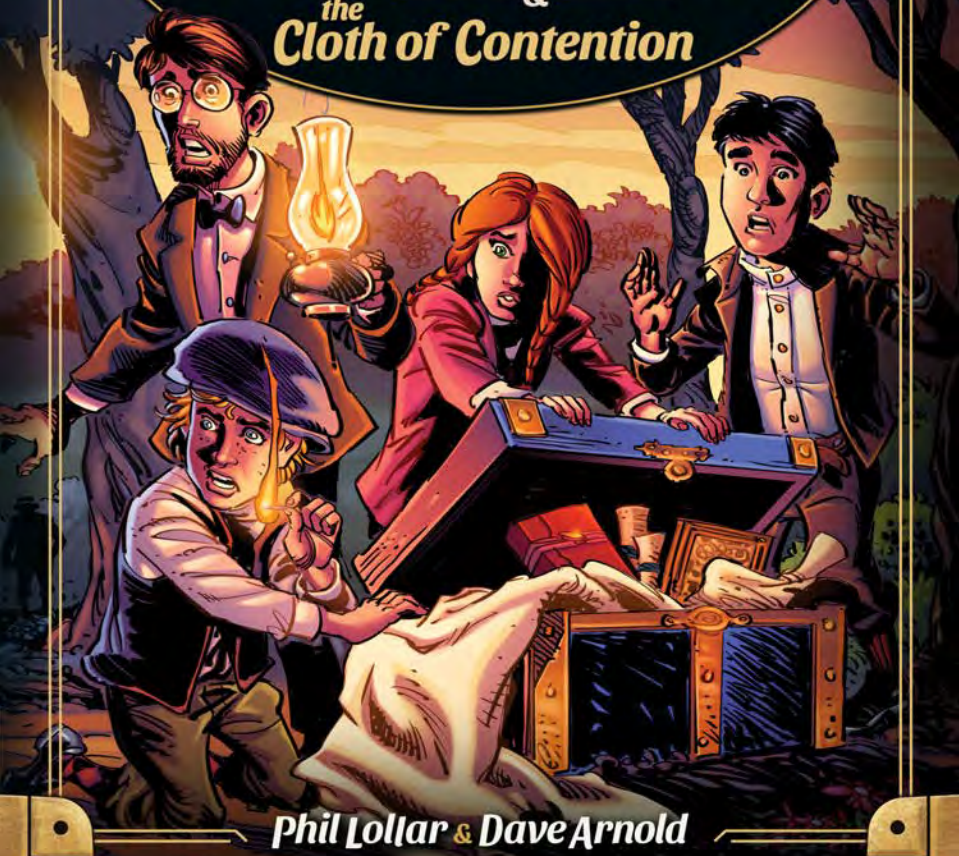


FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

Adventures in
ODYSSEY

YOUNG WHIT

&
*the
Cloth of Contention*



Phil Lollar & Dave Arnold

**YOUNG
WHIT**™
the &
Cloth of Contention

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FOCUS
ON
THE FAMILY®

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Young Whit and the Cloth of Contention

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For
Hal Smith,
Paul Herlinger,
and Andre Stojka.

Thank you all.

Prologue



T*his can't be happening! Why is all this happening?
It's all such a jumble! BenpoliceAlStevePaulEmmy
horsescrashconversionLazltdownkidnapbasketboronPhan-
tasmiConfabuLisaValVictutor—!*

“Johnny!” Emmy barked, jolting him out of his reverie.

“What?” he snapped. He looked at her and instantly regretted it.

She was shaking, sadness and confusion etched on her face, which was wet with tears. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I said that he confessed, Johnny! Ben confessed! Why would he do that? And Mr. Underwood looked so satisfied and smug!

And what about Steve? What is going on here? I mean really—*what is going on?*”

Johnny grabbed her by the shoulders firmly, startling her into an abrupt silence. “I don’t know, Emmy,” he said gently. “But we’re going to find out, all right?”

She blinked at him, took a breath, and burst into tears again.

He put his arm around her shoulders. “It’ll be okay,” he said.

But he wasn’t at all sure things would be okay. His dad was right—he was always in the middle of an adventure or an event or an “incident,” and today was no exception, though he desperately wished it were.

It had started out so nice. He and Emmy and Steve and Paul had gone on a horseback outing, in part to celebrate Steve’s becoming a Christian. The Mangle boys had been in a wagon, and he and Emmy had been riding behind. Suddenly Paul had lost control of the horses, the wagon had careened down a path and tumbled over, and Steve had flown out of his wheelchair.

Johnny was certain the worst had happened, but it turned out the best had happened instead. Steve *stood up!* For the first time in his life! It was a miracle! He was healed, not just of his injuries from the fall, but of muscular dystrophy, too! He was—is—a walking

example of the power of God. It was incredible! Even Karl Mangle, Steve's father, appeared to think so—until he looked at Johnny. It was a look Johnny had seen before, a creepy one that would've raised his hackles—if he'd had hackles.

And if all that weren't enough, Johnny and Emmy had then had to stand there and watch Al Hammett and Deputy Miller haul Ben out of his house in handcuffs and cart him away because he had confessed to helping Alvin Karpis and his gang rob Barrymore Banking and Trust!

Yes, he was far from believing that everything would be all right, but that's not what he told Emmy. He gave her shoulders another squeeze and said, "We'll figure it out. On the bright side, between Steve and Ben, I think we've filled our quota of surprises for a while—"

Beep! Beep!

They both jumped at the noise. A Greyhound Supercoach bus pulled off the road and up to a stop. The door opened, and out stepped an older Black woman. She was short and seemed almost as wide as she was tall. She wore a weathered but clean blue dress and carried a beat-up cardboard suitcase. Her round face was crowned with straightened, graying hair pulled up in a bun on the top of her head and tied with a large kerchief that matched her dress.

Coal-black eyes peered out from her careworn face, eyes that were at once kind and gave the impression that they could bore a hole right through you if you incurred her wrath. There was something familiar about her, Johnny thought, but it wasn't until her stern expression gave way to a beautiful smile with immaculate teeth at the sight of Ben's house that Johnny realized who she was.

"Oh, boy," he muttered.

"What's the matter?" Emmy whispered. "Do you know that woman?"

"I think so. And if she is who I think she is, then I was wrong about us filling our quota of surprises."

The bus driver closed the door, the woman waved at him, and the Greyhound glided back onto and down the road. The woman then headed straight for Ben's front door.

"Uhh, ma'am?" Johnny called, running up to her. Emmy followed close behind.

"Yes?" the woman replied.

"Y-you wouldn't happen to be Mrs. Huck, would you?"

The woman smiled again. "Why, yes, I would! I'm Mrs. Hattie Huck!"

Johnny paled slightly. "I'm John Whittaker."

"Oh my goodness!" Hattie dropped her suitcase and

immediately wrapped Johnny in a warm bear hug. “You the one my Ben wrote me about—the one whose family needs a housekeeper?” Hattie broke the hug but kept her hands on Johnny’s shoulders.

“Uh, y-yes, ma’am.”

“Ben jes’ goes on and on ’bout you! How smart and clever you are an’ all!”

Johnny’s face reddened. “Well, Ben’s really smart, too, . . . thanks to you! I’ve learned a lot from him!”

“You’re Ben’s mother?” Emmy said, surprised.

“Oh, sorry!” Johnny gestured to Emmy. “This is my friend Emmy Capello.”

“I knew it, sure as we standin’ here!” Hattie grabbed Emmy’s hand and pumped it. “Pleased to meet you, Emmy! Ben’s tole me lots ’bout you, too!”

Emmy blinked. “He has?”

“Sho’ ’nuff!” Hattie leaned in and added conspiratorially, “He said the two o’ you gets into trouble like a bear gets into honey!” She laughed warmly, and it made Johnny and Emmy want to laugh too. “Well, don’t let’s stand out here when we could be inside havin’ some sweet tea with my Ben!”

She started for the door, but Johnny stopped her. “Mrs. Huck—”

“Please, call me Hattie.”

“Uh, Hattie, Ben isn’t home.”

“No? Where is he?”

Johnny and Emmy exchanged looks. Johnny took a deep breath. “You need to come home with me. There are some things I need to tell you.” He added quietly, “And my parents . . .”

Hattie looked confused. “Shouldn’t we wait for Ben? Or at least leave him a note?”

“Uh . . . no. Um, I’ll explain on the way. Here, lemme get your suitcase.”

He took it from her, Emmy took Hattie’s arm, and the three of them headed down the road toward Magnolia Lane and the Whittakers’ house. Johnny’s jaw tightened. *I can’t believe I forgot all about her—and I didn’t tell my parents!* He sighed. *To paraphrase Oliver Hardy, “Here’s another fine mess I’ve gotten myself into.”*

Chapter One



Slap!

Johnny stifled a smile. He had never seen his father do a facepalm before.

They were in the Inner Sanctum, also known as his father's office. Johnny had gotten out of his cowboy outfit and into some regular clothes. In rapid succession, he had just told Harold and Fiona that Steve had been healed, Ben had been arrested, and Hattie had arrived just after the police had carted Ben away.

Rubbing his still-smarting forehead, Harold took a deep breath. "All right, let's take these one at a time, starting with Steve's healing. First, you're sure he was healed?"

“He stood up, Dad,” Johnny replied pointedly. “Ask Emmy if you don’t believe me.”

“Praise God!” Fiona interjected.

“You should’ve seen him run!” Johnny marveled. “He was like the wind! Emmy and I couldn’t even keep up!”

“God is so good!” Fiona exclaimed.

“Yes,” Harold said, nodding. “It is wonderful. Still, the question remains: How did it happen?” He looked at Johnny suspiciously.

Johnny shrugged. “I know what you’re thinking, but the cloth is still in the lockbox in the Durham Bank! I couldn’t have gotten it out without you. It takes two keys, and you have one of them.”

“Then how?” Harold asked.

“The Lord doesna need a cloth to perform a miracle, Harold,” Fiona said.

“No, of course He doesn’t,” Harold responded, “but the only miracle I’ve ever witnessed was because of the cloth.”

Johnny looked into his stepmother’s sightless eyes. He recalled when he and his father had tried to heal her with the cloth, before Christmas. She’d wanted nothing to do with it, which was a bitter pill for Johnny and Harold to swallow, but out of that bitterness, Fiona had led Johnny himself to become a child of God. Still,

something else stirred in his memory of the event. He had lost the cloth for several days prior to trying to use it on Fiona. When he had gotten it back and picked it up to lay it on her, he'd noticed that the cloth felt different. It was shorter. A large piece had been cut from it.

But the cloth in the lockbox in Durham wasn't anywhere near Steve when he was healed. In fact, all they could find to cover him with after the accident was Emmy's patchwork cloak. A piece of the cloth must have ended up in the patchwork somehow.

A chill suddenly shot up Johnny's spine. If a piece of the cloth ended up in the cloak, then it was entirely possible that other pieces of the cloth may be floating around out there. His brow furrowed, and he swallowed hard—a fact that didn't go unnoticed by his father. “John?” Harold asked. “Do you know something?”

“Um . . . I may.”

“What is it?”

“I don't want to say just yet. I need to check it out first.”

“John—”

“I promise I'll tell you as soon as I know for sure, Dad. We're going to trust each other, right?”

Harold frowned. “Okay. But please try to be discreet. Too many people know about this already.”

Johnny gulped again. “Uh, yeah . . . speaking of which . . .”

Harold’s shoulders slumped. “Oh, no! Who?”

“Professor Mangle. He was there, Dad. Steve ran into his arms. He was very happy, of course, but as he hugged Steve, he gave me one of his creepy looks.”

Harold sighed. “Well . . . obviously that couldn’t be helped. Karl is going to be a problem, though. He’s been chasing after this for years.”

“So, what do we do?” Johnny asked.

Harold shook his head. “Not ‘we’—me. I need to go over to the Mangles’ and assess the situation. First, though, there’s another situation you need to tell us about right here, sitting out in our living room.”

Johnny nodded. “Hattie.”

“Mrs. Huck,” Fiona corrected.

“She told me to call her ‘Hattie’—”

“Why is she *here*?” Harold interjected. “Her son was just arrested. Didn’t she want to go see him immediately?”

“Does she know about it?” Fiona asked.

“Yeah, I told her on the way over. And she did want to go see him right away, but . . . I thought I should bring her here first.”

Harold frowned again. “Odd coincidence that she just happened to show up now.”

Johnny looked at his shoes. “That’s because . . . it isn’t a coincidence.”

Fiona nodded. “Aye, I knew it. All right, John Avery. The whole story. Out wi’ it.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “Hattie’s here because Ben invited her.”

“And why did Ben do that?” Harold asked.

“Because . . . I asked him to.”

“And why did you do that?”

“Because . . . I thought she’d be a good . . .” Johnny swallowed hard. “A good . . .” He swallowed again and then said quickly, “Housekeeper.”

Fiona’s sightless eyes narrowed. “A housekeeper for who?” she asked icily.

“For . . . us,” Johnny admitted, then added quickly, “You do an amazing job, Fiona, really! But I think you need some help!”

“Not likely!” Fiona spat, her spine stiffening.

Harold put his hands on his wife’s shoulders but talked to Johnny. “You told Ben to tell his mother there was a job waiting for her here? And you didn’t bother to tell *us*?”

“I meant to—I did! But things have got so crazy lately that until she showed up on the bus today, I just plain forgot! I’m sorry!”

“What makes you think we can afford a housekeeper?” Harold asked.

“Or *need* one?” Fiona added sharply.

“You don’t have to afford her,” Johnny replied, ignoring Fiona’s query for the moment. “I’ll pay her salary!”

“You?” Harold and Fiona said in unison.

“Yes! I saved most of the money I made tutoring Victor Farnsworth! I’ll use it to pay her until I get another job!”

“And what if you don’t get another job?” asked Harold.

“The tutoring money will cover her through the summer,” Johnny replied. “I should be able to get another job by then! And yes, I remember that I still need to clean up the town hall records storage room this summer. I can handle both!”

Harold nodded slightly. “Sounds like you’ve got it all worked out.”

“All except for the part where we dinna need a housekeeper!” his stepmother snapped.

Harold turned her to face him, keeping his hands on her shoulders. “Sweetheart . . . it might not be a bad idea.”

It was the first time Johnny had heard his father use a term of endearment for Fiona. It made him feel a bit strange. He knew his father really loved Fiona, and he was glad Harold had found happiness, but it seemed to Johnny a slight to his mother's memory. Had his father already gotten over Janneth's death?

Fiona brushed off Harold's hands abruptly. "Ye think me incapable, do ye?" Fiona asked.

"No, not at all—"

"Then we agree: a housekeeper is not necessary. I'll tell her." And before Harold or Johnny could stop her, Fiona beelined to the door, threw it open, and headed down the hallway. Harold and Johnny both bolted after her, Harold in the lead and Johnny close behind, marveling at how quickly Fiona moved.

But just as she was about to enter the living room, she stopped—so suddenly that Harold had to grab the wall to keep from running into her. This caused Johnny to plow right into Harold's backside, bounce off him, and land on his own keister on the floor. Johnny was distinctly reminded of the last Three Stooges film short he saw; all they needed was Moe clunking their heads together. Harold gave him a peculiar look, which Johnny returned, and then both nearly burst out laughing.

Harold suddenly put a finger to his lips, shushing

Johnny. He pointed to his ear, and then to the living room. Johnny heard voices coming from the next room—those of Hattie and Charlie, his younger sister. And Fiona was listening to them. Johnny commando-crawled closer to the doorway and peered inside the room.

Hattie sat on the edge of Harold's overstuffed chair, and Charlie stood next to her, reading from one of her picture books. "*C for Crash! D for Dash!*"

"That's real nice, honey!" Hattie said. "You a fine reader!"

"Thanks," said Charlie. "I've been learning. This book isn't as good as *Mary Poppins*, though. My daddy reads that to me. Are you gonna be my nanny like *Mary Poppins*?"

"Wouldja like me to be?"

Charlie shrugged. "You're pretty nice, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well . . ." Charlie lowered her voice. "Are you magic like *Mary Poppins*?"

Hattie threw back her head and laughed, and Johnny thought she looked just like Ben. "Why, chile, when it comes to magic, *Mary Poppins* ain't got nuthin' on me!"

Charlie's eyes widened. "You can do magic?"

Hattie shrugged. "Ev'rybody can do magic! We jus' don't like to call it that. See, we live in a magical world!"

“We do?”

“Sho’ ’nuff!” She leaned forward. “Now, they’s some things ’bout that you need ta know. Fust, they’s good magic, and they’s bad magic. But the Lord God Almighty controls it all, ev’ry bit! He wants us to stay away from the bad magic”—she pushed her arms out—“an’ embrace the good magic!” She pulled Charlie to her in a big hug.

Charlie giggled, wriggled out of Hattie’s grasp, and then looked thoughtful. “But . . . is the good magic *really* magic?”

Hattie’s eyes grew wide. “A’course it is! Why, we live in a world where a man once took a big stick, threw it on the ground, and it turned into a snake! Then, a whole lotta other men threw *they* sticks on the ground, and *they* all turned into snakes! Then the first man’s snake swallowed up all the other snakes, and then turned back into a stick again!” Hattie leaned closer to Charlie. “Mary Poppins ever do *that*?”

Charlie frowned. “No . . . but . . . that’s just part of the story of Moses!”

Hattie leaned back in the chair, her hand on her chest. “*Just?* Moses was *real*! That really happened! He really did it! That was *real* magic, not like Mary Poppins! You hear what I’m sayin’?”

Charlie nodded slowly. “Yes . . . But you said *everyone* can do magic!”

“An’ so they can!”

Charlie shook her head. “Not me!”

“You jus’ *did*, chile! A minute ago!”

“I did? How?”

Hattie pointed. “What’s that in yo’ hand?”

Charlie held it up. “My book.”

“What’s it made of?”

“Paper.”

“And what’s paper made of?”

Charlie scratched her head. “I dunno.”

Hattie leaned toward her and whispered loudly, “Wood. From trees!” She rose from the chair and pantomimed sawing, mashing, and pressing. “All sawn apart, mashed up, and pressed together again! Now, what’s on that tree paper in yo’ book?”

“Drawings.”

“An’ what else?”

Charlie flipped through the pages. “Um . . . words!”

“An’ what are words made of?”

“Letters!” Charlie jumped up and down with excitement.

“Whoa, now! Look closer at ’em. Whatta you see?”

Charlie scrutinized the letters. “They look like . . . like straight and squiggly little lines.”

“Right! So, you got a buncha straight an’ squiggly little lines an’ drawings on a piece of tree in yo’ hand—an’ you can look at it an’ know what it means!”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “But . . . that’s not magic! That’s just . . . reading!”

Hattie put her hands on her hips. “An’ what makes you think readin’ ain’t magic? Besides, I ain’t got to the *real* magic part yet!”

Charlie giggled.

Hattie went on. “Now. Where did them straight an’ squiggly little lines that make up them letters that make up them words that you know what they mean on that piece of tree come from?”

Charlie pondered for a moment. “The writer! Her name is Wanda!”

“Mm-hm. An’ where’d Wanda get ’em?”

“I guess she . . . she just . . . thought them up!”

Hattie’s jaw dropped, and her hands flew to the sides of her face. “Thought ’em up? You mean in her mind?”

“Well, yeah! That’s where thoughts are!”

“Oh! So, when you read them straight an’ squiggly little lines that make up them letters that make up

them words that Wanda thought up, then you ain't just readin'. What you *really* doin' is *readin' her mind!* That makes you a mind reader, chile! Sound like magic to you?"

Now Charlie's jaw dropped. "Wow!"

Hattie sat back down and took Charlie's hands. "Now, here's the best part of all. What's this book right here?" She nodded toward the end table next to the chair.

Charlie turned. "That's Daddy's Bible."

"And the Bible is . . . ?"

Charlie thought for a long moment, and then it dawned on her. "God's Word!" she whispered.

Hattie nodded. "Which means that the Holy Scriptures are what *God* thinks! So, when you read the Bible—"

"I'm reading *God's* mind!" Charlie interjected excitedly.

Hattie smiled. "That's the best magic of all!" Charlie flew into Hattie's arms, and the two hugged again.

Just then Fiona stepped into the room, followed by Harold and Johnny, and cleared her throat. Charlie broke away from Hattie and ran to her mother. Hattie immediately stood up.

"Mama! I'm magical!" Charlie exclaimed.

“So I heard,” Fiona said stiffly. “Sorry, Mrs. Huck. I dinna mean to eavesdrop on your conversation.”

“Oh, tha’s all right!” Hattie said. “An’ please call me ‘Hattie.’ We was jus’ gettin’ to be friends, Charlie an’ me.”

“Can she be my nanny, Mommy?” Charlie pleaded. “She’s way better than Mary Poppins!”

Johnny held his breath. Harold didn’t move.

Hattie took a step forward. “Missus Whittaker, I jes’ want you to know that I don’ expect nothin’ from y’all. I did feel like it was time fo’ a change, and when Ben wrote an’ tole me how nice y’all are, and mebbe you needed hep, an’ mebbe I’uz the one to hep you, I did feel like God was tellin’ me to come here. But now, what wi’ Ben’s situation, I believe God brought me here fo’ a diff’rnt reason. My boy needs me.”

Fiona reached out and found Charlie’s head, then stroked her hair. “Of course, Mrs. Huck . . . Hattie. Ben must be your focus now. But . . . perhaps . . . you could come help take care of Charlie . . . if you have time.”

Hattie smiled. “I’d be happy to, ma’am.”

“Yay!” Charlie clapped and jumped up and down.

Johnny and Harold exchanged glances, and both heaved silent sighs of relief. Harold turned to Hattie. “Our home is open to you for as long as you need it.”

“I thank you, suh,” Hattie responded, “but, no thank you. I’ll stay at Ben’s house.”

“He’s innocent, Hattie,” Johnny said. “I know it! I can’t imagine why he confessed.”

“They’s only one way to find out,” Hattie replied evenly. “I need to go see him at the jail.”

“I don’t think he wants to talk to anybody.”

“I’m his mama. He’ll talk to me if he knows what’s good for him. Mr. Whittaker, if it’s not too much trouble, would you mind givin’ me a ride to the jail-house?”

“Yeah, I wanna go too, Dad,” Johnny said eagerly.

“It’s no trouble at all,” said Harold. “But it’s a bit late in the day. It might be better if you go tomorrow.”

Johnny looked out the window. Twilight was falling, and the scenery outside had taken on a golden hue. Where had the day gone?

Hattie nodded. “I guess it is gettin’ nigh onto sup-pertime. A’ight, tomorrow then.”

“We go to church in the morning. You’re more than welcome to join us. Then I’ll drop you off after.”

“Thank you, suh. I’d like that.”

There was a pause, and then Fiona said, “Well, speak-ing of supper, I should get to it. You’ll stay, Hattie?”

“Why, yes, ma’am! I could do with a meal. In fact,

if you jes' show me where ev'rything is, I'll make y'all sup—”

“No.” Fiona cut her off. “*I'll* do it. You make yourself at home and tell Charlie more about how *magical* she is.” Fiona exited into the kitchen.

No one said anything for a moment. Harold's face reddened with embarrassment. Johnny looked down at his shoes and then peered up at Hattie. To his surprise, she looked not insulted or hurt but sympathetic. She smiled reassuringly at Harold. Charlie just looked confused, then broke the silence. “C'mon, Hattie! I'll show you my room!”

“Dat sounds like a good idea, chile,” Hattie said softly.

Charlie grabbed her hand, and the two of them walked over to and up the stairs.

Slap! Harold face-palmed again, then winced at the pain.

Twice in one day, Johnny thought, stifling a smile.

