Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

There were two very important things I didn't have time to tell you about in my last story, *Screams in the Night*. One of those two things was what happened when we ran *ker-smack* into the kidnapper himself and had a terrible fight with him, and the other was a strange moonlight adventure in an Indian graveyard.

In fact, the two were sort of mixed up together. The kidnapper was doing something mysterious in that Indian graveyard, and some of the gang accidentally stumbled onto him. Did you ever see an Indian cemetery, the kind the Chippewa Indians have away up in northern Minnesota? That's the country where the Sugar Creek Gang was spending its awfully fast vacation. Those cemeteries are the strangest-looking places in the world. I'll tell you about the one we had our adventure in just as soon as I get to it.

I was sitting on the farther end of the long dock with my back to the shore, swinging my bare feet. I was holding onto my fishing rod and watching the red-and-white bobber way out in the lazy water.

Now and then the bobber would bob a little and move around in a small, lazy circle on the surface of the big blue lake, which meant

that the live minnow I had put on the hook for bait was down there in the water somewhere and was still frisky enough to be a very attractive afternoon lunch for any hungry bass or walleye or northern pike that might be dumb enough to come along and eat it.

I'd been sitting there for maybe ten minutes, not getting any bites except from deer-flies, which had terribly sharp stings. So I smeared some insect repellent on my bare hands and arms and face and legs and feet and was getting a good tan to take back home with me after vacation would be over.

It was about three o'clock, and all the gang except me were in their tents taking an afternoon nap, which was what we all had to do every day. A boy feels so good on a camping trip that he might get too tired, and when a boy gets too tired without enough rest and sleep, he can get sick easier or catch cold, and his body will be a good growing place for most any kind of germ.

I'd already had a short nap and had sneaked out by myself to the end of the dock, put a frisky, wiggling chub on for bait, and cast my line way out into the deep water. I was hoping that by the time it was time for the gang to wake up, I'd be getting a terribly big fish on my line. Then I could yell and scream, and we'd all have a lot of excited noise to start the rest of the afternoon off right.

After that, there'd be a picture to take of the fish and me, and maybe it would be big

enough to enter in the northern Minnesota fish contest. And then maybe our hometown paper, *The Sugar Creek Times,* would publish the picture, and the write-up would say something like this:

SUGAR CREEK BOY
LANDS FOURTEEN POUNDER

Bill Collins, eleven-year-old son of Theodore Collins, who lives just three and one-half miles west of here, has distinguished himself to anglers by landing a fighting, wild-running, very fierce-looking northern pike at Pass Lake, Minnesota, where he and his pals are camping.

I was still a little sleepy, and, since it's never very good fishing that time of day anyway, I sort of nodded. I must have dozed off, because all of a sudden I felt the dock shaking a little behind me, and looking around I saw one of the gang coming, his fishing rod in his hand and his straw hat flapping. His round face was grinning, although he had the finger of one hand up to his lips, meaning for me to keep still.

"Hi, Poetry!" I whispered.

He stopped close to me and looked down into my freckled face and said, "Hi, Bill! *Sh!* Listen! I've just thought of something important."

I watched him wiggle-twist his pudgy fingers into his khaki shirt pocket and pull out a

piece of white cloth with something wrapped up in it.

"What you got?" I said.

And he said, "See this piece of glass we found up there beside the sandy road last night where the kidnapper's car was stuck?"

I remembered all about it—the kidnapper's car stuck in the sand, the wheels spinning, him swearing and swearing, and Poetry and I hiding behind some bushes watching and listening, not knowing till afterward that a little kidnapped girl was in the backseat of the car right that minute.

The man all of a sudden had climbed out of the car and let out some of the air of his back tires to increase traction and then had climbed in again and roared away. After he'd gone, our flashlights had shown us something bright, and Poetry had picked it up and kept it, saying it was a clue. But it was only a broken piece of glass.

I stared at the piece of thin glass in Poetry's hand and thought of how it was curved like a piece of broken bottle.

"He was maybe drinking," I said, "and threw the bottle away and it broke and—"

"It's *not* a piece of broken bottle," Poetry said. He lifted the minnow pail that was sitting beside me and put it behind him so he could set himself down beside me. Then he said, "Take a look *through* it. It's a piece of lens from somebody's glasses, and I'll bet the kidnapper broke them while he was having trouble get-

ting his car out of the sand. Or maybe the little Ostberg girl wiggled and twisted, trying to get away, and they broke that way."

Poetry made me look through it, which I did, as he held it so that it wouldn't get dropped. While I was looking through it, I noticed it magnified things and also brought things up closer.

And then I saw my red-and-white bobber start moving faster than a four-inch-long minnow could have pulled it. Out—out—out it went. Then it dunked under, and the line on my rod tightened, and *then* the ratchet of my reel started to sing. As quick as a flash I tightened my grip on the pole and my thumb on the reel, letting the line unwind, waiting for the fish—or whatever was on the other end of the line—to get the minnow swallowed.

I quick dodged my face away from Poetry's hand and the piece of glass and got set to sock the line. I gave a quick fierce jerk, and you should have seen what happened.

Away out there about fifty feet, there was a fierce boiling of the surface of the water and a wild tugging on my line. I heard the reel spinning and felt the line burning hot on my thumb. I was sure I'd hooked a terrific northern pike, and Poetry and I all of a sudden started making a lot of fishermen's noise.

I scrambled to my feet and didn't even bother to notice what was going on behind me. I heard Poetry trying to get out of my way and out of the way of the minnow pail, which he

was having a hard time doing, but I couldn't look back to see. I had to hold onto my fish. I did hear Poetry grunt five or six quick grunts, though, and heard the pail get itself knocked over and heard and felt a heavy body go *ker-whamety-thump* on the dock.

Then there was a noisy splash beside me, and I knew it was the minnow pail. It'd had about twenty-five live chubs in it and shouldn't have been left on the dock in the first place but should have been down in the fresh water to keep the minnows alive.

Then there was another splash. I took a sideways look and saw Poetry himself down there in the water.

He grabbed the pail, yelling, "The lid wasn't fastened, and the minnows are all spilled out!" Poetry held up the empty pail with every single minnow gone that Barry, our camp director, was supposed to fish with that evening.

Well, my heart would have been beating hard with being to blame for losing the minnows if it wasn't already beating terribly fast with excitement because of the fish on my line. It was no time to worry over spilled minnows, though. So I yelled down to Poetry, "Look—look!"

And when Poetry looked, he saw what I saw. A great two-foot-long fish of some kind I'd never seen before jumped out of the water, showed every bit of himself in a long leap, and then splashed back in again and dived straight to the bottom.

And then all the gang were waking up in their tents. They came running out to the end of the dock to help by yelling and telling me what to do and what not to do all at the same time.

Splash! Zip! Swish!

I tell you it was an exciting time there for a few noisy minutes, with one member of the gang after another bounding onto the dock, and all of them telling me what to do and what not to do and why, and also how to and how not to.

But soon I had that big fish coming in a little closer to the edge of the dock where I was. Then, because he may have felt the way a boy would feel if he saw some giants yelling and waving their arms, he'd get scared and make a fierce run for the deep water again. And every time, I'd let him run and let the hot line go sizzling under my thumb from the whirring reel, so as not to let him break the line.

In about five minutes the fish was up close enough for Big Jim, the leader of our gang, to reach out with a long wooden-handled dip net and get him into it. In another jiffy he was landed.

"It–it–it's a *dogfish!*" Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, yelled when he saw the lunging, fierce-looking, large-mouthed fish in Big Jim's net. I looked at Dragonfly's eyes, which, when he's excited, get extra large the way a dragonfly's eyes are.

"It is not," Circus said, squinting at it and at the same time shading his eyes with his hand to

keep the sun out of them. Circus, being our acrobat, felt so good after his afternoon nap that he started walking toward the shore on his hands. He wound up in the shallow water beside the dock, because he accidentally lost his balance and fell off in a sprawling splash right beside Poetry, who was already there.

Little Jim, the greatest little guy in the gang and the most innocent-faced one of us, squeezed his way through to where I was and said, "It's a two-foot-long bullhead!"

"It can't be," red-haired Tom Till said, squinting his blue eyes at the fish. "Bullheads have horns, and there isn't a one on him!"

Well, it turned out that Dragonfly was right —it *was* a terribly big dogfish and wouldn't be good to eat, although some people might want to eat it.

Anyway, that's how the minnow pail with Barry's two dozen minnows got turned over and all the minnows spilled out, and why Barry, for a friendly sort of punishment, decided that Poetry and I had to go to a resort about a quarter of a mile up the lake and get more minnows.

And that's how Poetry and I ran *ker-smack* into the kidnapper mystery again. This is the way it happened.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I was sitting in a big white rowboat. It was docked at the end of the pier that ran far out into the water of the lake. From where I sat in the stern, I could see the two brown tents where the rest of the Sugar Creek Gang were supposed to be taking a short afternoon nap.

That was one of the rules about camp life none of us liked very well but which was good for us because then we always had more pep for the rest of the day and didn't get too tired before night.

I'd already had my afternoon nap and had sneaked out of the tent and to the dock, where I was right that minute. I was just sitting there and imagining things such as whether there would be anything very exciting to see if some of the gang could explore that big tree-covered island about a mile away across the water.

Whew! It certainly was hot out there close to the water with the sunlight pouring itself on me from above and also shining up at me from below. The lake was like a big blue mirror that caught sunlight and reflected it right up under my straw hat, making my hot freckled face even hotter. Because it was the style for people to get tanned all over, I didn't mind the heat as much as I might have.

It seemed to be getting hotter every minute, though. It was the kind of day we sometimes had back home at Sugar Creek just before some big thunderheads came sneaking up and surprised us with a fierce storm.

It was also a perfect day for a sunbath. *What on earth made people want to get brown all over for anyway?* I thought. Then I looked down at my freckled brownish arm and was disgusted with myself. Instead of getting a nice tan like Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, I always got sunburned and freckled, and my upper arm looked like a piece of raw steak instead of a nice piece of brown fried chicken. Thinking that reminded me that I was hungry, and I wished it was supper time.

It certainly was a quiet camp, I thought, as I looked at the two tents where the rest of the gang was supposed to be sleeping. I just couldn't imagine anybody sleeping that long—anyway, not any boy—unless he was at home and it was morning and time to get up and do the chores.

Just that second I heard the sound of footsteps from up the shore. Looking up, I saw a smallish boy with brown curly hair coming toward me along the path that runs all along the shoreline. I knew right away it was Little Jim, my almost best friend and the greatest little guy that ever lived. I knew it was Little Jim not only because he carried his ash stick with him—which was about as long as a man's cane—but because of the shuffling way he walked. I noticed he was stopping every now

and then to stoop over and look at some wildflower. Then he'd write something down in a book he was carrying, which I knew was a wildflower guidebook.

He certainly was an interesting little guy, I thought. I guess he hadn't seen me, because I could hear him talking to himself, which he had a habit of doing when he was alone. There was something kind of nice about it that made me like him even better than ever.

I think that little guy does more honest-to-goodness thinking than any of the rest of the gang—certainly more than Dragonfly, the popeyed member, who is spindle-legged and slim and whose nose turns south at the end; or Poetry, the barrel-shaped member, who reads all the books he can get his hands on and who knows 101 poems by heart and is always quoting one; and also even more than Big Jim, the leader of our gang, who is the oldest and who has maybe seventeen smallish strands of fuzz on his upper lip, which one day will be a mustache.

I ducked my head down below the dock so Little Jim couldn't see me and listened, still wondering, *What on earth!*

Little Jim stopped right beside the path that leads from the dock to the Indian kitchen, which was close by the two brown tents. He stooped down and said, "Hm! Wild strawberry." He leafed through the book he was carrying and wrote something down. Then he looked around him and, seeing a balm of Gilead tree

by the dock with some five-leaved ivy on it, went straight to the tree and with his magnifying glass began to study the ivy.

I didn't know that I was going to call out to him and interrupt his thoughts. That was something my mother had taught me not to do when a person is thinking hard, because nobody likes to have somebody interrupt his thoughts.

But I did. "Hi, Little Jim!" I said from the stern of the boat.

That little guy acted as cool as a cucumber. He just looked slowly around in different directions, including up and down. Then his blue eyes looked absentmindedly into mine, and for some reason I had the kindest, warmest feeling toward him.

His face wasn't tanned like the rest of the gang's. He was what people called "fair"; his small nose was straight, his little chin was pear-shaped, and his darkish eyebrows were straight across. His small ears were the way they sometimes were—lopped over a little because that was the way he nearly always wore his straw hat.

When he saw me sitting there in the boat, he grinned and said, "I'll bet I'll get an A in nature study in school next fall. I've found forty-one different kinds of wildflowers."

I wasn't interested in the study of plants at all right that minute. I was interested in having some kind of an adventure. I said to Little Jim, "I wonder if there are any different kinds of flowers over there on that island where Robinson Crusoe had his adventures."

Little Jim looked at me without seeing me, I thought. Then he grinned and said, "Robinson Crusoe never saw that island."

"Oh yes, he did! He's looking at it right this very minute and wishing he could explore it and find treasure or something," I answered, wishing I were Robinson Crusoe myself.

Just that second another voice piped up from behind some sumac on the other side of the balm of Gilead tree. "You can't be a Robinson Crusoe and land on a tropical island without having a shipwreck first, and who wants to have a wreck?"

I knew it was Poetry, even before he shuffled out from behind the sumac and I saw his round face and his heavy eyebrows that grew straight across the top of his nose, as if he had just one big long eyebrow instead of two like most people.

"You *are* a wreck," I called to him, joking. We always liked to have word fights that we didn't mean, after which we always liked each other even better.

"I'll leave you guys to fight it out," Little Jim said to us. "I've got to find me nine more kinds of wildflowers." With that, that little chipmunk of a guy scuffed on up the shore, swinging his stick around and stooping over to study some new kind of flower he spied every now and then.

And that's how Poetry and I got our heads together to plan a game of *Robinson Crusoe,* not knowing we were going to run into one of the strangest adventures we'd had in our whole lives.

"See here," Poetry said, grunting and sliding down off the side of the dock and into the boat where I was, "if we play *Robinson Crusoe,* we'll have to have one other person to go along with us."

"But there were only *two* of them," I said, "Robinson Crusoe himself and his man Friday, the boy who became his servant, and whom Crusoe saved from being eaten by the cannibals, and who, after he was saved, did nearly all Crusoe's work for him."

"All right," Poetry said, "I'll be Crusoe, and you be his man Friday."

"I will *not,*" I said. "I'm already Crusoe. I thought of it first, and I'm already him."

Poetry and I frowned at each other.

Then his round face brightened, and he said, "All right, you be Crusoe, and I'll be one of the cannibals getting ready to eat your man Friday, and you come along and rescue him."

"But if you're going to be a cannibal, I'll have to *shoot* you, and then you'll be dead," I said.

That spoiled that plan for a minute, until Poetry's bright mind thought of something else, which was, "Didn't Robinson Crusoe have a pet goat on the island with him?"

"Sure," I said.

And Poetry said, "All right, after you shoot me, I'll be the goat."

Well, that settled that, but we couldn't decide right that minute the problem of which one of the gang should be the boy Robinson

Crusoe saved on a Friday and whom he named his man Friday.

It was Poetry who thought of a way to help us decide which other one of the gang to take along with us. It happened like this.

"Big Jim is out," I said, "because he's too big and would want to be the leader himself, and Robinson Crusoe has to be that."

"And Circus is out too," Poetry said, "on account of he's almost as big as Big Jim."

"Then there's only Little Jim, Dragonfly, and Little Tom Till left," I said.

Then Poetry said, "Maybe not a one of them will be willing to be your man Friday."

We didn't have time to talk about it any further. Right then Dragonfly came moseying out toward us from his tent, his spindly legs swinging awkwardly and his crooked nose and dragonflylike eyes making him look just like a ridiculous Friday afternoon, I thought.

"He's the man I want," I said. "We three have had lots of exciting adventures together, and he'll be perfect."

"But he can't keep quiet when there's a mystery. He always sneezes just when we don't want him to."

Dragonfly reached the pier and let the bottoms of his bare feet go *ker-plop, ker-plop, ker-plop* on the smooth boards, getting closer with every *ker-plop*.

When he spied Poetry and me in the boat, he stopped as if he had been shot at. He looked

down at us and said in an accusing voice, "You guys going on a boat ride? I'm going along!"

I started to say, "Sure, we want you," thinking that, when we got over to the island, we could make a man Friday out of him as easy as pie.

But Poetry beat me to it by saying, "There's only one more of the gang going with us, and it might not be you."

Dragonfly plopped himself down on the edge of the dock, swung one foot out to the gunwale of the boat, caught it with his toes, and pulled it toward him. Then he slid himself in and sat down on the seat behind Poetry. "If anybody goes, I go, or I'll scream and tell the rest of the gang, and nobody'll get to go."

I looked at Poetry, and he looked at me, and our eyes said to each other, *Now what?*

"Are you willing to be eaten by a cannibal?" I asked, and he got a puzzled look in his eyes. "There're cannibals over there on that island—one, anyway—a great big barrel-shaped one that—"

Poetry's fist shot forward and socked me in my ribs, which didn't have any fat on them, and I grunted and stopped talking at the same time.

"We're going to play *Robinson Crusoe,*" Poetry said, "and whoever goes will have to be willing to do everything I say—I mean everything *Bill* says."

"Please," Dragonfly said. "I'll do *anything*."

Well, that was a promise, but Poetry wasn't satisfied. He pretended he wanted Tom Till to

go along, because he liked Tom a lot and thought he'd make a better man Friday than Dragonfly.

"We'll try you out," Poetry said and caught hold of the dock and climbed out of the boat.

The other two of us followed him.

"We'll have to initiate you," Poetry explained, as we all walked along together. "We can't take anybody on a treasure hunt who can't keep quiet when he's told to and who can't take orders without saying, 'Why?'"

"Why?" Dragonfly wanted to know.

But Poetry said with a very serious face, "It isn't funny," and we went on.

"What're you going to do?" Dragonfly asked, as we marched him along with us up the shoreline to the place where we were going to initiate him.

I didn't know myself where we were going to do it. But Poetry seemed to know exactly what to do and where to go and why, so I acted as though I knew too.

Poetry made me stop to pick up a big empty gallon can that had had prunes in it—the gang ate prunes for breakfast nearly every morning on our camping trip.

"What's that for?" Dragonfly asked.

And Poetry said, "That's to cook our dinner in."

"You mean—you mean—me?"

"You," Poetry said. "Or you can't be Bill's man Friday."

"But I get saved, don't I?" Dragonfly said with a worried voice.

"Sure, just as soon as I get shot," Poetry explained.

"And then you turn into a goat," I said, as he panted along beside us, "and right away you eat the prune can."

With that, Poetry smacked his lips as though he had just finished eating a delicious tin can. Then he leaned over and groaned as if it had given him a stomachache.

Right that second, I decided to test Dragonfly's obedience, so I said, "All right, Friday, take the can you're going to be cooked in and fill it half full of lake water!"

There was a quick scowl on Dragonfly's face, which said, *I don't want to do it.* He shrugged his scrawny shoulders, lifted his eyebrows and the palms of his hands at the same time and said, "I'm a poor heathen. I can't understand English. I don't want to fill any old prune can with water."

With that, *I* scowled and said to Poetry in a fierce voice, "That settles that! He can't take orders. Let's send him home!"

Boy, did Dragonfly ever come to life in a hurry! "All right, all right," he whined, "give me the can." He grabbed it out of my hand, made a dive toward the lake, dipped the can in, and came back with it filled clear to the top with nice clean water.

"Here, Crusoe," he puffed. "Your man Friday is your humble slave." He extended the can toward me.

"Carry it yourself!" I said.

And then, all of a sudden, Dragonfly set it down on the ground where some of it splashed over the top onto Poetry's shoes. Dragonfly got a stubborn look on his face and said, "I think the cannibal ought to carry it. I'm not even Friday yet—not till the cannibal gets killed."

Well, he was right, so Poetry looked at me and I at him, and he picked up the can, and we went on till we came in sight of the boathouse, which, if you've read *Screams in the Night,* you will already know about.

It was going to be fun initiating Dragonfly —just how much fun I didn't know. And I certainly didn't know what a mystery we were going to run into in less than fifteen minutes.

In only a little while we came to Santa's boathouse. Santa, as you know, was the owner of the property where we had pitched our tents. He also owned a lot of other lakeshore property up there in that part of the Paul Bunyan country. Everybody called him Santa because he was round like all the different Santa Clauses we'd seen, and he was always laughing.

Santa himself called to us with his big laughing voice when he saw us coming. "Well, well, if it isn't Bill Collins, Dragonfly, and Poetry." Santa, being a smart man, knew that if there's anything a boy likes to hear better than anything else it's somebody calling him by his name.

"Hi," we all answered him.

Poetry set down the prune can of water with a savage sigh as if it was too heavy for him to stand and hold.

Santa was standing beside his boathouse door, holding a hammer in one hand and a handsaw in the other.

"Where to with that can of water?" he asked us.

And Dragonfly said, "We're going to pour the water in a big hole up there on the hill and make a new lake."

Santa grinned at all of us with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes, knowing Dragonfly hadn't told any lie but was only doing what most boys do most all the time anyway—playing make-believe.

"May we look inside your boathouse for a minute?" Poetry asked.

And Santa said, "Certainly. Go right in."

We did and looked around a little.

Poetry acted very mysterious, as though he was thinking about something important. He frowned with his wide forehead and looked at different things such as the cot in the far end, the shavings and sawdust on the floor, and the carpenter's tools above the workbench—which were chisels, screwdrivers, saws, planes, and hammers and nails. Also, Poetry examined the different kinds of boards made out of beautifully stained wood.

"You boys like to hold this saw and hammer a minute?" Santa asked us. He handed a hammer to me and a saw handle to Dragonfly, which we took, not knowing why.

"That's the hammer and that's the saw the kidnapper used the night he was building the

grave house in the Indian cemetery," Santa said.

I felt and must have looked puzzled till he explained, saying, "The police found them the night you boys caught him."

"But—but how did they get *here?*" I asked.

Poetry answered me by saying, "Don't you remember, Bill Collins, that we found this boathouse door wide open that night—with the latch hanging? The kidnapper stole 'em."

I looked at the hammer in my hand and remembered. I tried to realize that the hammer I had in my hand right that minute was the same one that, one night last week, had been in the wicked hand of a very fierce man who had used it in an Indian cemetery to help him build a grave house. Also, the saw in Poetry's hand was the one the man had used to saw pieces of lumber into the right lengths.

"And *here,"* Santa said, lifting a piece of canvas from something in the corner, "is the little nearly finished grave house. The lumber was stolen from here also. The police brought it out this morning. They've taken fingerprints from the saw and hammer."

"Why on earth did he want to build an Indian grave house?" I asked, looking at the pretty little house. It looked like the chicken coop we had at home at Sugar Creek, only almost twice as long.

Dragonfly spoke up then and said, "He maybe was going to bury the little Ostberg girl there."

But Poetry shook his head. “I think he was going to bury the ransom money there, where nobody in the world would guess to look.”

Well, we had to get going with our game of *Robinson Crusoe,* which we did, all of us feeling fine to think that last week we had had a chance to catch a kidnapper, even though the ransom money was still missing.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

When you just *know* there's going to be some exciting trouble in the next twelve minutes or less, you have to make your red head do some quick clear thinking, if you can.

Not a one of the Sugar Creek Gang knew *what* was going to happen, but the very minute I heard that outboard motor roaring out on the lake, sounding as if it was coming straight toward the shore and the old icehouse we were all in, I said, "Quick, gang! Let's get out of here and get this ransom money back to camp!"

Little Jim's gunnysack had a lot of money in it right that minute, money that we'd dug up out of the sawdust in that abandoned icehouse. The sack was nearly filled with stuffed fish, big and middle-sized northern and walleyed pike with thousands and thousands of dollars sewed up inside.

I won't take time right now to tell you all you maybe ought to know about how we happened to find that ransom money buried in the sawdust of the icehouse. That'd take too long, and, besides, you've probably read all about it in the last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, which is called *The Treasure Hunt.*

I'd better tell you, though, that a little St. Paul girl named Marie Ostberg had been kid-

napped and the kidnapper had hidden up in the Chippewa Forest of northern Minnesota in what is called "Paul Bunyan Country," where we were camping. Our gang had found the girl in the middle of the night and then captured the kidnapper in an old Indian cemetery the next night.

Then we had a very mysterious and exciting time hunting for the ransom money in one of the strangest places in all the world to find money. At last we found it in this very old ice-house, sewed up inside these great big fish, which we'd been digging up and stuffing into the gunnysack.

In maybe another seven minutes we'd have had it all dug up and into the sack and would have been on our way back to camp. But all of a startling sudden we heard that outboard motor roaring in our direction. We knew that unless we moved fast we would never be able to get out and far enough away into the bushes not to be seen.

"What's the sense of being scared?" Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, asked me right after I'd ordered us all to get going quick. "The kidnapper's caught and in jail, isn't he?"

"Sure, but old hook-nosed John Till's running loose up here somewhere," I said.

John Till was a very fierce man and the unpleasant dad of one of the members of our gang. He had been in jail a lot of times in his wicked life and was staying in a cabin not more

than a quarter of a mile up the shore from where we were right that minute.

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one, turned around quick, scrambled back across the sawdust we'd been digging in, and peeped through a crack between the logs toward the lake.

"Who is it?" I asked.

And he said in his ducklike, squawky voice, "I can't tell, but he looks awful mad."

Well, anybody knows that nobody could see well enough *that* far to see a person's face and be able to tell whether it had a mad look on it. But if it was John Till, who hated us boys anyway, he probably *would* be mad and would do savage things to all of us if he caught us in that icehouse taking the money.

So we all scrambled as fast as we could out of that icehouse and into the open, carrying Little Jim's gunnysack full of fish. We made a dive across an open space to a clump of bushes, where we wouldn't be seen by anybody on the lake.

Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, was with us, and he, being the strongest of us, grabbed up the sack, swung it over his shoulder, and loped on ahead.

"Hurry!" we panted to each other and didn't stop running until we reached the top of the hill, which we did just as we heard the outboard motor stop. There we all dropped down on the grass, gasping and panting and happy

that we were safe. But I was feeling pretty bad to think that there were probably a half dozen other fish still buried in the sawdust in that old log icehouse.

"Quick, Poetry, give me your knife," Circus ordered.

"What for?" Poetry said and at the same time shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his official Boy Scout knife. He handed it over to Circus, who quick opened the heavy cutting blade and started ripping open the sewed-up stomach of the northern pike he'd just pulled out of the sack.

"There's no sense in carrying home a six-pound northern pike with only a quarter of a pound of twenty-dollar bills in it," Circus said.

I knew he was right. It was a long way back to our camp, and if for any reason we had to run fast, we could do it better without having to lug along those great big fish, especially the biggest one.

I didn't bother to watch Circus then, because I started peering through the foliage of some oak undergrowth back toward the lake. And I saw a man come around the corner of the icehouse and stop. The old door hung open, but I could see several boards nailed across the opening on the inside.

"Look!" Dragonfly said. "He's got a big string of fish."

And sure enough he had.

Little Jim, who was beside me, holding onto the stick he always carried with him when

we were on a hike or out in the woods, whispered close to my ear, "I'll bet he's got a lot more money sewed up in a lot more fish and is going to bury it in the sawdust where these were."

I happened to have my high-powered binoculars with me, so I quick unsnapped the carrying case they were in. I zipped them out and raised them to my eyes, and right away it seemed I was only about one-third as far away as I really was. I gasped so loud at what I saw—or rather *whom* I saw—that my gasp was almost a yell.

"Sh!" Circus said to us, just as if *he* was the leader of our gang, which he wasn't.

I was leader today—that is, I was supposed to be, because our real leader, Big Jim, wasn't with us. He was back at camp with Little Tom Till, the newest member of our gang.

"It's old John Till, all right," I said. I could see his stooped shoulders, dark complexion, red hair, bulgy eyes, bushy eyebrows, and hook nose.

"What if he finds we've dug up part of the fish and run away with them?" Little Jim asked in a half-scared voice.

"Maybe he won't," I said and hoped he wouldn't.

While I was watching John Till toss his stringer of fish into the icehouse and clamber up the boards after them, Circus was slashing open fish and taking out the ransom money, which was folded in nice plastic bags, the kind

my mom uses in our kitchen back home at Sugar Creek.

We all helped Circus do what he was doing, all of us maybe more excited than we'd been in a long time, while different ones of us took turns watching what John Till was doing.

I knew that soon he would be out of that icehouse again and probably would go back to the big white boat he'd come to shore in. He'd shove off and row out a few feet, and then there would be a roar of his motor, and away he would go out across the sunlit water, his boat making a long widening V behind him. Then we would sneak back and get the rest of the money.

Everything was now pretty clear in my mind as to what had been going on the last day or two. Perhaps John Till had been what police call an "accomplice" of the real kidnapper, and it had been his special job to look after the ransom money. He'd decided that the best way in the world to hide it where nobody would ever think of finding it would be to catch some big fish, cut them open, clean out the entrails, fold the money in plastic, stuff it inside the fish, and sew them up, the way my mother sews up a chicken she's stuffed with dressing just before she slides it into the oven for our dinner.

Then he would dig down deep in the sawdust of the icehouse till he came to some ice, lay the fish on it, and cover it up. Nobody would *ever* think to look inside a fish for money. Even if they accidentally dug up a fish, it'd be cov-

ered with sticky wet sawdust, and they wouldn't see the stitches in its stomach.

While I was thinking that and also watching the shadow of John Till through the doorway of the icehouse, all of a sudden there was a quick gasp beside me.

I said to Circus, "What on earth?" thinking maybe he'd found something terribly special.

But he hadn't. He dropped his knife, leaped to his feet, and said, "You guys stay here! I'll be right back."

"Stop!" I said. "Where are you going?" I remembered I was supposed to be the leader.

But Circus had his own ideas about that. He squirmed out of my grasp, almost tearing his shirt because I had hold of it and didn't want to let go.

The next second there were only four of us left—barrel-shaped Poetry; kind-faced, great Little Jim; pop-eyed Dragonfly; and me, red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced Bill Collins. Circus, I saw, was streaking through the bushes as fast as he could go toward the lake and the icehouse but not getting out in the open where John Till could see him.

What on earth? I thought. I didn't dare yell or try to stop him by whistling, or John Till would have heard me. And then who knows what might happen? I didn't have the slightest idea what Circus was up to.

He darted like a scared chipmunk out from some bushes not far from the icehouse and made a dive for the open door.

He's crazy! I thought. *He's going to try to—what* is *he going to try to do?*

I soon found out. It happened so fast that I didn't even have time to think.

Swish! Wham! A half-dozen flying movements and it was all over. Circus grabbed that icehouse door, swung it shut, lifted the big heavy bar and threw it into place, and old hook-nosed John Till was locked inside.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I've been racking my brain, which is supposed to be under my red hair, trying to remember if I've ever told you the story of the haunted house at Sugar Creek and what happened there one night when we went on a coon hunt with Circus's dad's long-nosed, long-eared, long-legged, long-voiced, long-tongued hounds.

Circus is the name of the acrobatic member of our gang, and his dad is the father of a large family of nearly all girls and only one boy. His dad is the best hunter in all Sugar Creek territory.

The things that happened around and in and on top of that old haunted house would make any boy's red hair stand on end and also scare the living daylights out of him—which is what they did to me.

As I said, I've been racking my brain to see if I've ever told you about that haunted house, and I can't remember having written even half a paragraph about it. So here I go with that spooky, weird, and breathtaking story about the old abandoned house that was way up on a hill above Sugar Creek on some wooded property that belonged to Old Man Paddler.

Old Man Paddler is the kindest, friendliest, longest-whiskered old man who ever lived. He

likes kids a lot and is always doing something that will make them happy or that will be good for them.

Of course, you know there isn't any such thing as a haunted house, which usually is supposed to be a house that nobody lives in but which is visited every now and then by a "ghost." Not a one of us believed in ghosts, except Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang. He is superstitious because his mother is.

When we heard about that old house in the woods and about the strange noises inside it that nobody could explain—well, it looked as if we were in for another exciting experience, different from any we'd had in our whole lives. It was while we were having a gang meeting one summer day on Bumblebee Hill that we first learned about it.

As quick as I had finished dinner that day, I looked across the table to where my grayish-brown-haired mom sat with my little sister Charlotte Ann in her lap.

My face must have had a question mark on it, because when Mom looked at me, she said the most surprising thing. I couldn't even imagine her saying it, it was so strange. She said, "Certainly, Bill, if you want to. I'm feeling just fine and not a bit tired. I can do the dishes alone for a change. So if you want to skip out and go down to your meeting with the gang, you just run along."

Imagine that! Mom nearly always expected me to do the dishes after every noon meal—

and so did Dad. And when both Mom and Dad expected me to do a thing, I nearly always did it, even when I didn't expect to myself.

I looked at Dad's big gray-green eyes under his shaggy brown eyebrows to see if Mom meant it, and if he was going to agree with her.

You could have knocked me over with a toothpick when he said, "That's right, Son, you run along to your gang meeting. Your mother and I have some things to talk over, and I'll knock off a little while from work and help her with the dishes myself."

Hearing him say that, and in such a way, made me suspicious that they wanted to get rid of me so they could talk about something that might especially interest me if I could hear it.

Still, I knew that in another minute I would dive for the screen door, shove it open, and make a wild dash across the yard. I would pass the big swing in our walnut tree, zip through the gate and across the graveled road, vault over the rail fence and run *swish-zip-zip-zippety-sizzle* down the path that had been made by barefoot boys' bare feet to the spring.

There I'd swerve to the right and dash up along another rail fence that bordered the top of a bluff just above the bayou. Then I'd swing right again and sprint to the foot of Bumblebee Hill and up its lazy slope to the old abandoned cemetery at the top. There we were going to have our gang meeting just as soon after lunch that day as all the members of the gang could get away from their houses and get there.

But with both of my parents wanting me to get lost in a hurry so that they could talk about something, I suddenly wished I could hear what they were going to say. I knew it wasn't polite to "eavesdrop," so I decided I wouldn't. It was almost by accident that I heard part of what they said—just enough to make me curious and want to find out more.

Right away I excused myself, scooped up my straw hat from the floor, where it wasn't supposed to be, and swished out our east door, which in the summertime is always open to help get a breeze through the house.

I was going so fast that I was halfway across our grassy yard before I heard the screen door slam behind me. Then I also heard something else, and it was, "*Bill Collins!* Come back here and close the door like a gentleman!"

When Dad says it like that, I always obey in a hurry.

I was trying hard to learn to shut doors like a gentleman around our house, but not having any older brothers or sisters to set an example for me, it was kind of hard. The only examples I had were my dad and mom, and they always shut the screen doors carefully anyway.

Well, I put on the brakes quick, stopped before I got to the walnut tree, dashed back, opened the screen door again, and shut it like a gentleman, which means quietly.

Then I saw our pitcher pump standing at the end of the boardwalk that runs out toward our barn. I saw the drinking cup hanging on a

wire hook on it. I decided to get a drink, because I always liked to hear the pump handle squeak when I pumped the pump.

After a cool gulp or two, I tossed what water was left in the cup out into a little puddle where maybe forty-seven yellow butterflies were getting a drink themselves. They were the kind of butterfly boys like to catch and also the kind that lay eggs on cabbage plants in the garden and whose worms hatch out of the eggs and eat up the cabbages. Those forty-seven—more or less—yellow butterflies all came to life quick and fluttered up in forty-seven different directions. Right away they started to light again all around the muddy edge of the little puddle of water.

I decided to go back past the screen door again, and just as I got there I stopped out of curiosity to find out if Mom and Dad were talking about me or something I had done and shouldn't have.

This is what I heard Dad's big gruff voice say: "Yes, it's too bad. Poor boy. He's got a tick and will have to have a doctor's care."

Who's got a tick—and what of it? I wondered, for there were all kinds of wood ticks around Sugar Creek and also different kinds up North, where we'd gone on a camping trip once.

Then I heard Mom say in her worried voice, which she sometimes uses when she is worrying out loud, "Yes, Theodore"—which is my dad's first name—"it's too terribly bad, and

it's his parents' own fault. They're always picking on him, and that's made him nervous."

"Poor Dragonfly," Dad's gruff voice said. "I wonder if I should have a talk with his father."

What they were saying didn't make sense at all. In my mind's eye I could see Dragonfly standing stark naked with both of his parents standing beside him, looking him over from head to toe and picking ticks off him, and Dragonfly not feeling well and having to go to the doctor. I wanted to call into the kitchen and ask Dad or Mom if Dragonfly was very sick, but instead I decided to run on down to the gang meeting, which I did.

Boy oh boy, I felt good as I dashed out across our grassy yard. I swerved out of the way when I came to the walnut tree, reached up and caught hold of the ropes on either side of the swing, swung myself up, leaped off, and dashed on through the gate past "Theodore Collins" on the mailbox. I made bare-feet tracks on the dust of the road as I vaulted over the rail fence, and away I went, feeling like a million dollars.

Even as I ran, I noticed the path was bordered on either side with wildflowers, such as buttercups, harebells, dandelions, oxeye daisies, and a lot of others. There were also mayapples, great big patches of them, with shining, light green leaves.

If there is anything in all the world that feels better than anything else, it is to run through a woods with bare feet on a shaded

path, smelling sweet-smelling flowers and pine trees and seeing different-colored butterflies flitting around—and maybe scaring up a rabbit and watching it run *hoppety-sizzle* in some direction or other to get away from what it thinks is danger.

I stopped at the spring to get another cool drink and looked out across Sugar Creek. I noticed that it was very quiet, not having a ripple on it but only a lot of different-shaped splotches of foam, which I knew were clusters of very small air bubbles sticking together. For just a second I thought about how well I liked old Sugar Creek and how I would like to go in swimming right that very minute with the rest of the gang.

Then, as I hurried on up along the rail fence toward Bumblebee Hill, I decided that Sugar Creek's unruffled surface with those specks of foam scattered all over it was kind of like a boy's face with a lot of freckles on it, which was the kind of face I had.

Sugar Creek and I were pretty good friends, I thought, as I dashed on.

I must have gotten an earlier start than any of the rest of the gang, because, when I came to the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, there wasn't a one of them there. Instead of going on up to the cemetery at the top, I just lay down in the grass at the foot of the hill and waited, hating to go up to the cemetery all by myself for some reason, even though there wasn't any such thing in the world as a ghost.

For a while I lay on my back watching some big white clouds up there in the sky, which looked sort of like the snow-white packs of wool that Dad shears off our sheep and ties into big white bundles for selling. I thought about how interesting it would be if I could make a quick jump clear up there and float from one cloud to another as if I was as light as a feather. Then I got to thinking again about how white they were, like my mom's sheets hanging on the line on Monday, and from that I thought of my parents and Charlotte Ann and her almost-snow-white soft skin and how cute she was when Mom was washing her face.

That made me think of Dragonfly, and at that very second I felt an ant or something crawling on my hand. That reminded me of Dragonfly's ticks. Also, at the very same time, I heard somebody sneeze and heard feet running, and I knew Dragonfly himself was coming.

I rolled over quick and sat up and squinted at him, not being able to see him very well because of looking up into the bright blue sky and at the snow-white clouds.

"Hi, Dragonfly," I said and looked at him to see if he appeared to be in good health, and he did, and I was glad of it.

"Hi, yourself," he said and plopped himself down on the ground and panted a while. He wheezed a bit, because he had a little asthma in the summer.

I looked at him, and he looked at me with his dragonflylike eyes, and he reached out with

his right hand and took hold of the fruit of a mayapple that grew close to where I'd been lying and started to pull it off. The lemon-shaped yellow fruit had been hanging the way the fruit of all mayapples do—from a little stem that was fastened at the fork of the mayapple stalk just under the spreading leaves.

"Did you ever taste one?" Dragonfly wanted to know and started to lift the round, smooth apple to his lips.

But all of a sudden he was interrupted by an excited small-boy voice calling out from somewhere not far away, "Hey, you, *stop!* Mayapples are *poison!*"

Even without looking, I knew it was Little Jim, the littlest member of our gang. He came dashing up to where we were, and I noticed he had with him a wildflower guide, which was open to a picture of a pretty green mayapple illustration. Finding out all he could about wildflowers and telling us about them whenever he found one he'd never found before—stuff like that—was one of Little Jim's hobbies.

Dragonfly didn't like to be stopped from doing what he wanted to do, so he bit into the mayapple. Then he screwed up his face into a homely twisted expression and spit out his bite quickly, drew his arm back, and hurled the rest of the apple up toward one of the white clouds that hung in the sky above Sugar Creek.

We all took a quick look at Little Jim's book, and I felt better when I read that "while the leaves and the stem of the mayapple are

poisonous, the fruit is not, but tastes very sour."

There isn't anything much prettier in all Sugar Creek territory, though, than a bed of mayapples growing in a shady place under a tree, each stalk about a foot high, and each one having a snow-white flower with a yellow center. They were very nice to look at even though they weren't good to eat.

"Look," Little Jim said, "here's a flower that's blossomed late. It's supposed to blossom in May, you know. See, it's got six petals, and the center has exactly twice as many yellow stamens."

"So what?" Dragonfly asked, still with his lips puckered up and also rinsing out his mouth with saliva, which he spit out in the direction of Bumblebee Hill.

"They're *all* like that," Little Jim said. "Every one that's ever born has only *one* white flower on it, and every white flower has just six petals and exactly *twelve* yellow stamens in its center!"

"Who cares?" Dragonfly asked in a disgusted mumbling voice.

Little Jim knew that it was important. I understood that little guy like an open book, and I knew what he was thinking about. I didn't say anything with my voice but only with my eyes when he looked into my green ones with his very clear blue ones. In fact, I didn't say anything about what we were thinking until quite a while later—not till a lot later in this story, when we were having some excitement that made some of our adventures in other years look like two cents.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The first time I saw that big dangerous-looking snake, it almost scared me half to death. It flattened out its ugly head, with its fierce-looking, shovel-shaped nose, and at the same time expanded its neck until it was almost three times as big as it had been. The snake was making a hissing sound like air being let out of a tire of my blue-and-white bicycle.

I stood stock-still and stared at it, my whole body tense with fright. It was lying in a half coil and had been sunning itself on the sandy path that leads from the two big pignut trees above our garden to an old iron pitcher pump at the other side of our farm.

If anybody had seen me staring at that savage-looking, mad-looking, mad-acting, reddish-yellow, thick-bodied snake with irregular-shaped brownish-black blotches scattered all the way down its length from neck to tail, he'd have said my eyes had widened until they were as big as the puffed-out head and neck of that snake.

I was barefoot too, so if the snake had wanted to, it could have bitten my foot or my ankle or one of my ten bare toes—I was that close to it. I didn't even have a stick in my hand as I sometimes have when I walk around our

farm, so I couldn't sock the snake the way a boy likes to do when he sees one.

"Hiss-s-s-s!" the big-bodied snake said to me fiercely.

Its ugly head was shaped like a triangle in our arithmetic book in school, and its nose turned up at the tip as if it was trying to smell to see what kind of strange animal I was myself.

As I said, I was scared stiff. My greenish-gray eyes must have been almost bulging out of their sockets as I wondered what on earth to do to kill the snake. If I tried to jump back, would it make a lunge for me and strike me with its fangs?

I couldn't help but think of one of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang whose name is Dragonfly. When he sees something exciting before the rest of us do, he always hisses like a snake, and his own eyes get big and round like a dragonfly's eyes are all the time, which is why we call him by that name.

Well, not having a stick to sock the snake, and not knowing what else to do, and being scared anyway, I let out several screams. In fact, I screamed maybe a half-dozen times, because the snake was not only puffing out its neck and hissing, but its triangle-shaped head was darting in and out in my direction very fiercely.

I must have come to life all of a sudden, for the next thing I knew, I had leaped back about six feet and was looking all around for a rock to hit the snake with. But I couldn't find any because Dad and I had been picking up all the

rocks from our farm for years and taking them out of the fields so we could raise better crops.

Even though I didn't find any rock, I did spy a big clod of dirt almost as big as my little sister Charlotte Ann's pretty round head, so I quick stooped, grabbed it up in my big-for-a-boy's hands, lifted it high over my head, and with all my fierce, half-scared, half-mad strength hurled it down toward the snake's shovel-shaped snout.

But as much as I hate to have to admit it, I missed. The dirt clod squished itself into a million particles of dirt and dust right beside where the snake's head had been a second before the clod got there.

And then the queerest thing I ever saw happened. That big forty-inch-long, yellowish-red snake all of a sudden opened its mouth wide and began to twist itself into and out of several kinds of knots as though I had actually hit it and injured it terribly. The next thing I knew, it gave itself a sideways flip-flop and landed on its back, exposing its pretty yellowish-green snake's stomach to the hot sun, which was shining down on both of us.

And the second it got on its back, it all of a sudden quit wriggling and twisting and just lay there as if it was absolutely dead.

What on earth! I thought. *I must have hit it after all!* And yet, I knew I hadn't, because I'd seen my clod of dirt miss by almost six inches. All that had happened to it was that maybe a lot of dust and dirt had spattered it in the eyes

and on the side of its angry head and three-inch-wide puffed-out neck.

But there it lay, not making a move and looking like a terribly big fishing worm that was as lifeless as a fishing worm is when a robin has pecked it to death, just before feeding it to one of her babies.

Well, what do you know? I thought. *I scared him to death!* I didn't know if it was my clod of dirt or the way I had yelled at it. But, of course, it couldn't actually be dead.

I looked around and saw a long stick, which I hadn't seen before, and, just to make sure, I picked up the stick and poked at the snake. It didn't even move the end of its tail but lay absolutely quiet.

I don't know what made me do what I did just then, but I all of a sudden felt very brave, sort of like maybe David in the Bible story, when he had killed a giant with one little stone out of his slingshot. I remembered that David was supposed to have had red hair, like mine, so I looked down at that giant shovel-nosed snake and yelled down at it, "Get up, you coward! Get up and fight like a man!"

Having the long stick in my hand, I knew I could kill it, as I had a lot of garter snakes and water snakes around Sugar Creek. So I yelled at it again, calling it a coward to let a ten-year-old boy scare it to death.

And then I got another surprise. From the direction of the iron pitcher pump, which is right close by the stile that we go over to go to

school in the fall and winter and spring, I heard a boy's yell. I knew it was the voice of my friend Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, who was my almost best friend and whose house I was on my way to when I had run into the snake.

"*Who's* a coward?" Poetry yelled to me from the top of the stile, where he was when I looked up and saw him. Then he scrambled his roly-poly self down the stile's four steps and came puffing toward me, walking up the dusty path.

"I just killed a great big snake." I said. "A fierce-looking one about six feet long and as big around as your wrist." It wasn't quite that big, but now that I was a hero, it seemed the snake was bigger than it was. Besides, I wanted Poetry to *think* it was until he got to where he could see it himself. Then I'd tell him I was only fooling, which different members of the gang were always doing to each other anyway.

I stood there, looking at Poetry lumbering toward me. Also I kept glancing at my defeated enemy, wondering how on earth I'd managed to scare it to death.

In a minute Poetry was there, and both of us were standing back about eight or ten feet and looking down at the yellowish-green, upturned stomach of the snake.

"How'd you do it?" Poetry asked. "What'd you hit him with—that stick?"

"I scared him to death!"

"*Scared* him to death! That's just plain dumb.

You can't do that to a snake. You have to hit him with something."

"I did," I said with a mischievous grin in my mind. "I threw my voice at him, and it hit him, and he just twisted himself up into a couple of knots, like a boy does when he gets the cramps from eating green apples, and he plopped himself over on his back and died, right in front of my eyes. I'm a ventriloquist. I can throw my voice, you know."

Well, it was fun kidding Poetry. Then I told him I'd missed the snake with a clod of dirt but that he'd died anyway.

"Maybe there was a rock in the clod," Poetry said, "and when the clod hit the ground six inches from his head, and burst in pieces, the rock flew out and hit him on the head, and it just sort of accidentally killed him."

That reminded me again of red-haired David. If there was anything in the world I'd rather do than anything else, it was to imagine myself to be somebody else—like a hero in our history books at school or a brave character in the Bible. Right that second, I remembered that David's one small smooth stone had socked Giant Goliath, killing him deader than a doornail. David had rushed up to the fallen giant and had stood on him, and it seemed maybe I ought to do that to my giant-sized, shovel-nosed snake.

"That's Giant Goliath," I said to Poetry, "and I'm David. I'm going to stand on him and cut off his head and—"

"Stop!" Poetry said. "He might *not* be dead. Here, give me that stick."

He took my stick, eased himself up closer to the snake, and poked at it. But it didn't move at all, not even its tail.

"It's dead, all right," I said, feeling even prouder of myself than I had been, because of what I had done.

Right that second, Poetry looked at his wristwatch and frowned at it and said, "Hey, we've got to get going! There's a gang meeting down at the spring. Big Jim just phoned our house, and it's very important. He tried to call you, but nobody answered your phone, so I was on my way over to get you."

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Long before we left Sugar Creek for our winter vacation along the Rio Grande River, I had been sure that when we went fishing down there we'd catch a fish as big as a boy.

I was *so* sure of it that I started telling nearly everybody I met about it. Why, that great big fish we were going to land might be as big as Little Jim, the smallest member of our gang, or maybe as big around as Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and the most mischievous one of us, who, because he wants to be a detective someday, is always getting us mixed up in some mysterious and exciting adventure.

But when, instead of a big fish, we caught something else just as big and had to pounce upon it and hold onto it for dear life or it would have gotten away—and also had to keep on holding on or we'd maybe have gotten our eyes scratched out or ourselves badly slashed up—well, I just couldn't have imagined anything so excitingly different happening to a gang of ordinary boys.

Of course, our gang wasn't exactly ordinary. Anyway, Circus, our acrobat and expert wrestler, wasn't. Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader, wasn't either. Neither was Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member, who was always seeing exciting

things first and also was always sneezing at the wrong time because he was allergic to nearly everything.

Certainly Little Jim, the smallest one of us, wasn't ordinary. He was an especially good boy, which any ordinary boy knows isn't exactly ordinary. He wasn't any sissy, though, as you'll see for yourself when I get to that part of the story where Little Jim joined in the struggle we were having with a very savage, wild, mad something-or-other one moonlit night on the American side of the Rio Grande.

Even I myself, Bill Collins, red haired and freckle faced and a little bit fiery tempered part of the time, wasn't exactly ordinary. My mother says that most of the time I don't even act like what is called "normal"—whatever that is.

Well, here goes with the story of the Sugar Creek Gang along the Rio Grande.

The Rio Grande is a wet boundary between Mexico and the United States and is a long, wide, reddish-brown river that the people who live down at the bottom of Texas have harnessed up and put to work for them—kind of the way Dad harnesses old Topsy, our mud-colored horse, and drives her around all over the Sugar Creek territory wherever he wants to.

The way they harnessed the river was by digging miles and miles of ditches for its water to flow all around through the Rio Grande Valley to irrigate their orange and lemon and grapefruit groves and patches where they grow cabbage and lettuce and carrots and other gar-

den stuff. They also purify some of the water to make it safe for drinking and cooking.

Of course, a lot of interesting things happened to our gang before that last exciting night—but I'll just sort of skim over those so I can get to the most dangerous part in less than maybe a couple dozen pages. Soon I'll be galloping with you right through the—but you wait and see what.

"Maybe my dad will decide to buy a grapefruit grove down along the Rio Grande, and maybe we'll move down there to live," Dragonfly said to me sadly about two days before we left for Texas.

He had come over to my house to play with me that snowy morning, and he and I were out in the barn cracking black walnuts and gobbling up the kernels as fast as we could. Every now and then his face would get a messed-up expression on it, and he would sneeze, which meant he either had a cold or was allergic to something or other in our barn.

Hearing him say that didn't make me feel very happy. Even though he sometimes was sort of a nuisance to the gang, he'd been one of us as long as any of us had, and it would make a very sad hole in our gang if he left us for good.

"Daddy says we'll have to try out the climate first to see if we like it," he said, still sad in his voice and sad on his face. Then he added hopefully, "I hope I have to sneeze every five minutes after we get there."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I'd rather live up here at Sugar Creek where I only have to sneeze every *seven* minutes"—which would have been funny if it hadn't been almost true.

Just that minute Mom's voice came quavering out across our cold, snowy barnyard the way it does when she is calling me to come to the house for a while for something. So in only a few jiffies, Dragonfly and I were both diving headfirst through the snow to our back door.

When we got inside the house, Dragonfly started sneezing again like a house afire, and it wasn't because of the good-smelling dinner Mom was cooking on our kitchen stove, either.

It was after we went into the living room, where Mom and Charlotte Ann, my baby sister, were that Dragonfly let out those stormy sneezes, six or seven of them in fast succession. Right away he exclaimed, "I smell somebody's powder!"

I quick looked at Mom's friendly, motherly face to see if her nose had any shine on it, the way it sometimes has when she's been working in the kitchen and hasn't remembered to powder it. It was a little bit shiny, so maybe Dragonfly was mistaken, I thought.

"The doctor says I'm allergic to some kinds of face powder," he said. He screwed up his face and sneezed three more times in even quicker succession than he had the other time. He looked with worried eyes first at Mom and then at Charlotte Ann.

My little sister, I noticed, was over in the corner, sitting on the floor. And she had Mom's

face powder box open and some of the powder had spilled out, making it look as if somebody had scattered peach-colored dust over about three square feet of the rug.

Right away, Dragonfly and I were out of doors again, getting there quicker than our old Mixy-cat could have gone if Dragonfly's Airedale dog had been chasing her.

All of a sudden, I got what wasn't a very bright idea. "You don't *have* to stay down South if you don't want to," I said to him.

"Why?"

"If you can *really* sneeze a lot while you're there, your folks won't move down to stay, will they?"

"No, but what if I *can't?* I can only sneeze when I'm close to something I'm allergic to." He scooped up a double handful of snow, made a ball of it, whirled, and threw it across the barnyard through the fast-falling flakes toward Topsy, our old horse, who was standing on the east side of the barn with her tail to the wind, the way horses do if they're standing outdoors in a storm.

"Look," I said, "let me fix you up a little box of Mom's face powder. And when you get down there, you—well, you'll know what to do with it."

He looked at me with a sneezy expression on his face and said, "I couldn't fool Dad. Besides, my mother would smell the powder on me and wonder if I was turning into a girl or something. She might even be allergic to it herself. She says I inherited the sneezes from her."

I knew several other things Dragonfly had maybe inherited from her, such as believing it meant bad luck if a black cat crossed your path or if you broke a looking glass, and good luck if you found a horseshoe. He also had a hard time not believing in ghosts, even though he went to our church and had become a Christian one day when he was sliding down a sycamore tree along Sugar Creek, like Zaccheus in the Bible. Because his mother believed in ghosts—or almost did anyway—it made it hard for him not to.

Dragonfly had a nice mother though, but he being her only boy, she worried about him too much, and that worried *him*.

Well, even my dad got what Mom called the "warm climate bug," and because Mom hadn't had any vacation for years, they decided we'd take our car and drive down to the bottom of Texas, too. That meant that with *two* cars going, there'd be room in the backseats for six boys to go along—which is how many of us there are in our gang except for little Tom Till, the seventh one of us, who had to stay home and help take care of his mother. He also was going to help his father do the chores for us while my family was gone.

Before I go any farther, maybe I had better explain to you how in the world a gang of school-age boys could get to go on a great warm-climate vacation in the middle of winter. If I don't, nearly every mother who reads about us getting to go will wonder, *What on earth—*

and why? And some of them might even start to worry about us.

Well, it just so happened that a lot of coal miners in the United States, not even knowing how bad we all needed a vacation from school, went on what is called a "strike." They didn't work for so long that the schools around Sugar Creek got low on coal, and most of them had to close for a while.

You could have knocked us over with a snowflake when we found out that the Sugar Creek School was going to close, too. Of course, the school could have burned wood, but the school board decided not to do that, so we almost *had* to go on a vacation to show the coal miners how much we appreciated their not working.

My parents, especially Mom, felt sorry for the coal miners' wives, who might not have enough money to buy their groceries, and she hoped the miners' little children wouldn't have to go hungry.

Dad didn't say much except that coal mining was very hard work and any man who had to work all day in a mine, wearing out his muscles and sometimes his lungs away down under the earth, certainly ought to have good wages —as much as his boss could afford to pay.

But anyway, the coal miners' strike was good for the Sugar Creek Gang, for as soon as our school closed, we quick packed up, and away we went.

On the way to the Mexican border, we

stopped to see some interesting places, one of which was Turkey Run State Park. In the summertime it is one of the most beautiful places in the world, having deep canyons and gorges cut right through sandstone rock.

"We'll have to come here sometime in the summer," Dad said, "when old Sugar Creek isn't all chained with ice and snow."

"*Sugar* Creek!" Dragonfly exclaimed. "Is *that* Sugar Creek?"

"Sure," Poetry said. He was in the backseat of our car with Dragonfly and me. "Don't you know your geography?"

"What's geography got to do with Sugar Creek?" Dragonfly asked. He was not very good in that subject.

Poetry answered, "Don't you know that Sugar Creek is the very center of the geographical world? Anybody knows that!"

Sometimes Poetry used such an argumentative tone of voice that it made me want to talk back even when I agreed with him, but this time I didn't let myself. I said to Dragonfly, "Sure, anybody knows that"—which anybody does.

The next place we stopped was at one of my cousins' houses, not very far from Turkey Run. There we left Charlotte Ann so that the coal miners' strike would be good for Mom as well as for the rest of us. When Charlotte Ann's around and not asleep, there isn't a moment of peace for anybody. She is what is called a "normal" two-year-old girl, which means it is very hard on her nerves to have to be quiet.

As soon as Mom and Charlotte Ann had finished crying, we started on, and Dad drove a little faster to make up for lost time, which Mom said wasn't lost.

When we were going through Vincennes, Indiana, Dad reminded us that it was the first capital of what our history books call Indian Territory.

Then we crossed a big river to go into Illinois, and Dragonfly looked out and down at the water and said, "Old Sugar Creek's water certainly looks good this far from home."

"You're crazy," Poetry said. "That's the Wabash River."

"I know it," Dragonfly said, "but our geography book has a map in it that shows Sugar Creek emptying its water into the Wabash away back up there somewhere not far from Turkey Run, so some of that water down here is Sugar Creek water."

It kind of pleased me that Dragonfly was smart enough to think of that. And of course he was right. Some of the water in the Wabash River had been given to it absolutely free by good old Sugar Creek.

At a smallish town called Samburg in Tennessee, which we drove out of our way to go through the next day, Dad stopped while we looked at a terribly big lake and told us, "That's Reelfoot Lake, boys. It was made by an earthquake in 1811—supposed to be the biggest earthquake America ever had."

It certainly was the strangest-looking lake I

ever saw. It looked as if there were maybe ten thousand old tree stumps sticking up all over it. There were also a lot of whole trees, especially cypress, making it look like a forest growing in a lake. Part of it looked like a Sugar Creek cemetery with a lot of black ghosts standing around in it.

"That's probably some of Sugar Creek's water, too," Dragonfly said. "Let's go in swimming."

"Don't carry a good joke too far," Poetry said, scowling.

But Dad heard what Dragonfly had said. "You're right, Roy"—that being Dragonfly's civilized name. "At the time of the earthquake, the Mississippi River had something like an epileptic fit. Its water backed up and filled all the huge cracks and crevices which the earthquake had made. Some of that water was probably Sugar Creek water, because Sugar Creek flows into the Wabash and the Wabash into the Ohio and the Ohio into the Mississippi. Yes, that's probably partly Sugar Creek water."

All of a sudden Little Jim, who had been standing beside me, broke away, made a dash down to the lake, scooped up a double handful of water, and, with a grin on his mouselike face, tossed the water up in the air over our heads. A second later some of it spattered on my freckled face, while he yelled, "Hurrah, it's raining Sugar Creek water!"

It was time to drive on, so we did, not stopping at any place very important. And then we

came to Houston, a big city in Texas, where there was a natural history museum and a zoo, called the Hermann Park Zoo.