

The Charter at Stonehenge

DON'T THINK anyone knew what used to be there, but whatever it had been, only the old stone foundation remained, in a clearing in the woods. The stones were worn and covered with moss. Inside the rectangular stone foundation was a pit about six feet deep and twenty feet across, filled with bushes and trees. It could have been there for a hundred years—nobody knew.

Cheryl, Randall, and I had found it years ago, exploring as kids, but it seemed too eerie to play in, so we had left it alone, filing it away in our heads for future reference. The old foundation sat there in the thick woods between Cheryl's house and the ocean, waiting. I had always thought of the foundation as waiting—waiting for someone to use it again, I guess, or maybe just waiting to disappear into the earth, like the building that once stood above it had.

It was waiting, all right, and on the second Friday of ninth grade, I had this certain exciting feeling that it was waiting for us.

The Charter at Stonehenge

□ 51 □

As Cheryl and I stood on the outer edge of the deep stone foundation, looking into the pit, Cheryl said, "This is great! I couldn't think of a better place to have our meetings!"

I walked around the edge until I came to a place where the foundation had given way, and the earth sloped down into the pit. I climbed down into the center, and Cheryl followed.

"It looks like it could almost be magical," she said.

"Maybe it's haunted or something."

"Well, don't go and make it all spooky," she said. But it was spooky already; spooky in a fun sort of way, like the mummy cases in the museum, or a ghost town. There was a feeling to the place that made anything we could possibly do there seem very, very important. It would give our club meetings a hint of mystery.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Four-fifteen. They'll be here in fifteen minutes."

As I looked around, I began to see things you couldn't see from up on the ledge. There were old green Coke bottles, and aluminum cans with the old-fashioned pull-off tabs that they stopped making years ago. There were designs on the cans that I didn't even recognize. For all I knew they could have been here since the building came down. All around us were little bits of the past that no one had touched for years and years. It was magical—like that Stonehenge place in England, mysterious rocks with a hidden history.

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 52 ■

"Let's call this place Stonehenge," I said to Cheryl.

"Great!" she said. "I like that." She climbed back up to the edge and sat on a moss-covered cinder block at the lip of the pit. The edge of Stonehenge.

"I feel like . . . a witch," she said.

"You look like one!" I said. She had stepped right into that one!

"Shut up! You know what I mean. It's like we could conjure up ghosts here!"

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Four-twenty," said Cheryl.

At first, I had felt funny talking to kids about this club; I was afraid they would laugh in my face—but no one did. Picking out the kids for the club became like a game. Cheryl and I would keep our eyes open, watching for kids in our exact situation; kids who were second-best, were miserable about it, and had to live under the shadow of some nasty "unbeatable" person, who rubbed their noses in it every day.

We ruled out some kids right away, others took longer, but finally we came up with a list of five kids who would be perfect. We didn't want a big group; seven, including us, was just fine. One by one, either Cheryl or I spoke to them when no one else was around. And you know what? Every single one of them wanted to be in the club—The Shadow Club—as Cheryl and I named it. So we called the first meeting,

The Charter at Stonehenge

■ 53 ■

then marked the trees so that everyone could find our secret meeting place in the woods. At any second they would converge on the old foundation, and the Shadow Club would be born.

"What time is it?" I asked.

Cheryl looked at me with those give-me-a-break sort of eyes, and said, "Stop being ridiculous," so I didn't ask anymore.

I climbed back down into Stonehenge to start up the campfire.

The sun was near the horizon and shadows were getting long and dark when everyone finally arrived. By now the little campfire I had started in the center of the big square foundation pit was burning strong. It wasn't dark, and it wasn't cold, and we didn't have marshmallows to roast, so the campfire didn't seem to make much sense, but it was there for a very good reason that only Cheryl and I knew.

"I guess we should start by formally introducing ourselves," I said.

"But why?" asked Randall. "We all know each other already."

"Shut up," said Cheryl. "You'll see."

"I'll start," I said, clearing my throat. I had practiced my speech a few times at home, so I didn't feel funny being the first one to go. "My name is Jared Mercer. I am the second-

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 54 ■

best runner in the school, second to Austin Pace, the most conceited, obnoxious . . . Is anyone here friends with Austin?"

Nobody raised their hand, so I continued.

". . . conceited, obnoxious, pain-in-the-neck kid ever to be on any track team. He takes every chance he gets to make me feel lousy, just because I'm not as fast as he is." I paused for effect. "I hate Austin Pace." I turned to Cheryl, and she began.

"My name is Cheryl Gannett. I am, and have always been, the second-best singer, dancer, and all-around performer in my family. Even my own mother forgets I can sing. Now it's the same way in school. My cousin Rebecca, who thinks she's God's gift to the universe, gets all the attention. I hate Rebecca."

"I get it!" said Randall. "OK, it's my turn. My name is Randall Gannett, and I'm the best swimmer in the eighth grade."

"Randall . . .," Cheryl said impatiently.

"Shh!" said Randall. "Like I said, I'm the best swimmer, but Drew Landers thinks he's better than me . . . but he's not."

"Randall, you can't do that," said Cheryl.

"Why not? It's true!"

"You have to admit it," I said. "You have to admit to being second-best, otherwise you can't be in the club."

The Charter at Stonehenge

■ 55 ■

"But he's not better than me!"

"No?" said Cheryl. "Did you ever beat him in a race?"

Randall looked like a cornered animal. "Almost . . .," he said.

"So he is faster."

"He cheats!" said Randall.

"How can you cheat in swimming?"

"Well, he's taller! If he wasn't taller, I would win." Randall shut up after that one, and looked around the circle, feeling embarrassed.

"Maybe we should go on, and come back to you later," suggested Cheryl.

"No, I'll go," said Randall, defeated. Now he looked down and fidgeted with a stick. "I'm the second-best swimmer, OK? Drew Landers is better than me; he always beats me by a tenth of a second, and then he laughs at me. He even laughs at me during swim meets, when everyone on the team is supposed to be cheering one another on." Randall looked up for a moment, then back down at his twig. A sad, but mean expression came over his face. "Even though I take second place all the time, he still laughs at me. And he calls me Duckfeet, because my feet are a little big. And next year when all the ninth graders graduate, he'll be the best on the team, probably the captain, and he'll still laugh at me every day. I hate Drew Landers." Randall looked up at Cheryl. "Are you happy?"

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 56 ■

"That'll do," said Cheryl.

Jason cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. He was rarin' to go. "My name is Jason Perez." He took off his glasses, probably feeling self-conscious about them. He was also self-conscious about being fat, even though he wasn't fat anymore; he had grown into his weight. "I play trumpet," said Jason. "I've been playing for four years, and I'm finally getting good enough to play first trumpet for band, and I've been taking extra lessons, but then last year, David Berger just up and decides he wants to learn trumpet, and in like three months, he's better than everyone, so he gets every single solo, and every single award, and I get absolutely nothing, ever, no matter how hard I practice, and I really hate David Berger!" He stopped for a second, and we all thought he was done, but then he started up again. "Last June, when they picked kids for the Young Musicians Society, did I get picked? No! David Berger, David Berger, all anybody ever hears about is David Berger! I can't stand him, and now he's been picked to play for the high school band—can you believe it? And then . . ."

"Jason," I said, interrupting, "how do you say all that without breathing?" There were a few giggles from around the circle.

"Well, sorry," said Jason. "I thought you wanted to know."

"You can tell us after everybody's had a chance," said Cheryl.

The Charter at Stonehenge

■ 57 ■

Everyone turned to Abbie, who had her strawberry blonde hair in some new style that was hard not to stare at.

"Well, as you know, I'm Abbie Singer, and I have absolutely no idea why I'm here." And that's all she said at first.

"C'mon, Abbie, you know why," said Cheryl.

"No, I really don't. I'm not second-best at anything—I don't even think I'm third-best. I do hate Vera Donaldson, like you said when you first told me about this club thing, Cheryl, but she is definitely not better than me in anything."

I turned to Cheryl, but Cheryl didn't say anything. It was Jason who spoke, very softly. "I know why you're here," he said, looking down at the pair of glasses he held in his hands. "You're here because you're the second-prettiest girl in school."

Abbie thought about this. "Is that why, Cheryl?"

"Well, you *are* the second most popular girl in school."

Abbie smiled. "Yeah, I guess I am, aren't I?"

"Vera Donaldson is a snot," said Jason. I thought that was too nice a word for her.

"Well, not everyone thinks so. She's the most popular girl in school," said Abbie, "and she hates my guts. I don't know why, but every time there's a guy who likes me, she always steals him away first, just for fun, or tells him nasty things about me. Do you know how it feels for people to say nasty stuff about you like that? And none of it's true! Absolutely none of it!" She clenched her teeth and her hands

THE SHADOW CLUB

□ 58 □

rolled into fists. "Just thinking about her makes my head hurt."

"Say it!" said Cheryl.

"I hate Vera Donaldson!"

O.P., who was next, looked around a bit nervously. She had been quiet all this time and knew perfectly well why she was here. O.P. was Korean, I think, but she didn't have any accent at all.

"I'm Karin Han . . . and . . . I guess I'm smart. I have the second-highest math and reading scores in the ninth grade. I get the second-best grades in just about everything, and Tommy Nickols always gets the best."

"Ughh! He's such a bozo," said Abbie.

"If I get a ninety-eight on a test," she continued, "then Tommy will get a ninety-nine. All the time. So last year he started to call me O.P., and now everyone does. It stands for 'One Point.'"

Randall giggled and Cheryl elbowed him.

"Yeah, everyone thinks it's funny. I don't mind being called it, but I hate it when Tommy Nickols says it. I guess I hate Tommy Nickols."

Last in the circle was Darren Collins, whose legs seemed longer than just about everyone's whole body. He was fourteen, but was getting pretty close to six feet already. I'll give you one guess what he did.

"Yeah, I'm second-best, too," admitted Darren. "I've

The Charter of Stonehenge

□ 59 □

never gotten MVP on any basketball team, I was always next in line—someone else always beat me out. Usually it doesn't really bug me that much, but for two years Eric Kilfoil has been making me look like a fool on the court all the time. He's like turned me into the team mascot or something, and makes everybody think I'm a dumb jock—but I'm not, I get good grades. Then he does these Harlem Globetrotter things to me, you know, like bouncing the ball off the top of my head, and then getting the shot in—and everyone laughs. Once, I got so mad, I stepped on his face and got taken out of the game. I hate Eric Kilfoil."

And it was back to me. By now the shadows were getting even longer; it was almost time for the sky to turn colors. A soft wind blew down into Stonehenge and the campfire crackled. The first part was done. Now came part two.

"Cheryl?" I asked.

"Oh, I forgot." Cheryl opened her folder and pulled out the charter of the club, written on imitation parchment paper. "Everyone has to sign this," she said, then began to recite the charter:

THE SHADOW CLUB CHARTER

We, the undersigned, do hereby form the Shadow Club—an organization dedicated to the righteous indignation of its members toward all those obnoxious

THE SHADOW CLUB

□ 60 □

unbeatable people who make our lives miserable every single day. We shall no longer suffer their slings and arrows. We will be proud of who we are, and not let them get the better of us.

We hereafter swear loyalty and secrecy to the Shadow Club, and all of its members, for as long as this charter shall exist.

I had to smile. Cheryl's mom was a lawyer, and only the daughter of a lawyer could come up with such a legal-sounding charter.

"What's righteous indignation?" asked Jason.

"It means we have a good reason to be p.o.'d," said O.P.

Cheryl and I had already signed it, so she passed it on to Randall and gave him a pen.

"Shouldn't we sign this in blood?" asked Randall.

"No way!" said Abbie from across the fire. "I refuse to bleed."

"Well, it was just an idea. I figured it would make it more official."

Randall signed it, and passed it to Jason. The charter went around the fire, came back to Cheryl, and she put it back into her folder.

"Is that it?" asked Darren.

"One more thing," I said. "The pictures."

"Oh, right," said Darren.

The Charter at Stonehenge

□ 61 □

Everyone reached into one pocket or another. I couldn't believe it; everyone had managed to get a picture.

"I hope you know how much trouble I went through to get this," said Randall. "I had to search through Drew Landers' swim locker. I found it in his wallet."

"I had to go and take a picture of David Berger," said Jason. "He had no idea why I did it."

"Good," I said. "Don't tell anyone why. Remember, no one tells anyone about anything we do in the club. That's part of the rules."

"Why do we need the pictures?" asked O.P.

"Symbolic gesture," said Cheryl.

Everyone held a picture of their mortal enemy in their hands. I held a picture of Austin. It had been a picture of both of us together, but I cut it in half. He smiled up at me from the picture and the smile said, "You'll never beat me!"

"We'll see," I muttered to the photo, then made sure everyone was watching, and tossed the picture into the fire. The edges flared, the colors faded, Austin's red hair turned brown, then black, and those eyes died, shriveling to ashes. We'll see, I thought.

Cheryl went next, and everyone followed, until the last picture had been thrown into the fire.

"I now pronounce that the Shadow Club has begun!"

The wind became a bit stronger, and the fire crackled. Everyone sat around the fire there in Stonehenge, watching

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 62 ■

the ashes of the pictures disappear. Then, they all slowly looked up, then at each other, then at Cheryl and me.

"So?" said Darren.

"So, what?" I asked.

"So, what do we do now?"

Suddenly my feeling of power flew away. I hadn't thought about that. I hadn't thought past the burning of the pictures at all. What came next? I didn't know.

"So what's this club going to do?" asked Abbie. I looked at Cheryl, who I figured would have all the answers, but she just looked back at me the same way I looked at her.

"Well, we go and do stuff," I said.

"Like what?" asked Jason.

"I don't know . . . go to the movies . . ."

"Go bowling," suggested Cheryl.

"Play games," I said.

"I got a miniature chess set with me," said O.P. "Anyone wanna play?"

"Give me a break," said Darren.

"I guess we could just hang out together," said Randall.

"Boooring!" said Darren.

"He's right," said Abbie. "It does sound boring."

"What about miniature golf?" suggested Cheryl.

"Booooooring!" said Jason and Darren together.

"Well, we could sell stuff and raise money," said Cheryl.

The Charter at Stonehenge

■ 63 ■

"For what?"

"For . . . Shadow Club T-shirts?" said Cheryl.

"Booooooooring!" they all said.

"Hey, I like you guys and everything," said Abbie, standing up, "but if I want to go out and do stuff like that, I have my own friends."

"Me, too," said Jason.

Darren stood up. "You know something, Jared?" Darren waited until everyone else was listening. "I think this was a really dumb idea."

"No it's not!" I said, standing up as well. I was a head shorter than him, and at that moment felt even smaller. Everyone seemed ready to agree that the club was stupid. Everything had been going so well; why did all this have to happen now?

"What's so good about it?" asked Darren. "So, you got us here, and we burned some pictures, and we signed a piece of paper. Big deal. I got better things to do on Friday afternoon. Why should I come to these dumb meetings?"

"Because . . ." I said, "because . . . we have stuff to do!"

"Like what?" asked Randall. Even Randall was a traitor! For a second I felt like it was over. Cheryl and I had lost complete control. But then I closed my eyes, thought for a second, waited until I felt the calm come back to my voice, and when it did, I had an idea—a fantastic idea that might just save the club!

THE SHADOW CLUB

□ 64 □

"Like what?" asked Randall again.

"We have secret things we're going to do."

"Like what?" demanded Randall, getting annoyed.

I smiled. "Just like the charter says, we're dedicated to fight the unbeatables, and that's just what we'll do. We'll wage a secret war against them . . . a war . . . of practical jokes, to embarrass and humiliate them, just like they do to us!"

It took a few seconds to sink in. Jason smiled first, then O.P., then Randall.

"Oh, I love it!" said Abbie.

"Intense!" said O.P.

"Classic!" said Jason.

Cheryl turned to me, a bit worried. "I don't know, Jared. We didn't talk about this."

"I know, I just thought of it."

"Wait a minute," said Darren. "You mean we all work together to really bother the unbeatables, and since no one knows about the club, they'll never be able to figure out who's doing it?"

"I love it!" said Abbie again.

"Classic!"

"Intense!"

"Jared, we could get in lots of trouble," said Cheryl.

"Naah," I said. "It's just for fun. We won't hurt anyone, we'll just bug the heck out of 'em!" Now everyone was walk-

The Charter of Stonehenge

□ 65 □

ing around thinking about it. "You should be glad," I whispered to her. "I just saved your club."

She didn't say anything back, because she knew it was true.

Darren looked at me and smiled—almost in admiration. "This could be interesting," he said. "Maybe this is a good idea after all!"

If Cheryl hadn't been convinced before, that certainly convinced her.

"Of course it's a good idea!" said Cheryl.

"But wait," said Abbie. "What kind of tricks are we going to pull?"

"Well," I said, "let's sit down and think about it."

For an hour we brainstormed ideas, all the practical jokes you could think of! We laughed ourselves loony just imagining them. It was incredible! All seven of us working together toward a common goal. A club, a real club.

We all exchanged phone numbers, then everyone got up, climbed out of Stonehenge, and went their separate ways, leaving Cheryl and me alone. I grabbed the bucket of water I had brought to pour over the fire.

"They all had a great time!" said Cheryl.

"Yeah! It's like a real club."

"It is a real club. I can hardly wait till next week. Little Becky won't know what hit her!"

THE SHADOW CLUB

■ 66 ■

"Neither will Austin." Just imagining it gave me goose bumps all over. I felt so good, I could have gone over and given Cheryl a big hug for thinking of this club. I wanted to, but I didn't. Like I said, Cheryl and I were just friends.

I poured the bucket over the dying fire. It sizzled, a cloud of steam and smoke came billowing out, and then the fire was gone. That's when I realized how dark it was getting. I could barely see the walls of Stonehenge around us now.

"We're gonna have lots of fun, I think. You get some good ideas sometimes, Cheryl."

"You, too." And then she gave me a hug. I couldn't believe she did, but I was glad, so I hugged her back. For that split second, it felt like everything in the universe was perfect, and we were the center of it, down there in Stonehenge.

Then the feeling passed, and she let me go, and looked down. I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I put them in my pockets, and we stood there feeling incredibly dumb, listening to the sizzling of the dying fire.

"Hey," yelled Randall from the lip of Stonehenge. "Hey, are you coming or what, Cheryl? What are you guys doing down there anyway, making out?"

"Die!" said Cheryl.

"Yeah, sure. I know," he said. "Well, whatever you're doing, let's go or we'll be late for dinner."

"I'm coming."

The Charter at Stonehenge

■ 67 ■

She climbed out of Stonehenge, and I followed. Before I left, I turned back and watched the last bit of steam rise from the campfire, and smiled. Monday was going to be the start of a fantastic week!