

SPECIAL
#7



The Boxcar Children[®]

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The Pet Shop Mystery

CREATED BY GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER



THE PET SHOP MYSTERY

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Something to Squawk About

The Alden children pulled a wagon down the street, taking turns tossing rolled-up newspapers onto the porches and steps of each house.

“Good one,” Henry, a tall fourteen-year-old, said to six-year-old Benny. “Right in front of the door, just the way Mr. Fisher likes it. I guess that’s it for today.”

But that wasn’t it for Watch, the Aldens’ dog. Something made his ears prick up. He took off for the dogwood tree on the corner.

“Watch! Watch! Where are you going?” twelve-year-old Jessie Alden called out. She ran after her dog. “Do you see a squirrel up there?”

Henry, Violet, and Benny Alden raced over to the tree. What was making Watch so excited?

“Squirrels don’t mean a thing to Watch,” Henry said. “He must have seen something else.”

The four children stood at the foot of the tree and stared up. All they could see were leaves and branches. But a second later, they heard a voice.

“Watch! Watch!” an odd voice squawked.

To see better, ten-year-old Violet brushed back a few wisps of her dark hair. “Somebody’s up in the tree. Somebody who knows Watch.”

“Watch! Watch!” the odd voice repeated.

By now Benny Alden was jumping up and down. “I see it! I see it!” he said to his brother and sisters. “It’s not a somebody. It’s a gray parrot.”

Nearly hidden in the branches was a light gray bird.



It looked quite at home in the dogwood tree.

Watch raced around in circles. He whined and sniffed. He scratched the tree trunk. But none of that got him any closer to this talking bird who knew his name.

“Watch! Watch!” the parrot squawked again.

Jessie tapped her forehead. “Of course! That’s Grayfellow from the Pretty Bird Pet Show. Remember how the owner, Mrs. Tweedy, told us he liked to peck at shiny things like jewelry and his watch when she feeds him? I bet that’s why he said ‘watch’ when we called Watch’s name.”

Watch plopped himself down on the grass. He rested his head on his paws. A silly bird had gotten the better of him.

Henry clipped a leash to Watch’s collar. “Come on, boy. Let’s go get Grandfather and come back with the car and a ladder. We’ll give Mrs. Tweedy a call to let her know we found her missing bird. There’s a bundle of old newspapers we have to give her anyway.”

After Henry left, Benny got a good idea. He dug into the pocket of his jeans. “I have some sunflower seeds. Maybe Grayfellow will come out when he sees a good snack.”

Before Benny could get out his seeds, the children heard more noise. This time it was coming from the nearby bushes.

Jessie grabbed Benny’s arm. “Shhh. I hope that’s not a cat,” she whispered. “Let’s leave Grayfellow up in the tree until Henry gets back.”

The children heard branches crackling. Something was moving in those bushes. Jessie tiptoed over and carefully parted the branches. “Arthur!” she screamed when she saw a boy’s face stare back at her. “Why are you hiding in these bushes?”

The boy wriggled his way out and turned to leave without answering Jessie.

“Don’t go,” Jessie said in a gentle voice. “We didn’t mean to scare you. What are you doing here?”

The pale, thin boy mumbled something the Aldens couldn’t hear.

Jessie moved closer to him. “Arthur, come meet my brother Benny and my sister, Violet. You’ve probably seen them around school. Violet, Benny, this is Arthur Byrd. He’s in my class.”

“Were you playing hide and seek?” Benny asked.

“Uh ... no,” Arthur answered. “I was looking for my cat. She’s lost.”

“Guess what?” Benny asked. “We found a lost animal, but not a cat. A parrot. It belongs to Mr. Tweedy at the Pretty Bird Pet Shop. My big brother went to get a ladder. We’re going to get this parrot down. Maybe we can look for your cat, too.”

Arthur put his hands in his pockets, then took them out. He started to say something but stopped. Finally he spoke up. “I, uh ... I’m going by the pet shop. I know Grayfellow, too. I’ll take the parrot back. Can I?”

Jessie was puzzled. “Thanks, Arthur, but don’t you want to keep looking for your cat?”

The boy bit his lip and stared down at his sneakers. “Um ... never mind. I have to go home. I’m late.” And with that, Arthur Byrd ran down the street.

Benny noticed something Arthur had left behind. He bent down and picked up a small package of sunflower seeds. “Hey, Arthur,” he called after the boy, “you forgot your snack.”

“That’s so strange,” Violet said to Jessie. “How did Arthur know it was Grayfellow in the tree? And why would he want to take him back to the pet shop instead of searching for his cat?”

Jessie looked down the street. “That *was* strange. And I wonder why he’s way over on this side of Greenfield looking for his cat. He lives on the other side of town. He’s so shy. If he hadn’t left so fast, we could have asked him.”

“Maybe Arthur can’t have a real pet, so he made up a pretend pet,” Benny suggested.

Jessie mussed Benny’s curly hair. “You might be right about that, Benny. He’s always been like that about himself. Well, at least we found one pet. I guess we’d better see what we can do about getting Grayfellow back to the pet shop. We can do it without Henry, I guess.”

Benny dug into his pocket again. “I have sunflower seeds, too. Let’s see if Grayfellow wants a snack.”

As soon as the parrot saw the delicious seeds, Grayfellow stretched out his long claws. One by one, branch by branch, the African gray parrot made his way down the tree to the lowest branch.

Benny held up a handful of seeds, then whistled.

Grayfellow studied Benny, Violet, and Jessie. With a flutter of his wings, he flew onto Benny’s arm. Now that Grayfellow was safe, Benny stayed as still as possible. He wanted the bird to trust him. “Here, boy. Here, boy,” he whispered.

“Here, boy. Here, boy,” Grayfellow said back. Then the parrot got to work on those sunflower

seeds.

Like most African gray parrots, Grayfellow was a good talker. He knew about ten words, and Benny wanted to hear them all. The children took turns feeding Grayfellow. The parrot hopped on Violet's arm and began to play with the pretty bracelet she had made the summer before.

"Now, now." Violet stroked the bird's soft gray head. "Don't unhook my bracelet. Just play with it until we take you back to Mrs. Tweedy."

"Tweedy, tweedy," the bird said.

"That's right. Mrs. Tweedy."

Grandfather chuckled when he arrived with Henry. "I told Henry we wouldn't need a ladder. I knew you three would get that bird down from the tree on your own. I wonder how he got loose in the first place. Agnes Tweedy is pretty careful with all her animals."

"On sunny days," Jessie began, "Mrs. Tweedy likes to take Grayfellow out of his cage and perch him on an open perch in the store window. If that little door to the store window was left open by mistake, he could have flown out the little door, through the store, and right outside! Even with clipped wings, Grayfellow can fly ... just not too far."

Grandfather Alden nodded. "You know, that's true. Only last week when I was picking up dog food, Grayfellow was loose in the store. He landed on my arm and started pecking at my watch."

"Watch! Watch!" the bird squawked again, and everyone laughed.

Mr. Alden drove slowly into Greenfield. He avoided every bump along the way so Grayfellow wouldn't get upset in the car.

Benny loved having a parrot in Grandfather's car. He hoped everyone in Greenfield was watching. "Know what?" he asked. "How come Grayfellow was all the way on Maple Street if he can't fly too far?"

"Hmm," Grandfather Alden said, turning up Main Street. "That's a good question, Benny."

CHAPTER 2

Feathers, Fins, and Fur

Mrs. Tweedy was at the curb as soon as Grandfather Alden's car pulled up. "Thank you so much, James, for bringing back Grayfellow. And thank you children for being clever enough to catch him."

After their grandfather left, the children gathered around Mrs. Tweedy.

Benny just had to tell her about their adventure. "A boy named Arthur was trying to find his cat. He knows Grayfellow, too. Then the boy ran away."

Mrs. Tweedy fiddled with her earring.



"Oh, I think I know who you mean. A boy named Arthur often comes in here. Such a shy boy. I always get the feeling he wants to tell me something. He only seems happy visiting my animals, especially Grayfellow. In fact, the last time Grayfellow escaped, Arthur brought him back."

"This time we brought him back, Mrs. Tweedy." Violet held out her arm for the older woman to take the parrot.

"Tweedy," Grayfellow said. The parrot pecked at Mrs. Tweedy's silver earrings.

"Naughty boy," Mrs. Tweedy scolded, but she didn't mean it. "Well, then, let's get you safely back into your cage."

The Aldens followed Mrs. Tweedy into the shop. A man the children hadn't met before stood behind the counter.

Jessie poked Henry. "That must be the new manager Mrs. Tweedy hired," she whispered to him.

brother. "He doesn't look very friendly. I hope he doesn't think we let Grayfellow escape."

The man stared at the Aldens.

Finally Mrs. Tweedy called him over.

"Oh, Mr. Fowler, let me introduce you to some friends of mine. They found Grayfellow while they were on their paper route. You'll be seeing the Aldens while I'm gone. They often drop off old newspapers for our bird and animal cages."

Mr. Fowler went right on feeding some goldfish. "I met one of them just a while ago, thank you."

The Aldens looked at each other, then at Mrs. Tweedy.

"But we were in school," Jessie said. "Then we did our paper route. In fact, we haven't been to this shop for a few weeks."

"Well, a boy who is always hanging around here came by earlier this afternoon, snooping around and bothering our birds. Probably went poking around where he didn't belong. Next thing I knew, the parrot was gone," Mr. Fowler said, shaking far too much fish food into the aquarium. "Children shouldn't be allowed in here without an adult."

"Now, now, Mr. Fowler," Mrs. Tweedy said. "You'll get used to having children in the store once you've been here awhile. After all, it was that boy who found Grayfellow the last time he got loose. Now the Aldens have found him. Most children are wonderful with animals."

"Well, all I know is that the parrot disappeared right after I saw a boy in here, maybe even one of these kids."

Mrs. Tweedy's face grew bright pink. "May I see you out front, Mr. Fowler? Let's collect the newspapers that Mr. Alden left on the sidewalk and take them to the storage building."

Mr. Fowler put down the fish food box without replacing the lid. "I can't be carrying things outside and tending the store at the same time, Mrs. Tweedy," the children overheard him complain.

The Aldens usually loved browsing in the Pretty Bird Pet Shop, but not after hearing Mr. Fowler. Although Benny had permission from Mrs. Tweedy to pet Doughnut, the guinea pig, today he didn't feel like it. Violet even skipped her visit to her two favorite parakeets, Milo and Magic.

"No more long faces," Mrs. Tweedy said when she returned. "Mr. Fowler is very grateful that you found Grayfellow. Truly he is. In fact, he has some notion that we should carry more unusual birds like Grayfellow. Of course, I wouldn't dream of it. The bigger birds don't belong in my small pet shop."

Violet's blue eyes widened. "You're not planning to sell Grayfellow, are you?"

Mrs. Tweedy shook her head. "Never. I promised Dr. Scott from the animal shelter that I would care for Grayfellow myself after he was abandoned. My canaries and parakeets are the biggest birds I have care to sell."

Jessie stroked Grayfellow's head with the back of her finger. "Why does Mr. Fowler want to see bigger birds?"

Mrs. Tweedy shrugged. "I don't know, really. Parrots are quite expensive, in the thousands of dollars. I suppose it would mean more money. But I have no such plans. I do hope Mr. Fowler will come around to my way of doing things. He's taking a while to get used to his job here. This is the second time Grayfellow got away."

Benny looked up at Mrs. Tweedy with his big brown eyes. "We're animal finders. We wouldn't let an animal get lost."

Mrs. Tweedy patted Benny's curly head. "Of course you wouldn't, Benny. I know how good you Aldens are with animals. Dr. Scott has often told me what a help you are at the shelter."

The children were all smiles now.

Mrs. Tweedy pushed her glasses on top of her fluffy white hair. "You know, I've been thinking of getting someone to help Mr. Fowler with some of the jobs in my shop. He might get used to the work sooner if he had a helper. Problem is, I'll be traveling for the next few weeks, and I won't have a minute to interview anyone."

Jessie lined up several cat food cans on the shelves so they were nice and straight. "Maybe Dr. Scott knows someone from the animal shelter. There are lots of volunteers."

That's when Mrs. Tweedy winked at the children. "I don't suppose you children would be available a few hours a day after school, and maybe a couple of weekends?"

"When can we start?" Henry asked.

"How about right now?" Mrs. Tweedy asked. She pulled out a clipboard from under the counter. "I made up this job list for Mr. Fowler. But I'll check off the small jobs that are just right for the four of you."

"I can clean Doughnut's cage," Benny piped up. "And make sure he and the other guinea pigs get brushed and petted every day. Isn't that what guinea pigs like?"

Mrs. Tweedy smiled. "That's just what guinea pigs like, Benny, especially when they're in a pet shop. If someone can groom them once a day, they will make much friendlier pets. I'll put you down for that job."

Benny went up to the guinea pig cage. "Can I start now?"

"Of course," Mrs. Tweedy said.

Benny found a grooming brush. He opened the cage door and gently lifted Doughnut out. Soon Doughnut was squeaking the way guinea pigs do when they are happy.

Jessie stood over Mrs. Tweedy's shoulder to see what else needed doing. "Henry and I can make some of the deliveries or go feed pets if the owners are away. A lot of your customers know us from my paper route anyway. We can do two jobs at the same time."

"Don't you think I can do more than one job at a time, Mrs. Tweedy?" Mr. Fowler demanded when he returned and overheard Jessie.

Mrs. Tweedy waved over Mr. Fowler. "Of course you can. I was just about to tell the Aldens that

In fact, you'll be doing much more than two jobs while I'm gone. And one of them will be supervising the Aldens."

"These kids?" Mr. Fowler asked, almost shouting. "I thought I was in charge of running the shop, not looking after a bunch of kids."

Mrs. Tweedy took a deep breath before she spoke. "They need very little supervision. Before their grandfather found them, the Aldens lived on their own in a boxcar in the woods. They did very well for themselves. They are hardworking, clever children. They can clean cages and help with the feeding and deliveries. That will free up your time for the bigger jobs."

Mr. Fowler banged a box of dog food cans on the counter. "What if they let the animals loose? That's what happened today."

Mrs. Tweedy's face grew red for the second time that day. "The Aldens had nothing to do with Grayfellow getting out, Mr. Fowler. I'm sure it happened because you've had too much to do. Now you'll have more time to supervise everything. I'm counting on you for that."

This seemed to calm down Mr. Fowler a bit. "All right," he agreed. "But make sure they know exactly what jobs on that list are theirs and what ones are mine."

Mrs. Tweedy nodded. "First of all, I want you to get to know the Aldens so you don't confuse them with other children. Henry is the oldest and Jessie the next oldest. They're both strong and very organized."

Mrs. Tweedy pointed out Violet and Benny, who were already on the job. "You'll be happy to have those two around, Mr. Fowler. Violet and Benny are so gentle with animals. They know how to give them attention without getting them nervous. Their second cousin Soo Lee is welcome here, too. Remember, you sold her a hamster a couple of weeks ago? She's been wonderful with it."

Mr. Fowler stared at the children but didn't seem to believe Mrs. Tweedy. "Don't see why the animals should be handled anyway. They're not playthings."

"Animals aren't playthings, Mr. Fowler, but they do like to play," Mrs. Tweedy said, going over to pet Doughnut. "I want all my animals to enjoy people so they'll make good pets. While I'm gone, no matter how busy everyone gets, I hope each of you—including you, Mr. Fowler—will give all my critters plenty of attention."

"We will!" the Aldens yelled, so loudly that no one noticed Mr. Fowler didn't join in.

A Mysterious Note

On the way home, the Aldens planned their pet shop schedules. Jessie walked along the sidewalk reading her list.

“I divided all the chores. Some have to be done every few days. But some jobs are daily—like filling water bottles and feeding the animals who need to eat every day.”

“Like me?” Benny asked, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. “I have to eat every day. And lots more than once. I wouldn’t make a good turtle or fish.”

Jessie gave Benny a friendly pat on the shoulder.



“You do make a good helper, though. After school we’ll do our newspaper route on the way to the pet shop. As for the pet-sitting and deliveries, we can do some of those jobs at the end of the day, on our way home.”

The children turned into the driveway. When they caught a whiff of something delicious, they walked a little faster—so fast that they missed seeing Arthur Byrd in the shadows. He had followed the Aldens all the way home from the Pretty Bird Pet Shop.

Watch and Mrs. McGregor, the family housekeeper, were in the kitchen when the children burst in with their news.

“We have jobs! Guess what kind?” Benny cried. He raced over to the stove to see what was cooking for dinner. “Yum! Beef stew.”

He sniffed the cornbread cooling on the counter. "When's dinner?"

Mrs. McGregor sliced into the cornbread and held out a piece for Benny. "Test this to make sure it's done. We're eating at six-thirty instead of six. Your cousins Joe and Alice are coming to dinner with Soo Lee. That's why I made cornbread to go with the beef stew your cousin Joe likes so much."

Benny smacked his lips. "And I like so much, too."

Mrs. McGregor's beef stew disappeared in no time. Joe Alden had an extra helping, and so did Benny. The only one who didn't seem to eat much was Soo Lee Alden, the little Korean girl Joe and Alice Alden had adopted.

"Don't you like beef stew?" Benny asked Soo Lee. "It's good."

"I have a surprise," Soo Lee answered, "but I can't tell."

"Shhh," Cousin Alice said to Soo Lee. "We're almost done. In a few minutes you can show Benny your surprise."

Now Benny Alden had a problem. He loved surprises, and he loved dessert. How could he sit still when he was waiting for both of them? "Can you give me a clue, Soo Lee?" he begged.

Soo Lee's brown eyes were serious. She shook her head without saying a word.

"Now, Benny, don't make it so hard for Soo Lee," Mr. Alden said. "When you're seven years old it's hard to keep secrets."

Henry came in from the kitchen with Jessie, just in time to keep Soo Lee from telling her surprise.

"Gingerbread, everybody!" Jessie set down a glass plate with a big square of gingerbread on the table. Henry carried in a bowl filled with whipped cream.

After the grown-ups took their servings, Benny passed the cake plate to Soo Lee. "I know Mr. McGregor's gingerbread isn't the surprise."

Soo Lee took a tiny piece. She didn't like sweets nearly as much as Benny did. She watched Benny clean every last crumb from his plate. Finally she whispered to her mother, "Can I show Benny our surprise now?"

Cousin Alice gave Benny a huge grin. "Yes, now is the perfect time. Everybody out to the boxcar."

The three adults and five children trooped to the boxcar.

Everyone could hear Watch whining from the house. This only made the children more excited about Soo Lee's surprise.

"Not another parrot?" Benny cried, hoping it just might be.

Soo Lee shook her head. "It's not a parrot."

"Hey, you brought your new hamster, Squeaky!" Benny cried when he saw a small animal cage on a table. "That's a good surprise, Soo Lee."

“That’s not the surprise,” Soo Lee said.

Cousin Joe took Benny by the hand. “Look inside.”

Benny stood over the cage and looked in. “Hey, Squeaky lost weight!”

Alice and Joe couldn’t keep from laughing.

“Not only did Squeaky lose weight,” Alice Alden began, “but we also discovered that Squeaky isn’t a he but a she. She had a litter of hamster pups two weeks ago. That’s Soo Lee’s surprise.”

Soo Lee opened the cage door. She gently lifted a tiny golden mouselike creature out of the cage. “There were two boy hamsters and two girl hamsters. You can have this boy hamster because you’re a boy, Benny.”

Benny looked up at Grandfather, who had returned from quieting down Watch. “May I keep the hamster, Grandfather? It doesn’t look like he eats too much.”

“Hamsters make wonderful pets, Benny,” Mr. Alden said. “Agnes told me what happened a few weeks ago when Mr. Fowler started working there. He mixed up the male and female hamsters. By mistake he sold Alice and Joe a female hamster that was about to have pups, instead of a male hamster.”

Alice picked up the hamster pup and stroked it. “Imagine our surprise two weeks ago,” she began, “when Soo Lee and I went to feed Squeaky and we found a cage full of little Squeakies! They were quite pink and bald and no bigger than my little finger.”

“They grow faster than we do, Benny,” Soo Lee told her cousin. “I kept the babies a secret the whole time.”

Mr. Alden was smiling. “I know it’s not really funny, but Agnes said several people who bought hamsters when Mr. Fowler first started working got the same surprise. Hamsters, hamsters, and more hamsters!”

Alice returned the pup to the cage. “Some people asked for their money back. But we knew just the place for one of Squeaky’s pups. Some of the neighborhood children will get the others in the litter.”

Soo Lee looked up at her cousins. “Mrs. Tweedy told my dad I can work at the shop, too.”

“We know, we know.” Violet hugged Soo Lee. “It will be so much fun taking care of the animals. We can’t wait.”

Cousin Joe handed Henry a bag with the words PRETTY BIRD PET SHOP on it. “You’ll find hamster food and a water bottle in there, Henry.”

Henry reached into the bag. “Hey, there’s a mix-up, Cousin Joe. This is turtle food. And I don’t see a water bottle in here, either.”

Joe Alden shook his head. “Not again! Mr. Fowler took the phone order for the cage and supplies before we came over here. He’s so disorganized, I bet he forgot. There will be hamster babies all over Greenfield with the way he does things. The sales slip is in the bag—unless Mr. Fowler forgot that

too. Maybe when you go to the pet shop you can exchange the turtle food.”

After the grown-ups went back inside, the younger Alden children took turns playing with Benny’s new hamster. They voted on names for the hamster and decided on “Pipsqueak.”

Jessie was too busy thinking to play with Pipsqueak. “I can’t figure out why Mrs. Tweedy hired somebody who keeps mixing up everything, including hamsters. Can you, Henry?”

Henry scratched his head. “I can’t figure it out, either. Mrs. Tweedy told Grandfather that Mr. Fowler had a good recommendation from another pet shop. But he doesn’t seem to care about animals enough to make sure they get the right kind of—”

“Henry. Look at this sales slip!” Jessie interrupted when she started to put the receipt back in the bag. “There’s a message on the back.”

Henry leaned over Jessie’s shoulder. “‘*Delivery, five o’clock Thursday. One macaw and one woolly*’ ... I can’t make out what that word is.”

“Tomorrow’s Thursday,” Jessie said, “our first day of work. So I guess we’ll find out what woolly something-or-other is. A macaw is a parrot, the biggest kind. It’s funny Mrs. Tweedy would get a delivery when she’s going to be away.”

“Especially a parrot,” Henry said. “Didn’t she just tell us she doesn’t ever plan to sell any large birds, not even Grayfellow?”

Jessie folded the receipt in half. She put it in the bag with the turtle food. “I sure hope we find out what Mr. Fowler is up to tomorrow at five o’clock.”

Mix-ups and Fix-ups

The next afternoon, the Aldens zoomed through their paper route. Jessie even put Soo Lee to work so everyone could get to the Pretty Bird Pet Shop as soon as possible.

“Last one, Soo Lee,” Jessie said when they reached the end of the route. “Usually we let Watson bring a paper up to this house. He likes to play with Cody, the dog who lives here. But we have to leave him home now that we’re working at the pet store, so you can put the paper on the porch. Don’t worry. Cody’s friendly.”

Soo Lee skipped up the steps to the house. The sleepy golden retriever lying on the porch thumped her tail when she saw Soo Lee.

“Good girl!” Jessie said. “We’ll stop by this house again on the way home. I noticed on Mrs. Tweedy’s list that Cody is supposed to get a new flea collar. You can deliver that, too.”

“I like my job,” Soo Lee said.

The children turned the corner onto Main Street. An elderly woman and several children stood in front of the Pretty Bird Pet Shop. Grayfellow was back on his perch in the sunny display window so everyone could watch him.

“Grayfellow is a good advertisement for the shop,” Jessie said when she saw all the attention the parrot was getting. She pulled on the front door. It didn’t budge. “What’s going on? This door is stuck.”

Henry gave a pull. The door didn’t move.

“Can’t you children read?” the elderly lady said to the Aldens. “Look at the sign on the door. It says CLOSED.”

“Closed in the middle of the day?” Henry cried. “Mr. Fowler is supposed to keep the shop open when Mrs. Tweedy is away.”

The old woman didn’t look a bit friendly. “It’s a good thing, too, keeping all these schoolchildren out of this shop for a change.”

The Aldens were much too polite to tell the woman how much Mrs. Tweedy liked having children in her shop.

Henry whispered to his brother and sisters. “Let’s go out back. Maybe Mr. Fowler had some chores in the storage building. He probably needed to close the shop for a few minutes. Now that we’re here, we can help him out.”

The children walked down a narrow passage to a small building in back of the pet shop.

“Look, there’s a light on,” Jessie said. She stood on tiptoe to look inside. She wasn’t tall enough

She knocked at the door.

There was no answer.

“I’ll give Benny a boost up to that small window,” Henry suggested. Henry easily swung Benny up. “Can you see anything, Benny?”

“I see Mr. Fowler, and he sees me.” Benny rapped on the window. “Can we come in, Mr. Fowler?”

Henry set Benny down on the ground and gave another good knock. “It’s the Aldens,” he shouted. “We came to help with the shop. If you unlock it, we can get started.”

“What should we do?” Jessie asked when no one came out. She dragged over an old milk crate and stood on so she could see inside the storage building. “There are two large empty birdcages in there,” she whispered. “Mr. Fowler just threw a cover over them.”

At last the door opened. Mr. Fowler stepped out. “Don’t you kids have homework or that paper route to finish?”

Benny smiled up at Mr. Fowler. He did not smile back. “We did our paper route. Today we started our new jobs. That’s what Mrs. Tweedy said.”

Mr. Fowler double-locked the storage building. “Mrs. Tweedy doesn’t know everything. That’s why she hired me.”

“She told Grandfather that you go bird-watching,” Violet said in her gentle voice. “I like to watch birds, too.”

Violet’s voice seemed to quiet Mr. Fowler. “Well, as long as you’re here, you might as well get started with the list Mrs. Tweedy gave you. But mind you, that’s all you do. Don’t go snooping where you don’t belong.”

Jessie tried to stay calm. “We’ll just do the jobs she checked off, Mr. Fowler. And anything else you want done, too.”

Mr. Fowler took out his big key ring and unlocked the front and back doors to the shop. “What you want is to manage this shop in peace. That’s what I was hired for.”

The Aldens didn’t say another word. They got straight to work. No use bothering Mr. Fowler on their very first day.

Henry brought in some heavy pet food boxes from outside. He opened each one and counted what was inside.

“Young man!” Mr. Fowler demanded. “Why are you taking so long? Just put the cans up on those shelves and be done with it.”

Henry showed Mr. Fowler a sheet of paper. “I was just checking that everything listed on this sheet is in the box. Two cans are missing. Mrs. Tweedy shouldn’t get charged for them. I can call the pet food company if you want.”

Henry couldn’t tell if Mr. Fowler was mad at him or at the pet food company. “I make the phone

calls around here, young man. You just unpack those boxes.”

“Yes, sir,” Henry agreed, but Mr. Fowler’s remarks bothered him. Why didn’t Mr. Fowler check the delivery? Didn’t he want to save Mrs. Tweedy money?

The other children tried not to get upset for Henry. There was so much to do.

Violet showed Soo Lee how to fold a small stack of newspapers so they would fit the canary and parakeet cages. The girls went about their jobs quietly so the birds wouldn’t get nervous.

Jessie went from cage to cage with Benny. She showed him how to refill the water bottles with fresh water and fill the food dishes with just the right amount of food.



Mr. Fowler watched everything they did until he couldn’t stand it anymore. “What are you taping to each cage, young lady?”

Jessie swallowed hard before she spoke. “I cut out pictures of each kind of food that the animals should get. I’m sticking the pictures on each cage so Benny won’t get the food mixed up.”

“If Mrs. Tweedy didn’t hire a bunch of kids, we wouldn’t have to worry about mix-ups,” Mr. Fowler said.

The Aldens said nothing, but they couldn’t help thinking. Wasn’t Mr. Fowler the one who got things mixed up?

The small brass bell over the front door rang off and on for the next hour. Customers came in, but the Aldens sent them all to Mr. Fowler. They didn’t want to upset him.

One of those customers was the elderly woman they had seen in front of the shop. “Who said you could comb that guinea pig, little boy?” the woman asked Benny while she waited for Mr. Fowler to get off the phone.

Benny stopped combing Doughnut. His ears turned red. "It's my job," he finally said.

The old woman came over and picked up Doughnut from Benny's lap. "This is how you do it," she told Benny as she combed Doughnut.

Mr. Fowler was off the phone at last. The old woman handed the guinea pig back to Benny. "Now do it the way I showed you."

Benny sat down. Doughnut lifted his head so Benny could comb him again.

"What's the matter?" Jessie asked when she saw Benny looking gloomy and just sitting with Doughnut.

"That lady, the one we saw outside, said I didn't know how to groom Doughnut." Benny made sure the old woman couldn't hear him. "She showed me how, but it's the same way I was doing already."

Jessie scratched the top of Doughnut's head. "Just go ahead. Mrs. Tweedy thought you did fine and she's the boss."

The phone rang. Mr. Fowler seemed to be busy with the elderly lady, so Jessie picked up the receiver.

Before Jessie could speak, a man started talking at the other end. "I'm on my way, Walter. So I'll shut down the shop. I'll meet you by the storage building in back. Five o'clock sharp."

Puzzled, Jessie held the receiver before hanging up. Was this a wrong number? It couldn't be. Mr. Fowler's first name was Walter. Jessie wrote down the man's message and took it over to Mr. Fowler. "Someone just left this message for you."

Mr. Fowler snatched the note. "Who said you could answer the phone, young lady? That's not on the job list."

"I ... uh ... I was right by the phone, and you were busy so ... I'm sorry," Jessie apologized. "I just wanted to help."

Mr. Fowler was really cross now. "If you want to help, get your delivery wagon loaded up. It's about time for you kids to go home anyway. Do your deliveries like you told Mrs. Tweedy, on your way home, away from this shop."

Jessie scooped up several orders from the counter and took them out to her brother. "These are the delivery orders," Jessie told Henry. "Mr. Fowler wants us to make the deliveries now."

Henry scratched his head. "What for? The store doesn't close until six. It's not even five o'clock yet."

Jessie made sure all the boxes fit nice and snug in the wagon. "Let's just do what Mr. Fowler says. He's making Violet, Benny, and Soo Lee afraid to do anything. And that old woman keeps scolding them, too."

"Oh, no," Henry said. "And this is only our first day. Let's wait until five o'clock to see if anybody shows up. I've been meaning to ask Mr. Fowler about the mysterious message on our receiver."

anyway.”

When Jessie and Henry went into the shop again, the old woman was gone. Mr. Fowler was on the phone again. “Yes, that’s right. I’m expecting them this afternoon. You can come by tomorrow after I close up the shop. Wait, never mind. Make that late Sunday after the shop closes at six. ’Bye.”

Henry and Jessie looked at each other. Did Mr. Fowler’s phone call have anything to do with the note? There was only one way to find out.

Henry reached under the counter. He pulled out the bag Cousin Joe had given the children. Henry cleared his throat to get Mr. Fowler’s attention.

“What is it now?” Mr. Fowler snapped. “My cousin Joe Alden gave me this receipt for a hamster cage Benny got from my cousins,” Henry began. “It says there’s supposed to be hamster food and a water bottle, too. But the bag only had turtle food in it.”

Mr. Fowler stared at Henry an awfully long time. “What are you talking about? Are you saying I made a mistake with this order?”

Henry shifted from one foot to the other. “Well, not exactly, sir. Maybe my Cousin Joe wanted turtle food, too. But he said he ordered hamster food and a water bottle. They weren’t in the bag, even though they’re on the slip.”

Mr. Fowler threw down his pen. “Now, how do you know this cousin of yours didn’t order just turtle food? Do you think customers don’t get plenty mixed up? If I had a dollar for every mistake customers make, I wouldn’t need this job.”

It was no use. Mr. Fowler wasn’t helping at all. Henry pulled out his wallet. He reached in for some dollar bills he’d earned from his paper route customers. “Can I pick out another water bottle and the hamster food now? I’ll pay for them.”

Henry put the sales slip on the counter. “Oh, by the way, this note was on the back,” Henry told Mr. Fowler. “I thought you might want it.”

Not looking at Henry, Mr. Fowler muttered again. “Go ahead. Pick out a water bottle. And the hamster food, too. You don’t have to pay. But hurry up about it. It’s time to close the shop. I have paperwork to do in back.”

Benny overheard this and looked up at the clock. He had just learned to tell time. “But the little hand is only near the five. Mrs. Tweedy stays open until six o’clock.”

Mr. Fowler went to the front door. He flipped over the OPEN sign so it said CLOSED. “Mrs. Tweedy isn’t here now. I decide when the shop opens and closes. Now get a move on, all of you.”

Henry held up the water bottle and hamster food he’d picked out. “Shouldn’t you ring this up so you can keep track of what I returned and what I bought?”

Mr. Fowler kept holding the door open. “Never mind that. Out. Out. Just go.”

The Aldens scooted out and heard the door bang behind them. They all turned around at the same time, only to see the shade come down over the door and the lights go out.

The Pretty Bird Pet Shop was closed for the day.

Special Delivery

One by one, the lights went on inside the houses the Aldens passed. There was only one more delivery left.

“My stomach is growling,” Benny said. “Mrs. Tweedy didn’t tell us how hungry this job would make us.”

“Hang on, Benny,” Jessie said. She checked off all but the last order slip. “Mrs. McGregor said she’d have dinner ready for us at six-thirty. We should be done by then.”

Soo Lee put her hand in Jessie’s and looked up. “Six-thirty? Is that a long time from now?”

Jessie checked her watch. “An hour or so. But you know what? I packed some cheese and crackers. Have some now so you don’t get too hungry. Henry and I just have a delivery of diet cat food to drop off at this house.”

“Goody!” Benny lifted Jessie’s backpack from the delivery wagon. He sat down on the grass with Violet and Soo Lee.

“Jessie, why does it say BEWARE OF DOG if they have a cat?” Violet asked when she spotted a warning sign on the front lawn.

“Oh, no,” Jessie answered. “That means there’s an unfriendly dog. They must have a guard dog and a fat cat. Let’s get this delivery over with quickly, Henry.”

The two older children went up the porch steps and rang the doorbell. They could hear the dog barking through the mail slot in the door.

“Grrr. Grrr.”

“I hate that low, growly sound,” Henry said to Jessie. “I hope the owner puts the dog in another room.”

“Brutus! Down! Quiet! Who’s out there?” a man inside shouted.

Jessie’s throat felt dry. She swallowed and cleared her throat. “It’s your delivery from the Pretty Bird Pet Shop.”

The man’s voice was very loud now. He had to shout above the dog’s barking and growling. “Get away. I didn’t order anything.”

“We have your ten-pound bag of diet cat food,” Henry called out.

“There’s no cat here. If you don’t leave, I’ll have to let Brutus out,” the man inside said to the Aldens.

The door opened suddenly. Jessie and Henry stepped back, their hearts pounding. The light behind the man made it impossible to see his face. But they couldn’t miss the sound of the dog’s angry

growling or his size. He was huge.

“We have your cat food,” Jessie repeated, barely able to speak.

The man shook his head. “I don’t own a cat. I don’t even like cats. There’s just Brutus here. I’m sure doesn’t like cats, I can tell you that. So just go back to where you came from, you two, or I’ll have Brutus chase you away.”

“Sorry to bother you,” Henry said. “We must have read the wrong number on the sales slip.”

“Put your glasses on next time,” the man said over the dog’s growls, “instead of bothering people at home.” With that, the man slammed the door.

“Phew.” Henry raced down the path with Jessie. “I thought we were going to be that dog’s dinner.”

Jessie walked under the streetlight to see better. She flipped through the order slips. Finally she found the one she was looking for. “Right here. It says right here that One-twenty Maple Street gets a ten-pound bag of Diet Meow Chow.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with a mean man *and* a mean dog. Besides, I’m so hungry, I could almost eat some Meow Chow myself. We’d better ask Mr. Fowler about it. Somebody might be waiting for this order.”

Jessie nodded. “We have to go back to the pet shop anyway. We need to get a dog flea collar for Cody at Seventy-one Maple instead of the cat collar that was marked on the order slip.”

“I’d rather face Brutus again than ask Mr. Fowler about these mistakes,” Henry said. “But I guess he’s the only one who can help us figure out these deliveries.”

The younger children were chilly and tired. Henry explained that the deliveries weren’t over yet. “Tell you what. No need for all of us to go back. Jessie can take you home. I’ll get the deliveries straightened out.”

“But we want to come,” Benny said. “That’s our job. Besides, I’m not hungry anymore.”

Everyone laughed at Benny’s remark.

“Those aren’t words we hear too often from Benny,” Henry said to Soo Lee. “Let’s get going then. Maybe Mr. Fowler is at the shop finishing the paperwork he talked about.”

The Pretty Bird Pet Shop was dark when the Aldens returned. All they could see inside were the dim lights of the aquariums. The bird cages were covered. The small animals seemed to be curled up asleep in their dark cages.

“Mr. Fowler is gone,” Jessie said. “I guess we can’t straighten out those orders after all.”

Henry waved the children toward the back. “Let’s check the storage building before we leave.”

The Aldens didn’t mean to be sneaky, but they were very quiet children. That’s how they happened to hear Mr. Fowler before he heard them.

“Just in time,” Mr. Fowler said to someone the children couldn’t see. “I’ll be done with them in a couple of days from now when Mrs. Tweedy is gone again.”

The children stiffened when they heard the flapping of heavy wings and a terrible squawking.

“Get her in the cage,” a second man’s voice said. “And hurry up about it. I didn’t have time to clip her wings. She wouldn’t last long in this weather if she flew away. Open the cage door.”

The Aldens heard a chattering sound, then Mr. Fowler’s voice. “Is that monkey tied up? The last thing I need is a monkey running all over the place. I’m telling you, these people had better be telling the truth about wanting it. This macaw parrot I can unload easy. But a monkey? Who’d buy it?”

“Yip, yip, yip,” the Aldens heard coming from the storage building.

“Awk, awk, awk,” the children heard when one of the men slammed the cage door shut. “Awk, awk, awk.”

Jessie straightened up. “Come on, Henry. We’ll find out what’s going on. The rest of you stay here,” she whispered. She raised her voice. “Mr. Fowler? Mr. Fowler? Are you back there?”

“Those kids again!” Jessie and Henry overheard Mr. Fowler say as he came out of the storage building. “I told you the shop was closing at five o’clock. What about your deliveries?”

Henry stepped forward to explain. “That’s why we came back, Mr. Fowler. One of the slips said to deliver a cat flea collar, but the customer needs one for her dog. And another slip had the wrong address.”

Jessie thought she noticed a small smile pass over Mr. Fowler’s face.

“Oh, and where was that?” Mr. Fowler asked, hiding the smile now.

“Nowhere special,” Henry said. He wasn’t about to let Mr. Fowler know about Brutus. “All we want to do is get the right orders to the right customers.”

That’s when Henry nearly jumped out of his sneakers. “Hey, hey! What’s this?” he asked, when he felt something heavy leap onto his shoulder.

“This is George. It’s a woolly monkey,” a strange man said, stepping out from the shadows. “Are you Mr. Fowler? I’m Jack Badham ... uh ... I’m from the, uh ... Tropical Animal Society. My friend Walter here is going to watch this monkey for a couple of days until we can ship him out to a zoo.”

Jessie reached up to pet the nervous, chattering monkey. “Good. He doesn’t belong in a pet shop. There, there, George. Don’t be afraid.”

The monkey had huge eyes. He didn’t seem quite as frightened when he heard Jessie’s voice.

“I won’t hurt you.” She looked at Mr. Badham. “Why don’t you bring this monkey to the Greenfield Animal Shelter for now? There’s more room than in this pet shop. Our friend Dr. Scott works there. She can take care of any kind of animal.”

“That is none of your concern, little girl,” Mr. Fowler said. “This monkey and the parrot Mr. Badham just brought here will be going to a famous zoo in a few days. They’ll be treated better there than at any shelter. What do you want now anyway?”

Henry spoke up. “We just want to take care of Mrs. Tweedy’s customers the way we promised her. We need a dog collar. And we have to find out who gets this diet cat food. Do you know?”

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