

The Secret of Phantom Lake

by William Arden (pseudonym of Dennis Lynds)

1973

A review by Ray Stout

Blazed by rumor or legend, the step-by-step trail toward finding lost, stolen, or buried treasure who-knows-where is the kind of mystery that stirs the youthful mind driven to find it. But this one doesn't quite open up the riches that are William Arden at his best with these priceless lads from Rocky Beach.

It's a fine enough piece of work. It's got a compelling backstory. But the story subsequent to that history — that is, the story throughout *Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators in the Secret of Phantom Lake* — is somewhat disappointing. It's a tale of our heroes in which the trail doesn't actually dead-end but ends, readerly speaking, in anticlimax.

The story begins strong. The boys are in a roadside museum with Jupiter's guardians, the junk collectors/sellers Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus, and their burly assistant Hans to pick up the artifacts the aunt and uncle are buying as the museum goes out of business. There's an intriguing find, a tense encounter, and a jarring, absorbing illustration within the opening few pages. What's found, and what opens their case, is an Oriental sea chest they later learn held pirate loot from the West Indies hauled on a ship that wrecked nearby 100 years earlier. But all they find in it are a ring and a (demonstrably) deadly weapon. At first, that is.

The reader's pull continues through the first several chapters. It's always a thrill when an Investigator delves into mystery-bearing archives or artifacts, and we're treated to that here when Bob pays a springboard visit to the Rocky Beach Historical Society.

What makes the story flounder is a shortage of plausibility (OK, we do get more keen to that once we outgrow the targeted reader ages) and a lack of character fullness. For example, the boys seem too willing to jump to a conclusion that Java Jim and Stebbins are working together to find the treasure, based on scant clues. Meanwhile the Scottish heritage of the clients isn't put to great effect. The testy Rory does play an intriguing role, but Mrs. Gunn is a grown lass who doesn't do much besides encourage the boys in their quest and whose presence serves ultimately to explain another character's motivations. And her son Cluny is the most regrettably underplayed. It's always compelling and inspiring when the Investigators have a comrade their age making the discovery journey with them, and that does occur here, but there's so much more Cluny could be. He might share with the boys, say, a longing for romping with his schoolmates back in the old country, or maybe some fascination with ships, shipbuilding, or shipwrecks.

The story might have been catalyzed by a visit from one of the series' occasional characters. Chauffeur Worthington might pick up the boys for a Rolls-Royce transport and, having spent vacations in Scotland, the Englishman might be familiar with the Phantom Lake legend and give them a valuable tip. Allie Jamison might step in and challenge their approach in a tantalizing

way. Or maybe Skinny Norris stumbles onto the treasure mystery and thwarts the boys at every turn.

There are a couple of timely old standbys effectively employed. One is the timeless California coastal fog. Another never fails to make some of us cringe: the breaching of Headquarters. For those who like to think of the masterfully hidden mobile home in a remote corner of The Jones Salvage Yard as nothing less than inviolably secret, the inner sanctum of brewing ideas and unparalleled breakthroughs, equally off the map and radar as the Batcave or the Coca-Cola formula, it's always a dreadful thought that those outsiders who behold it — especially the intruders — might spill the beans to the outside world. But it never fails to heighten the tension of a T3I tale: Something exciting happens whether the visitor be benign or burglar. It works here, as always.

Not to judge the book by its cover but rather the cover by the level of justice this one does the series, it's fair to feel underwhelmed. While the color and detail in the fleeing trio, including facial features, are commendably vivid and sharp, there's too little context. Only the solid, lake-blue background supports the subjects. The phantom tree is too overwhelming, too outlandish, a vicious one-eyed monster bearing fangs, sharp nose, and dagger-like jaw leaning toward the terrified boys with spread arms about to ensnare them, its entire surface irradiated as if being electrocuted. It's an almost campy image that seems out of character for Alfred Hitchcock and *The Three Investigators*. And that six-word (plus *in*) lead-up to the title of each book, which contributes mightily to that character, presents Hitch's name in a sans serif font that's out of harmony with the other pre-titles.

It's unfortunate, because this book marked the series' farewell of the cover artist, Ed Vebell. He had done fabulous work in painting the covers of *Shrinking House*, *Terror Castle*, *Stuttering Parrot*, and *Singing Serpent* and the internals for that last one. (It's a shame Vebell didn't make a second comeback, which he'd done between book Nos. 2 and 17, as well as the other surviving artists when they weren't commissioned to illustrate what turned out to be the internally pictureless last 15.) Despite this letdown, however, he had made valuable contributions.

And at least this cover does have the lead-in pre-title, which didn't appear on the books after Hitch's death in 1979. That loss is a shame. It's like *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* being butchered to *Presents* (pardon the hyperbole; but why couldn't a deceased non-fictional character live on in fiction the timeless way the Investigators do? It's worth debating, isn't it?). Still, Robert Adragna's paintings in the second generation of covers are first-rate. Fortunately, nearly every jacket after this that does sport the pre-title reverted to a font more congruent with those on the previous books. Aside from that, the Adragna *Phantom Lake* painting that succeeded this original on later editions is a welcome improvement, mostly in conveying a scene with a fuller context.

Just as fortunate is that this book's internal illustrations, as in all the T3I stories that feature them, are compelling, sometimes gripping. For that we can thank Jack Hearne, who shines in his second contribution to the series. It's a good follow-up to his solid debut in *Shrinking House*. There's a fine pivotal scene near the pivotal end. But the book's picture support is lacking in one

respect. There's nothing showing when the Investigative eyes are finally laid upon the MacGuffin, that staple element in Hitchcock tales that all the significant characters are striving to obtain. Have that scene, and even the less-than-stellar tale scintillates, at least for the moment.

Phantom Lake is not wholly unworthy of being a personal all-time series favorite. It just seems it could find greater favor had it been more fleshed-out.

Any of the original T3Is is worth knowing, this one included, if for nothing else than for an at-least fairly impelling mystery. But this one just doesn't deliver the wealth worthy of their potential. Instead, we open a lid to find, while not an empty chest, one filled with but half-off coupons. The bonanza just isn't there. Jupiter's aha moment, for example — that signature occurrence when his mind has hit on the key answer — strikes him only like a match that barely ignites, somehow lacking the spectacularity that catapults the best of the T3I stories to fulfilling resolution.

Nevertheless, the lack of bounty in reader reward at hunt's end shouldn't discourage one from joining the search. If it's T3I, that's treasure enough.