

FOREST CIRCLE QUEST

A MAGIC CIRCLE

STORY

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(FONTS NOT TRUE TO THE ACTUAL BOOK)

CHAPTER 1

A Lamb, a Mouse, and a Quest

‘Look, here come the Porkers!’ Joe Smith yelled to his group of friends, interrupting a fascinating game of seeing who could walk farthest into a mud puddle without getting waterlogged shoes. All interest in the puddle was immediately lost. Seeing the dreaded ‘Smith Crowd’ in their path, the approaching plump pair prepared to push off particularly promptly. Jean Bartman, a tall athletic girl acknowledged as second only to Joe himself in leading the ‘Crowd’, raced behind them to cut them off.

‘Oink, oink!’ she called. ‘How are the little pork pies today? Still pigging away to fatten yourselves up for Christmas?’

‘No, that’s turkeys,’ objected a scrawny boy called Stan Reed, trying to kick water at the two from the puddle. His shoes were already full to the brim, so it didn’t matter any more.

‘The Porkers just fatten themselves up all year round,’ sniggered one of the others.

A bright thought struck Stan. ‘Hey, piggies like mud, don’t they?’

‘That’s right, they do,’ said Joe, advancing on the pair. ‘Let’s give them a nice wallow in some.’

The faces of both screwed up to cry. ‘You touch us, an’ I’ll tell my Aunty!’ one of them quavered.

‘You did that yesterday, and she tried to get us into trouble,’ said Jean, also moving closer.

‘Maybe sitting in some mud will get it into your fat little heads that telling tales only makes us cross.’

The ‘Smith Crowd’ was a fairly normal bunch of high-spirited youngsters, with no more cruel or nasty streaks than might be expected when nobody bothered to stop them from doing whatever they liked. Still, something about the podgy brother and sister never failed to beg for a generous dose of bullying, teasing and tormenting. Percival and Patsy Parker-Pyle looked like identical twins, even though they were exactly one year apart in age. Percival had caught up with his elder sister in height, and they both had the same, and far too much, girth. They wore their mousy, untidy hair the same length, and always dressed in exactly the same way, and very sloppily. They even seemed to match one another in the patterns of pimples on their faces.

As Jean moved in to grab them she paused, staring in total disbelief. A small black lamb had suddenly appeared between her and her victims. It seemed to be glaring at her in a threatening way. She shook her head and muttered, 'Don't be silly, lambs can't look threatening.' She failed to convince herself. This one did.

The Parkers ignored the lamb. Their one idea was to get away, and their best option for doing so was to retreat, where there was only one enemy instead of the five coming from the front. Splitting up, they tried to dodge past Jean, one on either side of her, showing a remarkable turn of speed considering their weight. Jean hesitated for a second, realised she couldn't stop both of them, and made a determined dive at the nearest. A black blur passed her feet, and suddenly her dive had turned into a belly-flop, straight into the mud puddle nearest to her.

'Look at Jean!' hooted one of the others. 'She tripped over a sheep!' Convulsed with laughter, the rest slowed enough for the Parkers to build up a good lead.

Joe noticed this. 'They're getting away,' he yelled. 'After them!'

Forgetting their mirth for a while, the four sprinted after Joe, who was already catching up with the fleeing figures. The lamb, after following the pair for a short distance, had now stopped and turned round. It was in Joe's way, so the boy aimed a kick at it. He missed. The lamb suddenly wasn't in front of his foot. Instead, it seemed to have got behind his heel somehow, and given the kick a boost. Joe's kicking leg went up so far that the other followed it, and he landed flat on his back, knocking all his breath out. The girl following him tried to jump over his body, slipped in the mud, and landed on top of him.

Glancing over their shoulders in terror, the Parkers had seen this downfall, and now unwisely stopped for a better look. Led by Stan, squelching in his waterlogged shoes, the remaining three redoubled their speed, hoping to grab them before they started running again. Something went badly wrong. A busy black shape darted from one runner to the next, and each felt a woolly body touch them for an instant. Then their feet seemed to become hopelessly tangled, and all found themselves sprawled in an even bigger puddle than the one Jean was still painfully crawling out of.

So surprised were the Parkers at the sight of the entire 'Smith Crowd' wallowing in mud instead of making them do it, that they continued to stand and stare instead of making good their escape. Only when all their would-be tormentors were back on their feet did they think of fleeing again, but now something else amazing was happening. The lamb had been nibbling casually at some grass by the roadway, but as soon as all members of the grubby group were standing again he began advancing on them ominously. Again Jean found herself muttering, this time that lambs couldn't advance ominously. Again she found herself deciding that this one did.

Stan lost his nerve. 'That isn't a lamb, it's a devil!' he yelled. 'Or maybe it's mad, like a dog with that rabies thing, an' if it bites you, you also go mad an' die! I'm out of here!' He was, right away.

Panic is catching. It caught the others in a tight clutch, made them turn chicken, and the clutch of chickens followed Stan at speed, clucking. Only Joe remained, trying to catch enough breath to call his followers back to catch the hated Parkers. Then he caught sight of the rather nasty look in the lamb's eye as it still advanced towards him. He caught two more things: the panic-attack of his no-longer-following followers, and enough breath to follow them. He was still too winded to do another catching thing by catching up, though.

The lamb turned and trotted to where the Parkers were still standing with their mouths wide open. The corpulent couple wondered briefly if they should also run from him. (Or was it a 'her'? No, it seemed too cocky for that.) Anyway, he didn't seem to mean them any harm. In fact, it was almost as if he had been on their side deliberately.

'How did you do all that?' Patsy asked, and then realised how ridiculous she must sound, asking questions of a lamb. Now, of course, the awful Percival would never let her hear the end of it.

Her brother leapt at the opportunity. 'Expecting an answer, are you?' he sniggered. 'Let me give it.' He put on a bleating voice. 'Actually, you si-hilly girl, I was so frigh-igh-ightedened by all those children running at me that I got scare-eh-eh-eh-ed and ran in circles and tripped them up.'

The lamb seemed to glare at him, and then shook his head in a most human fashion.

Patsy developed a wild hope. Could it be one of her days for scoring over her horrible brother?

'You meant to trip them up, didn't you?' she asked eagerly. The lamb unmistakably nodded. 'You meant to come to our rescue?' The lamb nodded again. Patsy looked witheringly at Percival. 'You'd better apologise to both of us,' she demanded.

Percival spluttered. Of all the bad luck, this stupid animal happening to move in a way that made his dreadful sister seem right. Now she'd go into telling him to respect his elders, and how much less grown up he was than she, and that he was still a baby, and all the similar things that always made him get so mad with her. He tried to think of an insult horrible enough for the occasion, but before he could decide on what should follow 'You're a ...', the attentions of both were taken by the lamb. He had trotted ahead, glanced over his shoulder, and was now moving his head in a 'Follow me,' gesture.

Boy and girl stood rooted to the spot, mouths open again.

'D'you think he wants us to go somewhere with him?' Percival asked weakly, and his sister shook her head, nodded, and shrugged. Normally, that would have been enough for the boy to say something like, 'Was that a definite "I-don't-know", or are you still trying to find a mind so you can make it up?' but the lamb had now become impatient. Rearing up on its hind legs, it swept one hoof towards its front in a definite beckoning movement. Meekly, they followed as the creature led them some way back across the common in the direction of their home. Then, the lamb veered off onto a pathway leading towards a group of small trees at the far end, waiting for them as they skirted the worst of the puddles - this had been the first time the rain had stopped for the whole weekend. They knew the copse well, having picnicked and played there from youngest childhood, but now as soon as they entered it something looked strange and unfamiliar. The path seemed to end abruptly and, as if through slightly frosted glass, they could see trees larger than any they had ever noticed there before, and beyond them a glimpse of a garden far too beautiful to be real.

The lamb motioned with his head again, and as he went ahead of them his outline seemed to blur. Unconsciously grabbing one another's hands (they never held hands, normally) the Parkers followed. They had the strangest feeling: a bit like when ears are blocked and they get unblocked suddenly, but more as if their bodies had been taken apart and put back

together again all in an instant. Then, so many strange things were happening it was hard to take them all in.

They were standing on a log. The trees, and glimpses of garden between them, no longer looked hazy, but seemed even more breathtakingly lovely. To their left, the lamb was facing them with an eager expression; while to their right was a mouse, standing on hind legs in the middle of a lily pad floating in the air. Next to him hovered a board with all sorts of keys dangling from pegs. Beyond was something like a large square fishnet, hanging in midair as if pegged on a line.

A high-pitched 'Peep, peep!' came from the direction of the mouse, followed by a voice saying squeakily, 'Welcome to Fabulous Forest. You have logged in at ...'

'Never mind that now, there isn't time. You can log them in when - and if - they come back.' Now the speaker was ... no, it couldn't be ... but it was! The lamb!

Percival turned to his sister. 'If this is a dream, I suppose it must be a nightmare, with you in it,' he said, hastily releasing her hand.

'I was thinking the same, with you here,' snapped his sister, 'except no nightmare could ever look like that,' and she gestured towards the gardens. 'Maybe it's Eden, and you're here to be the snake.' She paused and added, 'Of course, that's an insult to snakes. They're nice creatures.'

The lamb regarded them with concern. 'I hope that spell didn't get messed up,' he muttered, and then addressed them. 'You are Val and Trisha Parker, aren't you?'

'No,' said Percival. 'That is, we are Parker-Pyles, and people call us Parker, but I'm Percival and this thing of a sister is Patsy.'

'I'm known as Baa, and this is The Mouse, with The Keyboard and The Net,' said the lamb absently. 'Oh dear, what could've gone wrong? Wait a minute, though,' and he turned to Patsy. 'Is your real name Patricia?'

'Yes,' said Patsy, but ...'

Baa gave a sigh of relief. 'Oh, that's all right then. You must be the ones. Obviously, if you

do the Quest, you'll somehow come to be known as Val and Trisha. Actually, I like the sound of it more than Percival and Patsy. Same as I like Mary more than Miranda.'

'Who's this Mary-Miranda?' asked Patsy-Trisha.

'Crown Princess Mary,' Baa responded casually. 'What you see over there are the grounds of Garden Palace, her home, where we all live.'

Percival-Val had more pressing things on his mind. 'What's this Quest thing?' he asked suspiciously.

'Oh, quite simple, really,' Baa said airily. 'Wizard Otterley lost something important and consulted Sad Sadie the Sorry Sybil about it. Sadie said she remembered that you two had come in to try and sort it all out – she gets time all mixed up, and remembers things that haven't happened yet. Of course, she said you'd been killed any number of times in trying to do it, and she cried buckets.'

Percival and Patsy promptly paled.

'Er, I don't think ...' said Percival, and 'Maybe we're not the right ones ...' said Patsy, at the same time.

'Oh, don't worry about that!' Baa said cheerily. 'You've no idea what horrible fates she predicted for Mary and me and our companions in a spot of bother we had recently, involving monsters and things, and how much she cried then. We came through all right, though. Mind you,' he added reflectively, 'it did get a bit sticky at times, what, as Wizard Prang would say. If I hadn't discovered that as well as being a bit of a wizard I had the Black Prince as an alter ego, things would have been rather bad.'

'Alter ego? Black Prince?' the two asked, in perfect chorus.

'Some wizards can become an alter ego, which means "other self",' explained Baa. 'Wizard Prang has an albatross, and loves flying. I have ... this.' All at once, a figure slightly taller than the two was standing before them, in armour from head to toe of a striking, radiant black. He removed his helmet, and a merry and good-looking boy with long curly black hair smiled at them before putting the helmet on again and instantly returning to being a lamb.

'Well, if you can be like that,' blurted Patsy, who had been much taken with the appearance of the boy, 'why are you that?'

'A lamb is what I am,' answered Baa, a little coldly. 'It's my normal self, and I'm happy and comfortable with it. I only usually do the Black Prince bit for adventures or official functions

and things.'

'If you and this Crown Princess are so good at adventures,' Percival asked challengingly, 'why aren't you going on this one?'

Baa sighed. 'It's an awful bore,' he responded, 'but Wizard Bang's had to go and look after North District until they find another wizard – the last one got bashed by trolls – and he's left me to do the wizarding for West District, where we are now, until he gets back. And Mary's trying to catch up on a lot of schoolwork she lost while she was being damsel-napped and fighting monsters and all that.' He looked doubtfully at the unprepossessing pair. 'Have you ever been on an adventure yourselves?' he asked.

With the memory of the Black Prince still fresh in her mind, Patsy wanted to impress. 'Oh, any number,' she said casually. 'We've had to become quite good at working out ways to get out of impossible situations.'

She wasn't quite lying. When the two of them weren't either reading or fighting one another, they would often go into an imaginary world as hero and heroine. They would take turns where one would invent a situation of desperate danger, mostly based on the latest books they'd been reading. Then the other would invent a way for them to have got out of it. Whenever they played this game, they completely forgot how much they hated one another and became the best of friends until the 'adventure' ended.

Percival was far less impressed by the Black Prince than his sister had been. 'We can't go off anywhere,' he objected, 'even though hols have just started. Aunty would freak, and then she'd call Mom and Dad, and they'd have to cancel a concert or something, and be mad as snakes – not that I've ever seen a snake really mad. They're quite good-tempered.'

'Why, what do your Mom and Dad do?' came the squeaky voice from the lily pad. The Mouse had apparently got over a fit of sulks he'd developed as soon as Baa stopped him from 'logging them in', whatever that was.

'Music!' Percival replied disgustedly. 'They dash all over the place playing their horrible cello and piano music, and looking all beautiful and handsome in their fancy evening dress, and being famous, while we get stuck with Aunty Prudence. She hates us, but hasn't anywhere else to live. The one good thing about her is,' and he brightened, 'she does feed us properly. Whenever Mom and Dad are home, we nearly starve.'

Baa and The Mouse looked at the round figures of the two, decided it was best to say

nothing, and that's what they said.

Patsy jumped awkwardly off the log. 'I'm getting dizzy up here,' she complained. 'Anyway, if the adventure doesn't take more than this afternoon, it probably won't matter.'

Baa looked at her wide-eyed. 'I sort of think it might take just a little longer than that,' he said. 'I mean, just getting to Northeast Forest could take a week or two. Still, The Mouse could perhaps get you back to the same "when" you left from ... no, that would be too expensive, and I haven't got too many trics left.' Seeing their puzzled expressions, he added, 'Trics spelt with a "cee" are units of magic energy, and we use them like money here, in accounts with Magic Supply Company.'

'Do you know any jokes?' The Mouse butted in eagerly.

'Not now!' snapped Baa. The Mouse looked hurt, so he went on, 'Sorry, but we really must settle whether Val and Trisha are willing to help us.' He turned to them. 'Don't worry, I'll find a way to get you here without any drama at home, one way or another. Just give me a day or so. Now, are you willing to go on this Quest, or not?'

Percival said 'No,' in a decided voice, and Patsy 'Yes,' in an excited one. Then they began arguing furiously, spending more time in hurling insults than in actually making points.

The lamb sighed. 'While you're, er, discussing it, just take a tiny peek at Garden Palace,' he suggested, and began to lead the way to the edge of the trees. Patsy followed eagerly, but Percival stayed stubbornly on the log for a while. Then, missing a sister to argue with, he jumped down, made a bad job of the landing, and skinned his knees. Sniffing, he caught up with the girl and lamb, and then forgot knees and everything else while he stared in wonder.

The glimpse through the trees had only hinted at how marvellous the gardens looked. In their blazes of colour, sweeping lawns of a vivid green, elegant follies and bridges, and stretches of sapphire-coloured lakes and ponds, they were utterly dazzling. Then, the palace! Rising from the centre of the gardens, and matching them as if planted there rather than built, it was so perfect in its fairy-tale grace and splendour that description would go on strike and demand overtime pay.

'Your rooms, while you stay here, would be near mine in that far tower,' Baa mentioned casually.

'Oh, yes,' breathed Percival.

‘Oh, yes-yes-yes!’ squealed Patsy, jumping up and down and looking rather like a beach-ball.

‘Good, then,’ said Baa, in a relieved tone. ‘Go home, and it’ll all be arranged.’ He turned and gambolled off in the direction of Garden Palace.

The last thing they heard as they climbed back over the log was The Mouse squeaking aggrievedly to himself, ‘They got off the log, so they should have been logged in and out.’

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