized what they were doing, Peter, with the help of the magician, had turned back a flat stone which looked suspiciously like a tombstone. On it was chiseled a mysterious sign.

“It’s the sign of Om,” the magician was explaining. “In India it stands for the highest form of mysticism. He may have used it as a marker.”

“Who?” asked Judy. “The statue?”

Paul glanced up at it, but none of the others paid the slightest attention to what Judy was saying. They were busy removing the stone.

“This must be the entrance to the cave,” declared Peter. “It was completely covered with ivy. We never would have found it if Judy’s shoe hadn’t scraped against it when she fell.”

“You were determined to find it, with or without me,” she retorted. “Isn’t anybody going to ask me if I hurt myself?”

Apparently nobody was. The rough-hewn steps they had discovered descending to what looked like a hole in the ground looked anything but inviting. But they caught everyone in their spell.

“Who goes down first?” the magician asked.

“Let me—” Judy began eagerly.

But Peter was saying, “I think I’d better. Nobody knows what we may find at the bottom. I’ll give the signal as soon as I’m sure it’s safe.”

It looked as if he were descending into a bottomless pit. The flashlight he held sent a weird circle of light ahead of him. It flickered and danced in an eerie fashion as he waved it and called out, “Come ahead!”

Judy, followed by the magician, Penny, and Paul, had descended no more than a few steps when a voice from the statue roared, “Stop where you are!”

Judy stopped. It was bad enough to have a statue sneeze at her. But to hear it roar out a command was a little too much. She stood frozen. Then she called down to

Peter:

“Peter, come back! I’m afraid to move.”

She was part way down the steps, but could not decide whether to go up or down. Either way held terrors for her now.

Penny and Paul were both hiding their faces in the magician’s coat. His own face was noticeably whiter. But he kept on a downward course.

Peter was very far down now. Judy suspected her voice had not carried to him. He called back, “The jade collection is here! It is inside some sort of cabinet. It’s locked, but you can see through the glass doors. Come on down! It’s quite a sight.”

“The jade collection is here,” Peter called

“The jade collection is here,” Peter called

Peter seemed so certain it was safe that Judy obeyed. The children, big-eyed with wonder, held onto the magician’s coat to steady themselves as they descended. Step after step they went, down, down, down!

“Are we to the center of the earth yet?” Penny finally asked.

Judy’s laugh sent back a strange echo. From the direction the steps had taken she judged they must be directly under the vault.

“I’ve reached the bottom,” she told the children. “It’s all right. Peter is here. Didn’t you hear me?” she asked him. “What did you mean when you said we were protected? If that was the chief deputy or one of his forest rangers up there, why did he tell us to stop?”

“He may have mistaken us for the thieves,” replied Peter, “but don’t worry about it. We’ve arranged a signal. One shot from my gun and he’ll come running.”

“You may need to fire that shot,” declared the magician. “That voice was no forest ranger. I’d know it anywhere. It was the voice of Paul Riker.”

“Me?” cried little Paul. “I didn’t—”

“Of course you didn’t, little rajah. It was your old uncle Paul, my boy. But don’t be scared. We’ll have a look at his jade collection anyway.”

“It’s right here,” Peter told him, turning his flashlight on a cabinet which appeared to be nothing more than one of the sections of a sectional bookcase. It was of mahogany badly in need of polishing. The glass could stand cleaning, too. But behind it Judy could see the elaborately carved little figures of many of the gods and goddesses that had been pictured in the magazine.

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?” asked the magician.

“It sure is,” agreed Peter. “A quarter of a million dollars worth of jade buried under an old vault with nothing but a thin piece of glass for protection.”

“Why?” asked Judy, unable to understand the millionaire’s motives. “What good are they down here?”

CHAPTER XXI

Under the Vault

The magician's reply was startling, to say the least.

"They are no good here to the living," he replied, "and I doubt if they will do Paul Riker much good after he's dead. But he's determined to keep what is his. He would rather burn or bury anything than share it. I know him. Yes, I was the one who had the contents of his house removed. I saw that the forest fire was burning in this direction, and so I hired men to remove his treasures and put them in storage. Call it robbery if you like, but no one knew where he was, and how else could I save them? I noticed the jade collection was not in the house, and decided he must have hidden it somewhere before he went away. And here it is. Do you see that little figure there with the elephant's head?"

"I see it!" cried Paul, standing on tiptoe. "That's my favorite next to Rama."

"Do you know his name, son? That's Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles. We're going to need that little fellow to remove some of the obstacles your uncle Paul is up against. But never forget this. He put those obstacles in his own way. His relatives were welcome here only when he could bend them to his will. It angered him when his nephews refused to follow the Riker tradition and deal in tombstones. They preferred to raise monuments to the living. You two children are a monument to your father, and to your old uncle, too, if only he had the eyes to see it. But no! Everything had to be quiet. He had no use for a business like mine that provides fun and entertainment. Finally he became suspicious of everyone. He's become a bitter, cruel old man. And yet in a way I loved him. Poor Uncle Paul!"

They stood there under the vault as if Paul Riker were already dead, mourning for him. But suddenly Peter sprang into action. He vaulted up the stairs, taking them three at a time. He was just too late. Judy heard a crash of stone falling against stone. They were imprisoned under the vault!

A shot rang out. Then another and another!

“Peter!” cried Judy. “Are you all right?”

“All right,” he called back in a voice of confidence. “You can trust the forest rangers to get us out of here if we can’t find a way out by ourselves.”

“If the children’s mother had come with us she might have been able to help us,” Judy told the magician. “She says she used to play here with the Riker twins, Philip and Paul. Their uncle chased them out and took possession of the cave. I should have asked her if there’s more than one entrance.”

“There were two,” was the startling reply. “One was the cave of Ravana. Rama would stand at the other entrance calling, ‘O my Sita! Do not give up hope. I will send my faithful Hanumen, king of the monkeys, with a ring for thy finger.’ The ring,” the magician explained in his ordinary voice, “stands for the magic circle of love that never ends, like the love of Rama and Sita.”

“You know the story as well as Helen does,” Judy said quietly, smiling. “You called Mr. Riker Uncle Paul and you knew about the cave. You *must* be—”

“For the time being, call me Rama,” he interrupted before she could say what she felt sure now must be his name. “I hope I may be the true Rama and that Sita will accept my ring.”

For a moment Judy really felt like Cupid, but she still hadn’t brought the two lovers together. Their predicament took her quickly back to reality. The other entrance to the cave proved to be effectively blocked by an iron door evidently bolted on the outside. After several useless attempts to open it, Peter fired a few more signal shots and then announced that there was nothing to do but wait.

“It’s a good thing we found the jade collection before the thieves did,” he said to the magician. “I doubt if your uncle could have stopped them.”

“He couldn’t have. I’d like to see the whole collection placed in a museum where it would be safe and other people could enjoy it and learn the legends about the different gods and goddesses.”

“I know a lot of them,” announced Paul. “Mom used to tell them to me before Penny began asking so many questions. Maybe Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, will remove the stone from over the door. I don’t like being shut down here. Is it all right if I ask him?”

Peter started to protest, but the magician said, “Let him pretend if he wants to. It will keep him from being frightened.”

“Lift me up!” Penny pleaded. “I can’t see anything.”

Judy smiled as she saw the magician lift her and hold her close. She was thinking what a good father he would make. Impulsively she asked, “You aren’t married, are you? I thought at first you were Mr. Dran. I know you live with them.”

“All four of them,” he said. “Mr. and Mrs. Dran and the two children. They keep my house in order and make it more like a home. Their boys are smart little fellows, but they can’t beat these two. Paul, here, knows the names of these pieces almost as well as I do.”

He was pointing them out, one after another, to the children. Not all of them were green. The monkey god was carved out of mottled gray jade, and Ravana, with his many heads, was almost black.

All the idols were small and delicately carved. The largest was the four-headed Brahma, the Creator, sitting on his throne in the center. The Preserver of Life, Vishnu, and the Destroyer, Shiva, were placed on his right and his left. The other jade pieces were variously grouped around them.

Peter pointed out the life god or the Preserver, and his wife, a tiny image. Penny said she looked almost like Sita.

“But where is Rama?” she asked.

“He’s in good hands, thanks to Judy and Peter,” the magician assured both children. “He’s waiting for Sita just as I am. When you see him I hope they will be together.”

“They will be,” Peter said with quiet confidence.

Now little Paul was curious.

“What did Rama look like?” he asked.

He was told that Rama was a green image and carried a sheaf of arrows at his

belt. He had been carved in the act of bending a great bow in order to win the hand of Sita.

“What bow shall I bend?” asked the magician.

“I think you’re already bending it,” Judy told him, “in winning the hearts of the children. Do they know who you are?”

She asked this last question in almost a whisper. The children had moved away from them a little and were busy talking to each other about the contents of the case. Peter had let them take his flashlight.

“It’s hard to say what they know,” the magician said in answer to her whispered question. “I think Paul suspects more than he will admit.”

“What about Penny? Does she know?” Judy asked.

“I don’t believe she does,” he replied. “She keeps staring at me with those big blue eyes of hers as if she expects me to vanish any minute. She’s such a little pretender that it’s hard to guess what she’s thinking. Neither of them has called me Uncle Paul. You knew it, of course?”

“After a while,” Judy said, relieved that he had admitted it. “Naturally, it explains a lot.”

There was a lot it didn’t explain, though. Judy was about to question him further when, suddenly, a light fell across the cabinet, and she heard Peter calling her from above.

“The entrance must be clear,” she told the children. “Let’s follow the magician up the steps and see what’s happening above.”

Angry words came down to her. An old man’s voice was raised above the others.

“So you did come back, you thieving rascal! I knew you would! But that jade collection is mine, I tell you! And I mean to keep it!”

CHAPTER XXII

Blackberry's Discovery

When Judy and the children reached the top of the steps leading up from the cave, they found a straight, tall, thin old man standing between the two forest rangers who had heard Peter's signal and freed them from the cave. Without a doubt, the old man was Paul Riker, and he was shaking his finger angrily at the magician.

"You're a thief just like your brother," the enraged voice of the old man continued. "I'll have the law on you! It was *you* who robbed my house, and now you're trying—"

"I only moved your things to keep them from being destroyed, Uncle Paul," the magician declared. "But the men I trusted have tricked me. They found out that your famous jade collection was missing when they moved your other things, and they have been searching for it ever since."

"What do you mean?" the old man demanded.

"I'll tell you what he means," Peter put in. "Three of the moving men he hired turned out not to be so trustworthy. They found a letter from your niece saying she was returning a piece that belonged in your jade collection. Since the collection was not moved to the warehouse, they thought it must still be in your house. They returned to the house after the police had left, and searched it." Peter hesitated. "It's my theory," he went on, "that they set fire to the house either on purpose or accidentally. However, you will have to convince the insurance people that you did not do it yourself."

"Set fire to my own house!" The old man roared with rage. "What kind of idiots am I dealing with? I simply closed the house and took a room in a place a few miles from here. And do you know why I did that? Because I had no wish to see that ungrateful girl nor the children of that scamp, Philip!"

"But you came back and watched what was going on," Peter reminded him.

“You were in the cave when my wife came here yesterday, and you are here again today. You went out the other exit from the cave as we came down the steps.”

“And why not?” the old man snapped. “It is my property, every inch of it, and I intended to guard it. Somebody had to,” he added. “That idiot, Abner Post, went away Thursday night and let this thieving rascal walk off with practically everything in my house.”

“I told you, Uncle Paul,” the younger Paul Riker said wearily, “I saw that your house was in the path of the fire and wanted to save your things. I came to the caretaker’s cottage, but it was locked and he was away. The big house was closed too. So I called up the moving company, gave them my name, and had them take your most valuable things to the warehouse. What else could I do?”

“It’s lucky for you, Mr. Riker, that he did,” Peter said, “The fire would have reached your house eventually. Then you would have lost everything.”

The old man cackled suddenly. “I wouldn’t have lost my jade collection,” he declared. Then his face darkened. “But there are two pieces missing now. And without Rama and Sita it’s hardly a collection at all. My thieving nephews robbed me of Sita years ago, and now somebody’s stolen Rama from inside the vault where I intended to keep the whole collection. I gave orders to have it buried with me, but who can I trust to carry out my orders?”

Judy wanted to tell him Rama was safe, but a warning look from Peter stopped her. As the millionaire raved on she began to understand the warped reasoning that had cheated him out of all the things she felt enriched a life. He seemed to care more for his memorial in stone than for the living memory he could leave with those who would love him if he would only let them.

“Do you remember, Uncle Paul, how you used to accuse me of stealing Sita?” the magician was saying. “Well, I can tell you now, because, for the first time, I know what happened to her. Philip took her to give to Helen.”

“And in all these years she’s never returned it!” the old man exploded.

“But Uncle, it was your own fault,” the magician pointed out. “You drove them both out and made them afraid of you. And Helen was on her way to return it to you. The thieves knew from her letter when she was arriving. They were on the

lookout for her and tried to force her to tell them where the rest of the collection was. Can't you see what they were planning? Be sensible, Uncle Paul, and let us put it in a museum where it will be under guard—"

"Never!" roared Uncle Paul.

"I think we will have to place it under guard while you are being questioned," Peter said quietly. "I hate to have to say this, Mr. Riker, but your house was not burned by the forest fire, and you will have to satisfy the insurance company as well as our office that you had nothing to do with either of the fires. The law says arson on state forest land is a federal offence."

Mr. Riker protested vehemently. Nevertheless, when the chief deputy of the rangers drove his car up to the vault, the old man got in with surprising meekness. Judy suspected that the excitement had tired him out in spite of his rambunctious spirit.

"I'll have to go with Mr. Riker, Angel," Peter said. "Do you mind driving home, or would you rather wait here for me?"

"I don't mind driving a bit," Judy replied. "But before we start, I want to find out why the statue seemed to talk. It's solid cement. Nobody could possibly get inside it."

"No," replied Peter, "but there are hollow pipes running through it. They were probably placed there to keep the cement from cracking. Old Paul Riker, down in the cave, must have shouted through them in order to scare people away."

"Hollow pipes," Judy said thoughtfully. "Peter, do you think the tree talked the same way?"

"Perhaps," he replied. "Horace told me *he* heard it say, 'We're starved!' just before you and the kids dashed in from the barn."

"Then it carried our voices from the hayloft! But who was up there, calling, 'Don't look for it!'"

Peter shook his head. He had no answer for that.

"One more question, Peter, please," Judy begged. "Why didn't you tell Mr. Riker

we had found his jade Rama? Were you trying to protect me?"

"And why not?" he answered. "You saw how vehemently he accused his nephew. He wouldn't have believed you were trying to help him. When we find Sita we'll give him both pieces and his collection will be complete."

"But how will you find her?" asked Judy.

"By finding the thieves. In the meantime," Peter said, "we intend to see to it that they don't find the rest of the collection."

Two of the rangers went down the steps into the cave and brought up the cabinet containing the jade. They put it in the car with old Mr. Riker, Peter got in, and off they went.

Young Paul Riker stood watching the car disappear down the road, as Judy loaded the two children and Blackberry into Peter's car.

"Poor Uncle Paul," he sighed.

CHAPTER XXIII

Stage Magic

“Nothing must keep your mother from attending the magic show with us,” Judy told the children when they reached home.

Little else was said about it.

“A secret is more fun,” Penny whispered. Both children knew now that the magician was their young uncle Paul.

There were so many secrets that Judy was afraid the children’s mother would suspect their plans. But she was too busy with plans of her own to pay much attention to them. The very next day she found employment in the Roulsville variety store and declared that she would soon repay Judy and Peter for all their kindnesses.

On the same day, which was Monday, Penny and Paul started in school, taking the bus at the main road and attending the school where Judy once went.

Wednesday finally came, the day of the magic show. Since there was no school the next day, Thursday being Thanksgiving, the children could stay up a little later in the evening. Penny was all excited.

“You just wait, Mommy!” she cried. “You’ll see I’m not making it up. The magician can even make wishes come true.”

“Wear your prettiest dress, Mom,” Paul suggested.

“Very well,” she agreed, “but I don’t want to meet this magician. You know how I feel about strangers.”

Judy did not tell her the magician was no stranger.

Judy and Peter arrived with Horace and Honey to find the Browns’ recreation

room already crowded. Rows and rows of chairs were lined up before the stage. The front row was reserved for the club members. Penny and Paul joined them.

“There’s room for you, too,” Ricky whispered.

“Thanks,” Judy whispered back.

They were all seated before she realized Helen Riker was not with them. “Where’s your mother?” she whispered across to Paul.

“She’s back there somewhere,” he replied. “Her face got awfully white when she saw him.”

Judy knew Paul meant the magician.

“I guess it’s all right,” she began uncertainly, “as long as she can—”

She was interrupted by the sound of clapping hands. The heavy velvet curtain had parted. The magician appeared on the stage smiling and bowing. He had a wand in his hand. As he waved it, flags of all nations began to appear. When the stage was quite filled with them he waved the wand again and every flag vanished.

“This is stage magic,” he announced. “Watch carefully and you may discover my secrets.”

After he had done a few more astounding feats with ropes, balls, and boxes, he asked, “Did anyone in the audience wish for a canary bird?”

“I did!” cried Paul, jumping to his feet.

“Will you step up on the stage for a moment?” asked the magician. “Birds come from eggs, do they not? May I take your handkerchief? I hope you don’t mind what happens to it,” he continued as he began rolling it into a ball. Soon the handkerchief was gone and in its place was a round, white egg!

“My handkerchief!” gasped Paul.

Judy could see that this trick had not been rehearsed. She was as surprised as the children were when little Paul reached in his pocket, at the magician’s

suggestion, and pulled out a real live canary.

“Where will I put him?” asked Paul as he held the fluttering bird.

“What about a cage?” asked his amazing young uncle. Touching the table in front of him with his wand, he made a cage appear out of nothing. Another flick of his magic wand and it disappeared.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” he asked. “As a rule magicians don’t explain their tricks, but this is going to be an exception. You’ve seen a magnet attract a pin or a needle. Well, the magnet on the end of the wand attracts the spring that collapses or unfolds the cage, and presto!”

The cage reappeared on the table, and Paul let the bird fly into it. There was a thunder of applause followed by the announcement that a girl could be made to vanish as easily as a birdcage.

“Let me!” cried Penny, running up on the stage.

CHAPTER XXIV

Real Magic

Judy was glad when Helen Riker slipped into the seat Penny had left. She was just in time to hear the magician's announcement that it would be real magic if he could make all the children's wishes come true.

"Penny has wished for her father and now she sees a man exactly like him. Is that right?"

"Oh, yes!" Penny said. "I closed my eyes, and when I opened them there was my daddy again—"

"You see?" he interrupted. "If I'm not her real daddy, I must be his twin brother. At any rate, the little lady trusts me. Now watch as I make her disappear."

Penny climbed up on the long table in front of the magician and waved good-bye to the audience. Her mother was watching as if she really expected a miracle. Turning to Judy, she said, "He isn't going to use a screen. I've seen this trick before, but Paul would be different. He *is* like Philip—so like him it's almost uncanny."

"Penny's gone!" cried Judy, but nobody heard her because at the same time exclamations of surprise went up from everyone else in the audience. The table top was empty. The magician had made the little girl vanish right before their eyes.

"That," he announced, "was a trick which Penny herself will explain to you as soon as I bring her back. I have to say a few magic words first. They may be familiar to someone in the audience."

And he began to chant, "Rama! Rama! Sita! Rama! Arise, daughter of Sita as lovely as a rose."

Holding his wand over a large, empty vase that stood on the table, he continued

to chant mystic phrases as first a bouquet of roses and then Penny herself came up, smiling through the roses.

“A real girl and real roses!”

“And a real daddy,” she chirped. “Isn’t that real magic?”

Clapping hands answered her as the magician began throwing the roses. Helen Riker caught one, and held it in her hand.

“It will make up for everything I lost, unless—Judy!” she asked suddenly. “Who were those boys who came in with him? I saw them together in the store, too. He’s not married, is he? I couldn’t—”

Judy told her the Dran family were only caretakers for young Uncle Paul as her family had been caretakers for old Uncle Paul.

“He said he likes children around him,” Judy finished.

“I can see that. Oh, I’m so happy. We don’t need those little idols, Judy. We’re going to have each other.”

“See, Mommy!” Penny announced, returning to her chair and cuddling into her mother’s lap. “Didn’t I tell you he could make wishes come true?”

Soon after that, the curtain was drawn and the magician did not appear again in spite of all the clapping. Now the club members gathered around Penny. She began to explain in a mysterious voice just the way she had rehearsed the disappearing trick. “There’s a hiding place under the stage. You remember how thick the table top was? Well, there’s a sliding panel of thin wood—see! And when the panel slid out from under me, I dropped right into the table and disappeared.”

“How did you get inside the vase?” several voices questioned.

Penny laughed.

“That was easy. I slid through the table leg. It was hollow and went down like a tunnel under the stage.”

“I was there,” Wally spoke up proudly. “I pushed up Penny and the roses through the table and through the bottom of the vase. It was a neat trick. I only wish—”

“What?” everybody asked when he paused.

“I wish my father’s pocketknife would turn up like Penny did,” he said ruefully. “Pop’s mad at me. I borrowed it to play with, and dropped it in the hay in your barn, Judy.”

“You did?” Judy asked. “When was this?”

“Saturday morning,” he replied. “I was going to look for it, but Ricky chased me out of there. We’d had a fight. He said, ‘Don’t look for it!’ I was going to come back and hunt around later, but he kept chasing me out, and yelling, ‘Run!’ and I was scared. He can throw knives, that Ricky! He’s—”

“Wait a minute,” Judy stopped him. “He has a knife, but have you ever seen him throw it?”

“N-no,” Wally admitted. “He can throw a lasso, though.”

“We know that.” Judy smiled at Peter, and from the way he smiled back she knew that he too had guessed the solution of the mystery of the talking tree. It had been Ricky’s voice all the time, but he hadn’t even known it himself.

The curtain suddenly parted and there stood Helen Riker and the magician on the stage together.

Running up on the stage, Judy whispered something to the magician and then turned to the audience.

“Weather permitting,” she announced, “a play will be given in our grove the day after Thanksgiving. I hope you will all be there to see it. The magician will direct it. I can’t promise for certain, but I believe he will accomplish the amazing feat of making a tree talk.”

She had no dinner to prepare the following day, as there would be a family gathering around her parents’ table. The Rikers were invited but politely refused.

“We’ll be having our own Thanksgiving at Paul’s house,” Helen Riker said, and

added impulsively, “Oh, Judy! Aren’t you happy for us?”

“I certainly am,” Judy said warmly, and meant it.

“Rama has rescued me,” Helen said, “as he rescued Sita in the ‘Ramayana.’ Friday you shall see it.”

Judy did see it. The story was all that she had hoped it would be—and more. Old Uncle Paul was there to watch it. He had been cleared of the charge of arson when Peter and the police caught the three men who had stolen Sita from Helen. The thieves also admitted having set fire to the house by accident when they went back to search for the jade.

The magician, taking the part of Rama, was also the narrator. Evil, according to the ancient story, reigned supreme until the god of life, Vishnu, and his wife were born as Rama and Sita. Prince and princess, they were fated to meet and marry.

Helen Riker, in a green dress, was beautiful as Sita. The children took the parts of the monkeys who rescued her, but the strangest character in the whole play was the demon Ravana. The part of the many-headed monster was taken by the talking tree! When Sita was kidnaped, she sat in its lower branches chanting her mystic “Rama! Rama! Rama! I seek thee within me and my senses are sealed.”

After the rescue, the magician, as Rama, was supposed to slay the monster and restore the powers of virtue to the earth. Each time he pierced the tree with his arrow, Judy, hiding in the barn to be the voice of Ravana, called out, “Too late!” But the last time she spoke the ancient words of wisdom, “Learn by my example! Do selfless deeds at once!”

And almost at once she was back in the grove presenting old Uncle Paul with his two precious jade statues. He took them both, fondled them a moment and then, with tear-moist eyes, said, “They complete the Riker collection. Put it in the museum, Paul. Let other people look at it. Let them learn by my example.”

“Never,” Judy told Peter later, “have I felt so sorry for anyone. He’s an old man and an unhappy man in spite of his wealth. He can’t have very many more years to live.”

“Be thankful,” Peter said, “that he has lived long enough to do this one generous

act. People will remember him for his jade collection long after they have forgotten even his monument. Someone—if I were Horace I could quote him exactly—said, ‘The best thing to do with a life is to spend it for something which outlasts it.’ And whether he intended it that way or not, that’s what Paul Riker has done.”

“I see,” Judy whispered. “Does love outlast it?”

Peter’s answer was a kiss. They both knew it did. They were quiet, sharing a wonderful moment together. Then Peter broke the spell by suggesting that Judy go with him to the barn.

“Honey’s still here. We must show her how the tree talked if Horace hasn’t already told her. It works just like the pipes in that statue, doesn’t it?”

After much persuasion, Honey consented to stand beside the hollow tree while they showed her how it had all happened.

“Don’t be scared,” Judy told her. “We may sound a little spooky.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she replied.

When they had climbed to the hayloft they stood directly under the little window that looked out over the grove. The hollow branch just outside it acted like a speaking tube and carried their voices out through the hole in the tree as they chanted:

*“You’re standing beside the talking tree,
But the voices you hear are Peter and me-ee!”*

Judy knew how hollow their voices must sound to Honey. A moment later she was racing toward the barn.

“So that’s it!” she charged. “You two spooks can haunt the grove whenever you want to by hiding in the hayloft and talking out that little window.”

Now she was convinced that the superstition had started when someone in the barn had accidentally frightened Horace.

“He’s so silly,” she said fondly, “but I can’t help loving him for it. And isn’t it

wonderful how things have turned out for Mrs. Riker and the magician?”

“It certainly is,” agreed Judy. “He gave her a ring just the way Rama did in the story. But, best of all, the collection is saved for future Ramas and Sitas. It’s nice to know what’s expected of the ideal man and woman, isn’t it? Peter,” she asked abruptly, “am I your ideal?”

“You’re my Judy,” he replied, “and that’s even better. What was it you said about every day beginning a new mystery?”

“It’s the way I feel about life,” Judy explained to Honey. “It’s my philosophy, my Judyana, or whatever you want to call it. Go down to the grove and the talking tree will tell you.”

“No, thanks,” Honey said with a laugh. “I’ve been meditating the matter, and my Honeyana tells me I’ve had enough. The next time I letter a sign, Judy, it will be for Dean Studios, not for anyone like you.”

Endpaper

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