



Shazam! #1

Aaron Martel

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Shazam!

Issue #1: "Wisdom"

Written by Aaron Martel

Plotted by David Charlton

Cover by Dr. Dread

Edited by David Charlton

The full moon shone brightly down on the back lot of the Fawcett City Museum as the large delivery truck was about to back into the receiving bay to unload its precious cargo. The driver was absently shifting into reverse when he was jostled by his passenger/partner's yelp.

"Hey Mack, lookit this!"

And the deliverymen looked out the windshield to see another unmarked distribution truck wheel into the lot and barrel straight toward them at ramming speed. The petrified deliverymen braced themselves, but just before impact the second truck turned and skidded hard to a standstill with a squeal of tires and the smell of burnt rubber. Shaken by the near crash, the deliverymen hardly noticed the shadowy figures heading for their vehicle until the driver's door was flung open and a pistol was pointed in Mack's face.

"Get out," the gunman hissed. "Both of you."

The deliverymen eased out of the truck and stood with their hands up, both visibly shaking with fear, to find three other gunmen with weapons trained on them. In a matter of moments the gunmen had knocked their victims out cold with the butts of their pistols and slithered to the back of the first truck, throwing open the doors and lowering the ramp. Strapped inside the truck was a large wooden crate with "FRAGILE-FROM EGYPT" markings on it in bold relief, and the four gunmen

swiftly removed the straps and lifted the crate with the utmost care.

As the gunmen were carrying the heavy box down the ramp one of them slipped and nearly dropped his end, wincing at the sound of the cracked, aged cackle that chastised him.

“Idiot! You drop that crate and I’ll have your head! Do you have any *idea* the importance of what’s inside that?” The voice belonged to a little bald man with round spectacles and a hunch in his posture. From his bearing and countenance it was obvious he was very old, yet he still seemed to burn with a manic energy belying his years.

The goons finished loading the crate in the back of the second truck and one of them pried the lid open with a crowbar. The diminutive leader excitedly peered inside, then jumped up and down with a portentous exuberance.

“Yes! It’s mine! Now go! GO!”

And the truck sped off into the night with the shrill tones of Dr. Thaddeus Bodog Sivana’s mad laughter.

CRACK!

Billy Batson hit the baseball right in the sweet spot, sending it sailing over the fence and leaving the pitcher shaking his head in disgust. As Billy rounded the bases he caught a glimpse of Freddy Freeman standing in the on-deck circle, watching Billy’s home run with a mixture of disbelief and admiration. The Fawcett City High baseball team practice was winding down, and Billy knew that Freddy would get one last at-bat before practice was called. After stepping on home plate Billy trotted past Freddy and they exchanged high-fives, and Billy was summoned to the dugout by Coach Braddock.

“Batson, you’re a weird kid, but ya got talent,” Coach Braddock told him gruffly.

“Thanks.” Billy wasn’t sure he’d been complimented.

"Guess I should tell ya, you an' Freeman made varsity," Braddock declared.

"Hey," Billy brightened. "Coach, that's - Holy Moley!"

Freddy had smacked his own home run, and the pitcher threw down his glove in frustration.

The two boys were walking home as they usually did after practice, basking in the glow of their accomplishment; not many freshmen made the varsity team. Freddy wanted to go to the ice cream shoppe and celebrate, but Billy had something else on his mind.

"Freddy, you ever hear about the 'spooky house' on Radley Street?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, s'posed to be haunted or something," Freddy replied. "They tell stories about it at the orphanage to scare us, as if Ms. Wormwood wasn't scary enough."

"What kind of stories?" Billy had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Y'know, kids go in and don't come out, ghosts and goblins, the usual stuff," Freddy shrugged it off. "Why?"

"Because Mary said she wanted to go there today and investigate it for WHIZ Radio," Billy said, alarmed.

"Geez, Mary and that stupid media class," Freddy grunted. "Why does she always hafta--"

And the two friends looked at each other.

Then they took off for Radley Street at a dead run.

Mary Bromfield stood at the rusted iron gate that was the entrance to the house at the end of Radley Street. The house itself was straight out of a horror movie, dilapidated and dark with broken and boarded windows flanked by weak, flapping shutters. When Mary had begun her investigation no one seemed to know how long it had been abandoned. In fact, Mary hadn't been able to dig up *any* information on it in the Fawcett City records; odd enough to begin with, but the fact that it was still standing was most perplexing of all. It was almost as if the townsfolk were *afraid* of it somehow, and given the house's 'haunted' reputation it seemed that most people had chosen to ignore it and pretend it didn't exist.

But Mary lived one street over from the spooky house, and recently she had heard some strange noises emanating from it as she rode her bike past it after school. She had always been aware of the house's foreboding presence and given it a wide berth, but when she thought she *saw* something moving in there one day, her reporter's instincts kicked into overdrive.

Mary was an investigative reporter for WHIZ Radio: Fawcett High, a student-run junior version of the actual WHIZ Radio located in downtown Fawcett City. She took her job seriously, as she hoped to become a *real* journalist someday. She thought she could break the spooky house story and impress Mr. Morris, her media teacher and station manager of WHIZ Radio FH. Mary had already proven herself to be a tenacious and hard working young lady, but she wanted a story to *really* make a name for herself. She had a feeling this could be it.

But as she stared at the house Mary's resolve began to falter. She hated to admit it, but she was completely creeped out by the ominous, looming atmosphere of the place. She couldn't bring herself to open the gate and enter the grounds, she needed to get away—

"Mary!"

Just as Mary was turning to get on her bike she saw Billy Batson and Freddy Freeman running towards her, waving their arms and calling for her to stop. She put her hands on her hips and gave them a petulant look as they reached her, both out of breath and panting.

“What are you two doing here?” Mary asked crossly.

“Billy said... you’d come here. What are you, crazy?” Freddy was catching his breath now.

“You know I’ve been seeing and hearing things here,” Mary said matter-of-factly. “And I want to do a piece on it for WHIZ Radio.”

“You’re not going in there, are you?” Billy was incredulous.

Mary half-heartedly nodded her head, but the boys didn’t catch her reticence.

“Not without me,” Billy fumbled awkwardly. Freddy looked with amusement at his friend’s reddening face. It was blatantly obvious Billy had a thing for Mary; small wonder, since Mary was the prettiest girl in ninth grade if not all of Fawcett High.

“Me too,” Freddy chimed in, for he harbored a secret crush on Mary as well.

“All right then,” Mary declared, somewhat aware of her friends’ jealous rivalry. “Let’s go.”

The kids slipped through the gate and crept to the house as if they were trying not to disturb it, and when they reached the front door Billy felt an inexplicable chill in his bones unlike anything he’d ever known before. Mary went to the windows to try to look inside, but they were boarded up tight so that was next to impossible. Even Freddy, who normally wore the veneer of slick confidence, seemed to be unnerved with the place.

“Uh guys, do we need to go in?” Freddy attempted to sound cool. “Because these old houses usually smell pretty bad.”

Billy looked at Mary, who wasn’t self-assured at all when she said, “Yeah, Freddy, I gotta find out about this place.”

Billy decided to step up. He grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pushed the door, which creaked loudly all the way open. Using Mary's flashlight, the kids peeked inside to see a room filled with old furniture covered in moldy white sheets, and cobwebs appeared to be strewn everywhere. Freddy was right about the odor, which was horrid beyond belief. Treading lightly into the room the kids heard their footsteps groan on the warped wooden floorboards, and the air was dank and musty.

Mary paused mid-step, looking at the floor. "Hey," she pondered. "How come the floor's not all dusty?"

Billy knelt and touched the floor with his hand. "Yeah, it's like someone's been walking through here."

"Or *something*," Freddy threw in.

An ear-piercingly loud screech then caused the three friends to reflexively jump into the air and scramble over each other to flee from the house, not bothering to shut the door. The trio then raced back up Radley Street as fast as their legs and wheels could carry them.

When they had gone the hidden loudspeakers mounted in the living room of the spooky house shut off, silencing the shrieks...

In the basement of the spooky house Dr. Sivana was screaming at the thug who had turned on the loudspeaker.

"You moron! I needed those kids! Can't anyone get good help these days?"

The basement was converted into high-tech laboratory where Sivana had his base of operations set up for the past few months. There were computers, gadgets, and all sorts of equipment the mad scientist required. There was also a bank of monitors that displayed the various rooms and grounds of the house, and a stereo system rigged up to scare away unwanted guests. When Sivana saw on one of the monitors the young investigators bolting from the house he had become enraged.

“But boss,” the thug protested. “I thought—”

“You don’t think!” Sivana stormed, and this triggered a fit of coughing. “Curse my wretched body (ackk!). *I* do the thinking around here, stupid! For my plan to work, I need the life force of a child! And they walked right in, ripe for the taking! Now, go get me one of those meddling kids!”

And Sivana cast his hungry gaze at the open crate, which revealed an austere Egyptian-style sarcophagus that contained what he hoped would be the key to his resurgence.

The next day was Saturday, and Billy got to sleep in since there was no school. He awoke to the smell of pancakes cooking, and Billy got out of bed and stumbled to the kitchen where his Uncle Dudley was at the stove making them breakfast. Uncle Dudley Batson was a short and tubby man with a round nose and wisps of gray hair on top of his head and around his temples. He was never particularly ambitious or intelligent but he was kind and loyal, always wanting to do the right thing in a given situation. He had also taken care of Billy’s father C.C. during the lengthy period when C.C. had succumbed to his frail mortal body, and Billy respected that. Billy also respected Uncle Dudley for keeping and guarding C.C.’s greatest secret: that C.C. was in fact the legendary superhero Captain Marvel who fought for truth and justice beginning in the 1930’s. When C.C. perished in the Crisis last year the torch had been passed, and Billy himself had become the second Captain Marvel, so Uncle Dudley promised to care for him and guard his secret as well. Now the two shared the family’s brownstone apartment at the corner of Parker and Binder, and in their time together they had grown close.

Billy sat down at the kitchen table just as Uncle Dudley placed a plateful of pancakes in front of him.

“Here ya go,” Uncle Dudley brightly said.

“Thanks,” Billy mumbled, taking a bite. “Say, you know anything about the house at the end of Radley Street?”

Uncle Dudley paused a moment before answering, "Horrible place. Shoulda knocked it down a long time ago. I used ta hear—"

The police scanner on the kitchen counter crackled to life. "Calling all units! Silent alarm at First National Bank! Possible robbery in progress! Repeat—"

Billy looked at Uncle Dudley, who nodded his head towards the outside door.

"Go," the old man urged. "And godspeed, lad."

Billy was already out the door.

There were two robbers: one was stuffing two large duffel bags full of cash from the open vault, and the other held his submachine gun while monitoring the bank employees, customers and the unconscious security guards. The first completed his task, and ran out to his partner, handing over one of the duffel bags. The second one spoke up.

"Thank you, First National," the robber announced dramatically. "You all played your parts perfectly. Stay down until we leave. Have a nice day."

The first robber grunted, annoyed with his flamboyant associate, and the two rushed out of the bank door with the duffel bags on their shoulders heading for their getaway car—

When they slammed headlong into something with such force both robbers dropped to the ground, hard. Dazed, the robbers looked up to see a man standing in front of them; the man wore a solid red outfit with gold boots, a gold sash belt and a huge gold lightning bolt across his chest. The man also sported a short white cape with gold trim, and his face held a bemused expression as he gazed at the two would-be thieves sprawled on the pavement.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," the man spoke in a clear, confident manner. "You're from out of town."

Still on the ground the robbers pulled their weapons and opened fire on the costumed newcomer, spraying him with a hailstorm of bullets for several minutes until their magazines were empty. Then there was stone silence as the smoke cleared away.

“You through?” Came the slightly amused voice.

The man was still standing before the dumbfounded robbers as if nothing had just happened. With blinding speed the colorfully garbed figure snatched the guns from the crooks’ grips and crushed the weapons into a tiny steel ball with his bare hands.

“Let me introduce myself,” The man stated, tossing the ball over his shoulder. “I’m Captain Marvel.”

The robbers stared up at him blankly.

“The World’s Mightiest Mortal?” Cap’s eyebrows arched.

The robbers stared up at him blankly.

“Well, just so you know, Fawcett City is my town. And it’s very unwise to rob a bank in my town.”

The robbers stared up at him blankly.

In one fluid motion Cap pulled them up by their shirts and zoomed into the air, carrying the screaming robbers with him until he reached a point just above Fawcett City’s tallest building. There he hovered with the robbers clinging to his arms, the duffel bags still hanging off their shoulders.

“Now, you’re never going to steal in my town again, right?” Cap asked while the robbers pathetically bawled their answers in the affirmative.

Slowly Captain Marvel lowered to the ground, handing off the traumatized thieves to the waiting policemen who retrieved the bags full of money. A large crowd had gathered to witness the entire episode, and they were wildly cheering for their hero. Cap firmly shook the hand of the lead sergeant.

“Thank you, Captain,” the sergeant smiled.

“My pleasure. It’s what I’m here for.”

Cap turned and waved to the crowd before taking to the skies again, leaving behind in the throng a disappointed Mary Bromfield, who had hoped to interview him for WHIZ Radio. As the crowd began to disperse a bolt of lightning struck down very close nearby, with a deafening crack of thunder that startled Mary. She looked to the sky and couldn’t understand where the lightning could have come from— it was a beautiful sunny day! As she pondered this, she heard Billy Batson’s voice calling to her.

“Mary! Mary, is it over?” Billy sprinted up to her and noted her dejected face. “Is Captain Marvel gone?”

“Yeah,” Mary sighed. “I missed him again.”

“He’s really something though, isn’t he?” Billy put forth.

“Yeah, he’s all right,” Mary was nonchalant. “Now Superman... what I wouldn’t give to see *him* in action...!” There was a dreamy quality to her voice that Billy found off-putting.

Superman?

“Hey Billy,” Mary was back on track. “Wanna go to the matinee? *Mad Monster 3’s* playing.”

“Sure,” Billy enthused.

“Maybe Freddy’ll wanna come too. Let’s go see if he wants to,” Mary suggested.

“Sure,” Billy responded, less enthused.

The Wormwood Orphanage had been around for many years, an old

three storey brick building badly in need of structural and cosmetic repair. The top storey housed the girls, the middle storey was the boys' dormitory, and the first floor held the cafeteria and administrative offices.

Billy and Mary had heard horror stories about this place from other kids but Freddy didn't talk much about it, as if he was ashamed of living there. Freddy only hinted that Ms. Wormwood, the headmistress, was a cruel and abusive taskmaster who physically resembled an old witch. Billy and Mary had never actually been there before, so they knocked on the front door with trepidation.

Ms. Wormwood answered the door herself, revealing that Freddy had been truthful with his description of her. A tall, spindly woman with dark brown hair streaked with gray pulled back in a tight bun, Ms. Wormwood looked down at the two kids on her front stoop with revulsion and a trace of menace.

"What do you want?" Ms. Wormwood snapped.

"Uh..." Mary stammered. "We're friends of Freddy Freeman—"

"Freeman? Where is he?" the old crone snarled.

Billy spluttered, "Um, we thought he was here—"

"No, he is not here," the headmistress' eyes narrowed to slits. "But if you do see him, tell that rotten, disrespectful child that if he isn't back here by sundown he will be *very* sorry!" And she slammed the door in the kids' faces.

The movie forgotten, Billy and Mary scurried away from the orphanage unaware that they were being observed by two predatory men parked across the street in a non-descript delivery truck.

In the basement of the spooky house Dr. Sivana maniacally laughed until he began to cough once again. His goons had carefully removed the well-preserved mummy from the sarcophagus and laid it out on a table,

leaving the lid to the ancient coffin open. Sivana greedily inspected the rather large figure wrapped in treated cloth before crowing to the pair of thugs waiting to do his bidding.

“Yes...all is ready now, all is ready!” the mad doctor croaked. “At last! I have what I need to hatch my plans...”

Sivana glanced over to where Freddy Freeman was gagged and tied to a small wooden chair. Freddy struggled with his bonds to no avail, and gave Sivana an angry look as the evil scientist shuffled over to him.

“Oh, you wish you were free, don’t you?” taunted Sivana. “But you see, you are very much the key to my designs. I needed a young life force and *you* will most certainly provide me with that. And don’t worry, your foolhardy friends will soon be joining you as well. *In death*. Aren’t you glad you entered my house, you little snoop?”

Sivana turned to his henchmen, pointing a crooked finger at the open sarcophagus. “And now, *put him in!*”

Billy and Mary were worried about Freddy. Hurriedly walking along and planning their course of action, the two youths didn’t notice the delivery truck creeping along behind them.

“We’ve gotta find him,” Mary tried to sound confident. “He’s probably just hanging around somewhere to get away from *that* horrible place.”

“We’ll check his usual spots first,” Billy offered, equally concerned. “Let’s go downtown to the ice cream shoppe—”

And Billy’s mouth was muffled as he was grabbed from behind by a large man and lifted off his feet. His arms pinned, Billy saw Mary attempting to resist being captured but she was no match for her much stronger attacker. Billy’s mind was reeling in panic as he tried to focus on how to handle the situation.

What do these guys want with us? Billy thought. Where are they taking us? Does this have to do with Freddy? If I can get my mouth free I can say the magic

word and become Captain Marvel, but Mary will see me! What do I do?

While Billy wrestled with his quandary the abductors began to drag the kids toward the back end of the delivery truck.

A wide-eyed Freddy frantically squirmed with the ropes that bound him as he was being carried to the sarcophagus, which seemed to Freddy a monstrous, gaping mouth. Dr. Sivana was still cackling, elated that his twisted schemes were coming to fruition.

“I’d been studying the ancient texts,” the evil scientist coughed. “I don’t understand all that magic mumbo-jumbo, but I had reached the end of my rope. It took me *years* to find the information I was looking for, but when I heard the news that the Big Red Cheese was dead— And I didn’t kill him!” Sivana raved on. “I was ready to give up! But then I found out there’s *another* Captain Marvel! A *new* Big Red Cheese! This one is *mine* to kill! So I returned to the Egyptian texts...”

Sivana was on a roll. “And a certain mummy, *this* mummy, can bring me the one thing I need to begin my life anew! So I arranged for the mummy to be brought to the Fawcett City Museum, where I could steal it for myself! But to animate it, I needed a young, vital life force, which is where *you* come in...”

The henchmen held Freddy above the sarcophagus, which was beginning to pulsate with an eerie, greenish glow.

“*Now, you dolts!*” Sivana screamed. “*Put him in now!*”

And the sarcophagus released a burst of bright green energy as Freddy, still conscious inside the sarcophagus, felt his strength ebbing away. He no longer could fight against his restraints, as if his very will was being sapped from him. He could only stare helplessly as Dr. Sivana rushed to the table where the mummy lay, excitedly looking for signs of life.

But nothing happened.

“*Drat!*” Sivana raged into another coughing fit. “I was *sure* this was it!

Drat, drat, drat!”

The brilliant maniac was so incensed he failed to notice the mummy opening one huge red eye and then stiffly sitting up. The spooked henchmen tried to point the mummy out to their boss but Sivana was lost in his tirade.

“Who disturbs... me?” the Mad Mummy spoke in a low craggy voice, sending a startled Sivana spinning to the floor.

“*It's alive. It's ALIVE!* And the texts were accurate,” Sivana gloated. “It speaks in the language of its animating force.”

Sivana got to his feet, speaking with a commanding tone. “I am Thaddeus Bodog Sivana, and I order you to do my will.”

“Yes...” the Mad Mummy intoned.

Sivana’s wild laughter echoed throughout the basement laboratory.

To be continued!

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