READING PASSAGE

The story is set in the South Kensington Museum in 1895.

Two boys stood in the Prince Albert Gallery, and looked down on a third. They could not see the other boy clearly, because he was on the far side of the case. He appeared to be sketching its contents.

Julian Cain was at home in the South Kensington Museum. His father, Major Cain, was Special Keeper of Precious Metals. Julian was just fifteen, and a boarder at Marlow School, but was home recovering from a nasty bout of tonsillitis. Tom Wellwood was about two years younger, and looked younger than he was, with large, dark eyes, a soft mouth and a smooth head of dark gold hair. The two had not met before. Tom's mother was visiting Julian's father, to ask for help with her research. She was a successful authoress of magical tales. Julian had been deputed to show Tom the treasures. He appeared to be more interested in showing him the squatting boy.

'I said I'd show you a mystery.'

'I thought you meant one of the treasures.'

'No, I meant *him*. There's something shifty about him. I've been keeping an eye on him. He's up to something.'

Tom was not sure whether this was the sort of make-believe his own family practised, tracking complete strangers and inventing stories about them. He wasn't sure if Julian was, so to speak, *playing* at being responsible.

'What does he do?'

'He does the Indian rope-trick. He disappears. Now you see him, now you don't. He's here every day. All by himself. But you can't see where or when he *goes*.'

They sidled along the wrought-iron gallery, which was hung with thick red velvet curtains. The third boy stayed where he was, drawing intensely. Then he moved his position, to see from another angle. He was hay-haired, shaggy and filthy. He had cut-down workmen's trousers, with braces, over a flannel shirt the colour of smoke, stained with soot.

'We could go down and stalk him. There are all sorts of odd things about him. He looks very rough. He never seems to go anywhere but here. I've waited at the exit to see him leave, and follow him, and he doesn't seem to leave. He seems to be a permanent fixture.'

The boy looked up, briefly, his grimy face creased in a frown. Tom said,

'He *concentrates*.'

'He never talks to anyone that I can see. Now and then the art students look at his drawings. But he doesn't chat to them. He just creeps about the place. It's sinister.'

'Do you get many robberies?'

'I don't even know if anyone would notice if we did, not with some of the things, though they'd notice quickly enough if anyone made an attempt on the Candlestick.'

‘Candlestick?’

‘The Gloucester Candlestick. What he seems to be drawing, a lot of the time. The lump of gold, in the centre of that case. It’s ancient and unique. I’ll show it to you. We could go down and go up to it, and disturb him.’

Tom was dubious about this. There was something tense about the third boy, a tough prepared energy he didn’t even realise he’d noticed. However, he agreed. He usually agreed to things. They moved, sleuth-like, from ambush to ambush behind the swags of velvet and down the turning stone stairs. When they reached the candlestick, the dirty boy was not there.

‘He wasn’t on the stairs,’ said Julian, obsessed.

Tom stopped to stare at the candlestick. It was dully gold. It seemed heavy. It stood on three feet, each of which was a long-eared dragon, grasping a bone with grim claws, gnawing with sharp teeth. The rim of the spiked cup that held the candle was also supported by open-jawed dragons with wings and snaking tails. The whole of its thick stem was wrought of fantastic foliage, amongst which men and monsters, centaurs and monkeys, writhed, grinned, grimaced, grasped and stabbed at each other. Tom thought immediately that his mother would need to see it. He tried, and failed, to memorise the shapes. Julian explained. It had an interesting history, he said. No one knew exactly what it was made of. It is probable that it had been made in Canterbury but, apart from the symbols of the evangelists on the knop, it appeared not to be made for a religious use. There was nothing, anywhere, like it.

Tom did not know what a knop was, and did not know what the symbols of the evangelists were. But he saw that the thing was a world of secret stories. He said his mother would like to see it. It might be just what she was looking for. He would have liked to touch the heads of the dragons.

Julian was looking restlessly around him. There was a concealed door, behind a plaster cast of a guarding knight, on a marble plinth, which led to the basement storerooms and workrooms. It was slightly ajar.