



*Sharon Hambrick*

*illustrated by Paula Cheadle*

## No Time to Lose!

Jake Sparks leaned back in the soft brown recliner. He locked his hands behind his head and stared at the old photograph of his great-grandfather, Edmund Wilton Sparks, that hung on the living room wall. The photograph was fading behind its glass, but Great-Grandfather Sparks's stern face gazed intently at Jake.

"Okay, Great-Grandpa," Jake said aloud. "I've got a new mystery for you. How would you find a missing monkey?"

"Great-Gramps can't hear you, Jake," his little sister Bridget said. "He's been dead sixty years."

"Sixty-five."

"Anyway," Bridget said, "you know he didn't help you with the last

mystery you solved. I did that!"

Bridget beamed triumphantly at Jake.

It was true, and Jake knew it. It had been Bridget who'd nudged him in the right direction last time when he had been searching for the lost goldfish.

"I admit it. But I'm going to solve this one. I'm bending all my mental powers on this one problem. You'll see; I'll figure it out."

Bridget mumbled something about Jake thinking he had all the answers. Then she grabbed a doll from underneath the couch and wandered out of the living room. Jake leaned back in the chair and thought about how the case of the missing monkey had begun.

It was the first day of school. Jake thought it seemed like every other first day of school he'd ever seen. There were the brand-new clothes and the squeaky-clean backpacks. There were schoolbooks that still looked shiny and new shoes that were not yet scuffed up.

Jake and his friend Nathan walked from the sixth-grade room at Philpot Christian School to the Philpot Public Library as they had done the first day of school for the last two years. They counted their steps as they walked. Last year, it took nine hundred and seventy-five steps, but this year, since their legs were longer, it didn't take as many.

"Nine hundred fifty-two!" Jake and Nathan said together as they stomped up to the front door of the library. "Hi, Miss Hancock," Jake said, and, "We're here!" Nathan said, probably a little too loud for a library.

"It's good to see you," Miss Hancock replied. She tucked a wisp of her gray hair behind her ear and smoothed her skirt down. "Are you going to be joining the Library Club again this year, Nathan?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nathan said smiling. "That's why I'm here. Mom says it's my civic duty to help you and to read to little kids."

"And what about you, Mr. Sparks?" Miss Hancock asked. "Are you joining the library club too?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said. "Mom says I can join if I'm home in time to do my chores in the evening."

"That will be perfectly fine," Miss Hancock said. "What chores do you have to do?"

"I feed the chickens. I tend a big plot of tomatoes. I'm supposed to, anyway. Dig out the weeds, watch for bugs, that sort of thing. Plus keeping the garage cleaned up, practicing, doing homework. You know, all the regular stuff."

"Sounds like a lot of regular stuff," Miss Hancock said, smiling. Jake loved the library, and he loved Miss Hancock. Miss Hancock would help you find any book you needed, and if you wanted to keep it longer than it was checked out for, she didn't care. She could also help you with your homework and could work out long division problems in her head.

Miss Hancock had been the Philpot Library's librarian since before Jake was born. But she wasn't the only wonderful thing about the library. There was also Barney, Miss Hancock's pet monkey. Usually Barney would sit on the floor doing nothing, but sometimes he would shriek suddenly and scare everyone, though they usually ended up laughing when they calmed down from the fright. Jake knew there probably wasn't another public library like Philpot's in the whole country.

"Well, don't stand outside in the heat," Miss Hancock said. "Come on in." She held the door open for them, and they walked into the cool of the library.

A few minutes later the first meeting of the Junior Library Club at the Philpot Public Library was called to order. Miss Hancock tapped a wooden gavel<sup>1</sup> on her desk.

"This meeting will come to order," she said. "I'd like to officially welcome you to this year's Library Club. I'm counting on all of you to help me reshelve the returned books in the right places, read to little children in the children's room, and generally make the Philpot library a happy place. Are we all agreed?"

Fifteen heads nodded yes.

"Good. Now, let me call Barney. As you know, Barney's my dear friend and confidant.<sup>2</sup> If I hear you've been naughty, I'll whisper it in Barney's ear, and he'll eat your homework!"

All the kids laughed, and Jake wondered if Barney wasn't the only thing unique about Philpot's library. Maybe Miss Hancock was a bit out of the ordinary too.

"Barney," Miss Hancock called. There was no answer, so she tried again. "Barney!"

Jake and the other kids got up and looked around, but Barney was nowhere to be found.

"Well, don't worry," Miss Hancock said, "he never misses din-

ner, and tonight I'm serving his favorite salad and a big bowl of mashed potatoes. He'll be home in time for that, I know!"

Barney did not return by dinner time, and the next day found Miss Hancock fluttering with anxiety. She was unable to speak to the library clubbers, though she smiled at them as they went about their tasks of putting books back on shelves and straightening magazines.

"He's lost," some kids said.

"He's stolen," others whispered.

By the second day, there was no doubt. Barney was missing for good. A reporter from the *Philpot Stew* showed up at the library for an interview with Miss Hancock. Jake Sparks watched from the children's room where he pretended to be interested in reading a book to several toddlers when what he really wanted to be doing was rushing out to tell the reporter to sound an urgent alarm for the return of Barney. There was no time to lose! The fact was, he'd seen Miss Hancock crying, and he didn't like that one bit.

That was the night Jake sat in the recliner and asked his long-deceased<sup>3</sup> great-grandfather's picture for help. Of course, no help came.

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<sup>1</sup>gavel—a mallet that a judge strikes on his desk for order or attention

<sup>2</sup>confidant—one to whom secrets are told

<sup>3</sup>deceased—no longer living; dead



The next morning, Jake was transfixed<sup>4</sup> by the front page of the *Philpot Stew*. Above the news of a hurricane in Alabama and a fire in Montana was a picture of a distressed Miss Hancock and this headline: "Beloved Librarian Offers Two Hundred Dollars for Barney's Safe Return!"

That evening Jake absentmindedly poured Italian dressing on his French fries and ketchup on his salad. He said "yes" when his father asked how his day had been, and handed his mother the pitcher of lemonade when she asked him to please pass the tomato slices. Bridget giggled into her hand, but didn't say anything.

"Is something wrong, Jake?" Mr. Sparks asked.

"Tuesday," Jake said.

"Jake, look at me," his father said. Jake looked up. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir; sorry sir," Jake said.

"I'm thinking about Barney and how I can find him. If I rush out right after dinner tonight, I think I can find him. Dad, there's a two-hundred-dollar reward!"

"What about your chores?" Mr. Sparks asked. "If you're monkey-hunting, when will you finish them? And what about your homework and your trumpet practice?"

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<sup>4</sup>transfixed—motionless in amazement