

CRUISING TO DANGER



PRISCILLA
HAGON

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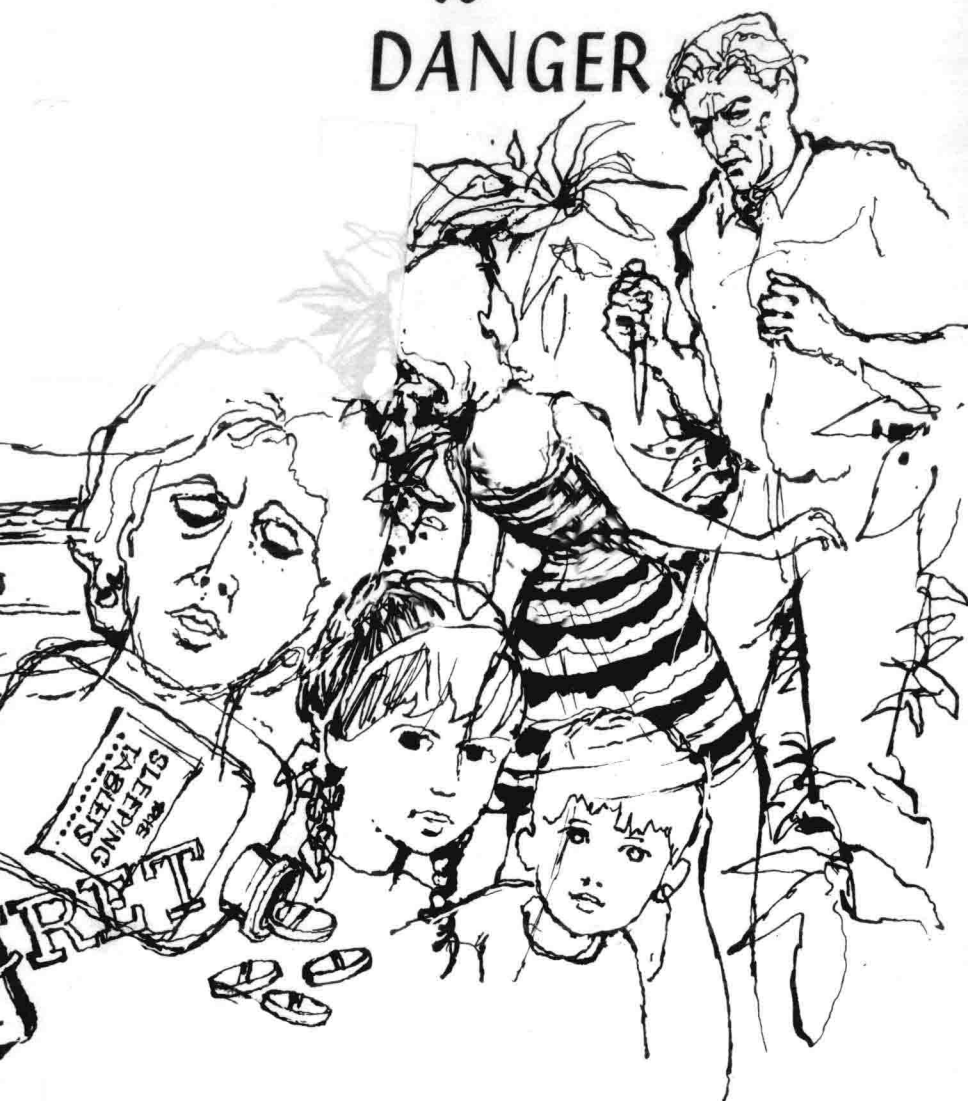
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CRUISING to DANGER



by *Priscilla Hagon*

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CRUISING TO DANGER



Joanna Writes a Letter

It was the kind of day that made me fall out of love with London. The wind was blowing up Gloucester Place, and a sudden flurry of chilly rain sent me to shelter in a doorway. It was just impossible to believe that it was August.

I was on my way to the public library to look at the ads in the newspapers, because I'd come to the conclusion that I must find some kind of summer job — preferably one that would take me somewhere sunny and warm. I had meant to ever since I returned from a climbing holiday in Wales, but somehow time had passed and I'd done nothing about it.

It was really Aunt Monica who had driven me to it. "I just don't understand the young people of today," she had said to Mother. "They have no sense of adventure. Take Joanna — I know she has brains, since she won a scholarship to Oxford, but meanwhile she just idles the days away."

"I *am* going to get a summer job of some kind," I said, "only I haven't heard of anything suitable yet."

"She spends a great deal of time writing," said Mother.

"No success, I suppose?" Aunt Monica sounded as though it was not to be expected, and I flushed and glared at her.

I was sensitive about my writing. I never showed my work to anyone, least of all to Father, and it had been a bitter blow when a mystery story kept on bouncing back from publishers with the utmost regularity.

"You ought to let your father help you. What's the use of having a well-known author for a father if he can't do something for you? A word or two in the right place —"

"I'll do it on my own or not at all," I said firmly.

"Well, the summer's passing," she had goaded.

And that's how I came to be standing in a doorway in Gloucester Place, waiting for the rain to stop.

I did like London really, but I often wished that my father hadn't given up his job with a travel agency. He had started writing his mystery stories in his spare time, but they were so successful that he had become a full-time author three years ago.

Before that we had often lived abroad — Milan, Paris, the Riviera. It was Italy I missed the most. I often longed inexpressibly for more color, for dark-blue skies and tall cypresses and little lizards scuttling among hot stones. . . .

The rain stopped and I walked on briskly toward the library.

"What I want is something exciting," I told myself, "exciting and in a warm place."

At first I seemed to be out of luck. And then I jumped, for I'd seen something in the *Times* that looked promising.

"Sensible, ordinary girl, age 17-20, wanted as companion

for two children during Mediterranean cruise August 25-September 12. Passage, expenses, reasonable pocket money. Apply Box —"

Two and a half weeks wasn't very long, but it would be something. And the Mediterranean sounded wonderful. "Sensible, ordinary girl . . ." Ordinary seemed a peculiar word to use. Why ordinary? What *was* ordinary, anyway?

I sat back and thought about myself. I hoped, really, that I wasn't entirely ordinary — it sounded dull. But if the advertisers wanted someone ordinary I would do my best to supply the need.

I suddenly yearned more violently than ever for sunshine, blue seas, gaiety, foreign scenes, and I couldn't imagine why I hadn't done something earlier to find a job. Perhaps it was because I'd been seeing so much of Michael in the evenings. Michael was soon going to work in Manchester and it had hurt my feelings very much that he seemed to be looking forward to it. I had been a little in love with Michael for some time, but all he seemed to be thinking of was the new job.

"Oh, bother Michael! I shall just have to forget him," I said aloud, and the woman at the next table looked at me in surprise.

I looked at the advertisement again and saw myself lounging by a swimming pool in my new bathing suit. I just had to get that job!

I rushed home in a very different mood from the one that had engulfed me when I set out, and composed a letter that was as ordinary as I could make it. I merely gave my age and said that I had just left a London high school, where I had been a prefect. I said that I liked and got along well with young children and would enjoy a Mediterranean cruise.

I longed to state that I was good at languages, but no such qualification seemed required. It was very puzzling—really very mysterious—and when I had finished the letter and posted it, I could see no reason why I should be chosen out of probably hundreds of eager applicants.

Yet, after a couple of restless days during which I mentioned the matter to no one, I received a letter asking me to come to an address in Upper Belgrave Street for an interview. The writer's name was Edward Verriton.

"My wife," he wrote, "is in poor health and we usually go for at least two cruises a year on her account. We need someone to have meals with the children—the girl, Candy, is nine, and her brother Gilbert just eight years old—put them to bed, and see that they behave themselves. There will be a children's hostess on board and she is sure to arrange many activities for the young people. So I hardly think that the duties would be onerous.

"If you are still interested in the position, kindly come to see me at three o'clock this coming Saturday afternoon."

Pleased and excited, I could hardly wait for Saturday to come. And I was still very curious to learn why the Verritons wanted an "ordinary" girl.

CHAPTER TWO



Joanna Acts a Part

It was a narrow house in Upper Belgrave Street with wrought-iron balconies and a brilliantly flowering window box on the ground floor, above an area. The housekeeper showed me into a large, cool room at the back of the house and waved me to a chair.

"Mr. Verriton is busy at the moment. I know your appointment was for three o'clock, but he has a visitor. He opened the door himself, but he came to me and said that he mustn't be disturbed on any account and he sent you his apologies. He hopes not to be very long."

"Oh, it's quite all right," I said, and settled myself primly with my gloved hands clasped over my handbag.

The housekeeper departed, shutting the door quietly, and

silence seemed to rush over the big, elegant room. My nervousness immediately increased.

Several minutes passed and I felt restless as well as nervous. They couldn't mind if I walked around a little. I looked at the portrait over the fireplace of a very beautiful but delicate-looking woman, and studied the books through the glass front of the bookcase. A children's book had been left open on the floor. It was *The Wind in the Willows*, an old favorite of my own.

Perhaps it was nerves, but the room seemed to me to be cold. Beyond the French doors there was a well-kept garden — a narrow London garden, shaded at the far end by a large plane tree. Sunlight fell across three steps that led down to a paved path. Surely they wouldn't mind if I sat on the steps while I waited.

I succumbed to temptation and opened the French door softly. After making sure that the step was clean, I sat down and contemplated the smooth grass and the round rose bed. It really was a very charming house and I was quite prepared to like the Verritons. But what mattered, of course, was that they should like me.

It was a few moments before I realized that there were voices somewhere above me. At first no words were distinguishable, then, probably because the speakers had moved nearer to an open window, I suddenly heard clearly. And at once I sat bolt upright.

"... I do wish you hadn't come here. I thought it was agreed long ago that no one should ever visit me at my own home? You might have been seen."

"There is surely no need to be so nervous," said another

voice. It was clear, authoritative and not noticeably foreign, yet somehow the diction was too precise. "I told you before, my dear Verriton, that it was an emergency. I had to speak with you. No one saw me. I telephoned from the box around the corner and you let me in yourself. You will let me out —"

"But you might have met the girl. The one who's coming to be interviewed."

"How would it have mattered? Anyway, I did *not* meet the girl. The entire street was deserted. Must you really take a girl with you on this cruise?"

"Well, I'd prefer not to, but —"

"It is because of your wife? That makes me a little uneasy. Are you quite sure —?"

"Her health's very poor, that's all." The words were spoken hurriedly. "She may as well have a real rest. And you can be sure that I shall choose a stupid girl. So long as she is not actually mentally deficient, and can look after the children, she will do. I pin my hopes on this one; the others I've seen weren't really suitable."

"You do realize the extreme importance of this trip? Nothing must go wrong. What about the children? Perhaps the girl is getting a little old —"

"Candy's only nine and quite a baby for her age, in some ways."

I was absolutely tense as I sat there listening, but suddenly the voices moved away again. I strained my ears, but caught only a few more words: ". . . in Naples . . . the usual way." And then something that sounded like "died 'em."

After that the slightly foreign voice said, "We should have had the window shut!" and Edward Verriton answered, "The

garden's empty. The children are with the housekeeper and my wife is out." But the window shut with a bang, all the same.

I rose, picked up my bag from the step and silently retreated into the room, silently closed the French door. I crossed the big room and seated myself once again on the upright chair. My thoughts were whirling; I felt more alive than I had for quite a long time. Alive, passionately curious, and somewhat unbelieving. That overheard conversation had been like something out of a film, or one of my father's books.

I had grown up with an interest in crime and adventure. After all, my father wrote mystery stories and his elder brother, Ronald, was a Detective Superintendent at Scotland Yard. Occasionally Uncle Ronald had entertained the family with stories of his cases, poking subtle fun at his brother, the mystery writer. I had always listened with interest, for one day I hoped to write exciting stories of my own. And here, right here, was a real-life mystery.

Of course there was always the chance that I had misinterpreted the words somehow. Perhaps there was a reasonable explanation, but I couldn't think what it might be.

Any minute now Edward Verriton might walk in and confront me, and the word "ordinary" suddenly had more meaning. He had probably really meant "dull, stupid," but hadn't quite dared to say so. He had just said that he would choose a stupid girl, though one who was not actually mentally deficient. The job, it seemed, was mine, if only I could strike the right note.

It should not be too difficult to pose as a nice, well-mannered, but rather silly girl. Definitely there must be no mention of