

requiem in granite

by . . . Robert F. Young

**Secretly Danny and Gwen knew that the giant was strong enough
to rip the mountain to fragments. But—they didn't think he would!**

The imagination of childhood often deep and dark and silent. Or it can become myth-making in its lightning-swift intuitions, shaping patterns of light and fire, of beauty and terror, in response to some unexplained inner necessity. It is never historical, never objectively realistic. It exists in a sense, completely outside of history. Hence the monuments of a vanished civilization may loom gigantic to it, and assume contours that never were on sea or land. That wonder Robert Young has grasped, and made real to us here.

THEY HAD BEEN playing on the plain all afternoon and their games had lured them away from the forest, farther away than they had ever been before. Late in the afternoon they paused to rest and that was when they looked up and saw how close they were to the Hollow Mountains. For a moment they were both too frightened to speak.

Then Danny threw his shoulders back and stood up very straight and said, "I just thought of a new game. A real game. Let's search the mountains for the giant-of-many-voices! Come on! No one's going to stop us!"

At first Gwen was terrified. "You wouldn't dare!" she said.

"I would too! He'll be easy to find. I know, because my father said this morning that it was time for the giant to come out of his cave and sing again."

They stood together in the crisp clean snow of the plain, staring at the honeycombed precipices and the crumbling crags and then higher toward the towering pinnacle rising against the darkening sky.

"Why doesn't he ever sing in summer?" Gwen asked. "Why does he always wait till the first snow?"

"I don't know." Danny's brow was crinkled in childish concentration. "Maybe he doesn't like summer. Maybe he can't sing unless it's cold and the ground is covered with snow. Come on, let's look for him."

"I'm afraid."

"Oh, you're always afraid! I'll look for him alone then."

He started toward the mountains, swaggering a little, his moccasined feet scuffing up diminutive clouds of snow. Gwen stood forlornly on the plain, watching him. A sense of utter aloneness suddenly overcame her—an acute awareness of the emptiness of the mountains, of the desolation of the plain, and the remoteness of the forest.

"Wait for me!" she called.

Danny slowed until she came up to him. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said reassuringly. He took her hand, clasping her cold fingers between his own. "When he comes out of his cave we'll hide. He's so big and we're so small he'll never even see us."

"But the Warden. Suppose he finds out we were in the Hollow Mountains? He said no one could enter the Hollow Mountains. Not even the lesser wardens. Not even the Great Hunters."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No."

"Then how is he going to find out?"

She was silent. They walked closely together, their thin shoulders sometimes touching. It was growing

colder. Their breath turned into little frosty clouds and their feet made creaking sounds in the snow. Presently the awesome cliffs of the outlying mountains loomed above them, chalk-white in the last pale rays of the sun,

They made their way through the debris cluttering the feet of the cliffs to the opening of a narrow canyon. There was something grim and terrible about the sheer honeycombed precipices; something macabre about the tiers and tiers of the yawning caves where the original tribe had dwelt long, long ago.

Gwen hung back and Danny had to half drag her over the piles stones and twisted metal that littered the canyon's floor. Some of the stones had odd markings. Once they dislodged a stone and it tumbled down between the piles, quickly freeing itself of its camouflage of snow. It made Gwen think of a man's face, with its jagged holes for eyes and its lipless travesty of a mouth.

She shuddered and gripped Danny's hand tightly. She remembered with uncomfortable vividness the stories which the lesser wards told around the dying cook-fire at night. The stories about the original tribe and the wrathful SeeDee. The SeeDee had appeared after the Great Brightness and afflicted the tribe with the Sickness. Then *he* had driven the tribe out of the Hollow Mountains and into the forest.

He had taken the well men and made them wardens, and *he* had taken the almost well men and made them lesser wardens. And then *he* had created the Giant-of-many-voices and made him Guardian of the Hollow Mountains, so that the tribe would never dare to return to them again.

They had come to an open place where another canyon crossed the one up which they had been moving. Danny paused, looking around. The silence was almost tangible. It lay heavily upon the mountains, and overflowed the dusk-darkened canyons.

"Let's go back," Gwen said.

"No!" Danny said. But he stood quietly in the cliff shadows as though reluctant to move on.

"What if the Warden misses us?"

"He'll never miss us!"

"Suppose we get lost?"

Danny didn't answer for a moment. He glanced uncomfortably at the impassive cliffs. He looked up at the dark, indifferent sky. He listened to the brooding silence.

"We'll stick to this canyon," he said finally. "Then we can't get lost. Come on."

Gwen accompanied him reluctantly. They continued up the canyon, picking their way through the increasing piles of debris. The temperature fell steadily and the cold began to penetrate their thin deerskins, to creep up through the padded soles of their moccasins. The canyon widened abruptly and the precipices seemed to rise into the sky itself. Tier upon tier of the sepulchral cave mouths piled endlessly upward till the merciful dusk hid them from view.

They hurried on. Presently they noticed that the cliffs were dwindling, dropping lower and lower, and receding farther and farther back. After a while they came to a place where there were no cliffs at all, or mountains either: nothing but a vast circular concavity ringed by twisted hills of stone and steel.

The two children stood very still, looking out over the black desolation. Darkness had fallen and they could barely see the farther rim—a jagged line of shattered pinnacles showing vaguely against the fist pale radiance of the rising moon.

"The place of the Great Brightness," Gwen whispered.

"I know," Danny breathed. "I—I guess we'd better go back."

"Let's run. I'm scared, Danny."

"There's nothing to be scared of, just that—" He paused, trying to keep his own fear from showing in his words. "It's just that the mountains are too big. They're too big, that's all. We could never find the giant. Not even in a thousand years."

They began to retrace their steps. Behind them the moon rose, bringing the mountains into ghastly relief. The contours of the cliffs subtly changed and the cliffs became pale caricatures with haunted eyes staring emptily from dark honeycombed depths.

The canyon's floor was a bewildering chiaroscuro. The two children slipped and fell, and helped each other up, and slipped and fell again. They began to run. They ran hysterically, scrambling and tumbling

over the piles and piles of debris. They did not stop running till they heard the voice of the giant, and they stopped then only because the intensity of their terror transformed them into statuettes.

The voice was all around them. It was not one voice but many voices, and yet it was still one voice, a complex, resonant, magnificent voice that rose and fell on great crests and troughs of sound.

They listened to it, clinging to each other, their faces blue-white with cold and terror. They waited hopelessly for the giant to come striding through the canyons. They listened for the awesome thunder of his footsteps.

The voice created exquisite patterns, formed transient fretworks, wove a quivering skein of sound through canyons and caves, around pinnacles and crags. It rose on great crescendos that overflowed the Hollow Mountains and for, the night itself. It was overwhelming; and it was appallingly beautiful.

The two children waited and waited, but the giant did not appear. They listened for his steps and heard nothing but his voice. After a while some of the fright left them and they began to pick their way back through the canyon towards the plain, circumventing the unpremeditated tumult of the original tribe, stumbling on loose stones that sometimes weren't stones at all but skulls instead. The plain was pale-white in the moonlight. Hand in hand, they started running across it toward the dark blur of the forest. The voice of the giant-of-many-voices became fainter and fainter as they neared the forest, and their fear faded away. Then a ragged mass of cloud edged across the moon's face, and a shapeless shadow rushed across the plain, engulfing them.

Fear overcame them again, and they ran wildly through the night. When they reached the forest they crept thankfully between the trees. For a long while they lay in the soft snow, resting, and when their breaths returned they climbed into the lower branches, passed swiftly to the upper terraces, and swung off toward the reassuring tree houses of the tribe.

IT BEGAN to snow and the snow came down silently on the plain. It fell softly on the naked mountains.

Joy to the world! the voice sang.

Silent night, Holy night—

O little town of Bethlehem!

The snow began to cover the mountains. It crowned rivened pinnacles. It piled ever higher on crumbled crags. It filled crevices and softened the littered floors of canyons.

The voice sang on in the thickly falling snow.

Peace on the earth, good will to men—

God rest you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay...

And then the voice faded away, as the ancient public address system, with its thermostatic controls which the dropping temperature had activated, again completed its cycle of recorded carols. And there was nothing left but the snow and the silence. The deep crisp snow and the solemn silence.