

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

Adventures in
ODYSSEY

YOUNG WHIT

&
the Shell Game



Dave Arnold

**YOUNG
WHIT**™
the &
Shell Game

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Dave Arnold
with Phil Lollar

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Young Whit and the Shell Game

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THE SURPRISE

Chapter One



“May 25 will be a day the baseball world long remembers. Babe Ruth, the Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, the King of Swing, may be on the tail end of his career, but you’d never know it by his performance today! The Braves fans here at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh have been mesmerized as Ruth has belted home runs number 712 and 713! And he’s not done yet. The Babe walks up to the plate with the same swagger we saw in his youth. His face like iron and his indomitable will a force to be reckoned with, Ruth believes that any baseball thrown his way has no place this side of the home run wall. And has he ever proved it! Not only is he the home run record holder, but the man he eclipsed, slugger Roger Connor, lags far behind, with only

*one-fifth as many homers! Can Ruth extend his lead yet again?
The fans are sure cheering for it!*

*“Pirates’ pitcher Guy Bush steps up to the mound with every
intention of striking Ruth out. But can he?*

“Here’s the windup . . .

“ . . . and the pitch . . .

*“Oh my! Ruth hit the ball with such force that it might just
escape the atmosphere! It’s . . . up . . . and SOARS straight out
of the park! The greatest slugger of all time, Babe Ruth, has just
hit home run 714!*

*“The crowd is on its feet. Perhaps every baseball fan in
America is standing. May 25—what a day! What an amazing,
marvelous, spectacular day!”*



BAM! Mangle’s pistol fired.

Time seemed to stop.

The burning shed and trunk cast an eerie, flickering glow.

Johnny looked down and then screamed. “STEEEEEVE!”

*Steve lay sprawled on the grass, barely breathing, blood
pouring from his chest, the color rapidly draining from his face.
Johnny crouched beside him, putting pressure on Steve’s wound
with trembling hands.*

*Karl Mangle glared in horror at the pistol, its barrel still
smoking in his hands. He hurled it away. He kneeled beside his
son, unable to speak.*

“P-Papa,” Steve muttered weakly, “i-it’s . . . o-okay . . . Papa.”

Karl took Steve’s hand and kissed it, bent over his son’s dying body, and wept.

“W-Whit,” Steve whispered.

“I’m here,” Johnny said shakily. “Hold on!”

Steve shook his head. “Th-thank . . . y-you . . . for . . . everything . . .”

Then the light went from his eyes . . . his breath slowly escaped from his lungs . . . his body went limp . . . his face . . . lifeless.

An unearthly moan of ultimate suffering erupted from Karl Mangle.

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The date was May 25. A day Johnny would remember the rest of his life. What a day.

What a terrible, awful, miserable, rotten day.



Whit woke with tear-filled eyes.

His room was dark, save for one faint glimmer—a street-light poking its yellow rays past the curtain into Whit’s room. He lay motionless in the same position as when he’d awoken, hoping, *praying* he could go back into the dream just this once and change the final outcome.

But nothing changes in dreams. Whit had relived the same dream almost every night since Steve died. He even began to pray before falling asleep that this time would be different. That he would wake up and discover it had only happened in the dreams. That Steve hadn't been shot.

Or at least that Whit hadn't destroyed the cloth.

But *nothing* changes in dreams. Nothing.

Steve had loved baseball. Whit thought it bitterly ironic that the final home run record was set on the same date Steve died.

Whit turned over like a page in a novel moving on to the next chapter. His younger sister, Charlie, stood hovering over his bed. "Are you all right, Johnny?" she asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You were yelping. I thought it was McDuff, but it was you."

A ray of light shone on McDuff, curled up at Whit's feet on the end of the bed, eyes closed, still as a stuffed animal. Whit stretched his arms. "I'm fine, Charlie. Go back to bed."

She put her small hand on his. "I don't like it when you're afraid. It makes me scared too."

"I'm not afraid. Just had a bad dream. And call me Whit, okay?"

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

"I'm not Johnny anymore."

"You are to me. But I'll call you Whit anyway." Charlie

smiled at him for a few seconds, saying nothing. Then she turned and pattered out of the room.

Whit rolled back over and nestled himself against the wall. The plaster felt cool, a welcome respite against the night air, which remained stuffy and warm. He prayed quickly, then closed his eyes again to try one more time.

But now the dream wouldn't come.



June 15. The sun eventually rose, as it had every day before. Whit almost wished it hadn't. Each new day became an excruciating exercise of trying to forget or ignore, grieve or heal, temper his anger or find a meaningful purpose in the tragedy of his friend's death. It had happened weeks ago, but the anguish seemed more terrible now than it even did then. His father said that was because at first he was in shock. As that wore off, the grief took over.

Whit guessed it must be true; he'd seen his stepmother, Fiona, wrestle with the same emotions when she lost her sight last year. She had, of late, mostly come to terms with her situation. Whit wondered how a person gets past the grief once it settles in. And then he wondered if a person *should* get past it.

Even though he had been sleeping more than usual, he felt tired. He didn't like that. So he threw back the covers and forced himself out of bed.

He had work to do. He and Ben Huck were assigned the task of cleaning and organizing the Records Department storage room in the basement of Provenance Town Hall as their penance for breaking and entering last fall. While they'd done a bit of work around the first of the year, there was still a mountain waiting for them that would take much of the summer. He'd have little to no free time before school resumed, which Whit was actually glad for. It was something to do, and he needed something to do.

After breakfast, he sat on the hall bench to put his shoes on. He was lost in thought when Hattie, the family housekeeper, sat down beside him. She began putting her shoes on as well.

"Thought I'd walk along with you to Town Hall," she said. "I got business to take care of down yonder. Mind the comp'ny?"

"Sure," Whit said with a shrug. "What kind of business?"

Hattie was all smiles. "Good kind."

Shoes on, Whit stood to leave. As he made his way toward the door, Hattie stopped him cold.

"Hold your horses! You ain't said goodbye to your mother yet. She's in the sittin' room."

Whit called out, "Bye, Mom."

Hattie stood up, stared him down, and with scrunched eyebrows said, "Why, that's not a proper goodbye! Do it like you mean it."

“Yes, ma’am,” Whit said, though he didn’t understand why a formal goodbye was so important this morning. Most days he left without so much as a grunt.

In the hallway, he heard Hattie call out, “And don’t forget the hug and a kiss now!”

Fiona sat in a side chair, her fingers sliding over the bumps of her braille Bible. She heard him enter, finished the verse, and paused her fingers. “Good morning, John Avery.”

“Morning. What passage are you reading?” Whit asked.

She turned toward him, her eyes fixed on nothing. “Psalm 91. It’s me favorite. ‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.’ No matter how often I read that psalm, it fills me with confidence.”

“Confidence about what?”

“Not what. *Who*. Confidence in the Lord above, that He knows our needs even before we know we have them. And that He’s working out something wonderful, something beautiful to carry us through our valleys.”

Whit couldn’t imagine anything wonderful or beautiful about the valley he found himself in. This valley felt nothing but awful. It didn’t make sense, and no Bible verse could bring sense to it. It wasn’t that Whit was angry at God. Steve’s death wasn’t God’s fault, and he knew it.

It was *his* fault. And he knew it.

“I’m going to Town Hall now. See you tonight.”

Fiona opened her arms, waiting for him to enter them. “You heard Hattie. Don’t forget the hug and kiss.”

Whit folded his arms around her, and she embraced him tenderly. Her hug felt safe, a place of peace. He didn’t want to let her go.

“I love ye, lad.”

“Love you too, Mom.” Whit kissed her gently on her cheek. His lips tasted a salty tear, and he looked at her curiously.

She quickly patted his back. “You best be off now! Be good. What am I sayin’? You’re always good.”

He decided to leave it at that, gave her one more kiss, said one more goodbye.

Hattie waited at the door. “Now, aren’t you glad you said a proper goodbye?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

In her hands was a large picnic hamper. “I’m ready if you are.”

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“Food. I expect you’ll get hungry in the by and by.”

“A hamper of food that size would feed me for a week!” he said.

“Trust me,” she said, “you’ll be glad I brought it.” Then she opened the door and walked out like a woman on a mission.

Whit considered saying goodbye to his father, but since Hattie had said nothing about it, Whit figured he had left

early. Although it was summer break, Harold still spent time at the university, studying or preparing for the coming year.

The summer day started muggy. An uncharacteristic rain had fallen overnight, and the lovely petrichor mixed with a faint scent of sandalwood in the thick morning air. Most days Whit would have breathed such aromas deeply, but today his mind wandered away from sights and smells to memories and feelings. Each block of the walk to Town Hall played out like a piece of a timeline: One block was the move from Scotland . . . the next, meeting Emmy . . . the next, his grandfather's gift of the trunk . . . the next, the discovery of the cloth that healed . . . the next, the Confederate gold, the gangsters, meeting Jack, meeting Steve, losing Steve . . . and there the timeline ended. Life for Whit would continue past that marker. Steve's timeline would not.

In front of Town Hall, Whit thanked Hattie for the lunch and took the hamper from her.

It was heavy. Forget feeding *him* for a week—this supply could feed *several people* for a week!

"Thanks. I'll see you tonight," he said. He turned and walked up the steps to the entry.

Hattie followed.

Whit went inside. So did she.

"My business is in here too," she said.

"What business?" Whit asked.

"*My* business," she repeated resolutely, but not so much

that a grin couldn't accompany it. She followed him all the way to the Records room—and directly inside. Ben was already there. Surprisingly, standing beside him was Whit's father.

“*Dad?* What are *you* doing here?” Whit asked.

Before Harold could answer, a familiar voice called out, “You must not have seen me.”

Whit swung around. Emmy stood in the back corner beside two suitcases and Whit's duffel bag. “Surprise!” she said.

Whit's head swam as he tried to process and explain the significance of these seemingly random but somehow coordinated circumstances. His eyes darted back and forth, scanning the room and scrutinizing every person's body language and expression for a clue that could fill in the blanks. But nothing, absolutely *nothing*, computed.

Ben's head flew back, and one of his trademark laughs blasted out. “This is the first time I ever saw you stupefied. And that's sayin' somethin'!”

Emmy beamed with excitement. “We're going on an adventure!”

Whit tried processing one more time: *Suitcases . . . an adventure . . . I'm traveling somewhere. And Emmy's going too. But who else? And where? And why?* No one had asked if he even wanted an adventure. Truth is, the thought made his stomach fall.

Harold patted Whit's shoulder affectionately. “Your mother and I decided you needed some time away.”

His stomach slipped down even further. “But . . . I thought I was supposed to work here with Ben this summer. I mean, it was the condition for his being released from jail.”

“You’ve been through enough lately, Son,” Harold said gently. “I spoke with Deputy Miller. He agrees.” Whit observed an emotion in his father’s eyes that he’d never seen before. Whit didn’t think it was pity, which he was grateful for. Pity felt condescending. Was it compassion? Maybe.

“That’s really nice, Dad. But Ben shouldn’t have to do his work *and* mine. It’s . . . well, it’s not fair.”

“I won’t be doin’ your work,” Ben said, gesturing toward Harold.

Harold took the cue. “I’m going to take your place. I’ll do your work.”

Whit always considered himself to be unflinching . . . unfazed . . . unrelenting. Which is why the sense of dread mushrooming in his heart at that moment completely unnerved him. “But it’s not your responsibility. It’s mine!” he said.

Harold’s face warmed. “Those are the words of a boy becoming a man. And as your father, I respect them.”

“Good,” Whit said with a nod, relieved.

“But I want to do this for you. Trust me. You need this trip.”

Whit hoped the dread he felt at that moment didn’t show on his face, but it was plastered on him like a billboard sign.

Emmy leaned forward, her mouth agape. “You . . . don’t want to go?”

Whit stood in the crosshairs of everyone’s gaze without a clue of what to say next. So he said nothing.

Ben sat on the edge of a table, scratching his head. “I agree with your folks. You need to get away for a little while, Whit. Go someplace where the memories won’t be so tender. This here town’ll keep pokin’ at you. So will this storage room. No matter where you go, you’ll see Steve’s face. But you might not see it as much where you’re goin’. Havin’ some time away from it all will help you heal up.”

Whit could not deny Ben’s words. Every street, block, and path he passed on the way to Town Hall was a place where he’d made memories with Steve. And every memory that surfaced picked at his emotional scars, releasing the flow of emotions behind them. But Whit also couldn’t deny how the mention of the word *adventure* made him feel.

Uncomfortable.

Unsure.

Unsafe.

Oh, to be back in Fiona’s warm hug again!

At that moment, the realization hit him. *That’s* why he’d needed to say his proper goodbye to her. *That’s* why her hug had felt different. And that’s why her goodbye had felt more meaningful.

Battling the tide of emotions welling up inside him,

Whit steeled himself to do what he had to do. He strengthened his resolve, stood up tall, added a smile to his face, and proclaimed, “You’re right. Thank you.” Then he looked about at each person in the room. “Thank you all.”

A tear welled up in Harold’s eyes, followed by a twinkle of admiration. “Excellent. Now, I expect you’ll want to know where it is you’re going.”

Whit’s festooned smile remained firmly in place. “Yes, sir!”

“A few months ago, I received a curious correspondence. It was a letter addressed to your grandfather. Obviously, the sender didn’t realize that he passed on five years ago.” Harold handed Whit the envelope. It was addressed to Jackson McClintock, Kinglassie, Scotland, and came from Taylor McClintock, Triple C Ranch, Texas.

“Who’s Taylor McClintock?” Whit asked.

“It appears that Taylor is your third cousin,” Harold said.

“I didn’t know we had any living relatives here in the States.”

Harold shrugged. “Nor did I. Until that letter came.”

Whit slipped the letter from the envelope. It read:

To Jackson,

I would call you “Uncle” Jackson because my dad’s your brother, but since I’ve never met you, I don’t suppose I’ve earned the right to use the word. I’m sorry

to tell you that Daddy passed away a few months ago. I thought the grizzled old buzzard would outpace Methuselah—that he was too ornery to die. But a long-horned steer had had enough of him, and that was that. He's buried up the hill from the ranch.

If you care about such things, you should know we carved him a nice tombstone. It reads, "Archibald Washington McClintock died in the saddle one day after his sixty-eighth birthday. An odd stick, but a right smart cattleman."

I was going through his papers and found your address. Thought the decent thing was to let you know your brother bit the dust. Truth is, since I ain't never met any of my kin, I was hoping to tempt you into corresponding with me. I ain't the biggest toad in the puddle hereabouts, and the world's a lonely place when yer the only McClintock in it.

*Regards,
Taylor McClintock*

Whit folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and handed it back to his father.

"That letter was forwarded to me by the Kinglassie post office," Harold explained. "When I received it, I wrote back to inform Taylor about your grandfather's passing but also let him know that you and Charlie were related and living now

in America. Taylor wrote back extending an invitation for the family to visit the ranch and bring along whomever we liked. We can't all go, but your mother and I think it's important that you get away for a while. And when I approached Emmy's parents about her going with you, they agreed that getting away would be good for her as well."

"I appreciate your thinking of me, Mr. Whittaker," Emmy said.

Whit's face scrunched up. "You're sending two kids alone into the Wild West to fend for themselves?"

"Who says you goin' alone?" Hattie asked. "And I got a hamper with some food and an ache to see new country and meet new folks."

"Some food?"

"A day's worth," Hattie said. "Any more would spoil. There's a few gifts in there for your cousin. Can't arrive empty-handed."

"Good point. It's an *actual* ranch?" Whit asked.

"That's what the letter said," Harold said.

"Then we could see all sorts of things: desperadoes, gun-fights, stampedes, and even bar fights. Right, Dad?"

Hattie put her hands on her hips and said to Harold, "If'n you say yes, ain't none of us goin'!"

"If you say no, what's the *point* of us going?" Emmy responded.

"I'm sure it'll be fun," Harold said, chuckling. "Taylor

wouldn't have invited you if it wasn't safe." Turning to Whit, he added, "But knowing you, I've no doubt there will be an adventure or two in the mix."

Whit tried for all his worth to keep the anxiety of this trip behind his eyes, but he averted his gaze from Harold just in case some of it was filtering out.

"Can I tell him the other surprise?" Emmy pleaded. Harold agreed. Whit braced himself as Emmy launched in. "We'll be there at the best time ever!"

Ben interjected, "I don't know 'bout that. The Alamo happened a hunnerd years ago."

"Right, which is why this is the perfect time! We'll be there for Texas's Centennial celebration!" Emmy announced.

"It started last week," Harold said, "but it runs until the end of November."

"Loads of famous people will be there! Stars from Hollywood . . . even President Roosevelt! Wouldn't it be amazing to see the president?"

"And it sounds like there's to be some interestin' displays." Ben added. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if some important inventors even showed up."

"And they'll have all sorts of entertainin', like square dancin' and music and skits of Wild West justice," Hattie said. "Oooh-eee! Now *that'd* be a sight!"

If he told them that it all sounded overwhelming, which at that moment it did, Whit knew he would spoil the

moment. So, without hesitation, he redoubled his efforts at enthusiasm. “It all sounds nifty! Thank you again for this. Thank you *all*. It’s . . . just what I need.” Then he walked across the room, picked up his luggage, and announced, “Well, adventures don’t happen by standing around talking. Let’s get going and find one!”