

The Mystery Night

By Elsie Locke

New Zealand Department of Education © Crown

All this happened a long time ago. You could not find a place like our magic cave any more. But I can never forget the fancy streamers or the golden blanket, or the pictures of dancing girls in harem trousers - or the look of contentment on our father's face when we found it.

My name is Adrienne. I was eight when our mother died, and Shane was five.

Mum had been ill for weeks. Aunt Eva stayed to look after us, and kept us all busy all the time. I used to sit in the bedroom and read stories to Mum or play the recorder to her. Then she died, and we had two hard weeks with all sorts of people coming and going.

When Aunt Eva went back to the farm, it seemed as if our whole lives had changed.

Dad worked in the office of the woollen mills. It was quite an important job. To keep our home going, he engaged three housekeepers, one after the other. None of them stayed very long. They said they couldn't manage Shane and me because we were too naughty.

Well, we were naughty. They didn't understand how much we were missing our mother, or why we wanted everything done the way she used to do it. Shane had an old teddy bear he hadn't touched for ages. Now he went round clutching it all the time. Mrs Graham told him that big boys who go to school don't play with teddy bears, especially a dirty old thing with one eye and one ear. After that, Shane pretended he was deaf when she spoke to him, and wouldn't talk to her.

Miss Nash told me off for coming home dirty after I'd been playing in the hedge-house down the street. It wouldn't have mattered to Mum. She'd only have said to go and get washed. Miss Nash kept picking on me for not making my bed properly and not putting my things away and not hurrying up to dry the dishes. I couldn't please her if I tried, so I stopped trying; and annoyed her on purpose.

The third housekeeper, Mrs McWhirter, couldn't see a joke, and that's a hard thing to put up with when you come home from school nearly bursting with a new one. Somehow, we couldn't help giving her cheek. When Dad caught us at it, he was very angry, and it was unusual for him to get angry at all.

After dinner that night, I went looking for him in the workshop to tell him I was sorry - and he was crying. He held out his hands to me, and I put my arms round his neck and cried with him. It was because of Mother, and because of me and Shane, as well. But Shane was only little. After I'd cried a while, I felt better and braver, and I saw that Dad had calmed down, too.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll try hard to be nice to Mrs McWhirter. Cross my heart I will."

"No, I'll tell her to go," said Dad. "There's not a woman born that can take your mother's place, Adrienne. I'll find a way to manage without a housekeeper."

After Mrs McWhirter left, we went to Mrs Moon's after school. That was only temporary. Mrs Moon lived next door and we liked her, but she was an old lady who couldn't stand a lot of noise. We promised Dad we would stick to quiet games, and painting, and cutting out; and we kept our promise. Dad fixed the dinner himself. He wasn't much of a cook, so he brought home fish and chips or saveloys or Chinese takeaways.

When he came to collect us, he had quick conversations with Mrs Moon that we weren't supposed to hear. But her voice got louder when she was worried, and that's how I heard her ask, "But won't that be the end of your chances? You'll never get to be manager that way. And they're bound to cut your salary."

"Oh, they'll do that all right. I'll be on union rates," said Dad, laughing. "I don't care, so long as I keep the children with me."

He looked over and saw I was listening.

"What was all that about?" I said when we went home.

"You'll find out when the time comes," he said, and he laughed again. It struck me that this was the first time I'd heard him really laugh since Mum had died, although he used to be a jokey father. Something good must be happening if he was getting his sense of humour back.

All that week, Dad was acting like an excited little boy getting ready for something special. Shane noticed it, too, and asked a lot of questions, but he was told to wait till Sunday. We waited till Sunday teatime, when we were desperate with curiosity, before he came out with it.

"So you want to know what's cooking?" he said with a grin.

"Yes please, Dad!" we cried together.

"You'll soon see. Have a good wash and put your pyjamas in the car and take a book to read. You're going to sleep out."

"Where? In a tent? Like holidays!" I exclaimed.

"No questions. Just do as you're told. You'll soon see," said Dad.

"Can I take Teddy?" said Shane.

"Of course you can. Take anything you like so long as you can carry it."

So I took my doll, Primrose, and a ragbag of things I used to take to the hedge-house, and two books. "Will it be dark when we get there?" I asked as we drove through the town.

"Oh, it's not that far," said Dad. And he turned off the main road that led out of town and into the street leading to the woollen mill where he worked.

I thought he was going to get something he'd left at the office, and then we'd go on. But after he'd opened the big gates into the yard, he drove right past the office building and up to a green door with a wicket-gate standing open. He stopped the car and got out.

"What do you want in there?" said Shane.

"Just be patient," said Dad as he banged on the door.

A man stepped through the wicket. We could see right away that this was a jokey man. He was short and round, and happy wrinkles went from the sides of his mouth all over his cheeks and over his quick blue eyes. From the bald patch on top of his head down to his ears was a white fuzz that gave him a look of everlasting surprise. Dad, who was much younger, and tall, dark and handsome as Mum used to say, looked very ordinary beside him.

"Who are you?" demanded Shane.

"I'm the Big Genie," said the man. "This way, Aladdin and Fatima, this way to the magic cave."

"I'm Shane," said my brother. He was too small to catch on to the Aladdin story like I did.

"Go on," said Dad. "Let's see what it's all about." As if he didn't know!

We followed the man through the wicket and down a short passage and into a big high room with four huge black things looking like steam locomotives without any wheels. They were studded with brass plates and bars and knobs all gleaming bright. Even the black was shiny. Shane stood there with his eyes popping. He loved engines.

"Meet our Arabian princesses," said the Big Genie. "Pansy and Polly and Peggy and Primrose."

"Primrose, that's my doll's name," I said, holding her up.

"You mean that beautiful lady is named after my boiler? Is the bear named Pansy, then?"

"No," said Shane, disgusted. "Anyway, what's a boiler?"

"My princesses are the boilers. Pansy and Polly and Peggy and Primrose. You can touch them, Shane. They won't break."

He must have seen that Shane's fingers were itching. Shane threw Teddy to me and went rushing all over the place, touching and hitting and feeling and stroking all the parts he could reach of those wonderful engines.

"What's it all about?" I said seriously.

"This is the boiler house," said Dad, "and the Big Genie here, Tom Fisher, he's the head boilerman."

"And the Little Genie there," said Mr Fisher, pointing to Dad, "he's the new boilerman's mate. How d'you think he'll go with the polishing rag? I bet he doesn't know a tin of Brasso from a tin of sardines."

"All I need is practice," said Dad. He grabbed a dirty rag and jumped at Mr Fisher, who ducked behind Pansy, and then Peggy and then Polly. Mr Fisher got away and put Shane in between and the three of them dodged all over the place, shouting with laughter. I climbed on a table and nearly burst my sides.

Dad was the first to sit down, puffed out. Mr Fisher joined him. "I didn't play the fool with your dad when he was in the office," he said. "Last week he was my boss. Now I'm his boss. What do you think of that?"

I got the message at last. "Are you going to work here all the time, Dad?" I said.

"That's right, Adrienne. By permission of the manager, and for a very special reason. Come this way. You haven't seen your magic cave yet."

He opened the door into a little room. It must have been a storeroom once, and boxes were still piled up at one end. But the other end, by the window, had been papered with coloured travel posters and cut-out pictures of folk tales. The best ones were of the Arabian Nights. The dancing girls in their harem trousers looked as if they really were dancing. Round the light was a paper shade, and from it to the walls went all kinds of streamers made of crepe paper and tinsel and milk bottle tops. Under the window was a hump covered with green canvas.

"It's like Christmas!" exclaimed Shane.

"A magic cave is better. It doesn't go away like Christmas," said Mr Fisher. "Come on, Little Genie, lend a hand with the magic parcel here."

They rolled that green hump right over, and inside it were two mattresses and two pillows, and some bright-coloured blankets.

"Are we going to sleep here?" cried Shane, jumping up and down with excitement. "Which is my bed?" Head over heels he went on to the one with red blankets and lay on his back with his feet climbing up the wall. It was just as well I liked the gold blankets best, or there'd have been a row.

"This is how it works out," said Dad. "You'll sleep here while I'm working out there on the night shift. We have to get the steam up to work the machines in the morning. When the day shift comes to work, I'll take you home, get our breakfast and have my sleep while you're at school. I'll be awake again in time to get our dinner."

"Can he cook, Adrienne?" said the Big Genie.

"He's good at fish and chips!" I said, laughing. And then I added, "I'll teach you, Dad," which was also a joke, because I knew less than he did.

"Now settle down and have some sleep. We've got a job to do," said Dad seriously.

They had to answer a few more questions about how the boilers worked; how they stoked up the fires to boil the water that sent steam rushing through the pipes to work the machinery. It was better than electric power, said Tom Fisher proudly. Then I read a story to Shane, just as Mum would have done, and we slept soundly until Dad came to wake us in the morning.

For years and years we slept at the mill from Sunday night to Thursday night. In the school holidays we stayed on the farm with Aunt Eva, or somewhere else with our relations. Very soon Dad and I, and Shane, too, learned to manage all the cooking and the housekeeping.

When the Big Genie retired from work, they promoted Dad to be head boilerman. He never did get to be manager of the mill, as Mrs Moon had said. But I don't think he cared about that.