1

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The SWAMP ROBBER

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was the laziest day I ever saw and so hot it would have made any boy want to go fishing or swimming—or maybe both. I don't think I was ever so glad in my life that school was out, because just as soon as I saw those big fat fishing worms being turned up by Dad's plow when he was breaking the garden, I knew what I wanted to do. What I *had* to do, in fact, or the whole day would be spoiled.

Right away I laid my rake down—I was raking the yard—and went out behind our garage to a barrelful of empty tin cans that we'd pretty soon have to haul away to the dump down along Sugar Creek. I threw a handful of dirt into a can and started dropping in the biggest, juiciest worms I could find—the kind that would make any fish go so crazy with hunger he'd risk getting caught rather than let the worm wriggle around on the hook all by itself.

It made me think of that time I sneaked into Mom's pantry and filled my pockets full of cookies, and had my mouth full too, just as Mom came hurrying down from upstairs where she'd been making the beds. She took one look at me, called out sharply, "William Jasper Collins!" and made a dive for me. She caught me too and—but that's a story I don't tell any-

body. I was just little then and didn't know any better, but after that I made up my mind I'd never take any more cookies without asking first.

I've got the best mom in the world, don't think I haven't. I guess punishing me hurt her worse than it did me. That night when I'd said my prayers and been tucked into bed, she hugged me awfully tight.

But as I said, that was when I was little, not more than seven years old. Now I say my prayers by myself, climb into bed in the dark, and just call, "Good night!" down the stairs. I wouldn't let Mom know for all the world that I kind of miss being tucked in, but I do.

Well, pretty soon I had that bait can almost full of worms. I was thinking how hot it was here in the garden and how cool it would be down at the river and how Roy Gilbert and I would just lie there in the new green grass and watch the lazy specks of foam floating along on the water. And every now and then our bobbers would start acting funny, moving around in circles and ducking under the water like tiny diving birds, and our string of fish would get longer and longer with rock bass and chub and—

"Jasper!"

Dad's big voice was just like a finger being poked into a great big beautiful soap bubble. It burst my dream all to nothing. And when Dad called me Jasper instead of Bill, I knew he didn't like what I was doing.

I set the bait can down in the deep furrow and answered innocently, "What?"

"What are you up to?" he demanded roughly. He had the horse's reins slipped around his shoulders, and his hands were gripping the plow handles real tight. I could tell, because his sleeves were rolled up and the muscles on his arms were like great big ropes. My dad was awful strong—or maybe I should say *very* strong. My folks are having a hard time teaching me to use the right words. It's awful hard to quit using the wrong ones, you know.

I didn't know what to say to my dad. So I just called back indifferently, "Nothing," and picked up a clod of dirt to throw at a blackbird that was gobbling up some of the worms I had missed.

"Come here!" Dad said, "and bring that can of worms with you!"

My heart went *flop*. I couldn't fool Dad in anything, and I knew better than to try. But I could see the whole day being spoiled. Just think of all those fish swimming around on the bottom of the creek, hungry for nice, wriggling worms. And just think of how Dad liked to eat fish when they were all cleaned and rolled in cornmeal and fried crisp and brown the way Mom can fry them. I decided to remind him how good fish would taste for supper that night. I picked up the can and walked across the garden to where he was waiting.

Dad could always read my mind just like I could read a book. (I was in the fifth grade in

school, you know.) He had turned around and was sitting on the crosspiece between the plow handles. His big brownish-red eyebrows were down. I stood there holding the can of worms in both hands.

The horses were so hot that white lather was all over them. They'd been sweating so much there was lather where the harness rubbed their sides, and you could smell the sweat. Sweat was trickling down Dad's face too. I guess there never had been a hotter spring day. Little heat waves were dancing all over the garden.

I kept looking down at my toes, which were digging themselves into the cool, newly turned earth, and Dad kept glaring at my can of worms. I hadn't really done anything wrong, hadn't exactly planned or even thought anything wrong. Except maybe I was wishing I didn't have to rake the yard and was hating rakes, hoes, garden-making, and all the work. I guess you'd call it being lazy. Maybe it was.

"Well?" Dad demanded.

Then I saw his snow-white teeth gleaming under his red-brown mustache and the twinkle in his eye. It was like a cool dive into Sugar Creek on a smothering hot day. Whenever I saw Dad's teeth shining under his mustache, I knew everything was all right.

"Bill Collins," he said, and I felt better than ever—even though his voice was still gruff. "I want you to take that garden rake, clean it off, and put it away in the toolhouse. Then get your long cane fishing pole and go down to the river

—you and Roy Gilbert or some of the boys—and fish and fish and wade in the branch until you get over that terrible case of spring fever. And don't come back until you've caught all the fish that'll bite! You've had a hard school year—with your arithmetic, geography, and science—and you need a rest!"

At first I couldn't believe he meant it. But when he reached out, put his arm around my shoulder, gave me a half hug, and said, "I was a boy once too," I believed him without trying.

You should have seen me carry that long cane fishing pole in one hand and the can of worms in the other, running straight toward the river where I knew Roy'd be waiting for me. For the night before we'd laid our plans to meet there at two o'clock, if we could.

But I never dreamed so many things could happen all in one day, or that before I'd get back home again Roy and I would have been scared almost to death, or that this was going to be the beginning of the most exciting week of my whole life.

2

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The KILLER BEAR

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was Dragonfly who first saw the bear—a big, hairy, black thing that looked more like one of my dad's hogs than anything else.

None of us boys had ever seen an honest-to-goodness wild bear, although we'd all been to the zoo and the circus and had watched bears juggling rope balls and doing different kinds of acrobatic stunts. Naturally we had read a lot of bear stories, having borrowed books from our school and public libraries. But we had never dreamed that a bear story would happen to us, the kind of story that would make any boy's hair stand right up on end.

Perhaps I'd better explain right away that when I say "us" I mean the Sugar Creek Gang, which is the name of our gang of six boys. We have crazy names as nearly all boys do—that is, all of us except me. I am just plain Bill, which is short for William, which name I don't like. My middle name is Jasper. I don't like that either.

Dragonfly's real name is Roy Gilbert, but we call him Dragonfly because he is always seeing important things first. His eyes grow big when he does, making him look a little like a dragonfly or a walleyed pike.

Then there is Big Jim, the leader of our gang, who has been a Boy Scout; and Little Jim,

the grandest fellow you ever saw and as good as a million dollars worth of gold. Little Jim is my very best friend, except for Poetry. Poetry is the name we've given to Leslie Thompson because he knows maybe a hundred poems by heart and is always quoting one of them, much to Circus's disgust. Circus is our acrobat. He can juggle baseballs better than any trained bear and is always climbing trees and acting like a monkey and looking like one. He is almost as mischievous as Poetry, although I don't think anybody could be *that* mischievous. Poetry is big, almost as big around as a barrel.

That's all of us: Big Jim, our leader; Little Jim, the best Christian any boy ever saw; Poetry, whose voice is squawky like a duck with a bad cold; Dragonfly, whose eyes are as keen as a hawk's. And Circus, whose dad was always getting drunk. Circus has four sisters, one of them only about a month old, just one day younger than my own little sister, Charlotte Ann, who really ought to belong to our gang too because she's so great. But she can't because she's too little and especially because she's a girl, and girls don't usually belong to a boys' club.

Let me see—oh, yes! I ought to tell you that Poetry has a tent in his backyard, where our gang sometimes has our meetings—when we don't have them at the spring or the big sycamore tree or on top of the hill on the east side of the woods, where there are a big rock and a big patch of wild strawberries.

Well, I'd better get busy telling you about

the bear. When we first saw her, she was way down along Sugar Creek, right out in the middle of the swamp. She'd been wallowing in the mud, the way black bears do in the summertime when it's terribly hot. That's why I told you the bear looked like one of my dad's big black hogs.

Dragonfly had come over to my house right after lunch that day. And because it was so terribly hot, my dad and mom decided we could go swimming—except that we had to wait an hour first because it's dangerous to go in swimming right after a meal. You might get cramps, which is kind of like "local paralysis," and you can't move your legs, and you might drown. Maybe I'm going to be a doctor someday. That's how I happen to know the medical names for some of these things.

"Whew!" I said when I'd finished eating. "It's *terribly* hot!" Then I said, "May I be excused, please?" That is what you're supposed to say when you leave the table before the others do.

"Certainly," Dad said.

But Mom said, "I'm sorry, Billy, but I'll have to have help with the dishes today. It's wash day, you know."

I looked at all those dirty dishes on the table—the plates and cups and saucers and my big blue-and-white mug out of which I drank milk three times a day. And when I saw all the forks and knives and spoons and a big stack of other dishes, it actually hurt way down inside of me. I'd a whole lot rather be dunking myself in the

old swimming hole in Sugar Creek than sloshing soapy water over dirty dishes—*hot* water at that! On a terribly hot day!

Then I happened to think how much my mom loved me and how hard she had to work all the time to keep our clothes clean—and the house—and prepare the meals and take care of Charlotte Ann, and how very tired she looked.

So I just made myself smile and say cheerfully, "Sure! I'll help you! I can't go swimming for an hour anyway!"

There was another reason that I wanted to help Mom, which I can't take time to tell you now. But when I'd been in the other room, looking at Charlotte Ann and watching her drink her milk out of a bottle, I'd heard Dad say to Mom, "There's a little secret I want to tell you about Bill when I get a chance. You know . . ."

Then he told her something I'd told him that very morning—a secret that was the most important secret of my whole life. But I think I'll let you guess what it was.

Pretty soon the dishes were finished and Dragonfly was there, and in a jiffy he and I—both barefoot and with our overalls rolled up so our toes wouldn't get caught in the cuffs and send us sprawling head over heels—went scuttling like wild things across the road, over the old rail fence, and through the woods to the spring, where we knew the gang would be waiting for us.

In ten or fifteen minutes we all were there—all except Little Jim, who took piano lessons

and had to practice a whole hour every day, a half hour in the morning and a half hour right after the noon meal.

He had taken lessons last summer too and could play a lot of things. Someday maybe he'd be a famous concert pianist. He knew the names of nearly all the famous musicians, such as Bach and Beethoven and Wagner. He even knew stories about different ones. Little Jim's mother was a wonderful musician, and she played the piano in our church on Sundays.

Did you ever hear a flock of blackbirds in the autumn, getting ready to fly south for the winter? Their voices are all raspy from chirping so much, and they seem to be squawking to the leaves of the trees to look out because pretty soon Jack Frost'll get 'em and they'll all have to die and be buried in a white grave.

Well, when our gang gets together after we've been separated for a while, we're almost as noisy as a hundred blackbirds. Blackbirds are what the winged notes on Little Jim's music sheets look like. They almost make a fellow dizzy to even think of trying to play them.

Pretty soon Little Jim was there, carrying the stick that he had cut from an ash limb. He nearly always carried a stick. He came running down the hill with his straw hat in one hand and his stick in the other, his short legs pumping like a boy's in a bicycle race and with the dark curls on his head shining in the sun.

And then we were all running as fast as we could toward the swimming hole.

"Last one in's a bear's tail," Circus cried over his shoulder. He was the fastest runner of all of us. He had his shirt off even before he got there, taking it off on the run. He was the first one in, all right, and I was the last. I was a little slow on purpose because I didn't want Little Jim to be the bear's tail.

"Bears don't have tails," Poetry yelled to Circus.

"Neither do cows jump over moons," Circus yelled back.

That started Poetry off:

"Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon."

Circus made a dive for Poetry, caught him around the neck, ducked him a couple of times, and said, quoting a poem himself:

"This is the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog, that worried the cat,
That caught the rat, that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built."

Poetry looked disgusted at being called a cow, not being able to help it because he was so big.

Well, we had water fights and diving and swimming contests until we were cooled off. Then we dressed and started looking for different kinds of shells. All of us were collecting shells for a hobby that summer.

I don't know how we got to talking about bears, but we did. And I'll have to admit I felt kind of creepy when Dragonfly told us a true story about how a bear once caught and buried a man alive. We were down along the edge of the swamp, lying in the grass, right close to the big hollow sycamore tree, resting and thinking about how we'd caught a bank robber there just one month before.

"It happened away out West along the Colorado River," Dragonfly said. "First, the bear—it was a great big grizzly—caught and buried a colt. Grizzly bears cache their food, you know, like dogs do a bone. Then they come back later and dig it up and eat it. Well, when the owner of the colt found out where it was buried, he tried to shoot the bear.

"Old Grizzly just rushed at him and knocked him down. The man's gun barrel hit his own head and knocked him unconscious. Then old Grizzly, thinking the man was dead, picked him up and buried him right beside the colt.

"Then the bear dug up the colt, ate some of it for dinner, and went away. Of course, the man wasn't buried very deep, and he could still breathe. Pretty soon he came to and dug his way out and hurried away before the bear decided it was time for supper.

"That's a true story," Dragonfly said as he finished.

"But there aren't any bears around here, so we don't need to be afraid," Big Jim said, looking at Little Jim, who was holding on to his

stick with both hands as if he was beginning to be scared.

"Not any grizzly bears," I said, "because they don't live in this part of America." I'd been reading about bears in a book in my dad's library. My dad had the most interesting books for a boy to read.

Soon we began to feel hot again, and we decided to follow the old footpath that leads through the swamp. It was nearly always cool there. Little springs came out of the hillside and oozed their way through the mud, making it cool even on the hottest days.

We were still thinking about bears—anyway, I was, and Little Jim was holding on to his stick very tight—when suddenly Dragonfly said, "Pssst!"

3

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The WINTER RESCUE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Beginning to write a story is something like diving under a cold shower—or taking the first plunge into Sugar Creek when the water's cold. It's hard to get started. But after I'm in, paragraph deep, and my thoughts are splashing around a little, it certainly feels great. My words go swimming and diving and having a good time —in ink, of course, because I always use a pen when I write.

So, hurrah! Here I am, already started, trudgening along faster than anything on a brand new Sugar Creek Gang story. Does it ever feel good to be writing again!

In just a minute I'll explain what I mean by "trudgening." That is, I'll explain it when I'm telling you about the last time our gang went in swimming before school started that fall.

That was kind of a sad day for us—that last Saturday. Especially for Little Jim, and I'll have to tell you about it even though I don't like to write about sad things.

Hm, I wonder how many miles the point of a boy's pen travels while he's writing a long story like this one's going to be. Hundreds and hundreds of miles, I guess, although I never figured it up. Not liking arithmetic very well is the main reason.

Well, none of us boys wanted school to begin, even though we knew every boy ought to have an education if he wanted to amount to anything. But at last that wonderful summer was over, and we knew there wasn't any way to get out of it. Going to school is like starting to swim too. After you get in, it's fun, and it's good for you. It washes all the ignorance off a boy and makes him feel good.

It was Saturday, the last Saturday of our summer, and it was noon at our house. I took the last bite of my three-cornered piece of blackberry pie and chewed it as long as I could because it tasted so good I hated to swallow it. Then I looked across the table at my dad's bushy blackish-red eyebrows to see if he was going to say no when I asked him if I could go swimming.

Charlotte Ann, my three-month-old, black-haired baby sister, was in her blue-and-white bassinet, kind of half lying down and half sitting up like a baby bird in a nest full of pillows. She was smiling as if she was happier than anything and was gurgling and drooling, which means she was making bubbles of saliva tumble out of her soft little lips. And her arms and legs were going like four windmills whirling all at once. Her pretty little ears looked like the halves of dried peaches, which somebody had glued onto the side of her head.

She's getting prettier all the time, I thought. *If only she doesn't get red hair like mine.* I could see that someday maybe there'd be freckles on her

nose, and I felt sorry for her because I had freckles myself and didn't like them. In fact, there were freckles all over my face.

Dad's big eyebrows were halfway between up and down, and Mom was busy eating her pie and smiling back at Charlotte Ann. In fact, Dad was looking at Charlotte Ann too, as if Bill Collins—that's my name—wasn't even important anymore. I had had to take second place at our house ever since Charlotte Ann was born. That's what a boy has to do when a new baby comes to his house to live.

I sighed, thinking about how hot it was and looking over the top of a stack of dirty dishes in the sink by the window. I was wishing I was outdoors running through the woods toward the spring, where I knew Dragonfly, Poetry, Circus, Big Jim, and Little Jim would be waiting for me and where old Sugar Creek would be almost screaming for us to come and jump into it.

The creek wanted to prove to us its water was still warm enough to swim in, even if it was going to be fall pretty soon. Then it would be winter, and Sugar Creek would have a cold, sad face until the spring rains came and washed it again and the sun melted its ice coat and made it happy. Say, if I were old Sugar Creek, about the only time I could ever be happy would be when a gang of boys was swimming in my warm, sparkling water.

I looked away from the window without seeing the dishes and was looking at the little Scottish terrier design on Charlotte Ann's bassinet

when I said, "Look at her wave her arms and legs, Dad! I'll bet she could swim without even having to learn how."

My dad could read my thoughts just like I could read an electric sign on a city store. You should have seen his big eyebrows drop like a grassy ledge caving in along Sugar Creek. "Those aren't swimming movements," he said, taking a last bite of pie. "Those are movements a boy's hands make when he is doing the dishes."

That's why I was the last one of our gang to get to the spring that day.

It seemed to take almost an hour to wash those dishes. While I was doing them, I looked down at Charlotte Ann, who was still making spit bubbles. Her lips were like two red rose petals all wet with dew, and I thought, *Go on, little innocent child, and have your play! Someday you'll grow up, and then you'll have to work!* And for a minute I was mad at her for not growing faster.

But pretty soon the dishes were all done and set away, and I was feeling happy again. I made a dive for my straw hat, which was on the floor in a corner where I wasn't supposed to put it. Mom always wanted me to hang it up. A jiffy later I was outside, my bare feet carrying me lickety-sizzle down the path through the woods to the spring.

I tell you, it was great to be with the gang again. Maybe I'd better tell you about our gang just in case you may not have read my other Sugar Creek Gang stories—although it seems

everybody in the world ought to know about us, with all the newspaper publicity we got after Little Jim killed that fierce old mother bear. If he hadn't, she might have ripped him all to pieces with her horrible teeth and claws or maybe hugged him to death the way bears do.

Well, this was our gang: Big Jim, our leader, who was so big he had actually shaved his fuzzy mustache once and who had been a Scout; Little Jim, a great little guy with blue eyes like Charlotte Ann's and the best Christian in the world; Circus, our acrobat, who right that very minute was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling looking like a chimpanzee; Poetry, who was short and globular—which means "round, like a globe"—and who knew 101 poems by heart; Dragonfly, whose eyes were very large like a dragonfly's eyes—he could see better than the rest of us; and me, Bill Collins.

The new member of our gang was there too, Little Jim's pet bear, the little black baby bear whose savage mother got killed in my last story. That brown-nosed bear was the cutest, most awkward little fellow you ever saw. He could already do a half dozen tricks. We had named him Triangle because there was a three-cornered white spot on his chest like black baby bears sometimes have.

Little Jim had put a new leather collar on Triangle's neck with the word *Triangle* engraved on it. And Little Jim's favorite Bible verse was right below that: "Train up a child in the way

he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it."

I never saw anybody in my life who was a better Christian than Little Jim, and he wasn't ashamed of being one either. In fact, he was proud of it.

Poetry had made up a good poem about Triangle, which started like this:

Black little, bad little, brown-nosed bear,
Frowzy little fellow with a tail that isn't there.

Bears really don't have tails except for a stubby little stump that looks kind of like a dog's tail that has been cut off. Only Triangle's tail didn't stand straight up the way a tail does on a happy dog. It hung down the way a sheep's tail does.

No girls belonged to our gang. None of us boys liked girls very well. Girls are such funny things, always scared of mice and screaming whenever they see a spider or something. Circus *did* have a kind of nice ordinary-looking sister whom I'd made up my mind I was going to kill a spider for as soon as I got a chance—which I didn't get until school started that fall.

But we decided to let Little Jim's bear belong. Bears aren't afraid of mice. They even eat them. Triangle liked mice, frogs, fish, ants, bees and their honey, blackberry pie, and things like that. We couldn't let him eat too much honey or other sweet things at one time, though, or he'd have gotten sick.

You should have seen that little fellow swim! He was as playful as a kitten in the water. And he was only about three times as big as a big tomcat, although he was growing fast.

Well, there we were, all of us barefoot, knowing that next Monday we'd have to wear shoes all day at school and feeling sad because of it. All of a sudden, Circus—who, as I told you, was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling—let out a war whoop, slid down the tree, and started running toward the swimming hole, yelling back over his shoulder, "Last one in's a bear's tail!"

In less than a jiffy all the gang was running right after him as fast as they could go—all except Little Jim and Triangle and me. That mischievous little rascal of a bear had evidently made up his mind he didn't want to go in swimming, because he wouldn't even get up when Little Jim told him to. He just lay there in the sun as though he was too lazy or sleepy to move.

I caught hold of the chain that was fastened to his collar, and both of us pulled and scolded until Triangle growled a disgusted sort of growl and whined lazily. That made Little Jim decide to give him a switching with a little willow switch, which is what you have to do with baby bears when they won't obey you.

That switching helped a little, like punishment does a boy for a while, and soon we were on our way to the swimming hole. I noticed when we were half pulling the little bear along behind us that the collar around his neck was a

bit too loose and maybe we'd better tighten it another notch. But Little Jim said he thought that'd be too tight and might choke Triangle. Besides, the collar was locked on, and the key was at Little Jim's house almost a quarter of a mile away.

Then we were at the swimming hole. Because Triangle was still stubborn and didn't want to go into the water and was cross when we threw him in and wouldn't do any of his tricks for us, Little Jim decided to tie him to an ash sapling up on the bank.

"Smarty," Little Jim said. "I'm going to tie you up behind this big stump so you can't even watch us. That's your punishment for not cooperating," which was a word our teacher uses on our report cards. When we don't obey her or join the others in their play or work, she gives us a check mark in the square that says, "Does not cooperate." (That fall there was only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who had a check mark there, but I won't tell you which one of us it was because I don't think my parents would want anybody to know.)

Each one of our gang had his favorite swimming style. Little Jim used the breaststroke, which made him look like a white frog swimming in the water. Circus used the crawl stroke. In fact, most of us did. That's the kind of stroke many fast swimmers use. But Poetry, being an expert swimmer, had a newfangled stroke called the "trudgen." He just lay facedown in the water, rolled his barrel-like body from side to side, and

swung his arms in long, overarm movements, each arm taking turns. His feet under the water worked like my mom's big silver-colored scissors do when they're cutting out a new dress for Charlotte Ann.

All the time I was in swimming I kept thinking about little brown-nosed Triangle up there on the bank behind the stump, and I thought, *What if the little fellow should slip the collar over his head and run away?* There was a big cornfield right there beyond the stump, and a baby bear might get lost in a cornfield, not having any mother to take care of him. And pretty soon it'd be fall and then winter. Or what if somebody who wanted to steal him and sell him to the zoo should sneak up and slip the collar off his neck and carry him away?

More than an hour later we sort of came to ourselves and realized we'd better get dressed to go home. Tomorrow would be Sunday, and we'd have to polish our shoes and do some extra chores on Saturday so we wouldn't have to do them Sunday. As I told you in my last book, all of our gang went to church and Sunday school. We felt sorry for any boy who didn't want to go and for all the kids whose parents didn't think a boy's soul was as important as the rest of him.

Imagine a boy going to school five days a week to learn reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and other important things and then not go to church just once a week to learn about the Bible, which is the most impor-

tant book in the world. It tells you how to be saved, which is even more important than being educated.

Well, Dragonfly got dressed first and ran up the bank toward the old stump to untie Triangle, with Little Jim and me right at his already-dirty bare heels. All of a sudden Dragonfly stopped dead in his tracks and cried, "Hey! He's *gone!* Triangle's *gone!* Somebody's stolen him!"

4

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The LOST CAMPERS

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

There was a big flood in Sugar Creek that spring. Do you remember the time we went to see Old Man Paddler at his cabin in the hills? I guess there never was a snowstorm like that one either. It snowed and snowed and kept on snowing nearly all winter, and that's the reason there was such a big flood in Sugar Creek when all that snow melted.

But if there hadn't been a flood in which Little Jim and I almost got drowned, then later on in the summer—when the gang was up north on our camping trip—maybe Poetry and Dragonfly and I all three *would* have drowned. Poetry and Dragonfly and Little Jim are the names of some of the boys in our gang. I'll introduce you to them in a minute. So before I can tell you about the tangled-up adventures we had up north, I'll have to give you a chapter or two on the famous Sugar Creek flood.

You see, all that snow melting and running across the fields and down the hills into Sugar Creek made him angry. After he woke up out of his long winter's sleep, he got out of bed (creek bed) and ran wild all over the country. His fierce brown water sighed and hissed and boiled and roared and spread out over the cornfields and the swamp and the bayou like a

savage octopus reaching out his long, brown water-fingers. He caught pigs and cows and logs and even barns and whirled them all downstream, turned them over and over, and smashed them against rocks and cliffs.

Well, a boy isn't always to blame for all the trouble he gets into. Certainly Little Jim and I weren't to blame for there being so much snow that winter, and we couldn't help it that it rained so hard and so much in the spring and caused the flood that was actually the worst flood in the history of Sugar Creek.

Although maybe I *shouldn't* have put Little Jim into a big washtub and towed him out through the shallow water to his dad's hog house, which was standing in water about two feet deep. But Little Jim's kitten was up on the top of the hog house, meowing like everything, and it looked like the water might get higher. Maybe the kitten—which was a very cute blue-and-white one with an all-white face and a half-white tail—would be drowned, we thought, so we decided to rescue it before the water crept up any higher. And we might just as well have a lot of fun while we were doing it.

Even a boy knows better than to make a raft and float on it out into a mad creek, and we wouldn't have tried to do such a silly thing, but what we did do turned out to be almost as dangerous. You see, Little Jim's dad's low, flat-roofed hog house was standing in very quiet water that had backed up from the bayou into their barnyard. It didn't look a bit dangerous

to do what we decided to do. In fact, it wasn't, when we started to go out to where the kitten was. And it wouldn't have been at all, if the dike way up along Sugar Creek hadn't broken and let loose a wall of water about three feet high. It came rushing upon us and—but that's getting ahead of the story.

Let me introduce the gang first, in case you've never heard about us. There were just six of us up until the time Tom Till joined, and when he joined that made the number seven, which is a perfect number.

First, and best, in our gang was Little Jim, a good-looking kid with shining blue eyes, and a great little Christian. For a while he had about all the religion there was in the Sugar Creek Gang, until the rest of us woke up to the fact that to be a Christian didn't mean that you had to be sad and wear a long face or be a girl. And we found out that Jesus Himself was a boy once, just our size, and He liked boys even better than our parents do.

Then there was Big Jim, our leader, who had a baby-sized mustache that looked like the fuzz that grows on a baby pigeon. He was the best fighter in the county, and he'd licked the stuffings out of Tom Till's big brother, Bob. Did I tell you the Till boys' dad wasn't a Christian?—that being the reason Tom and Bob didn't know anything about the Bible and were as mean as an angry old setting hen when you try to break up her nest.

Big Jim and Little Jim weren't brothers but

were just friends, liking each other maybe better than any of us liked the rest of us. Unless it was the way I liked Poetry, which is the name of the barrel-shaped member of our gang, who knows 101 poems by heart and is always quoting one and who has a mind that is like a detective's. Poetry had a squawky voice like a young rooster learning to crow, and he growled half bass and half soprano when he tried to sing in church.

Then there was Circus, our acrobat, who turned handsprings and somersaults and liked to climb trees better than a healthy boy likes to eat strawberries. Circus's dad had been an alcoholic, you know, but something happened to him, which the pastor of our church called being "born again," and after that he was the grandest man a boy could ever have for a father. Except, of course, my own dad, who must have been the best man in the world or my mom wouldn't have picked him out to marry.

Boy oh boy! You ought to meet my brownish-gray-haired mom and my neat baby sister, Charlotte Ann. Mom isn't exactly pretty like Little Jim's mom, but she's got the nicest face I ever saw. Even when she isn't saying a word to me, I can feel her face saying nice things to me and Dad and Charlotte Ann, kind of like wireless telegraphy or something.

Let me see—where was I? Oh, yes. I was telling you about the gang. Dragonfly's the only one I haven't mentioned. He's the pop-eyed one of the gang. He has eyes that make me think

of a walleyed pike and especially of a dragonfly, which has two great big eyes that are almost as large as its head, which of course Dragonfly's aren't. But they're big anyway, and his nose doesn't point straight out the way a boy's nose ought to but turns south right at the end. But after you've played with him a few times and know what a great guy he is, you forget all about him being as homely as a mud fence, and you like him a lot. Well, that's us: Big Jim and Little Jim, and Poetry and Circus, and Dragonfly and red-haired me, Bill Collins. Maybe I ought to tell you that I have a fiery temper that sometimes goes off just like a firecracker and is always getting me into trouble.

And now, here goes the story of the flood that was the worst flood in the history of Sugar Creek. Even Old Man Paddler, the kind, white-whiskered old man who lives up in the hills and was one of the pioneers of the Sugar Creek territory, can't remember any flood that was worse.

That old man knows so many important things, and he can tell some of the most exciting tales of the Sugar Creek of long ago. Maybe someday I'll see if I can coax him into writing about the terrible blizzard of 1880 and of the old trapper whom the Indians got jealous of because he caught so many more beavers than they did. They shot him through the heart with an arrow one morning while he was setting his traps. Old Man Paddler has told us boys that story many times.

Well, after we'd saved the old man's life

that cold, snowy day, which I told you about in my last book, *The Winter Rescue,* and after my dad and Circus's dad and a lot of other men had waded through the storm up into the hills to get us—and after we finally got home safely the next day—it began to snow and snow, and all the roads were blocked, and we had to actually dig a tunnel through the big drift next to our barn before we could get in.

After a while, though, a nice long while in which Charlotte Ann kept on growing and learning to say "Daddy" and to sit up without being propped with a pillow, spring began to come. First, there'd be a nice warm day, then a cold one, then rain and more rain, and a warm day again. Then one day in late March, old Sugar Creek started to wake up from his long winter's nap.

About a week before the actual flood, when the creek was still frozen, our gang was standing on the big bridge that goes across the deepest and widest part, looking down at the dirty, snow-covered, slushy-looking ice. And all of a sudden we heard a deep rumbling roar that started right under the bridge and thundered all the way up the creek toward the spring, sounding like an angry thunderclap with a long noisy tail dragging itself across the sky.

Little Jim cried out as though someone had hurt him. "What *is* that?" He looked as if he was afraid, which he is sometimes.

And Big Jim said, *"That?* That's the ice cracking. It's breaking up, and in a few days maybe

it'll all break and crack up into a million pieces and go growling downstream, and when it does, it'll be something to look at! See those big ugly scars on that old elm tree over there? Away up high almost to the first limb? That's where the ice crashed against it last year. See where the paint is knocked off the bridge abutment down there? The ice was clear up there last year."

Crash! Roar-r-r-r-zzzz! The ice was breaking up all right because it was a warm day and all the snow was melting too.

We stayed there watching Sugar Creek's frozen old face, and I thought about all the nice fish that were down under there. And I was wondering if maybe the radio report was right, that it was going to rain for a week beginning that very night, and what'd happen to the little fishies who got lost from their parents and in the swift current were whirled away downstream to some other part of the country.

Well, the radio was right. It began to rain that night, and it kept right on. The ice melted and broke and began to float downstream. It gathered itself into great chunks of different sizes and shapes and looked like a million giant-sized ice cubes out of somebody's refrigerator, only they acted as though they were alive. The brown water of Sugar Creek pushed them from beneath and squeezed its way out through the cracks between pieces and ran over the top, churning and boiling and grinding and cracking and roaring and sizzling and fussing like an old setting hen.

I tell you, it was a great sight to see and great to listen to, and we had the feeling all the time that something was going to happen.

And something did happen—not that day but soon after that, on a Saturday. I had gone over to Little Jim's house on an errand for Mom, although she and I had just made up an errand so I'd have a good excuse to go over there.

You see, Little Jim's pet bear had had to be sold to the zoo. It was getting too big to be a pet and was sometimes very cross and might get angry someday and hurt somebody. Little Jim's parents had bought a blue-and-white kitten for him so that he wouldn't be so lonesome. As I told you, the kitten's face was all white, and it had a half-white tail, making it about the prettiest kitten I ever saw.

I had on my hip-high rubber boots when I came sloshing into Little Jim's backyard about two o'clock that afternoon, just as he was finishing practicing his piano lesson, which was a hard piece by somebody named Liszt.

The sun was shining down very hot for a spring day. I could hear Sugar Creek sighing about a fourth of a mile down the road, and I wished we could go down there and watch the flood. But our parents wouldn't let us stand on the bridge anymore, because it wasn't safe. Some bridges farther up the creek had actually been washed out.

The water had filled up the old swamp and the bayou that was on Little Jim's dad's farm,

backing way up into their barnyard and making their straw stack look like a big brownish-yellow island in a dirty brown lake.

Little Jim finished his piano lesson and came out to where I was.

"Hi, Little Jim," I said, and he said, "Hi, Bill."

He still had a sad expression on his face because he didn't have any baby bear to play with.

"I came over to borrow some baking soda," I said. "How's the new kitten today? Where is he? I want to see him. Boy, it sure is a pretty day. Wish we could go down and watch the flood."

He grinned at all the different things I had said, and he sighed and mumbled, "I'd rather have my bear back."

"You could have a bare back if you tore your shirt on a barbed wire," I said, trying to be funny and not being.

And just then I saw his little blue-and-white cat out in their barnyard on top of the hog house. It was a brand new hog house about four feet high and had a board floor, Little Jim told me. He knew because his dad and he had built it themselves. They hadn't even set it up on its foundation yet.

The kitten looked lonesome. How it got up there we didn't know, unless it had been trying to catch a mouse and the water had crept up on it unawares. Anyway, there it was, and it was meowing like everything and looking like a boy feels when he's lost.

It looked like a rescue job for lifeguards, which all of a sudden Little Jim and I decided we were.

"Let's go out and get him," I said.

There really wasn't any danger, for the water wasn't moving. It had backed up from the bayou and was just standing there making a big dirty lake in their barnyard.

"We ought to have a boat," I said, looking around for something that might be good to ride in.

It was Little Jim's idea, not mine, to get his mom's washtub. It wouldn't be big enough for two of us, but it would hold Little Jim, and I had on boots anyway and could pull him. Then when we got there, we could put the kitten in the tub too, and I could pull them both back to shore, the "shore" being the side of a little hill right close to the barn.

It didn't take us more than a jiffy to get the tub and to get Little Jim squatted down in the middle of it and me on the other end of a long rope, pulling him out to the hog house.

Squash, squash, slop, splash went my big rubber boots, and Little Jim floated along behind me, grinning and holding onto the sides of the tub with both hands and with his teeth shut tight, trying not to act scared.

"Where's your dad?" I asked when we were halfway out to the kitten, which was meowing even worse than before.

"He and Big Jim's daddy are up at the other end of the bayou piling up sacks of sand,"

Little Jim said, "so the water won't break over and flood our cornfield. Because if it does, it'll wash out all the wheat Dad sowed between the rows last fall."

Well, we didn't know very much about floods, except that when we were little we'd heard about one on the Ohio River. But anyway, we were having a lot of fun, so we went on out through the muddy water toward the hog house.

Pretty soon we were there, and Little Jim and I climbed up on top of it and sat there in the sun, pretending we were on an enchanted island and were pirates. Then we were shipwrecked sailors.

We put the cute little fuzzy kitten in the tub and pushed it out into the water—the tub, I mean—with the kitten in it. Kitty didn't seem to mind that, so we left him there while we told stories we'd read in books and talked about our coming camping trip up north and how much fun we'd have and a lot of things. I tied the end of the rope around my leg so Kitty wouldn't drift away.

And all the time, *time* was passing, and the snow up in the hills was melting, and all the little rivers and branches that ran into Sugar Creek kept on emptying themselves. And all the time, the men were up there at the head of the bayou stacking big sacks of sand on the levee that protected Little Jim's dad's field from the flood.

Then, just as time does when a boy is having a lot of fun, two whole hours went past, and

all of a sudden Little Jim said, "Look, Bill! The water's getting higher! It's almost—*look out!*" And then he began to scream, "We're moving! We're—" He turned as white as a piece of typewriter paper, and he grabbed hold of me so tight his nails dug into my arm.

I believed it and didn't believe it both at the same time. I looked down at the water, which was certainly a lot higher than it had been. The back side of the hog house was sliding down deeper. I knew what had happened. That back end was set right at the edge of a little hill, and the water had crept up and washed the dirt away from underneath it. And quick as a flash I knew we were in for it.

I looked toward the river and the bayou, and there was a big log spinning toward us. The dark, swirling, muddy water was carrying cornstalks and tree branches and pieces of wood and all kinds of debris, and the log was headed toward us.

Straight toward us, faster and faster! It looked as if all of Sugar Creek was running over the cornfield below us and that it had picked up all the woodpiles in the country and was carrying them away.

Little Jim held onto me, and I held onto him, and we both held onto the roof of the hog house, knowing that if the hog house slid down the hill a little farther, it'd turn over or slide right out into the current, and we'd be carried away. I tell you I was scared, *so* scared that I was numb all over and couldn't think straight.

Then, with a terrible grinding roar, that big log crashed into the side of our hog house. And that was the only thing that was needed to break it loose and start it moving. In seconds there we were, floating away, twisting around and around but *not* turning over! And we were being carried down toward the big bridge where Sugar Creek was the maddest of all.

"We—we're *g-gone!*" Little Jim said, his teeth chattering. And then that little fellow, because he was a wonderful Christian, said, "It's better for us to d-drown than it would be for Little Tom Till or Big B-Bob, 'cause th-they're not saved."

Imagine that! He knew that if we'd drowned right there we would have gone straight to heaven! And that's a lot more than a lot of the smartest people in the world know.

5

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The CHICAGO ADVENTURE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PRESS
CHICAGO

1

Roaring along through the sky 5,000 feet high—which is almost a mile—and at 400 miles an hour was the most thrilling experience of my life up to that time.

Well, come to think of it, I guess riding on the waves of a mad lake, with nothing to hold me up except a life-preserver vest, was really the most thrilling as well as the craziest. As I told you in my last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, being tossed around by those big angry waves was like being scared half to death riding on a Tilt-A-Whirl at a county fair.

I had thought maybe an airplane ride would be even worse. It wasn't at all, but, boy, oh boy, was it different!

Of course none of us thought that Dragonfly, who is the balloon-eyed member of our gang, would get a bad case of vertigo and have to have the stewardess give him first aid to bring him back to normal again. In fact, the pilot actually had to come down to a lower altitude before Dragonfly was all right.

That's getting too far ahead of the story though, and I'll have to wait a chapter or two before I explain what vertigo means.

I'm going to be a doctor when I grow up, you know, and that's why I'm learning the names

of all the medical terms I can while I'm little, which I'm not actually anymore. I'm already ten and three-fourths years old and have red hair and—but it wouldn't be fair to tell you about myself before introducing the rest of the gang.

The Sugar Creek Gang is the most important gang in the whole country, maybe. Anyway, we have more twisted-up adventures than most anybody else in the world, and so far they have all come out all right.

Maybe I'd better take time right now to introduce the members of the gang to you—and to explain why we were taking an airplane ride and where to.

You remember that Circus, who is our acrobat and who also has an acrobatic voice that can climb the musical scale even better than he can climb a tree, had been invited to a big Chicago church to sing over the radio on Thanksgiving Day. Well, the date was changed, and he was going to sing at what is called a youth rally on Labor Day weekend in September instead, and all the gang was going with him.

Little Jim, the littlest and the grandest guy in the gang, and maybe in the whole world, had to go with him to accompany him on the piano anyway, he being an expert pianist. So, of course, we all wanted to go along, and our parents had said we could—that is, they had *finally* said we could.

It took my brownish-gray-haired mom quite a while to make up her mind to let me go, and I had to wash dishes every noon for all the rest of

the summer just to show my appreciation. I even had to do them as if I liked to—while I didn't, although I was beginning to have sense enough not to say so.

The day Mom finally made up her mind was one of the hottest days we'd had that year. I actually never had felt such *tired* weather in all my life. You could lie right down after eating a dinner of fried chicken, noodles, buttered mashed potatoes, and raspberry shortcake, and go to sleep in less than a minute. You could stay asleep all the way through dishwashing time—that is, if Mom didn't get tired of waiting for you to come and help, and call you.

You could even sleep better if you knew that, after the dishes were done, there were potatoes to hoe and beans to pick. But if you happened to be going swimming, or if there was going to be a gang meeting, you weren't even sleepy.

That afternoon there were beans to be picked, so as soon as I had finished my shortcake, I asked to be excused. Dad said yes and let me get up and go into our living room, which was the coolest room in the house, and lie down on the floor until Mom had the dishes ready.

Mom's floor was always clean, but even at that she always made me lay a paper on it before I could put a pillow down to sleep on. I hadn't any more than lain down, it seemed, when her voice came sizzling in from the kitchen and woke me up.

I didn't like to wake up any more than I did any other time. I'd been dreaming the craziest dream. Anyway, it seemed crazy at the time, and anybody would have laughed at it. I never realized, while I was dreaming, that something was going to happen almost like that in real life after we got to Chicago.

I dreamed that I was already a doctor and that I was in a hospital with a lot of nurses in white all around. Also, all around and overhead, airplane engines were droning. One of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang had eaten too much raspberry shortcake and had a stomachache, and the only thing that would help him was for me, the doctor, to give him a blood transfusion. In my dream I was pouring raspberry juice into one of the veins of his arm through a little tin funnel, and he was crying and saying, "I don't like to wash dishes! I don't want to!"

That was when Mom called me to wake up and come to help her.

I woke up halfway at first, and I was as cross as anything, which any doctor will tell you is natural for anybody when he gets waked up without wanting to be.

But my dad, who is a Christian and knows the Bible from A to Z—and not only says he is a Christian, but actually acts like one at home as well as in church—he says the Bible says, "Be angry, and yet do not sin." And that means if somebody or something makes you angry, you

ought to tie up your anger, the way people do a mad bull, and not let it run wild.

Dad says a boy's temper under control is like a fire in a stove, useful for many things. But when it isn't controlled, it's like a fire in a haymow or a forest. Some people actually die many years sooner than they ought to because they get mad so many times and stay mad so long it makes them sick.

Maybe my dad tells me these things especially because I'm red-haired and maybe am too quick-tempered. He says if I don't lose my temper all the time, but keep it under control, it'll help me do many important things while I'm growing up.

So, as angry as I was for being waked up and for having to do dishes, I tied up my anger as quick as I could. I didn't say a word or grumble or anything. I didn't even frown.

By the way, do you know how many muscles of your face have to work to make a fierce-looking frown? Maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it actually takes sixty-five, our teacher says. And it takes only thirteen muscles to make a smile. So it's a waste of energy to go around frowning when you're already tired and lazy.

While on the way from the living room to the kitchen to help Mom, I remembered something Dad had told me one day when I was going around our barnyard with a big scowl on my very freckled face. This is what he said: "Bill Collins, you're making the same face while you're

a boy that you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life."

That had made me scowl deeper than ever, and I went toward the barn still scowling but not saying anything. The minute I got into the barn, though, I took out of my pocket a little round mirror that I was carrying and looked at myself. And because I was angry, I scowled and scowled and made a fierce face and stuck out my tongue at myself and hated myself for a while.

Then I saw a big, long brown rat dart across the barn floor, and in a flash I was chasing after it and calling old Mixy-cat to come and do her work and see to it that there weren't so many live rats around the Collins family's barn.

What Dad had said didn't soak in at all until one day Mom told me almost the same thing, only in different words.

My mom has the kindest face I ever saw, and her forehead is very smooth, without any deep creases in it—either going across it or running up and down. Just for fun one day I asked her if she'd been ironing it, it was so smooth, and do you know what she said?

She said, "I've been ironing it all my life. I've kept the frowns and wrinkles off ever since I was a little girl, so the muscles that make frowns and wrinkles won't have a chance to grow"—which they will if they get too much exercise.

So it would be better for even a girl to be cheerful while she's little enough to be still

growing, so she'll have a face like my mom's when she gets big.

Well, I thought all those thoughts even before I was halfway to the kitchen. On the way, I stepped into our downstairs bedroom for a half jiffy to look at Charlotte Ann. She was my one-year-old baby sister and had pretty brownish-red curls and several small freckles on her nose. She was supposed to be sleeping and wasn't. She was lying there holding a toy in one hand and shaking it and trying to take it apart to see what made it rattle.

I stood looking down at her pretty pink cheeks, and her brownish-red hair, and her chubby little fists, and at the kind of disgusted pucker on her forehead because the toy wouldn't come apart.

"Listen, Charlotte Ann," I said, scowling at her, "you're making the same kind of face now you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life. You've got to think pretty thoughts if you want to have a pretty face."

Then I went out into the kitchen and washed my hands with soap, which is what you're supposed to do before you dry dishes, or else maybe Mom will have to wash the dishes over again and the drying towel too.

I still felt cranky, but I kept thinking about the airplane trip the gang was going to take to Chicago—all the gang except me, so far—so I kept my fire in the stove. I knew that pretty soon my parents would have to decide something, and I kept on hoping it would be "Yes."

My mom had been teaching me to sing tenor, and sometimes on Sunday nights, when she'd play the organ in our front room, she and Dad and I would sing trios, which helped to make us all like each other better. So while we were doing dishes that noon, Mom and I started singing different songs we used in school and also some of the gospel songs we used in church. And the next thing we knew, the dishes were done and put away, and I was free to go and pick beans if I wanted to, or if I didn't want to.

I was wishing I could run lickety-sizzle out across our yard, through the gate, across the dusty gravel road, and vault over the rail fence on the other side. I'd fly down the path through the woods, down the hill past the big birch tree to the spring, where the gang was supposed to meet at two o'clock, if they could. Sometimes we couldn't because most of us had to work some of the time. Today was one of the days I couldn't.

As soon as I'd finished the last dish, which was our big long platter that had had the fried chicken on it, I went back into our bathroom. I looked past my ordinary-looking face and saw my dad's reflection in the mirror. He was standing outside our bathroom window, which was closed tight to keep out some of the terrific heat that was outdoors. Standing right beside him was Old Man Paddler.

For those of you who've never heard of Old Man Paddler, I'd better say that he's one of the

best friends the Sugar Creek Gang ever had or ever will have. He lives up in the hills above Sugar Creek and likes kids, and he has put us boys into his will, which he says he's already made.

He and my dad were standing there talking, and the old man's gnarled hands were gesturing around in a sort of circle, and he was moving them up and down and pointing toward the sky.

Right away I guessed he was talking about the airplane trip to Chicago. I could see his long white whiskers bobbing up and down the way a man's whiskers do when he's talking. All of a sudden, he and Dad reached out and shook hands and then started walking toward the porch.

All of another sudden a great thrill came running and jumped *kersmack* into the middle of my heart. I was so happy it began to hurt inside terribly, because somehow I knew that I was going to get to go with the rest of the gang.

And just that minute, as Dad was opening the screen door to our kitchen to let Old Man Paddler in first, Dad said, "All right, we'll let him go!"

My hands weren't even dry when I left that bathroom. In fact, I hardly saw the towel that slipped from the rack where I'd tossed it up in too big a hurry. I wanted to make a dive for that old man's whiskers and hug him. Instead, I just stood there trembling and seeing myself sailing along through the air with big white clouds all

around our airplane and the earth away down below.

Pretty soon we were all in the living room, where it was cooler than in the kitchen, and were all sitting on different chairs. I had my bare feet twisted around and underneath my chair and fastened onto the rounds and was rocking back and forth, noticing that with every rock the chair crept sideways a little over the rug.

It was kind of like a meeting of some sort at first, with all of us sitting quiet. Then Dad cleared his throat and said in his big voice, "Well, Bill, Mr. Paddler has persuaded us to let him invest a little money in you. He wants to pay your way to Chicago by airplane. His nephew, Barry Boyland, has agreed to come and be chaperone to the whole Sugar Creek Gang."

There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes, several of them in Dad's, and also some in Mom's. Dad finished by saying that the beans could be picked later in the day when it was cooler, and that I really ought to meet with the gang today, if I wanted to, and—

As quick as I could, after I'd courteously thanked the kind, trembling-voiced old man, I was out of the house, running through the heat waves, toward our front gate. I frisked across the road, stirring up a lot of dust, and vaulted over the rail fence. Then I went like greased lightning toward the spring, imagining myself to be an airplane and trying to make a noise

like one, wishing I *was* one, and almost bursting to tell the news to the rest of the gang.

My dad's last words were ringing in my ears as I flew through the woods, with my voice droning like an airplane. This is what he said while we were still in the living room: "Of course, Bill, we shall expect you to keep your eyes open and learn a lot of things while you're there. Make it an educational trip as well as a pleasure trip."

My own answer was very quick. "Sure," I said, already halfway across the room to the door.

I remembered my promise later, though—and kept it too, when I wrote a letter to my parents from Chicago.

Zzzzz-rrrrrr! On my way to the spring!

6

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The SECRET HIDEOUT

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

If I hadn't been the janitor of our little one-room red brick schoolhouse, I don't suppose I would have cared so much when Poetry's wet pet lamb walked around all over the floor with his muddy feet.

Lambs, you know, are not supposed to go to school, and even though the Sugar Creek Gang knew that, they thought they'd like to see what it was like to have one come in spite of the fact that it was, as a certain poem says, "against the rule."

It certainly made the children laugh and play—and it also made some of them cry and work, especially me. That is, I had to mop the floor, and I had to stay in at recess to do it, with Poetry and all the rest of the gang helping me. It took longer to get the floor clean than it should have, because the lamb accidentally turned over a pail of sudsy water, and it scattered itself in every direction there was.

Maybe before I tell you what the teacher said about the lamb at school, I'd better explain why it was there, and who I mean when I say "Poetry," and also when I say "The Sugar Creek Gang," because maybe you've never heard about us. Then you'll understand that we really weren't trying to get ourselves into trouble

when we took that innocent lamb to school that Monday morning.

The idea had first come to us when we were having our gang meeting the second Saturday after school started. We held our meeting in an abandoned graveyard away up on the other side of Bumblebee Hill, which is the nickname for Strawberry Hill that we'd given it after we'd killed a bear and later fought a tough town gang there. In fact, the bumblebees helped us lick that tough, swearing bunch of boys.

As I said, the second Saturday after school started, we had our gang meeting in that spooky old cemetery, which they didn't bury people in anymore. And that was the time we decided to let Poetry's lamb follow him to school the very next Monday morning.

Right after dinner that Saturday, after I'd dried the dishes and Mom and Dad had both said I didn't have to work that afternoon, I made a dive for our kitchen door. I stopped outside only long enough to keep the door from slamming, so it wouldn't wake up my little one-year-old baby sister, Charlotte Ann. Then like a wild deer, I galloped out across our grassy yard, passed the big walnut tree with the high swing in it, swished across the road past our tin mailbox, which had on it *Theodore Collins,* my Dad's name. And then I touched one hand on the top rail of the fence, vaulted over, and ran.

Ran, I tell you, straight down the path through the woods that leads to the spring. At the biggest tree I swerved to the right and fol-

lowed another path, which had been made by boys' feet. Soon, gasping and panting and swinging my straw hat, I was at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, where the gang was supposed to meet first.

We all had a spooky feeling about meeting in that graveyard because there were so many stories in the world about graveyards having ghosts in them. So we'd planned to all go there together, and if there *were* any ghosts, we could —well, we could all run away together anyway.

I'd stopped to get rid of some of my extra breath, always having too much after running like that, when I heard a noise of underbrush crashing and breaking and a heavy body running.

I looked up, and there lumbering toward me was my best friend, Leslie Thompson, whose nickname is Poetry. Right that same minute he saw me, and he began to quote between puffs one of his more than one hundred memorized poems. It was about the wind, which I guess his heavy breathing had reminded him of. It went like this:

> I saw you toss the kites on high
> And blow the birds about the sky;
> And all around I heard you pass
> Like ladies' skirts across the grass—
> O wind, a-blowing all day long!
> O wind, that sings so loud a song!

That was one of my favorite poems.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were lying in the long mashed-down grass, watching the white clouds hanging in the lazy blue sky and listening to each other catch his breath.

He started quoting the second verse, getting about halfway through when he was very suddenly interrupted by somebody's spraying water in his face with a squirt gun.

Even I was half mad for a minute, because some of the water spattered in *my* face. Besides, I'd been sort of dreaming about the wind that Poetry's poem was describing, and nobody likes to have his thoughts interrupted.

Poetry had just been saying:

> "I saw the different things you did,
> But always, you, yourself, you hid;
> I felt you push, I heard you call,
> I could not see yourself at all . . ."

Then he started to gasp and sputter and get red in the face and roll over and sit up and say something, and from the bushes behind us there came a squawky voice, imitating Poetry's. It said:

> "The rain is raining all around,
> It rains on field and tree;
> It rains on umbrellas here,
> And on the ships at sea."

I knew right away which one of the Sugar Creek Gang it was, because he was the only one

of us who was more disgusted than the rest of us with Poetry's poetry. He was always quoting one of them himself just to make it seem ridiculous. Even if I hadn't heard his voice and seen his brown hair on his hatless head, his blue eyes, and monkeylike face, I'd have known it was Circus.

He came cartwheeling toward us in grand style, just like an acrobat on a county fair stage, only better.

The next minute Circus and Poetry and I were all in a tangled-up scramble like a bunch of boys in a football game. Poetry especially was grunting and trying to unroll himself from the rest of us. In fact, our six pairs of legs and arms, making twelve altogether, sort of looked like a lot of fishing worms in a knot.

We hadn't any more than unscrambled ourselves when there came more running feet in our direction, and in another minute we were four instead of three. This time it was a spindle-legged little guy with very large, bulging eyes and a nose that was crooked at the end. His actual name was Roy Gilbert, but we called him Dragonfly, because his eyes were enormous—almost too big for his little head, which a *real* dragonfly's eyes are, but which, of course, Dragonfly's eyes weren't.

That little chattering, pop-eyed member of our gang was always seeing things before the rest of us were, and sometimes he saw things that really weren't there at all. He was right though, when he saw that big savage bear, which

we killed and which I told you about in one of the other Sugar Creek Gang stories. He was also right the time he saw that bank robber, whom we helped capture. On top of that, Dragonfly was also right when he saw the ghost running—or flying or something—in that same old cemetery one night.

But that's almost telling you a secret that I'm saving until another chapter and which didn't happen until after Poetry's innocent lamb had followed him to school.

Anyway, pretty soon Big Jim, the leader of our gang, came swishing down the path. He stopped in the shade of the bushes beside us and started catching his breath like the rest of us. I couldn't help but notice that the little fuzzy mustache he had shaved off just before we had taken our trip to Chicago was still off, with not even a sign of its having begun to grow again. In fact, it hadn't been long enough to shave in the first place. Big Jim was a great leader, I tell you—a fierce fighter and as strong as anything. His hands were calloused from hard work, which he even *liked* to do.

Each one of us lay in a different direction, chattering away and waiting for the rest to come.

Little Jim, our smallest, was nearly always late because he had to practice his piano lesson right after the noon meal each Saturday. He was getting to be a great player, his mom being the best musician in all Sugar Creek territory.

Pretty soon I heard somebody coming. I looked around a corner of the elder bush I was

lying under, and it was Little Jim, just poking along, barefoot, his new, clean blue denim overalls rolled up halfway to his knees and his half-worn-out brown straw hat on backward and his little mouselike face looking very content. He was carrying an ash stick about three feet long, with stripes on it, the stripes having been made with his pocketknife by cutting off the bark, so that it looked like a big three-foot-long piece of stick candy.

"Hi, Little Jim!" different ones of us called to him.

He kept on doing what he was doing, which was knocking off the tops of different weeds with his stick, not paying any attention to us. Then he stooped and rolled up his right overall leg, which had just come down. While he was still stooped over, he grunted, "Hi, everybody." Then he straightened up and grinned.

Little Jim flopped himself down beside us just in time to get up with us, for at that same minute from the other direction came little red-haired, freckled-faced Tom Till, the new member of our gang. Fiery-tempered Tom was a great guy even if his big brother, Bob, had caused us, especially Big Jim, a lot of trouble.

Anyway, the minute Little Jim and Tom got there, we scrambled to our different-sized bare feet and started up Bumblebee Hill to the cemetery and—you can believe this or not—to run into another mystery, which I'll tell you about as soon as I get to it.

Writing a story, you know, is like building a

tall building. If you put the top on first, without any good foundation, the house will fall down. So I have to save the top of the story, which is the mystery, for later. And the mystery is the ghost that Dragonfly saw one very dark night.

"Here we go," Big Jim called to us, unfolding his long legs and rambling up the hill with the rest of us scurrying after him. Suddenly he stopped, looked back at us, and with a strange expression on his mustacheless face said, "Anybody afraid?"

And we yelled a big noisy "No!"—all except Dragonfly, whose mother was what is called a superstitious person and actually believed in such things as ghosts. She even believed that if a black cat ran across the road in front of you, it meant you were going to have bad luck.

Anyway, when Dragonfly didn't act as though he was glad we were going up to have our meeting in the old cemetery, I knew the reason, and I felt sorry for him.

"Come on, fraidy-cat!" I said and grabbed him by the arm.

Poetry grabbed him by the other arm, and away we went to make plans that were going to make some of the schoolchildren laugh and play and some of them cry and work.

We certainly didn't know, when we started up that hill for our first fall gang meeting, that the whole fall was going to be filled with exciting adventures. One especially was going to make my fiery red hair stand on end and scare me and the rest of the gang half to death.