



The Mystery of the Gold Coins, Part 1

“Where are you going?” Karen asked as she joined her four friends walking down the street.

“To see Mr. Colin,” Christopher answered. He, along with Susan, was twelve years old and the eldest of the group of friends.

Karen quickened her step to keep up with the others.

“Mr. Colin Hedgcome? Everybody says he’s ... you know...,” she said, tapping her head, “a bit barmy. He sees things that aren’t really there, stuff like that.”

“You don’t know him like we do, though,” said Earl. “He’s all right.”

(Earl, being eight years old, was the youngest of the five friends.)

“Yes, he’s our friend,” said Christopher. “It’s unkind to talk like that about him when you don’t know him.”

“Sorry. I’m just telling you what people say,” said Karen.

Karen, age eleven, had recently returned to Sheldon. Two years prior, her parents had moved to a city nearby because of her father’s work. With Sheldon growing and changing, however, her father was transferred back to Sheldon.

Leaving Sheldon had been difficult for Karen. At the time, she had to say goodbye to friends and all that she had known in that city, and now she was back, and Sheldon didn’t seem the same to her. Even her friends’ interests had changed now that they were older. Nevertheless, Karen was undeterred; she always loved an adventure and was always ready for a challenging experience.

“You don’t believe everything people say, do you?” Susan asked Karen as they continued briskly to their destination.

“Not really ... well, it depends. But why do you visit this old man, anyway?”

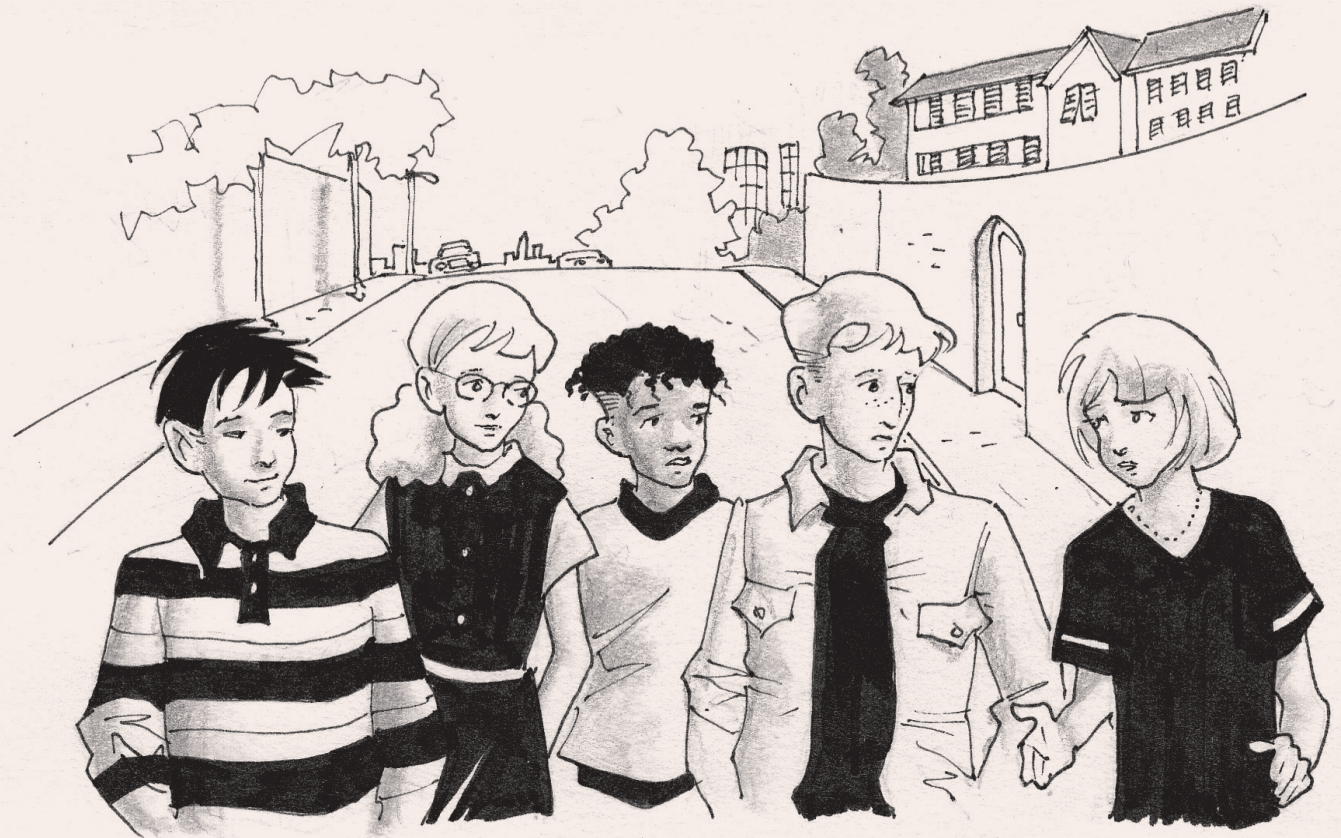
“He has all this neat stuff from at least a hundred years ago,” said Kento. “He’s like a living time machine.”

“Yes!” Earl added. “And he makes this tasty fruit shake with mango ice cream and—”

“And what’s more,” Susan said, “he’s been telling us the most fascinating stories about his life.”

“How far did he get?” Karen asked.

“Well ... Mr. Colin told us how he had been an aircraft mechanic for the air force in WWII. He also shot a tribal chief’s cuckoo bird in the protected forest on an island in the Pacific because he was hungry, and then he had to flee in a canoe to a nearby island to escape death. Shooting one of the chief’s cuckoo birds was not good, you know.”



Kento

Susan

Earl

Christopher

Karen

"I suppose not," said Karen.

"He next started working at a steel mill in another country," said Susan, "which was kind of a dead-end job. One of his friends died in an accident at the mill, which got him thinking about everything. Then he prayed to God and got some big revelation, and he decided to be a missionary."

"And...?"

"That's as far as he got," Susan said, catching her breath.

"So, if I want to hear the rest of the story, I have to come with you, right?"

Susan nodded.

"Then you can meet him yourself and see what you think of him, instead of listening to what everybody else says," Christopher said with a grin.

Before long, they arrived at the white front gate of Mr. Colin's property and walked up the pathway and through the garden, which comprised various trees, plants, and flowers that Mr. Colin had collected on his travels. Among them were beech trees from Bulgaria, orchids from El Salvador, and a clove tree from Zanzibar.

In the center of a Japanese-style garden, a red bridge arched over a small pond on which pink water lily blossoms were floating and orange and white koi were swimming.

They climbed the steps to a modest two-story house painted royal blue, which had a giant sequoia towering above the roof. Preparing to knock on the door, Christopher raised a large ring, which ran through the nose of a bronze tiger's head.

"That's spooky," Karen said, staring at the fierce-looking face.

"Mr. Colin picked it up on one of his trips to Tibet," said Susan.

Christopher banged the knocker twice.

Frisky, Mr. Colin's Labrador retriever, his only live-in companion, barked a friendly greeting from the window.

Mr. Colin moved the curtain aside and smiled to see his young friends at the door. With great effort, the old man opened the door and greeted them warmly. A luxuriant white beard compensated for the loss of most of his hair.

"It's the Squad," he said, and then noticed Karen. "Hmmm ... with a new member?"

"Karen's an old friend," said Susan. "She returned to Sheldon just last week."

"Well, I'm glad you brought her with you. Another member of the Squad ... the Five Squad!" Mr. Colin paused and smiled. "That has a nice ring to it."

"We're very interested in hearing the rest of your story, Mr. Colin," said Earl.



"You're an enthusiastic squad," Mr. Colin said with a chuckle. "I'll continue it soon enough. Make yourselves comfortable. I'm just in the kitchen. I had a feeling you'd be back today, so I whipped up one of my favorite drinks ... avocado shake!"

"See, I told you he's all right," Earl whispered as he nudged Karen.

As they walked to the living room, Karen glanced inside the rooms they passed. Her eye caught a display of various musical instruments in one room—a sitar, a ukulele, and some African-looking drums.

Where are all of these strange musical instruments from? she wondered. *I would love to have a go on them.*

While Frisky was busy soliciting pats and strokes from each of the children, the five scuttled about, finding their seating of choice, and

Mr. Colin talked as he poured the ice-cold, creamy liquid into their tall glasses and added a straw.

"This is an adaptation of a drink I learned to make on one of my trips to Indonesia," he said. "Blend avocado, shredded coconut, sugar, cream, shaved ice, and there you have it. One of the best drinks known to man—pure nectar from God!"

As they drank, Mr. Colin continued telling his life story, accompanied by photographs of his missionary adventures.

"And here I am with Maureen," Mr. Colin said with a twinkle in his eyes, pointing to a picture on the wall of him many years younger with his wife.

"She was pretty," said Karen.

"Maureen was a true angel! And I'm sure she's even more beautiful now in heaven," Mr. Colin said wistfully and continued. "And here we were working at a school

in India. They had to carry their water very far every day, so God helped us build a mechanism that brought the water straight into the village center."

"What's that snake?" Christopher asked, pointing to another picture on the wall.

"That's an African rock python that decided to join the Bible class I was giving in Cameroon. This next picture is when we were working with the homeless in Mexico. Some of our friends took over the ministry when we left."

Mr. Colin continued with several other pictures until he came to a painting that was hanging over the mantelpiece. The artist had depicted Jesus descending from the heavens to Earth.

"And here is the one who made all my life's adventures possible," Mr. Colin said, gazing at the picture.

"Amazing perspective," said Christopher, being an avid student of art. "And such vibrant colors."

"And the picture seems so *real*!" Susan said.

"It's funny you mentioned that, dear girl. The other day the picture did seem to come to life—and He told me that I was going home soon."

"Home? I thought that *this* was your home," said Karen.

"Our *forever* home—heaven. Jesus told me that I would meet Maureen there soon."

"Don't go yet," Susan said softly.

"I must. Like the old song goes....," Mr. Colin started singing an old gospel blues song.

*"You may be young, you may be old.
You may be rich, child; you may be poor.
But when the good Lord gets ready, you got to move.
You got to move, move, move. You got to move."*

"But enough about me, children. Tell me, what have you been up to?"

"Kento's building a Go-Kart for a 'Back to the '50s' race," Susan said. Kento nodded.

"Is it up and running yet, son?"

"Almost. But I'm having a hard time getting the steering to work."

"I have just the thing that might be able to help you with that—pulleys."

"How's that going to help?" Earl asked.

"First let's see if I still have those pulleys. Come on, follow me to the attic," said Mr. Colin, and led them outside to the trunk of the sequoia.

"What a huge tree!" Christopher exclaimed.

"Yes. Ten feet in diameter."

"But where is the attic?" Kento asked.

"Ah! You don't think a crazy old fellow like me would have one of those ordinary attics at the top of his house, do you?" Mr. Colin answered, and opened a door that was hewn into the bark of the tree. "No siree, something a bit more eccentric in my case."

The inside of the tree had been hollowed out, and the children looked inside in awe.

Switching on a light, Mr. Colin revealed a room lined with dusty shelves full of boxes. A ladder led to a second floor.

"Here's *my* attic."

"Amazing place, Mr. Colin," Christopher said.

"Can we look around?" Karen asked.

"That's what attics are for, dear girl."

"How did you build this room inside the tree?" Kento asked.



"It came with the house. No one really knows, although there are all kinds of stories about how it got here. One story told is that a pioneer dug it out a long time ago to escape an attack. Some others say that the tree was struck by lightning which burned a hole into the trunk, but the tree and the hole kept growing. Others say it was a fungus that caused it. And then..." Mr. Colin paused for effect, "there's even an ancient legend that it was a dragon's den."

The five gasped.

"Now, where did I put those pulleys?" Mr. Colin asked, looking at Frisky. "Let's see..."

The others lost no time exploring the many old artifacts that filled the room. Karen strummed on an old Nigerian zither that resonated dissonantly.

"Needs a tuning after all these years," she said, "but it's interesting."

Susan picked up a faded 19th century newspaper. An advertisement read:

Get a truss. Marcus Abercrombie says, 'I have a truss that helps cure ruptures. No steel band around the body. Holds any rupture.'

Susan looked up, puzzled. "What's a truss?"

"Hmm ...," he said with a grin. "Maybe something akin to a pair of underwear, only sturdier!"

Everyone giggled.

"Oh, here they are..." Mr. Colin said, and handed two pulleys to Kento. He then took a pen and pad from his shirt pocket and sketched a diagram of how to use them for Kento's Go-Kart's steering wheel.

"Just look at this ancient gramophone!" Karen said. "Does it still work?"

"Let's find out," Mr. Colin said, and took a dusty 78-rpm black disc, 10 inches in diameter, and set it on the turntable. He cranked up the handle on the side, which set the turntable spinning. He set the needle on the spinning disc and

a scratchy-sounding song came warbling out of the large, ornate brass horn:

"When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother: 'What will I be?"

Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?"

Here's what she said to me:

'Que será, será!

Whatever will be, will be;

The future is not ours to see.

Que será, será.

What will be, will be.'"

The song came to a crackling end and Mr. Colin lifted the needle from the record.

"Cute little song," said Karen. "I'd like to learn the chords."

"It's talking about not worrying about the future," Mr. Colin said pensively. "A good idea, if you ask me. But there is a way to see into the future."

"How's that?" Christopher asked.

"God can answer our questions and give us counsel or show us things about the future when He knows it will help us. You remember that Bible verse I taught you last time from the book of Jeremiah?"

"Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not," Susan confidently recited. "Jeremiah 33, verse 3."

"Very good, Susan. And one example of God showing me a great—and which I consider, a rather mighty thing which I knewest not—was that I would be going home soon."

Uncomfortable, sad silence followed Mr. Colin's announcement; no one wanted to think about the old sage leaving them just yet.

"Hey, you could have a garage sale of this er ... stuff," Kento said, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

"I could. Don't know why I've kept it all; maybe because selling it would be like selling off my memories. Besides, I don't think I would get much for any of it, do you?" Mr. Colin asked.

"You could probably get a good price for this amazing picture," Christopher said, pointing to a large painting of a muscular, dark-skinned angel handing a young man some coins. The angel towered over the man who was kneeling in front of him. Dashes of bright white light highlighted the angel's figure.

"Ah, I found it at a rummage sale and thought it was quite unique. I was planning on restoring and reframing it, but I'll probably never get around to it."

The children gathered around the canvas for a closer look.

"Besides its interesting brushwork, it looks rather supernatural," said Christopher. "Does it mean something?"

"Well, it did seem to have something more to it than merely being a nice picture. Once, while looking at the painting, Jesus showed me that the coins are symbolic of our faith in God, which has been passed on to us."

Suddenly, Mr. Colin handed the painting to Christopher. The boy looked startled and staggered a little under its weight.

"You can hang it in your clubhouse ... the Lodge, right?"

"Right ... but you are giving this to me?"

"Indeed I am."

"But I couldn't take it from you. It's so special to you."

"Look, it's been sitting up here for so many years, at least it will add a nice decoration to the Lodge," Mr. Colin said and laughed. "I can't take it with me, anyway, and besides, I won't need it, since where I'm going I'll probably be able to see this angel for myself!"

"Thank you, Mr. Colin. We'll hang it up in our clubhouse," Susan said.

"That reminds me—there's something else I wanted to give you. Something very special, indeed!"

Mr. Colin unlocked a trunk in the corner of the room, and pulled out a small oblong wooden box. Enjoying keeping the children in suspense, he paused before opening it.

"Can you guess what's inside?"

"Art materials?" Christopher asked.

"Nope."

"I know—a musical instrument?" Karen said.

"Nope."

"Something to eat?" Earl asked hopefully.

"Sorry. If so, I would assume it to be rather inedible after so many years!"

"A new invention?" Kento asked.

Mr. Colin shook his head.

Susan looked intensely curious. "Is it a ... oh, I don't know. Show us, please!"

"Ha! Enough speculation, as good as it was. Let's have a look."

Mr. Colin opened the lid to reveal twenty gold coins of various sizes set snug in red velvet.

"So shiny!" Earl exclaimed.

"I've never seen coins like these before," Christopher said in amazement.

"What's that writing on them?" Susan asked, picking one up and inspecting it.

"Latin—the language of the ancient Romans. These coins are very old, and they are very valuable."

"Where did you get them?" Kento asked.

"My father gave them to me. He got them from his father, who had gotten them from his father, and so on. They've been passed down through about ten generations so far. I don't

have any children to pass them on to, and so I want to give them to you, to care for and pass on in time."

A draft of wind swung the creaking door open, startling the little group.

"Oh, my, it's already dark," said Mr. Colin. "You'll need to return home soon. Christopher, since you're the eldest, I'm making you the steward of the coins. Please take good care of them."

"I will, sir."

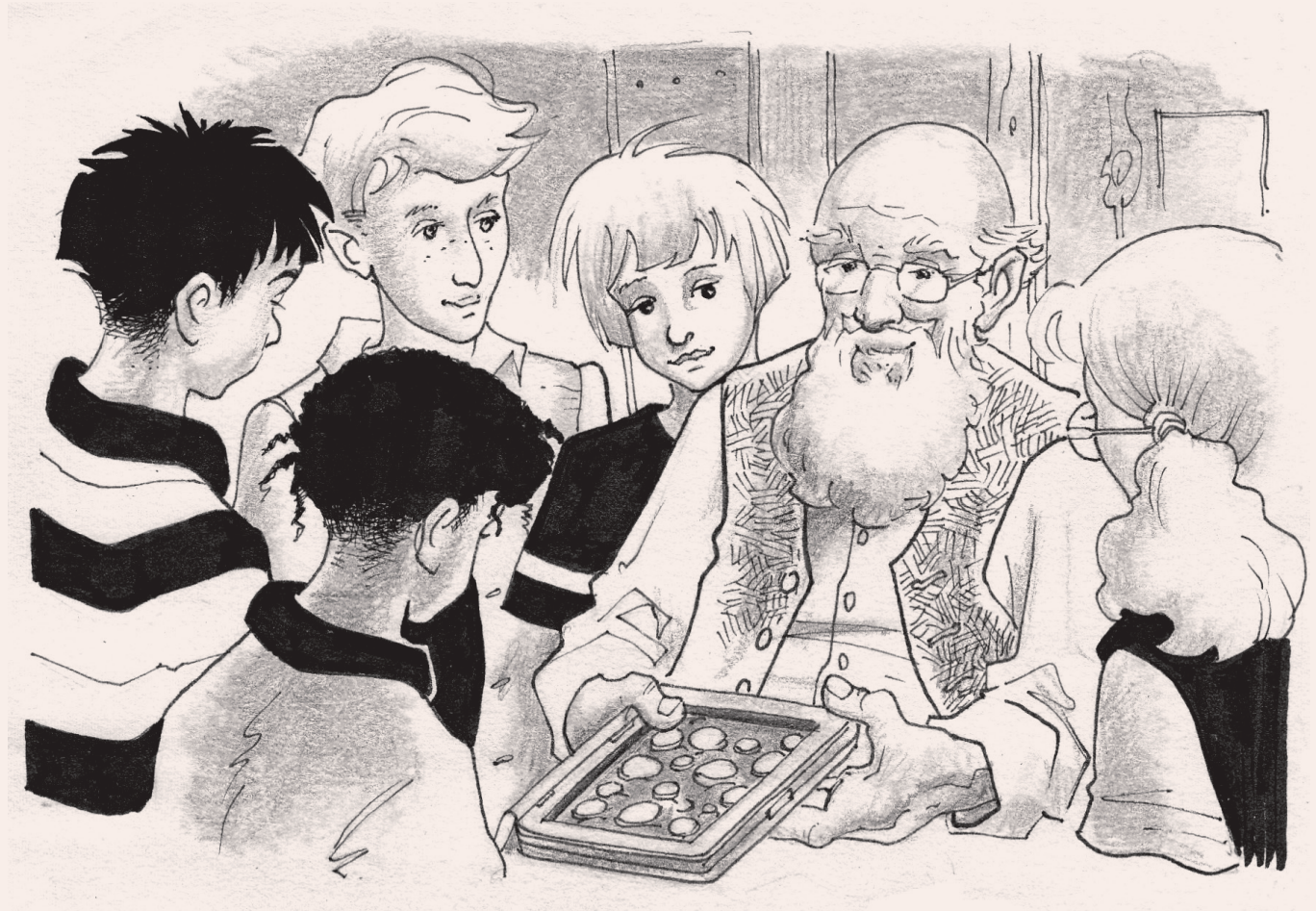
"Before you go, let's pray together." Mr. Colin gathered the children into a circle and bowed his head. "Father, thank You for these

wonderful children, all of them. Thank You for the love they've brought into my life and for the enjoyable times we've had together. Go with them now and keep them safe. Help them, too, to treasure these coins that I've passed on to them and to be good stewards over them. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, I pray."

"And be with Mr. Colin, too," Earl added. "We always have such good times with him, thank You for that."

The five echoed his prayer with "Amen," and set off for their homes.

* * *



The following day, they returned to Mr. Colin's house, and despite their repeated knocks, there was no answer. Nevertheless, they could hear Frisky's frantic barking coming from somewhere.

They had just turned to leave when a neighbor approached them.

"You've come to see Mr. Hedgcome?" the man asked.

"Yes. But he doesn't seem to be home. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"I'm afraid he passed away in his sleep last night—just after midnight, according to the doctor."

Stunned, the children shook their heads and said nothing.

The neighbor continued, "I'm sorry to have broken it to you suddenly. I've seen you visiting, so I presumed you were his friends."

"We certainly were," Susan said, and burst into tears.

Frisky was barking louder now than ever. "I just came here to take care of the old man's dog and take him to the city kennel," said the neighbor.

"Oh, please don't do that!" said Susan. "We'll ask our parents if we can take care of him."

"I don't know ..."

"Please, sir!"

"Hmm ... I suppose it would be all right."

The neighbor put Frisky on a leash, which he handed to Christopher.

The children thanked the man and made their way despondently back down the street.

* * *

"I always enjoyed going to see Mr. Colin," Susan said as the five convened at the

Lodge later on that day. "He was like a grandfather to me after mine died. When we were with him, it seemed time went by so quickly."

"He taught us so many things," Kento added.

"And he wasn't weird at all," said Karen. "Maybe he was different but not crazy like people said. I wish I could've known him better."

"I'm sure he's happy now. Probably feeling a lot better than before," Christopher said, trying to comfort them—and himself.

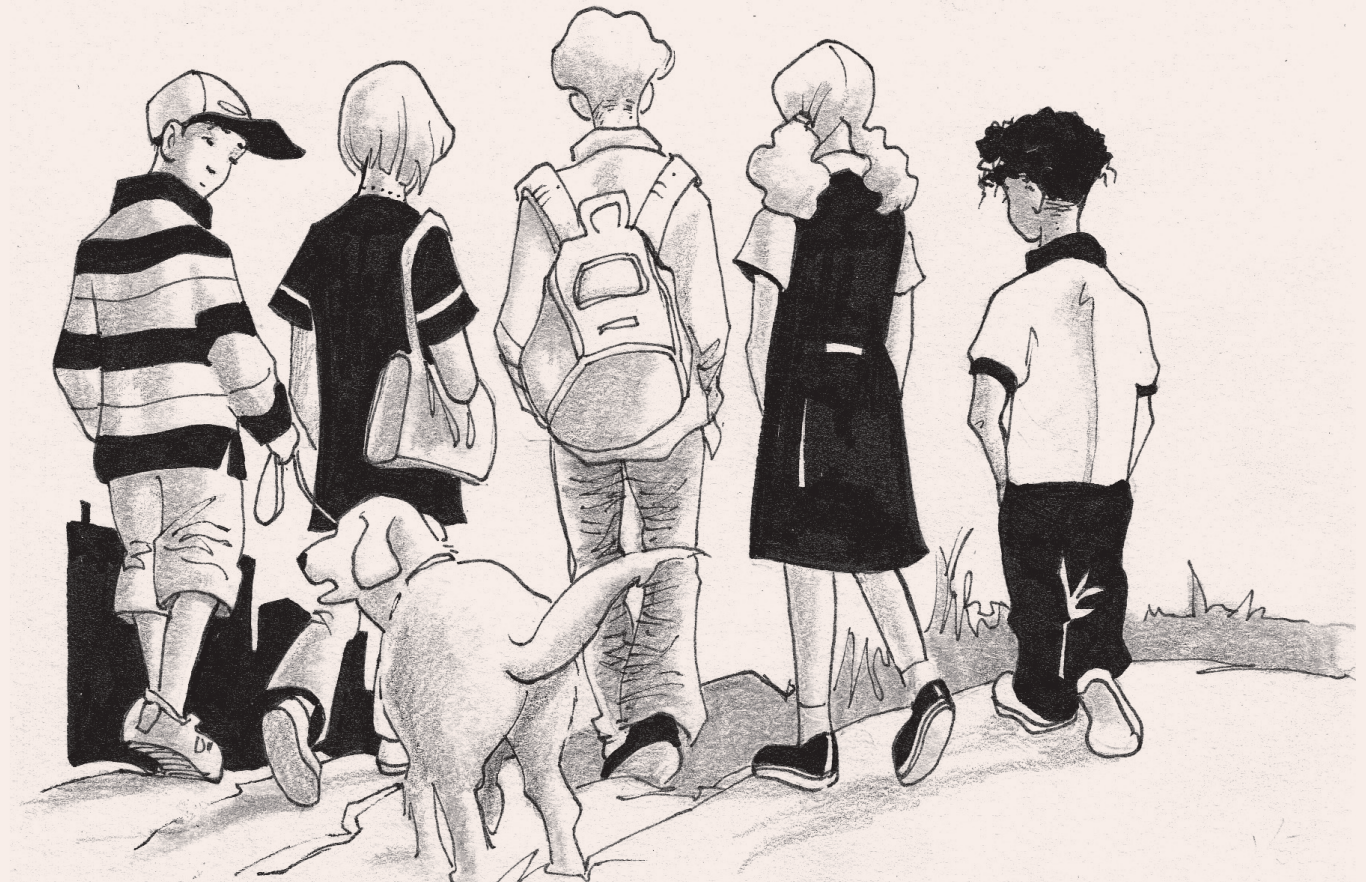
"Mr. Colin was the most interesting and most fun person I've ever known," said Earl. "I'm going to miss him."

The other four nodded in accord and silence fell until Christopher spoke. "What are we going to do about the coins?"

"Mr. Colin said they were valuable, right?" said Karen.

"Are you suggesting we sell them?" Susan asked.

"N-no. But seeing as we own them, it would be nice to know how valuable they are. At least we could take them to a coin dealer and see what they're worth."



"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to find out," Christopher said.

"Fair enough," Kento said, and Earl agreed. Susan merely shrugged.

"Where would we find a coin shop?" Earl asked.

"We could always look online for one in our vicinity," said Karen.

Kento did a search on his phone and the others gathered around.

"Coin World' and 'Coin Collector's Corner,'" he said. "That's all we have in our town. 'Coin World' seems to be the closest. It's on Crispen Avenue."

"Crispen Avenue!" said Susan. "It's a bit..."

"A bit what?"

"N-nothing. But there's a bus that will take us right to where the shop is, and we can be in and out in a jiffy."

With the box of coins in hand, the children boarded a bus that drew up right outside the coin shop, which seemed oddly out of place with its freshly painted white walls and gaudy, brass-framed windows standing amid a squalid district.

"Doesn't seem to be the best part of town," Kento remarked.

"I had wondered about that," said Susan.

"But the shop looks okay," said Christopher. "We just want them to tell us how much the coins are worth."

"We've come all this way. It'll be too late to go anywhere else before it's dark," Karen said. "And who says the other place is going to be any better?"

"Let's just do it," said Christopher.

"Wait! I think we're forgetting something..." Susan said just before they entered the shop. She hadn't been sure about this idea from the start, and something didn't seem right. On top of that, she kept thinking that they'd forgotten something.

That's it! she thought, remembering how Mr. Colin often told them that when we're not sure of something or don't know what to do, to *pray*.

But now we're forgetting to do just that.

"Forgetting what?" the others chorused.

Susan suddenly became embarrassed and blushed.

It was one thing when it was coming from Mr. Colin to remind us to pray, but from me? Susan screwed her face up at the thought. *And besides, we're only getting the coins priced. That's all.*

She shrugged and gazed at the pavement. "N-nothing," she mumbled. "I ... oh, nothing!"

A buzzer announced the children's entrance as they entered Coin World, and a paunchy man, presumably the manager, came out from behind a curtain wearing a broad but insincere smile. His black hair was slathered with grease, and a shaggy mustache hung over his upper lip. His eyes were dark and beady and offset by a broken nose. Frisky immediately showed his dislike by menacing growls, but quieted after Kento hushed him.

"Hello, Mr. ..." Christopher began.

"Manchester's the name—Mr. Manchester, but folks around here know me as 'Skeets.' So, what may I do for you, boys and girls?"

"Well, Mr. Skeets, we have some coins that someone gave us, and we were wondering if you could look at them," Karen said.

"That's my business. Let's see them."

Christopher pulled the wooden box from his backpack, placed it on the glass counter and carefully opened the lid. The owner's eyes widened, and then, feigning nonchalance, he slowly examined each of them under his magnifying glass. After referring to some books on his shelf, he put his magnifying glass down and looked closely at the five friends.

"Where did you say you got these?"

"From an old man. He was a good friend of ours."

"Was?"

"He passed away."

"Hmm. So he left the coins to you?"

"Yes."

"Where did he say he got them?"

"He said that his father had given them to him."

"Excuse me, sir, but why are you asking all these questions?" Susan asked.

"In my business, you can never be too careful."

"Careful?"

"Well, young lady, it's like..."

"Can you just tell us how much they are worth?" said Christopher.

The man smirked, placed his forearms on the glass counter, and leaned forward. "I must say these are good fakes ... very good fakes indeed. What did this old man do for a living?"

"He was a missionary."

"He traveled all over the world," Earl added.

"Ah, that explains it then. The natives of these foreign lands are always trying to pawn off bogus coins on travelers. If you know what I mean."

"No, we don't, sir," said Christopher. "Mr. Colin told us that these coins are very valuable, and that they've been passed on for several generations in his family. They should at least be worth something for how old they are."

"You're a smart kid, but gullible. Yes, even if they had been passed on for whatever number of generations—"

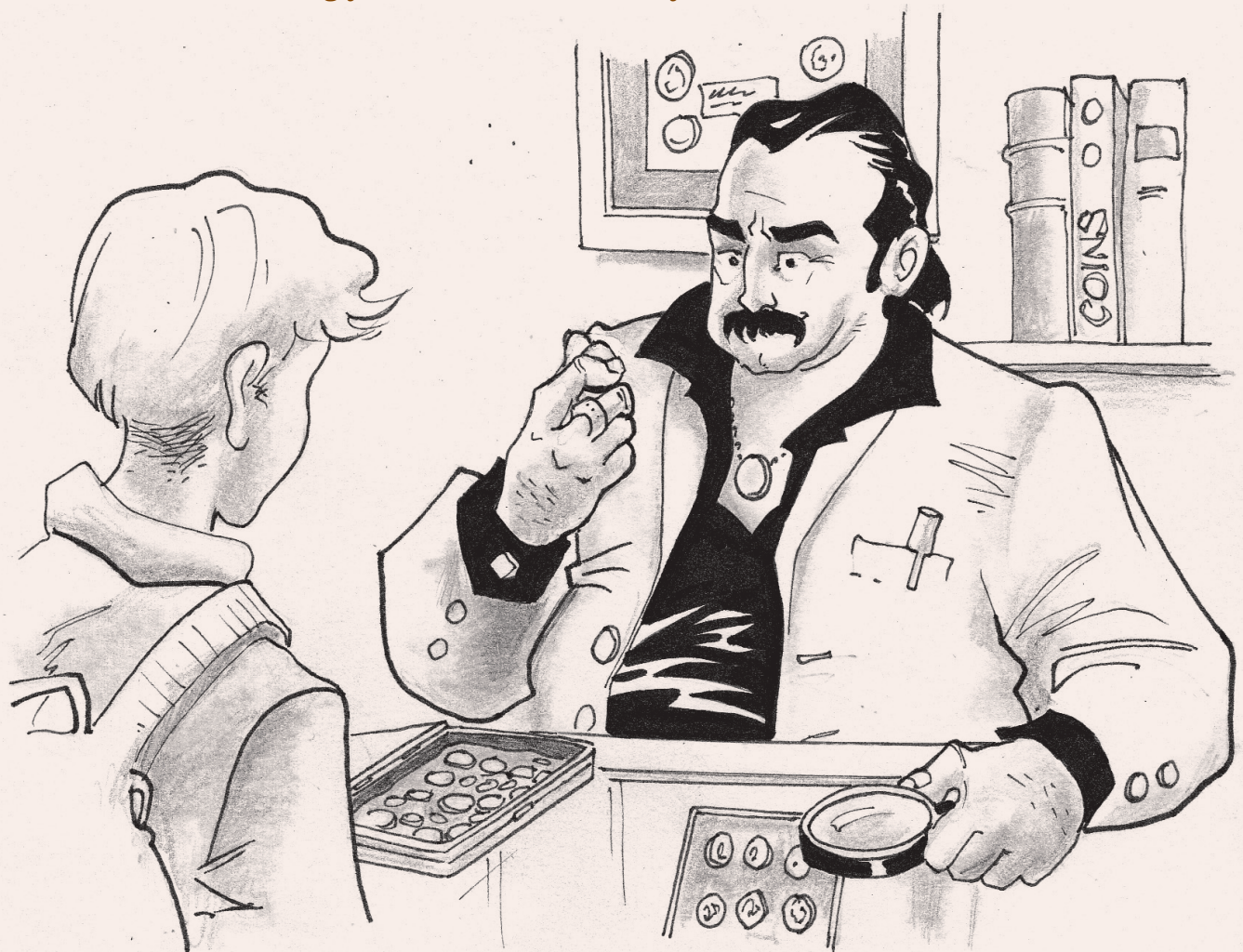
"Ten," Susan interrupted.

"Ten, whatever," Skeets said with a note of irritation. "I'm telling you, these coins are

no more than ten years old, and certainly not from ancient Rome. My point is—old men often make up stories. They start going crazy and telling you things that never happened."

"Mr. Colin wasn't crazy," Earl said. "Just because he died, doesn't mean he couldn't think properly."

"Look, I'll do you a favor. I'll buy these coins from you ... as a favor, only. This old man seemed a pretty important person to you."



"He most certainly was," said Susan.

"Okay. I'll give you twenty bucks for them. I could use them for my display window. It might attract customers."

"Only twenty? But Mr. Colin told us they were very valuable."

"He obviously didn't know his coins very well. On the other hand, I am an expert in the field, and I'm telling you, you won't get much money from anyone for those coins. They are barely worth the metal they're made of. They'd make a fantastic decoration, though."

"We aren't planning on selling them, Mr. Skeets," Karen said. "Even if they're not worth anything to you, they're worth something to us."

"Karen's right," said Kento. "At least they'll remind us of Mr. Colin, even if you say they're not worth much money."

"Maybe we should get a second evaluation," Susan muttered.

"Don't be ridiculous ... look, I was only trying to help," Skeets

said, quickly replacing a scowl with a smile. "But seeing as you've decided to keep them, that concludes our business. Have a good day, children."

He opened the door and ushered them out. "And next time, don't waste my time." As the children crossed the street to the bus stop, Skeets locked the shop door and turned the "open" sign over to "closed."

* * *

Except for a few sighs and whispers of disappointment, the children were silent on the bus ride home. Christopher frowned, as he tightened his grip of the backpack containing the box of coins.

"Worthless?" he muttered. "I doubt it."

Susan sat staring out of the bus window, her mind turning in thought. *I wonder why I thought we shouldn't go into the shop. The man was not nice at all, but nothing*

happened. I was just getting all worried and thinking we might lose the coins. But they're not even worth any money, or so the man said...

"Susan!" Karen was tapping her shoulder.

"Oh ... what?"

"I've called your name like three times. It's our stop."

"Oh, y-yes, of course...", Susan said as she followed the others out of the bus. As the bus drove off, she paused.

"I miss you, Mr. Colin," she whispered.

"Hey, aren't you coming to the Lodge with us?"

"No, Karen. I think I'll just go home now."

"Are you okay? You seem distracted."

"I'm fine. See you all tomorrow."

"Certainly," Karen called back as she ran after the boys, who were ambling disconsolately down the street toward Christopher's house, where their clubhouse stood at the back of the property.

Being so absorbed in their melancholy, none of the five had noticed a gaunt man had entered and exited the bus with them. But Susan, who had been walking in the opposite direction, heard a whisper in her head.

Turn around.

“Huh?” she said aloud.

Just turn around, the thought persisted.

She stopped walking and turned in time to see the last of the four children as they turned the corner.

“What now?” she muttered.

Suddenly, a gangly silhouette emerged from behind a tree. He seemed to be checking the silent street to see if anyone had followed him. He paused as he looked in her direction. Susan ducked into a nearby gateway, and, realizing it was the gate to her own house, she ran to the front door and let herself in.

“Susan?”

“Yes, it’s me, Mother,” she said, dashing up the stairs to her room in order to glimpse the man from her bedroom window.

The street being well-lit, it was not hard to see him. It seemed he had been following her friends, but then he strolled carelessly across the road and away from them. Susan waited at her window and did not see him again. Then her mother called her for dinner.

What’s up with me? Susan thought as she made her way downstairs. *I have this feeling like something bad is going to happen, but I don’t know what. And then I start thinking that everything we do is going to cause something bad to happen.*

That’s so stupid, she concluded, and shrugged off her concerns.

But as she lay in her bed that night, she thought about everything that had happened that day—the news of Mr. Colin’s passing, the idea to price the coins, the caution she had felt, the unkind shop owner, the voice that had caused her to turn and spot the presumed stalker.

I must just be getting bored, she mused. *He didn’t even follow them. At least I didn’t see it. No, it’s just been a long day, and I’m tired.*

But as she closed her eyes, she suddenly remembered what Mr. Colin had once told her. *“Just because the voice you hear whispering in your heart doesn’t make sense, it doesn’t mean that it is wrong. Sometimes God tells us to be careful or to not do something, and we are wise to listen to that voice. Otherwise, we may have unexpected troubles to deal with.”*

“Please, Jesus,” Susan prayed. “Help me not to be afraid to say something to my friends, even if it seems corny or weird. I’m sorry for not listening to the voice that told me we should pray before

going into the shop. It would be terrible if anything bad happened because I didn’t speak up.”

As she closed her eyes to sleep, she could hear Mr. Colin’s voice in her mind quoting one of his favorite scriptures: *“All things work together for good for them that love God.”*

And with that thought, Susan fell into a sound and peaceful sleep.

To be continued...

