Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The night we accidentally stumbled onto a brand-new mystery at Sugar Creek was the darkest summer night I ever saw.

Imagine coming happily home with two of your best pals, carrying a string of seven fish and feeling wonderful and proud. And then, halfway home, when you are passing an old abandoned cemetery, imagine seeing a light out there and somebody digging! All of a sudden you get a creeping sensation in your spine, and your hair under your straw hat starts to try to stand up!

Well, that's the way it started. Nobody from Sugar Creek had been buried in that old cemetery for years and years. It was only good for wild strawberries to grow in and bumblebees to make their nest in and barefoot boys to have their gang meetings in, telling ghost stories to each other.

And yet there it was, as plain as the crooked nose on Dragonfly's thin face, or the wide nose on Poetry's face, or the freckled nose on mine —an honest-to-goodness man was digging in the light of a kerosene lantern. The lantern itself was standing beside the tall tombstone of Sarah Paddler, Old Man Paddler's dead wife. It was shedding a spooky light on the man and his

nervous movements as he scooped yellowish-brown dirt out of the hole and piled it onto a fast-growing pile beside him.

I knew he couldn't see us, because we were crouched behind some elder bushes that grew along the rail fence just outside the cemetery. But I also knew that if we made the slightest noise he might hear us. And if he heard us—well, what would he do?

I kept hoping Dragonfly's nose, which as everybody knows is almost always allergic to almost everything, wouldn't smell something that would make him sneeze. Dragonfly had the craziest sneeze of anybody in the world—a small squeal with a whistling tail on it. If Dragonfly would sneeze, it would be like the story of Peter Rabbit running away from Mr. McGregor.

As you remember, Peter Rabbit was running *lickety-sizzle,* trying to get away from Mr. McGregor, the gardener. Spying a large sprinkling can, Peter jumped into it to hide himself. The can happened to have water in the bottom, and that was too bad for poor Peter Rabbit's nose. He sneezed, and Mr. McGregor heard it, and Peter had to jump his wet-footed, wet-furred self out of the can and go racing furiously to get away from mad Mr. McGregor and his garden rake.

"Listen," Poetry hissed beside me.

I listened but couldn't hear a thing except the scooping sounds the shovel was making.

Then he squeezed my arm so tight I almost said "Ouch" just as I heard a new sound. It

sounded as if the shovel had struck something hard.

"He's struck a rock," I said.

"Rock nothing," Poetry answered. "I'd know that sound anywhere. That was metal scraping on metal or maybe somebody's old coffin."

Poetry's nearly always squawking voice broke when he said that, and he sounded like a frog with laryngitis.

As you know, Dragonfly was the one who was a little more afraid of a cemetery than the rest. So when Poetry said that like that, Dragonfly said, "Let's get out of here! Let's go home!"

Well, I had read different stories about buried treasure. In fact, our own gang had stumbled onto a buried treasure mystery when we were on a camping trip up North and which you can read about in some of the other Sugar Creek Gang books. So when I was peeking through the foliage of the elder bush and between the rails of the tumbledown old fence, watching strange things in a graveyard at a strange hour of the night—well, all of a sudden I was all set to get myself tangled up in another mystery just as quick as I could, that is, if I could without getting into too much danger at the same time. As Dad says, "It is better to have good sense and try to use it than it is to be brave."

Just that second I heard a bobwhite whistling, *"Bob White! Bob White! Poor Bob White!"* It

was a very cheery birdcall, the kind I would almost rather hear around Sugar Creek than any other.

As fast as a firefly's fleeting flash, my mind's eye was seeing a ten-inch-long, brown-beaked bird with a white stomach and a white forehead. The feathers on the crown of its head were shaped like the topknot on a topknotted chicken.

The man kept shoveling, not paying attention to anything except what he was doing. He seemed to be working faster though. Then all of a sudden he stopped while he was in a stooped-over position and for a minute didn't make a move.

"He's looking at something in the hole," Poetry whispered. "He sees something."

"Maybe he's listening," I said. It seemed he was—the way a robin does on our front lawn with her head cocked to one side, waiting to see or hear or both a night crawler push part of itself out of its hole. Then she makes a dive for the worm and holds on for dear life while she yanks and pulls till she gets its slimy body out. Then she eats it or else pecks it to death and into small pieces and flies with it to her nest to feed it to her babies.

Seconds later I heard another birdcall, and it was another whistling sound, a very mournful cry. *"Coo-oo, coo-oo, coo-oo."* It was a turtledove.

And it was just as though that sad, plaintive turtledove call had scared the living daylights out of the man. He straightened up, looked all

around, picked up the lantern, and started walking toward the old maple tree on the opposite side of the cemetery.

"He's got a limp," Poetry said. "Look how he drags one foot after him."

I didn't have time to wrack my brain to see if I could remember anybody who had that kind of limp. No sooner had the man reached the maple tree than he lifted the lantern and blew out the light.

Then I heard a car door slam and the sound of a motor starting, and two headlights lit up the whole cemetery for a second. Two long, blinding beams made a wide sweep across the top of Strawberry Hill, lighting up the tombstones and the lonely old pine tree above Sarah Paddler's grave and the chokecherry shrubs and even the elder bush we were hiding behind. Then the car went racing down the abandoned lane that led to the road not more than three blocks away, leaving us three boys wondering, *What on earth?* and, *Why?* and, *Who?* and, *Where?*

It seemed I couldn't move—I had been crouched in such a cramped position for so long a time.

It was Dragonfly who thought of something that added to the mystery. He said, "First time I ever heard a bobwhite whistling in the night like that."

The very second he said it, I wished I had thought of it first. But I did think of something else first. Anyway, I said it first. It was, "Yeah,

and whoever heard of a *turtledove* cooing in the night?"

"It's just plain cuckoo," Poetry said. "I'll bet there was somebody over there in that car waiting for him and maybe watching, and those whistles meant something special. They probably meant 'Danger! Look out! Get away quick!'"

Then Poetry said in an authoritative voice, as if he were the leader of our gang instead of Big Jim, who is when he is with us—and I am when Big Jim isn't—"Let's go take a look at what he was doing."

"Let's go home," Dragonfly said.

"Why, Dragonfly Gilbert!" I said. "Go on home yourself if you are scared! Poetry and I have got to investigate!"

"I'm not s–scared," Dragonfly said.

As quick as we were sure the car was really gone, I turned on my dad's big long flashlight, and Poetry, Dragonfly, and I started to climb through the rail fence to go toward the mound of yellowish-brown earth beside Sarah Paddler's tombstone.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The very thought of my city cousin coming to visit us for a whole week while his parents went on a vacation was enough to start a whirlwind in my mind.

A whirlwind, you know, is a baby-sized rotating windstorm. On most any ordinary summer day around our farm, you can expect to see one of these friendly fun makers spiraling out across the fields or through the woods like a little funnel of wind. It laughs along, carrying with it a lot of different things such as dry leaves and grass and feathers from our chicken yard or dust from the path that goes from the iron pitcher pump across the barnyard to the barn, or anything else that's loose and light.

Away the little whirlwind goes, *whirlety-sizzle,* like an excited boy running in circles. Is it ever fun to toss yourself into one of them and go racing along with it and in it. Nearly every time I get into the middle of one, though, it acts as if it can't stand having a red-haired boy getting mixed up in it, and all of a sudden it isn't a whirlwind anymore. All the leaves and grass and dust and stuff stop whirling and just sail around in the sky awhile before they come floating down all over the place.

So Wally, my whirlwind city cousin, was com-

ing to visit us. He not only had a lot of mischievous ideas in his mind, but he didn't like to be told anything, such as how to do a thing and especially *not* to do a thing.

The worst thing was, he was going to bring with him his copper-colored dog, which he had named Alexander the Coppersmith and which didn't have any good country manners. Certainly there would be plenty of excitement around the place, and some of it would be dangerous. Just how dangerous, I couldn't tell until Wally and his dog got there.

There isn't any boy who likes excitement more than I do, and I even like it a little bit dangerous, as well as mysterious, but I *didn't* want Wally to come, and I *didn't* want Alexander the Coppersmith either.

Honest to goodness, I never heard or saw or smelled such a frisky, uncontrollable, uneducated, ill-mannered dog without any good country breeding, from his mischievous muzzle all the way back to his "feather."

Maybe you didn't know that dogs have feathers, but they do. "Feather" is the name of the tip end of a dog's tail. It's the featherlike hair that grows on the very, very end. I didn't know that myself until I read it in a book about dogs, which Dad gave me for my birthday.

When I had first seen Wally's dog, I thought it was an Airedale. Wally was extraproud of his copper-colored quadruped because he could do several things, such as sit up and bark when he wanted food.

I never will forget what happened the year Wally brought him the first time. It was on a Thanksgiving Day. Wally had been so sure that if we tied our turkey's neck to a rope and tied the other end of the rope to Alexander that he would lead the turkey all around the pen like a boy leading a pony. We tried it, and for a while it was a lot of fun watching the dog do his stuff. The turkey followed along behind like a baby chicken following its mother, until all of a sudden our old black and white cat, Mixy, came arching her back and rubbing her sides against things the way cats do. A second later, Alexander was making a wild dog dash toward Mixy. At that very second also, Mixy made a wild cat dash out across our barnyard toward the barn.

Alexander forgot his neck was tied to a turkey's neck. He dragged the turkey *flip-floppety-sizzle* behind him.

You can believe that I, Bill Collins, came to the quickest life I had ever come to. I started to make a wild dash for the gate of the turkey pen to shut it so that Alexander couldn't get out to catch Mixy, and also so the turkey couldn't get out, because it was the very turkey we had been saving for months to have for Thanksgiving dinner.

Besides, Mixy was my very favorite cat friend, and I couldn't stand the thought of her getting hurt, although I knew she was a fierce fighter and could probably take care of herself if the dog did catch up with her. I had seen her lick the daylights out of several of our neigh-

borhood dogs. Boy oh boy, when she gets her temper up, she can lick the stuffings out of the fightingest dog in the whole territory.

Squash! Wham! *Floppety-gobblety-sizzle!* Even though Mixy got to the barn safely, and Wally finally got Alexander the Coppersmith quieted down, the turkey's neck was broken, so Dad had to come and finish killing it, which he did, thirty minutes sooner than he would have anyway.

Even though Wally had been training his dog the best he could, that dog didn't seem to have any control of his emotions whenever there was a cat around.

And now Wally was coming again, and it was *that* dog he was bringing with him! Dad and I were talking it over one day about a month before Wally and Alexander arrived.

"Don't worry," my reddish brown mustached, bushy eyebrowed father said. "He will be a year older and a year smarter than he was last year." Except that Dad was thinking about Wally.

"He'll be a year older and a year dumber," I said, thinking about the dog.

"You can't say things like that about one of your relatives."

"I mean the dog will be a year dumber."

"And besides," Dad said, "Wally is not only your cousin. He is your Aunt Belle's only son, and an only son is sometimes a problem."

"I am your only son, too, and I hope I am not as wild as he is."

"I hope so myself," Dad said.

For a second I was half mad.

But Wally was really bad. He just couldn't learn anything. He couldn't be *told* anything, and he was always wanting to do what he wanted to do, whether anyone else wanted him to do it or wanted to do it with him. And it wasn't because he had red hair and freckles, because I had them, and I certainly wasn't that independent a person—not all the time. Not even half the time.

Dad tried to make me look at things more cheerfully by saying, "The Lord hasn't finished making Wally yet. He's only been working on him ten years, and about the only tools He has had to work with are his parents. Parents have a lot to do with what a boy turns out to be."

Because Dad and I were always joking with each other, I asked, "Is that why I'm such a good boy—I have such good parents?"

Dad grinned under his mustache and with his eyes and said, "You *are* a pretty good boy—don't you think?"

"I hate to say it," I said.

I remembered that when I was just a little guy, Dad would scoop me up in his arms and hug me. But that would look silly for a red-haired, freckle-faced boy as old as I was to be getting picked up by his father at nine o'clock in the morning. Besides, Dad had that bristly mustache, and what boy in his right mind would want to get mixed up with that? It'd be as bad as a dog getting mixed up with a fat porcupine.

Just thinking that reminded me of Wally

once more and also of his uncontrollable dog, and I was worried again. Nothing Dad could say that morning helped a bit. I simply couldn't get reconciled to the idea of losing a whole week of my life.

Mom had her say-so on the subject that same day. "I'll expect you to put on your very best manners when your Aunt Belle and Uncle Amos are here—for a very special reason."

"Why?" I said. "What reason?"

Mom was taking an apple pie out of the oven at the time, and I was smelling pie and thinking maybe it might not be such a bad thing to have Wally come. Every time we had company at our house, she always baked a lot of pies and cookies and stuff.

"Don't you know?" she asked.

"I don't see any special reason why I have to be extragood when such an extrabad boy is coming to see me," I said.

She answered, "Ask your father, then," which a little later I did when my dad and I were out in the garden hoeing potatoes.

"How come I have to be an extragood boy when Wally is here? How can I be, when it is hard enough just being as good as I am?"

"Can't you guess?" he asked.

I racked my brain to try to think what he was thinking of—and couldn't and said so.

"Well, let it go at that. You'll probably think of it yourself."

Mom called from the back door then, saying, "Telephone, Bill!"

I dropped my potato hoe as if it were a hot potato and started on the run, not knowing who wanted to talk to me but hoping it would be one of the gang, hoping especially it would be Poetry, the gang's barrel-shaped member.

And sure enough it was. He was coming over to my house right after lunch. "Have I ever got a surprise for you!" he said in his usual squawky voice.

Boy oh boy, did it ever feel good when Poetry talked like that. He had a detective mind and also what is called an "inventive" mind. He was always thinking up something new for us to do, and nearly always it was something especially interesting or exciting. Sometimes it was dangerous, but it was always fun!

A little later, when he hung up, I was tingling all over. My almost best friend, Poetry, was coming to play with me that afternoon, and he had a surprise. It could be—well, almost anything!

Right after the noon meal, he came sauntering over to our place. He stopped and waited for me in the big rope swing under the walnut tree beside the road. I was just about to take my last bite of blackberry pie when I looked out the east screen door and saw him. I also heard him making one of his fancy birdcalls, which was half like a harp and half like a musical whistle. It seemed to say, "Bill Collins! Bill Collins! Skip the dishes!"—which I knew I shouldn't do, and didn't.

Dad also heard Poetry's whistle, and his

voice came out from under his mustache, saying, "You boys have plans for the afternoon?" The way he said it was like a cowboy's lasso settling down over a calf's neck. I felt myself and my plan for the afternoon being stopped in their tracks.

"We *did* have," I said. "Is there something I ought to do around the house and garden first?"

"First and second and third," he answered. "The dishes first, the potato patch second, and the barn third." He stopped, and I thought I saw him wink at Mom.

Not being sure, I used a very cheerful voice, saying, "OK, I'll hurry out and tell Poetry to go on home. We were only going on a hike anyway."

"And maybe go swimming also?" Dad's voice said again.

"I'll go out right now and tell him he shouldn't have come." In a flash I was off the bench I had been sitting on. I was halfway through the screen door before Dad tightened the noose of his lasso with "STOP!" in a thundery voice.

I stopped stock-still, then stumbled down the steps and stopped again in a tangled-up heap as the door I'd gone through slammed shut.

It was quite a while later before Poetry and I got started on our hike—he having helped me with the different kinds of work I had to do first.

"You're a good boy," Mom said to Poetry as he and I were getting a drink at the iron pitcher pump just before leaving.

"Am I?" Poetry asked politely. Then he added, "Will you tell my mother that sometime?"

"She knows it. She told me that herself once." Mom was wearing her very friendly mother face, the kind that was especially nice when we had company at our house.

"Maybe *your* mother could tell my mother to tell *me* that, too," I suggested to Poetry.

Mom laughed a friendly laugh. "Oh, Bill Collins, you *know* you are a good boy."

"You know it, and I know it," I said, "but you might tell my *father* that sometime."

I pumped another cup of cold water and tossed it over the horse trough, where it surprised a dozen yellow butterflies that had gathered around a little pool of water. The butterflies shot up into the air in different directions like sparks from a log fire do when you poke a stick into it, or as if a whirlwind had come along and swooped them all up into the air. Then they settled down again around the water pool.

Well, Poetry and I were finally off *lickety-sizzle* across the yard, past "Theodore Collins" on the tin mailbox, across the dusty gravel road, over the rail fence—I vaulting over and Poetry hoisting his roly-poly body over the top rail—and the two of us racing barefoot in the path that had been made by boys running toward the spring.

On the way, I was hoping that some of the rest of the gang would be there, such as spindle-legged Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member whose nose turns south at the end, or Little Jim, with his mouselike face and curly hair—the only one of the gang who could play the piano and also maybe the only one of us for sure about whom, if his mother told him he was a good boy, it would be the truth any time of day she happened to say it.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Our six sets of Sugar Creek parents expected us to have a very safe and sane winter vacation at the Snow Goose Lodge.

They expected it because our camp director was to be Barry Boyland, Old Man Paddler's nephew. Barry had taken us on two north woods summertime trips, and we'd not only come back alive but were, as they expressed it, "better boys than when we went."

We had gone South once in the winter, all the way down to the Mexican border. We'd gone up North twice in the summer, but never before had we spent a week in the north woods in the winter. Our folks seemed to think it would be good for us to have the experience of ice fishing, skiing, playing boys' games around an open fire in a fireplace, and learning a little more about woodcraft and other things it is worthwhile for a boy to know and do.

It's a good thing our parents didn't know in advance that a one-hundred-pound timber wolf would be hanging around the lodge most of the time we were there.

And my mother's grayish-brown hair would have turned completely gray overnight if she had known that the weather in the Paul Bunyan Playground was going to be so unseason-

ably warm that it would wake up the hibernating bears—and that we would have an adventure with an honest-to-goodness live bear before our wonderful week was over.

Our folks certainly didn't imagine that after nearly a week of unseasonably warm weather, while the bears were still out, not having found their new winter quarters, a wild blizzard would come sweeping in and we would be caught out in it a long way from the lodge, not able to tell directions or to find our way back.

It's a very good thing our parents didn't know.

Of course, none of the gang knew it either. All we knew was that somewhere in the wilds of the North, near a town called Squaw Lake, on the shore of a lake by the same name, there was a lodge called the Snow Goose, and we were going to have a one-week winter vacation there.

The Snow Goose Lodge, as you maybe already know, if you've read the story named *The Green Tent Mystery,* was owned by the Everards, people who spent part of one wonderful summer camping in a green tent in our own Sugar Creek territory.

What you don't know, and maybe ought to before you get to the most exciting part of this story, is that our camp director, Barry Boyland, was studying in a Minneapolis college, and the vacation was for his education as well as ours.

"He's writing an important paper on 'Wildlife in the Frozen North,'" Mom said at the supper table one evening before we went.

"And you boys are to help him while you're there," Dad said across the table from me.

Mom's kind of bright remark in answer was: "You are not to *be* the wildlife, understand, but only to help Barry learn all he can about it."

I knew from what they had said, and the way they said it, that I was expected to behave myself even better than usual.

What else you don't know—and maybe would like to—is that this year the Everards had gone to California for the winter. The Gang and Barry would be alone at Snow Goose, except for the time Ed Wimbish, an old trapper, would spend with us.

The day finally arrived for us to leave. After we'd said our last good-byes to our envious fathers and our half-worried mothers, we were on the big bus and gone. Barry would meet us at Minneapolis. Then we'd spend the night in a hotel to get acquainted with what it is like to stay in a big city hotel. We'd start early the next morning in Barry's station wagon for the Snow Goose.

After we had traveled maybe twenty-five miles on the bus, Big Jim, who was sitting in the seat beside me, drew a letter from an inside pocket and said, "I got this just before we left. It's from the Everards."

I read the letter and felt my spine tingling with the kind of feeling I always get when I'm beginning to be scared. When I'd finished it, I passed it back, saying, "Better not let Little Jim

and Dragonfly know about it. They're too little. They'd be s–scared."

There was no use keeping the secret from any of the other members of the gang, though. We'd all have to know sooner or later. So Big Jim let everybody read the letter, the scary part of which was:

> You won't need to be afraid of any of the wildlife you will see around the lodge. The bears are in hibernation, and the wolves are cowards and afraid of human beings. You'll probably not see even one wolf, unless it is Old Timber, which Mr. Wimbish will tell you about. We've never seen him ourselves. Ed calls him the ghost wolf because he always fades from sight a second after you see him—or so Ed says. But Ed exaggerates, and you can take some of what he says with several grains of salt.

"Sounds fishy to me," I said to Big Jim. I'd read stories about wolves, and in the stories they hadn't been afraid of human beings at all.

Poetry, who had brought his camera along, said, "I've always wanted a picture of a human ghost but could never get one. I'm going to try a ghost *wolf!*"

His tone of voice was light, but I knew from the way he looked at me that he was only talking that way to help keep Little Jim and Dragonfly from worrying.

When we got to Minneapolis, Barry met us and took us to the Hastings Hotel, where we

had two big double rooms with a bath between them and an extra cot in each room.

Dragonfly tried to make us laugh by trying a very old and very worn-out joke on us. He said, "How come we have to have a bathtub when we aren't going to stay till Saturday night?"

"Quiet!" Big Jim ordered. "I'm phoning Sugar Creek to tell them we're all here and all right."

Dragonfly tried another joke, saying, "But some of us are not all *there,*" which wasn't funny, either.

Soon Big Jim had his mother on the phone.

I was standing close by, looking out the window at a small snow-covered park with trees and shrubs scattered through it. My mind's eye was imagining Old Timber standing tall and savage-looking with his long tongue out, panting and looking up at us. Even though my thoughts were at Snow Goose Lodge, it was easy to hear what Big Jim was telling his mother and also to hear what her excited mother voice was saying to him. She could hardly believe we were there so soon.

Then all of a sudden there were what sounded like a dozen other mother voices on the party line, trying to give Big Jim special orders for their sons. Big Jim had a pencil in his hand and was grinning and writing. Then, all of a sudden he was holding out the phone to me, saying, "It's your mother. She wants to talk to you."

"Your compass, Bill," Mom said. "You left it

on the upstairs bureau. Be careful not to get lost in the woods. Better buy a new one if none of the other boys have any. You know you got lost up there once before—and also on Palm Tree Island."

It was good advice, although it worried me to have her worry about me.

"Don't worry," I said into the phone and maybe into the ears of five other mothers. "The sun shines up here too—the very same sun that shines down there—and we can tell directions by it anytime."

"Then be sure your watch is running and the time is right *all* the time," she ordered me. And I knew *she* knew the secret of telling directions on a sunshiny day if you had a watch and knew how to use a certain Scout trick. Mom was right, though. The watch had to be set correctly.

I guess a boy ought to be glad he has a mother to give him good advice, even if sometimes he doesn't need it because he already knows exactly what she is telling him.

While we were all getting our hair combed, our ties straight, our shoes touched up a little, and our coat collars brushed for dinner in the hotel, we tossed what we hoped were bright remarks at one another. Nobody got angry at anybody since it is a waste of good temper to lose it on a friend.

Nothing happened of any importance till after dinner, which at Sugar Creek we would have called supper.

I'd thought Barry seemed a little anxious

about something while we were in the dining room. He hardly noticed the pretty murals, except to tell us they were enlarged photographs in full color of actual cherry trees, with grass and dandelions underneath and a gravel road running past. They covered one whole wall of the dining room.

He kept looking around, and whenever what is called a "page" went through, calling out names of people wanted on the phone, he seemed to hope his own name would be called.

We hadn't any sooner gotten back to our rooms and settled down a little than the phone rang. I was closest to it and, in a mischievous mood, pretended a dignified voice and answered, saying, "Room 423, the Hastings Hotel. William Collins speaking."

I certainly felt foolish a second later when a woman's voice said, "May I speak to Barry, please—Mr. Boyland, I mean?"

I felt and heard myself gulp, then I answered, "Certainly. Just a moment."

I didn't have to call Barry, though. He had been sitting under a floor lamp on the other side of the room, reading a book called *Hunting in the Great Northwest* and taking notes with his green pen, maybe jotting down things he could quote in the important paper he was going to write for his college class.

Well, the very second the phone rang, he was out of his chair like a rabbit scared out of its hole. Almost before I could hand him the phone, he had it and was saying, "Hello!" in a

voice that sounded as if he was all alone with somebody he liked extrawell and was telling her something nobody else was supposed to hear.

Maybe it wasn't polite for me to listen, but how could I help it? It wouldn't have been polite for me to stop my ears, would it?

I couldn't tell what the woman's musical voice on the other end of the line was saying, but Barry's deep-voiced answers were like a boy's hand stroking a baby rabbit in the palm of his other hand. He was talking to her about his trip into the frozen North and asking her not to worry, that he'd be all right.

"Yes," Barry was saying to the person I imagined was his age and was pretty and could smile like our Sugar Creek teacher, Miss Lilly. "I'll be careful. I have six bodyguards, you know."

And then, all of a sudden, Barry was saying, "Yes. I think I can run over for a few minutes."

He put down the phone, turned back into the room, and said, with excitement in his eyes but with a very calm voice, "I'll have to be gone for an hour or so, boys. You can wait here, or you may go down to the basement game room for Ping-Pong—but mind you, no disturbance! Remember who you are."

"Your mother worried about you, too?" Little Jim asked, and I knew he was thinking that whoever called Barry was Barry's own mother, giving him last-minute instructions to take care of himself.

Barry looked at Little Jim with a faraway

expression in his eyes. Then he grinned and answered, "Every good mother worries a little."

Maybe I shouldn't have said what I did just then, but I might not have been able to help it even if I'd tried. This is what came out of my mind as I answered Little Jim, "His mother is maybe only about twenty years old."

Barry shot me a quick look with a grin in it and right away put in a phone call for a taxi. He got his heavy brown storm coat out of the closet, put it on, brushed a few flecks of dust off its dark-brown mouton collar, took another look in the mirror at his hair, ran his hand over his chin to see if he needed a shave, decided he didn't—or if he did, he wouldn't have time to give himself one—and a minute later was out the door and gone.

His idea that we might want to go to the game room in the basement was a good one. So pretty soon, Big Jim, who had charge of us, gave the order, and pretty soon after that we were in the basement playing noisy sets of the same kind of table tennis we sometimes played in Poetry's basement back home.

I watched for my chance to talk to Poetry alone for a few minutes, because I had something special on my mind. When he and I finished a game and handed our paddles to Dragonfly and Little Jim, we took the elevator to the hotel lobby.

We knew it wasn't supposed to be good for a boy to eat hard-to-digest candy before going to bed, so we bought the kind of candy bar we

liked best and hoped it wouldn't be hard to digest.

Poetry said, as he unwrapped his, "My jaw muscles haven't had any exercise since we were eating dinner beside the cherry trees."

"Supper," I said.

"Dinner," he countered and added, "the people back at Sugar Creek are behind the times!"

We were in two big leather-upholstered chairs behind a potted palm at the time. Ignoring what Poetry thought was a bright remark, I told him about the cheerful woman's voice I'd heard on the phone, asking for Barry. "She wasn't any more his mother than the man in the moon is a man," I said.

Poetry let out a low whistle, squinted his eyes, then said, "Poor Barry," and shook his head sadly.

"How come you say *that?*" I asked.

He sighed, took another bite of his bar, shook his head again sadly, and answered, "Life is more fun being a boy—without growing up and having a girl to worry about."

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes, while I thought about the happiness I'd seen in Barry's eyes when he was flying around the room getting his tie straight, his coat on, the dust off its lapels, and running his hand over his chin the way Dad does to see if he needs a shave.

There was a radio on in the hotel lobby, and somebody's voice was racing along very

fast, giving a news program. My mind was so busy thinking about Barry and wondering where he was and when he would be back that I hardly noticed the news announcement about the weather. It was something about "unseasonably warm weather in northern Minnesota continuing for another week." I could see, out the hotel's large picture window, the stars twinkling in an absolutely clear sky.

Poetry and I, behind our potted palm—pretending we were in a climate where palm trees grow naturally, such as at the very bottom of the United States where we had spent a whole week's winter vacation with Mom and Dad and Dragonfly's parents—sat munching away, talking dreamily about imaginary things:

"See those seagulls up there, tossing around in the hot summer air?" he asked.

I answered lazily, "Don't make me open my eyes. I'm too sleepy here on this sandy beach under this palm tree."

"All right, then. See those snow geese flying? See that beautiful white snow goose, with black wing tips and a pink beak, headed north to the lodge?"

I yawned lazily, my nine-o'clock-at-night imagination making me feel sleepy. "I don't know what Barry went after in such a hurry, but I wish he'd come back. It's my bedtime."

And that's when Barry came breezing into the lobby, and with him was a sparkling-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl in a dark green coat with wide fur sleeves and a fur collar. She was only

about five-and-a-half feet tall and was laughing, as also was Barry. They didn't seem to know there was anybody in the world except each other. He was carrying a four-foot-long gun case with a luggage-type handle.

I looked at Poetry in his chair, and the two of us stayed as low as we could under the fronds of the potted palm.

Barry set down the gun case, and the two of them went outside again into the cold night.

In a flash, Poetry and I were out of our tropical climate to see what was going on outside, if anything.

What we saw wasn't any of our business, but since it happened right in front of our astonished eyes, we almost had to see it.

"What do you know about that?" Poetry exclaimed in a disappointed voice. "Poor Barry!" —the same thing he had said when we were still up in our room.

For about a minute Barry and the girl stood at the door of a taxi, whose driver was waiting for her to get in. Then, all of a sudden, they gave each other a half-long kiss, as I'd accidentally seen Mom and Dad give each other quite a few times back home. Barry helped her into the cab then, closed the door, and stood watching while the driver steered out into the night traffic and was gone.

By the time Barry was back inside, Poetry and I were walking around the lobby, looking with let's-pretend indifference at the pictures

on the walls and at the many different kinds of candy bars at the hotel magazine stand.

Barry's voice behind us was certainly cheerful as he said, "You boys want a candy bar? Pick out your favorite. The treat's on me."

"No, thank you," Poetry said politely. "Candy at bedtime isn't good for a boy my size."

Just then, from the stairway leading to the basement game room came the rest of the gang, and there wasn't a one of *them* who thought a candy bar would be hard to digest before going to bed.

A little later we were all up the elevator and into our rooms, where Barry asked us, "Want to see what I went after?" He opened the gun case and took out one of the prettiest rifles I ever saw.

All our eyes lit up, Big Jim's and Circus's especially. "We may have to bring down a wolf, or maybe we can get a deer or two," Barry explained.

"Or a bear," Little Jim said with a grin, maybe remembering that he himself had once killed a fierce old mother bear back at Sugar Creek.

"This is what the phone call was about," Barry explained, looking at me out of the corner of his eye, which made me look around out of the corner of my eye at the other members of the gang. He was probably remembering I had said quite a while ago, after I'd heard the lady's musical voice on the phone—"His mother is maybe only twenty years old."

For a few seconds you could have heard a pine needle fall, everything was so extraquiet.

"You see," Barry added, "one of my classmates at college lives at Squaw Lake. She's a grandniece of Mr. and Mrs. Wimbish. When her own mother and father died, they sort of adopted her. This gun was her Christmas present to me. She had to order it from the East, so it was a little late getting here. Isn't it a beauty?"

I thought, as Barry talked, that it was indeed the prettiest repeater rifle I ever saw, with its crowned muzzle and raised-ramp front sight and gleaming walnut stock. Just looking at it made me tingle with anticipation at what an exciting and maybe even dangerous time we were going to have on our vacation.

My mind flew on ahead to the Snow Goose, so that I missed part of what Barry was telling us. I didn't come to until I heard him saying, ". . . so that's the way it is. Next June, just as soon as school is out up here, there'll be a wedding at the Snow Goose. You boys'll get to know her yourselves when she comes up the last of the week to bring the station wagon."

"The station wagon?" I exclaimed. "I thought *we* were going to ride up in it ourselves. I thought—"

"We *were* to have," Barry explained and started to untie his tie, getting ready to get ready for bed. "But I had to have the engine overhauled, and the mechanic ran into some serious trouble.

"Jeanne is letting us drive *her* car. Two of you," he added, as he slipped out of his shirt and I saw his powerful muscles like a nest of snakes under his tan skin, "two of you will have to ride the bus. There wouldn't be room in the car for all of us, along with all this luggage." He gestured around the room at our six different kinds of suitcases.

There was some friendly excitement for a while, as different ones of us begged Barry to let us ride the bus to Squaw Lake.

"It'll have to be two of the biggest ones of you," Barry decided.

"Biggest *tall* or biggest *around?*" Poetry asked hopefully.

That sort of settled it. Barry decided on Poetry for sure, and a little later, maybe because Poetry and I were such good friends, he picked me for the other one of the two.

Early in the morning we were off—Poetry and I on the bus, and the rest of the gang with Barry as soon as they could get the car serviced. As we pulled out of the gas station and headed out through the snowplowed streets toward the open country and the wild, frozen North, I was wondering how much sooner we would get to Squaw Lake than they would.

Poetry was wondering the same thing and said so. But he wasn't worried the least bit about what we would do to pass the time while we waited for them. Something else was on his mind. "Poor Barry! He's one of the finest woodsmen I know. He likes the out-of-doors,

and nature studies, and camping out. What'll he do, marrying a citified girl like that—you know—like that extrapretty, helpless-looking girl we saw back there in the hotel?"

I sighed and looked out the window at the cars and trucks we were threading our way through, then back at Poetry's face. "Yeah, poor Barry! Poor Sugar Creek Gang too! We'll lose our camp director!"

Neither of us said anything for a while. For a minute I felt pretty sad, but Poetry cheered me up by saying, "But both our fathers got married once, and it didn't hurt them—not much, anyway."

Hearing that, my thoughts took a flying leap out across the sky to Sugar Creek, and I thought about what a fine person Theodore Collins was. Also I seemed to see him and Mom sitting at the breakfast table that very minute without me. They were pretty nice people. Both of them, I thought.

Answering Poetry, I said, "Yeah, but my father married a good farm girl, who knew how to work and could bake pies and cakes and do all the other things a farmer's wife has to do."

"My mother too," Poetry said proudly. Then he shook his head once more and added, "But I'm afraid Barry's got a girl who'll have to be waited on, and who won't want to camp out, and will be too dainty to rough it like he likes to do."

But we couldn't worry our heads about it. We had a long ride and a wonderful winter

vacation ahead of us: ice fishing, running the trapline with Barry and Ed Wimbish, the old-timer trapper who, with his wife, Martha, once owned the Snow Goose but had sold it to the Everards.

Wildlife in the frozen North, that was what Barry was going up to study. How much wildlife would *we* see on our vacation? How *wild* would it be? And how *savage? Was* there an honest-to-goodness one-hundred-pound timber wolf hanging around the place, or was old Ed just an exaggerator as the Everards' letter had said?

We'd soon find out.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

We were in the middle of the most exciting part of a pretend cowboys' necktie party when we heard the shot.

It was one of the loudest shotgun blasts I had ever heard, and its echoes were like four or five fast thunders bounding through the Sugar Creek hills.

What on earth! I thought.

We all stood still and stared at each other with startled faces. We had been running in one direction and looking back in the opposite direction toward the old scarecrow that we had used for our bad man in our game of cowboys' necktie party.

We had strung up the scarecrow by his neck, hanging him from the branch of a river birch about twenty yards from the sandy beach of our swimming hole.

The ridiculous-looking old dummy we had named Snatzerpazooka was just where we wanted him now, at the edge of Dragonfly's father's cornfield. Hanging there in plain sight, swaying in the breeze, he would scare away the crows that had been digging up the new corn sprouts. Dragonfly, as you maybe know, was the nickname we had given to the pop-eyed member of the gang, whose actual name was Roy Gilbert.

The very minute Snatzerpazooka was up and swinging, we started on a helter-skelter run along the creek toward the spring. Following what we knew to be the pattern of cowboys in the Old West after a lynching, which they called a "necktie party," we were all galloping away on our imaginary horses, looking back and shooting with our voices, using our plastic and metal and wooden toy guns, yelling, *"Bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang-bang-bang!"*

I was seeing Snatzerpazooka over my shoulder, his ragged blue-and-white-striped overalls, his tied-on black hat, his crossbar. At the same time, I was galloping on my imaginary white stallion behind barrel-shaped Poetry, who was riding his own imaginary ordinary-looking roan horse.

The early summer wind was blowing in my hot face, my sleeves were flapping, and it felt good to be alive in a wonderful boys' world.

The rest of the gang were on their own different colored imaginary horses, yelling, *"Bang! Bang! Bang!"* as I was. All of us were emptying our imaginary six-shooters at the grotesque scarecrow dangling by his neck in the afternoon sun.

Right in the middle of our excitement was when we heard the *actual* shot from somebody's actual gun! It was an explosive blast that sent a shower of shivers all over me and scared me half to death.

As I've already told you, we all stopped and stared at each other, but not for long. Big Jim,

our leader, barked, "Quick! Down! Drop flat—all of you!"

By *all* of us, he meant not only mischievous-minded, squawky-voiced Poetry; spindle-legged, pop-eyed Dragonfly; and red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced me, Bill Collins, son of Theodore Collins; but also Circus, our acrobat, and Little Jim, the littlest one of us and the best Christian.

In case you might be wondering why Little Tom Till wasn't with us on our necktie party, maybe I'd better tell you that all that spring and early summer, he had been chumming around with a new boy who had moved into the neighborhood. That new boy was our enemy—and it wasn't our fault, either. It hadn't felt good to lose Tom out of the gang—even though he wasn't exactly a member but only played with us and got to go with us on different camping trips.

Well, when Big Jim barked that fierce order for us to "drop flat," we obeyed like six boy-shaped lumps of lead—all of us except Poetry, who could only drop *round*.

Who, I wondered, had fired an actual gun? A *shotgun!*

We lay as quiet as six scared mice, straining our eyes to see through the sedge and ragweed and wild rosebushes and other growth, listening for all we were worth, and wondering, and worrying a little.

It certainly was a tense time. I could hear my heart beating, also the rippling riffle in the

creek several feet behind me. Farther up the creek in the direction of our just-hung Snatzerpazooka, a saw-voiced crow was signaling with a rasping *"Caw! Caw!"* to his crow friends to stay away from the cornfield because there was a man around with a shotgun.

The smell of sweet clover from across the creek mingled with the odor of gun smoke.

Just then Dragonfly said wheezily, "*Look!* Snatzerpazooka's gone! He's down! His rope's broke!"

"He can't be!" I answered. "That was a leftover piece of Mom's clothesline, and that old scarecrow wasn't heavy enough to break it!"

A second later, though, my straining eyes told me Dragonfly was right. Even as far away as we were, I could see about five feet of rope dangling from the birch branch, and there wasn't any scarecrow hanging by his neck on the end of it.

"Maybe the knot came untied," Circus suggested.

Big Jim, beside and a little behind me, was peering over the top of a pile of drift left early that spring when Sugar Creek had overflowed its banks. He answered Circus, saying, "It couldn't have. I used a bowline knot, and that kind can't slip or jam!"

"It might have slipped off over his head," Circus growled back, maybe not wanting his idea squelched.

"If it had," Big Jim said deep in his throat, "the noose would still be there on the end of

the rope"—which made good sense, because there was only the five feet of rope dangling in the breeze and no noose at the end.

Who, I worried, *had shot the shot and why? And where was our scarecrow?*

How long we all lay there whispering and wondering and trying to imagine who had shot the shot and why and what at, I don't know, but it seemed too long before Big Jim would let us get up and follow him back to the river birch to look around.

While you are imagining us crouching and half crawling our way along the edge of the cornfield that bordered the creek, like scouts scouting an enemy camp, wondering with us who had shot the shot and why and what or who at, I'd better also explain what a cowboys' necktie party is and why we had given our scarecrow such a name.

It was Dragonfly himself who had named him. Why he named him that was because of the strangest story you ever heard, the *oddest* thing that ever happened around Sugar Creek or maybe anyplace in the whole world.

You see, when Dragonfly was just a little guy, only about three-and-a-half years old—before there *was* any Sugar Creek Gang—he had no sisters or brothers and was lonesome most of the time. So he created a playmate out of his own imagination.

I never will forget the first time I heard the name *Snatzerpazooka* and how excited little Dragonfly was, how he yelled and cried, in fact

actually *screamed,* when he thought his imaginary playmate wasn't going to get to go along with him and his folks when they went to town. It happened like this:

Dragonfly's parents with their little spindle-legged pop-eyed son, had stopped their car in front of our house beside the mailbox that has "Theodore Collins," my father's name, on it. While Mom and Dad stood in the shade of the walnut tree and visited with them through the car window, Dragonfly and I monkeyed around the iron pitcher pump, which is not far from our back door.

Feeling mischievous at the time, I thrust my hand into the stream of water Dragonfly was pumping into the iron kettle there, and, just as quick, flicked some of the water into his face.

A second later, he started to gasp and to wrinkle up his nose and the rest of his face. He looked toward the sun and let out a long-tailed sneeze, then said, "Snatzerpazooka!"

"Stop that! Don't sneeze like that!" he cried.

"I didn't sneeze," I answered him. "You did!"

"I did not!" he argued back. "*He* did!"

"He *who* did?" I asked.

That's when he used the word in his normal voice, saying, "Snatzerpazooka did!"

I looked at his dragonflylike eyes, which had a strange expression in them. "Who in the world is Snatzerpazooka?" I exclaimed. I was pumping a tin of water at the time. I tossed the water over the iron kettle into the puddle on the ground there, scaring a flock of yellow and

white butterflies out of their butterfly wits and scattering them in about seventeen different directions.

Dragonfly started to answer, got a mussed-up expression on his face, and let out another noisy, explosive sneeze with Snatzerpazooka mixed up in it.

His father called then from the car, saying, "Hurry up, Roy! We have to get there before two o'clock!"

"Just a minute!" Dragonfly yelled toward his father. Then he did the weirdest thing. He looked around in a circle and swung into a fast run out across the grassy yard, dodging this way and that like a boy trying to catch a young rooster his folks are going to have for dinner.

"Stop, you little rascal!" Dragonfly kept yelling. "Stop, or I'll leave you here!"

Then Dragonfly's father's deep voice thundered over Mom and Dad's heads toward his zigzagging son, now near the plum tree. "Roy! Stop running around like a chicken with its head off, or we'll drive on without you!"

Dragonfly stopped, and a minute later he was on his way to the gate. He was a little slow getting through it—*over* it, rather, because he was trying to do what Dad had ordered me never to do. He was climbing up the gate's cross wires to climb *over* the gate, when all he would have had to do would have been to lift the latch and walk through.

The minute Dragonfly was on the ground, he reached back and up with both arms, as if

he was reaching for something or somebody, and I heard him say scoldingly, "Come on! Jump! I'll catch you!"

"Roy Gilbert!" Dragonfly's father growled again gruffly. "Hurry up!"

"I can't," Dragonfly whined back. "I can't get him to get off the gate! He's stubborn and won't do what I tell him!" Dragonfly kept on not hurrying and not getting into the car's open backdoor, which I could see his impatient father was wanting him to hurry up and do.

A second later Mr. Gilbert's temper came to life, and he was out of the front seat in a hurry. He scooped up his son in his strong arms, carried him struggling to the car, half-tossed him into the backseat, slammed the door after him, and quickly got into the front seat again beside Dragonfly's worried-faced mother.

The car engine ground itself into noisy life. In a minute the Gilbert family would go speeding down the road, stirring up a cloud of white dust that would ride on the afternoon breeze across the field toward Strawberry Hill.

That's when Dragonfly let out a yell with tears in it, crying, "Wait! Don't go yet! He's still back there on the gate!"

Next, that little rascal shoved open the car door, swung himself out, scooted to the fence, helped his imaginary playmate off onto the ground, shoved him into the backseat, and climbed in after him.

What, I thought, *on earth!*

As soon as the Gilberts' car was gone and

the lazy cloud of dust was already on its way across the field, I heard Mom say to Dad, "At least our boy isn't as bad as *that!* Whatever is wrong with Roy, anyway?"

"Nothing's wrong with him," Dad answered. "He's just a normal boy who needs a little brother or sister to play with. Not having any, he has created one out of his own lively imagination."

Hearing Mom and Dad say that to each other while they were still on the other side of the gate, I broke in with a mischievous grin in my voice, saying, "*I* don't have any brothers or sisters, either."

That was before my little sister, Charlotte Ann, was born, which you know all about if you've read the very first Sugar Creek Gang story there ever was—the one that is called *The Swamp Robber.*

I had my right foot on one of the cross wires of the gate as if I was going to climb up and over.

Dad gave me a half-savage stare through the woven wire and, with a set jaw, exclaimed an order to me, which was, "Don't you *dare!* And we have enough trouble keeping *you* out of mischief! What would we do with *another* one of you?"

For some reason my foot slipped off the cross wire, and I was quickly off to the big rope swing under the walnut tree to pump myself into a high back-and-forth swing. I was wishing at the same time that I *did* have a little brother to play with. I was also wondering what if I

made for myself an imaginary playmate? What would he look like, and what would I name him? What a crazy name—Snatzerpazooka!

And what a lot of crazy experiences we had that summer with Dragonfly himself.

Dragonfly's parents worried about their boy for a while—what with his all the time talking to his ridiculous playmate, acting all the time as if there were two of him, having fights and arguments with a person nobody except Dragonfly could see or hear. That boy certainly had a "vivid imagination," Mom said one day.

In fact, his parents got to worrying about him so much that they took him to a doctor in the city, a special kind of doctor who understood children's minds. They found out it was almost the same as what Dad had already told Mom.

"There's nothing wrong with him that having a pet or a real-life playmate won't cure. Snatzerpazooka will just fade out of the picture after your boy starts to school or when he begins normal boy-life activities," the doctor told them.

But Snatzerpazooka didn't fade out. Dragonfly was so used to him and had so much fun playing with his imaginary playmate that even after he began going to school, and after the Sugar Creek Gang was started, he still hung onto him.

Many a time when we were down along the creek somewhere or up at the abandoned cemetery having a gang meeting and some-

thing important was brought to a vote, Dragonfly would make us let Snatzerpazooka vote, too.

Poetry worked harder than the rest of us trying to help Dragonfly forget his imaginary playmate. He refused to call him Snatzerpazooka but gave him the name Shadow instead. The two had an honest-to-goodness fight about it one day down at the spring. We had all finished getting down on our knees and drinking out of the reservoir the way cows do—that is, all of us had our drink except Dragonfly.

He stood back near the board fence, waiting till we were through. Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, and still on his hands and knees at the reservoir, looked back toward Dragonfly and said, "Here, Shadow, come get your drink!" He then went through the motions of helping Dragonfly's imaginary playmate onto *his* hands and knees, bent his head forward and down to the surface of the water, saying, "You're a pretty dumb little bunny. Don't you know how to drink like a cow? You *look* like one! Get your head *down!*"

Then Poetry gave Shadow's imaginary head a shove clear down under the water, his own right hand going under with it.

In seconds, Dragonfly was like a young tiger. He leaped forward and down onto Poetry's back and started whamming him with both fists, demanding, "You stop dunking him!"

Poetry stopped all right. He was bowled over by Dragonfly's flying attack and a split second later was on his stomach in the almost icy

water. He came up sputtering and spitting water. Reaching behind him, he caught Snatzerpazooka's *live* playmate by both his slender arms and ducked *his* head under as far as he had Snatzerpazooka's imaginary head.

Big Jim came to the rescue of both of them by stopping the fight and saying, "Come on, Snatzerpazooka! You come on up into the sunlight with me and get dried out. You'll catch your death of cold." With that he went through the motions of picking up the imaginary little boy and carrying him up the incline. Dragonfly himself hurried along after them.

By the time I got there, our spindle-legged pal was as far as the stump we later named the Black Widow Stump and on his way toward home. He had his right hand out behind him as though he was leading somebody, and I heard him say, "Come on, pal! Those roughnecks don't know how to treat a gentleman!"

No sooner had Dragonfly and his just-dunked imaginary playmate disappeared over the rim of the hill than Poetry started quoting one of the many poems he had memorized. It was one most of us knew by heart ourselves. It was by Robert Louis Stevenson, and in Poetry's squawky, ducklike voice it sounded almost funny:

"I have a little shadow that goes in and
out with me,
And what can be the use of him is
more than I can see.

He is so very, very like me from the
heels up to the head,
And I see him jump before me, when I
jump into my bed."

Poetry was yelling the poem as loud as he could, so that Dragonfly could hear it. He started on the second verse but got interrupted by Dragonfly sneezing in a long-tailed, extraloud voice and exclaiming, "Snatzerpazooka!"

Poetry yelled back a mimicking sneeze and cried, "Snatzerpa*shadow!*"

Because we all liked Dragonfly a lot, we decided at a special meeting to pretend along with him, letting him take Snatzerpazooka along with us whenever he wanted to, waiting for the imaginary little rascal when we had to, helping him over the fences, even carrying him when Dragonfly said he was too tired to walk.

Dragonfly didn't cause us much trouble that first summer. The only thing was, Snatzerpazooka began to change a little. From being a helpless, innocent little fellow that had to be carried or helped over fences, he began to get ornery. Sometimes we'd hear Dragonfly quarreling with him and calling him names.

One summer day when I was down along the bayou not far from the Black Widow Stump, I felt a sneeze coming on. I twisted my face into a Dragonflylike tailspin and burst out with an explosive "Snatzerpazooka!" loud enough to be heard all the way to the clump of evergreens at the edge of the bayou.

Poetry was with me at the time, and being in a mischievous mood he mimicked me with a sneeze just like mine, which in his squawky voice sounded like a guinea hen with a bad cold. His sneeze, in the middle of which he cried, "Snatzerpashadow!" instead of "Snatzerpazooka!" hadn't any sooner exploded out across the bayou than there was a saucy yell from behind the evergreens crying, "You stop that! There isn't any Snatzerpazooka!"

Then, from behind those evergreens shot a spindle-legged, pop-eyed boy. A brown-and-tan puppy with a crank-handle tail leaped along beside him.

That was when we found out there wasn't any Snatzerpazooka anymore—or wasn't supposed to be, anyway.

Dragonfly was both mad and glad: mad at us for sneezing the way we had, and happy all over because his parents had gotten him a dog playmate. He told us how much the dog cost and what a good trailer he was.

"Looks like a bloodhound," Poetry said. "Here, Red, come here and let me cheer you up a little!"

He was one of the saddest-faced dogs I'd ever seen. His hair was smooth but seemed very loose, as if he had three times as much as he needed, or as if his mother had made him a hair coat that was a lot too big for him. His skin was extrawrinkled on the forehead, and his ears were long and floppy.

"He *is* a bloodhound," Dragonfly boasted.

"He's half bloodhound and half beagle. That's how come it was so easy to find you guys. I put him on your trail, and he led me straight to you. See here?"

Dragonfly held out to me my old straw hat, which that very morning I'd been wearing around the house and barn and had left on the ground under the plum tree.

"How come he didn't bawl on the trail?" Poetry asked.

We'd all hunted at night with Circus's dad's hounds, and when they were trailing, there was plenty of dog noise.

Dragonfly's proud answer was "He's going to be a *still* trailer."

That was hard to believe, yet there was my old straw hat, and here was Dragonfly with his hound pup, which right that minute was sniffing at me and wagging his crank-handle tail as much as to say, "Here's your criminal! He smells just like his hat! Now what do you want me to do?"

You never saw such a happy little guy as Dragonfly over his droopy-faced hound. The doctor had been right. Dragonfly needed a real-life playmate—a human being or a pet, he had said.

"How do you like that?" Poetry said to me one day a little later. "Having us for playmates wasn't enough. He had to have a floppy-eared, droopy-faced, crank-tailed, loose-skinned half bloodhound!"

Dad explained it this way: "He could be with you boys only part of the time. He needed a playmate *all* the time for a while—at home as well as at school and at play. He'll be all right from now on. You just wait and see."

We *did* wait and see. But Dad was wrong, as wrong as he had ever been in his life. Just *how* wrong, I'll tell you in the next chapter.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The first time anybody around Sugar Creek knew for sure there was a bloodthirsty, savage-tempered wildcat in the territory was when one of them sneaked into Harm Groenwald's pasture and killed three of his prize lambs.

I never will forget the hair-raising chills that ran up and down my spine the morning I heard about it.

We had just finished breakfast at our house when we got the news. It had been one of the most peaceful breakfasts we had had in a long time. Charlotte Ann, my mischievous-minded, usually-hard-to-manage baby sister had been being especially well behaved, not fussing or whining but behaving like most babies don't in the morning.

My grayish-brown-haired mother was sipping her coffee quietly and had a very contented look on her face as we all waited for my bushy-eyebrowed father to finish reading the Bible story he had just started.

As I listened, I didn't have any idea that part of what he was reading was going to get mixed up in the excitement of a wildcat hunt before the summer would pass.

The short Bible story was about a grown-up boy named Jacob, who had had a quarrel with

his brother, Esau. To save his life he left home to go to another country where his mother used to live.

The first night of the long journey was spent in very rocky territory with steep cliffs and outcrops and different-shaped boulders piled on each other. It made me think of the rocky hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. In fact, the hills in that part of Sugar Creek territory were not far from the haunted house we all knew about, and they were the best place in the world for wildcats to live and hunt and raise their families. Of course, I didn't think of that while Mom was sipping her coffee and Charlotte Ann was playing with her cute, pink, bare toes and Dad was reading along in his deep, gruff voice.

Anyway, while Jacob slept outdoors that night—using a stone for a pillow—he had a dream about a stairway leading all the way up to heaven. In the dream he saw angels going up and down on it.

In a minute Dad would finish reading, and then we'd have what Mom calls a Quaker prayer meeting. That means we'd all be quiet a minute and each one would think his own prayer to God just before Dad or Mom or maybe I would pray with out-loud words, and our day would be started right.

Then is when, all of a sudden, the phone started ringing in our front room.

I listened to see whether it was going to be our ring or somebody else's. I knew all the

gang's numbers by heart: two longs and a short for Little Jim; two shorts and a long for Poetry; three shorts for Circus; two shorts for Big Jim; four shorts for Dragonfly; and ours was one long and one short.

Different other neighbors had different other numbers.

On our phone system, all anybody on our seven-phone line had to do if he wanted to talk to any other family on the line was to go to the phone, lift the receiver, and ring whatever number he wanted.

Of course, everybody on the party line could hear the phone ring in their own house and would know who was being called but not who was calling—unless they lifted their own receiver and did what is called "eavesdropping." Nobody was supposed to do that, but different people sometimes did and made different people mad at each other.

There was also a special ring, which was hardly ever used. It was called an "emergency ring," and nobody was supposed to ring it unless there was an actual emergency, such as an accident or a death in the family or somebody's cow had run away and couldn't be found. That emergency ring was two extra long longs and two very short shorts.

Well, our heads were all bowed at our breakfast table, and in my imagination I was up in the hills not far from the haunted house, lying on a stone pillow and watching angels moving up and down a golden stairway, sort of

like people riding up and down on an escalator in a department store. And that was when I heard the jangling of the telephone. My mind was jarred all the way back to our kitchen table, and I was hearing the extralong ring, followed by another just-as-long long and then two short, sharp shorts.

"Emergency!" Mom, sitting beside Charlotte Ann's high chair, exclaimed, jumping like a scared rabbit that had been shot at and missed. A startled look came over her face, and she was out of her chair in a flurry, accidentally knocking over her chair to get across the kitchen floor as fast as she could, into the living room and to the phone to answer it.

All that excitement brought Charlotte Ann to baby-style life. Her arms flew out and up in several directions. She knocked over her blue mug of white milk, which spilled over the edge of her tray and splashed onto the floor. Mixy, our black-and-white house cat came from her box of straw by the kitchen stove and started lapping up as much of the spilled milk as she could before anybody in the family could mop it up and it'd be wasted.

In the living room Mom's voice gasped, "What! A wildcat! Who said so? How do you know?"

I was out of my chair even faster than Mom had gotten out of hers. I stood beside her at the phone, straining my ears to hear whoever's voice was on the other end of the line, but I couldn't. That is, I couldn't hear any *one* voice.

Instead, because Mom had her receiver about an inch from her ear, I heard a jumble of what sounded like a dozen women's voices. Everybody was talking to everybody, and almost nobody was listening to anybody.

I tell you there was a lot of excitement around our house after Mom hung up and explained what the emergency was. It was Harm Groenwald's fast-talking wife who had rung the emergency number. They'd had three of their prize lambs killed last night. Their carcasses had been torn in the same way that two of their other lambs had been a year ago.

"This time I'm going to find out what killed them!" Harm had told his wife. "I'm going to call Chuck Hammer."

Mrs. Groenwald said the Sugar Creek veterinarian had hurried out from town to have a look at the dead lambs. He used to live out West and had seen kills like that before. He turned the bodies over a few times and said grimly, "We've got either a mountain lion or a monster wildcat on our hands. They both kill the same way. See here?"

He showed Harm what he meant. "They always crush the neck bones in front of the shoulders, then tear into the carcass *behind* the shoulders and eat the heart and liver first."

"But whoever heard of a mountain lion or a wildcat around here?" Harm objected. "They don't live in this part of the country!"

"*One* does," Chuck said, "and he's a big one! Huge!"

They found its tracks in a muddy place, and Chuck said, "Wildcat! I'd say thirty-five pounds, anyway. Maybe forty-five!"

Harm Groenwald's fast-talking, high-pitched-voiced wife told all that to all the people who had answered the emergency ring—told it in less than a minute and a half. It took Mom almost three minutes to tell it to Dad and me.

Dad quick got on the phone then and asked the vet, who was still at Groenwald's house, to stop at our farm on his way back to town. Addie, our red mother hog, had given us a litter of six pigs last night, and Dad thought Chuck ought to look her over and maybe suggest a better diet for her so that her babies would grow stronger fast.

I helped Mom clean up Charlotte Ann's spilled milk and finished just in time to go out to the hog lot where Dad and the veterinarian were talking about the monster of a wildcat and also where Chuck was giving Addie a physical checkup.

"She's all right," he told Dad. "She's given you six of the healthiest pigs I've ever seen. Not a runt in the litter."

Poetry, my best friend, had heard the emergency ring and was on the way to our house to talk it over with me when he'd hitched a ride with Chuck. So he was there, too. That was one reason I didn't quite finish helping Mom clean up the kitchen. I needed to get out where all the excitement was.

Standing by Addie's gate, Poetry started a singsongy little ditty he'd learned somewhere:

"Six little pigs in the straw with their
mother,
Bright eyes, curly tails, tumbling on
each other;
Bring them apples from the orchard
trees,
And hear those piggies say, 'Please,
please, please.'"

I told Poetry it was a cute rhyme, and that started him off in a singsong again.

In fact, right that minute there was a glad singsong feeling in my mind. There had been ever since Harm Groenwald's wife had told Mom and Mom had told Dad and me that it was a wildcat that had killed Harm's two lambs last year as well as this year's three. It had been a wildcat and not a *dog* that had done it!

You know why I was glad if you've read the story *The Bull Fighter.* I never will forget those 10,000 minutes—which is how many minutes it took for a week to pass. Wally, my city cousin, had spent the whole 10,000 minutes at our farm. And Alexander the Coppersmith, his ill-mannered, city-bred dog, had been with him, the most uncontrollable dog there ever was.

Anyway, the night Harm Groenwald's two lambs were killed was the same night Wally's nervous mongrel had unleashed himself. It was my fault that his collar was too loose. *My fault,* I

had thought again and again, *that two innocent lambs had been killed!*

I hadn't told anybody. One reason was that, if they ever proved it was Wally's dog that had done it, then Alexander would have to be shot, and I'd be to blame for *his* death, too. It'd be a shame for a city dog that didn't know any better to have to lose his life.

So I'd put off telling anybody, but I shouldn't have. I should have told what Alexander did before Wally took his dog home to Memory City with him.

But now I'd never have to! Feeling glad in my heart toward God for making everything work out the way it had, and because I was in the habit of talking out loud to Him anytime I felt like it, I all of a sudden said, "Thanks! Thanks a lot!"

Poetry, not knowing what I'd been thinking, answered with his squawky, ducklike voice, "I'm glad you like it. I'll sing it again." And he was off in another half-bass singsong about the six little pigs in the straw with their mother.

We were all interrupted then by the sound of dogs' voices coming from the direction of Harm Groenwald's pasture. I'd heard those same long-voiced hounds before. My mind's eye told me it was Jay and Bawler, Circus Browne's dad's big coonhounds. I was sure they were on the trail of the wildcat. Already Harm Groenwald had called on the best hunter with the best hounds in the whole territory to help him catch the wild beast that had killed his sheep.

Many a time at night I'd heard those dog voices hot on a coon trail along the bayou or the swamp or in the rocky hill country above Old Man Paddler's Lincoln-style cabin.

Jay is a big, long-bodied, hundred-pound bluetick with a deep, hollow bawl. Bawler is a lanky black-and-tan only about half as big as Jay. She has a high-pitched wail that sends chills up and down your spine when she's excited and going strong on a trail.

"Let's go join the hunt!" Poetry exclaimed.

And I answered, "Sure! Let's go."

Dad stopped us, though, by saying, "No, it's an organized hunt. The men have guns, and they won't want any boys along."

It didn't feel good to be stopped, but we weren't the only boys who didn't get to go. Circus, the best athlete and the acrobat of our gang, Dan Browne's only son, didn't get to go, either.

In a few minutes, there he was, coming through the orchard toward us. On a leash, running all around him in a lot of excitement, was his new hound pup he had named "Ichabod," one of the cutest black-and-tans you ever saw.

"The hounds are coming this way," Poetry cried. "Listen! That means Old Stubtail came this direction last night after he killed the lambs. I'll bet he's got his home down in the swamp or maybe along the bayou!"

"Or in the cave," a voice behind us piped up. It was Little Jim, the smallest member of

the gang, who had come without making any noise.

Old Bawler and Jay were *really* coming our way. Already they were in the lane at the south side of our pasture—over the fence, through the pasture and watermelon patch, and straight for the pignut trees at the north end of our garden.

That was enough to scare me. It meant that last night after Old Stubtail, as Circus called him, had had his lamb dinner at Groenwalds', he had come across *our* south pasture, through *our* farmyard, and had been only a hundred yards from *our* henhouse and—

I got my thoughts interrupted then by the hound pup on Circus's leash going simply wild with excitement because Bawler was his mother, and he wanted to get into the excitement, whatever it was.

The pup was at the end of his leash, pulling and tugging and struggling wildly. And then his collar was over his head, and he was off toward the pignut trees to join in whatever kind of dog game his mother and old Jay were playing.

And that's when I heard the pup's hunting voice for the first time. It was a high-pitched, wailing tremolo, like the highest tone on the organ at our church. It was also the longest wail I'd ever heard.

Now there were *three* hounds, and I never saw hunting dogs more excited. They were as excited as if it had been only a few minutes

since the big cat had gone through our orchard. They were over in the orchard now, heading through it toward Poetry's dad's woods and the mouth of the branch beyond and the cave beyond that and Old Man Paddler's hills beyond that.

Mr. Browne let out a yell when little Ichabod joined the chase. He ordered him to stop, but Ichabod wouldn't. It was too much fun. He was also using his own sense of smell to tell him where to trail.

At the orchard fence, though, the pup scared up a rabbit and went off in a different direction, giving chase with an even more excited voice than before.

Bawler and Jay were over the orchard fence and on their way toward the Sugar Creek bridge, and Ichabod was heading toward the place where he'd last seen the rabbit, which was near the beehives in the orchard.

Circus made a dive for his hound when he circled near, grabbed him, and soon had him on leash again. He also gave him a good scolding, saying, "Don't you *ever* do that again! *Never* leave one trail for another. Do you hear?"

Well, it was a long, hard chase for Dan Browne and his hounds. Finally, somewhere in the hills in dry, ragged outcrops above Old Man Paddler's cabin, the dogs lost the scent, and the hunt was over.

Thinking maybe Old Stubtail might come back to finish eating one of the lambs he'd killed, Circus's pop set a number three double-

spring steel trap at a place in the fence where it was easy for a large cat to get through. He tied a feather on a string and hung it on an elderberry bush close to the trap so that the wind would blow it. The cat, belonging to the same family as a house cat, which would be attracted to anything like that, might see the feather, smell the bait near the trap, and get caught.

That night a farmer three miles down the creek lost a calf. The kill was the same kind—a broken neck in front of the shoulders, a hole behind the shoulder, and the heart and liver eaten out.

Paul Hutchens

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We first learned about the mystery of Wild Horse Canyon while we were still at Sugar Creek, three days before starting for our summer vacation in the Rockies.

It was half past one, Friday afternoon. In a few minutes, just as soon as Little Jim got there, we would open our gang meeting, decide a few important things, then go in swimming. It would be our last happy-go-lucky swim until we got back, because while we were out West, we'd have to use hotel or motel pools where there'd be a lot of other people. Mountain streams would be too cold to swim in and really enjoy it.

We were all lying in the shade of the Snatzerpazooka tree, about twenty feet from the sandy beach of our swimming hole. Snatzerpazooka himself, the scarecrow we'd hung up early that summer to keep the crows from gobbling up the new shoots of corn in Dragonfly's father's cornfield, was swaying in the lazy afternoon breeze. Dragonfly's new Stetson cowboy hat was hanging on his left wooden shoulder.

Circus, our acrobat, was up in the tree. In fact, he was sitting on an overhanging branch close to the tree's trunk, using the trunk for a backrest.

Little Jim kept on not coming, and we kept

on feeling impatient, waiting for him. In a way, Little Jim was the most important member of the gang. That is, it was extra-important that he be there at this meeting. It was his folks—his township trustee father and his very musical mother—who were taking us with them on the out-West vacation. They were going to spend two weeks at a famous music festival in the mountains, and we were all getting to go along. I could hardly wait till next Monday.

Little Jim, the cutest member of the gang and maybe the most cheerful, was one of the best boys there ever was, I thought, as right that second I saw him coming along the path that leads from the spring to the Snatzerpazooka tree.

"Here he comes!" I exclaimed to the rest of us. "Hurry up!" I yelled down the narrow, weed-bordered winding path to him and expected to hear him call back cheerfully, "I'm coming!" as he nearly always does whenever anybody yells to him like that.

He came puffing up to where we were, but there wasn't any usual cute little grin on his cute little mouse-shaped face. Instead, his lips were set, and he was either sad or mad about something. I couldn't tell which.

"'S'matter?" Poetry asked him. "How come you're so late?"

Little Jim's worried, teary-voiced answer cut like a knife into my heart when he said, "It's Crescendo! Something's happened to her. We can't find her anywhere. She didn't sleep in

her box last night or the night before, and she didn't come home this morning. She's been gone two whole days!"

We all knew what he meant when he said "Crescendo." He meant the very cute calico cat that had been Little Jim's pet ever since he was only five.

Little Jim was sad all right; he was also mad. He took a swipe at a tall mullein stalk with the striped walking stick he always had with him. He broke the mullein stalk, and its yellow-flowered head bent over and hung upside down.

"We wanted to give her to the animal shelter to feed and look after till we got back—and now she's gone!"

While Little Jim was getting his breath and telling us about Crescendo's being lost, strayed, or stolen, Dragonfly cut in to exclaim, "Who cares about a calico cat? Let's get started swimming!"

Big Jim growled back at him, "We're having an important meeting! Besides—don't you remember?—we have to examine the creek bottom first!"

"Why?" Dragonfly whined, pretending he didn't already know, and sneezed. In fact, he sneezed three times in rapid-fire succession—which meant we weren't starting on our mountain vacation any too soon for him. Hay fever season was already here.

"Because," Circus called down from his tree seat, "the heavy rains we've been having lately may have washed a lot of junk into the swim-

ming hole, that's why. A waterlogged old stump, sharp rocks, or broken bottles or tin cans we might get hurt on. Or maybe the water washed out a few dangerous holes."

I knew what he was talking about. Every year after the spring floods and also after every big summer rain had sent a rush of water swirling down the creek, we tested the bottom to be sure our swimming hole was still a safe place to swim. Sometimes it wasn't until we'd taken out quite a lot of junk that had been washed in.

Anyway, while we were waiting to test the creek bottom—and also trying to cheer up Little Jim, who was really worried about his calico pet, which was one of the prettiest cats I ever saw—we decided to look over some of the out-West advertising Big Jim had brought with him. It was some he had gotten in the mail that very morning from the town near which we were going to camp for two whole weeks, high in the Rockies. We would go into town every day to a big tent in a meadow there to hear the wonderful music of some of the world's greatest musicians.

Big Jim hadn't any sooner opened the *Aspen Avalanche* than Dragonfly let out a happy exclamation, saying, "Look! There's a cowboy wearing a hat just like mine!"

What he was looking at and exclaiming about was a full-page advertisement for a rodeo that was going to be held in Aspen. Right in the middle of the page, sitting on a very pretty

horse, was a man in a Western outfit, and on the man's head was a swept-brim hat, which, I noticed, *was* just like Dragonfly's. For half a second, I envied the spindle-legged little guy that his folks had let him have a big broad-brimmed Stetson while mine hadn't let *me*.

Then I saw the name of the cowboy and let out an exclamation myself. "Hey!" I cut loose with. "It's Cranberry Jones!"

Boy oh boy, oh boy oh boy! my mind exclaimed. Cranberry Jones, whose voice I'd heard on the radio and had seen different pictures of riding his famous palomino horse, was going to be one of the stars at the Aspen rodeo, and we would get to see him ourselves!

Dragonfly sprang to his cowboy-booted feet, swept his swept-brim hat from Snatzerpazooka's left shoulder, shoved it into our circle, and exclaimed, "See! His hat's just like mine!"

Poetry grunted, shrugged, and in his ducklike, squawky voice answered, "Yours is like *his,* you mean."

Dragonfly pouted back, "What's the difference? Just so they're alike!"

I looked at his chimpanzee-like face and at the hat he had just put on and liked him in spite of him.

Big Jim broke up our nonsensical argument then by saying, "Look, you guys! Want a mystery to solve while we're out there?"

Just the word "mystery" brought my mind to excited life. Big Jim had turned back to the front page, where there was a column of news

items with a heading that said: "Rolling Stones from the Avalanche."

Below the heading were interesting stories of things that had happened long ago. Each had a different date. One was "Thirty Years Ago This Week." Another was "Twenty Years Ago." Another, "Ten Years Ago." And down near the bottom were a few lines about an old man named Joe Campbell, Cranberry Jones's stableman, who had died of a heart attack last New Year's morning. Joe's body was found in a snowdrift just outside the stable door only a few yards from where one of Cranberry's palominos was standing, saddled and showing evidence of having been ridden.

"Joe's habit of taking very early morning rides 'for my health,' as he always expressed it, had been the cause of his death. The weather had been just too cold for an old man to venture out." That was the way the story ended.

But the mystery that Big Jim had just pointed out had happened the night before on New Year's *Eve* and had a heading that said:

BLONDE DISAPPEARS AFTER MIDNIGHT
DRINKING SPREE IN WILD HORSE TAVERN

Circus right that second came scrambling down the tree, shaking the branch Snatzerpazooka was hanging on and knocking some of the sawdust out of his stuffed head—Snatzerpazooka's stuffed head, I mean. Some of it fell

into my eyes so that for a second I couldn't see what I was seeing.

Besides, some of the print in the story was blurred and several lines were worn. Even some of the words were missing. It was a spooky story about a young lady who had come to the Winter Ski Festival. The story said, "She took a few lessons on the Little Nell Beginner's Slope, then was away to the more dangerous runs: The Cork Screw, Ruthie's Run, and even the treacherous FIS. Yesterday, after the morning mail . . ."

Big Jim, who was reading aloud to us, stopped. "Her name's worn off," he said, squinting at the paper, holding it close to his eyes and trying to make out the missing word.

"Let *me* see," Poetry said. "I've got twenty-twenty vision without glasses." He studied the story, then in his usual mischievous tone, remarked, "Like it says, she's *missing*"—which wasn't very funny.

Big Jim read on. "Yesterday after the morning mail . . . seemed despondent and spent most of the day alone. She was seen late at night at the Wild Horse Tavern bar. About midnight she left the bar and was last seen fighting her way through the blizzard toward her motel four blocks away. She did not arrive at the Snow-slide and at press time still had not been found."

Big Jim finished reading the news article to us. It was like reading the first chapter of an exciting mystery story in a magazine and seeing

at the bottom of the page the words "To Be Continued."

"Look!" Circus exclaimed. "There's an editor's note!"

And there was. It began, "The mystery is still unsolved. The story has been pointed up this week by the owners of the Snow-slide, The Cranberry Jones Enterprises. Jones himself has offered a $500 reward for any information . . ."

That was as much of the editor's note as there was. The rest was worn away, maybe by the paper's being much handled in the mail.

Well, it wasn't any ordinary mystery story, and it wouldn't be continued in next week's *Avalanche*. If there was ever any new chapter, somebody would have to find the disappearing woman.

Already my mind was out there in the mountains in last winter's blinding blizzard, trying to imagine who the woman was and what had happened to her. I was wishing that when we got there we would stumble onto a clue of some kind that would help us solve the mystery.

"I know what I'll do with the five hundred dollars, if I get it," Dragonfly piped up. "I'll get me a palomino just like Cranberry Jones's. I'll—"

"If *we* solve the mystery," Poetry countered, "*we'll* divide it six ways between us, and your share'll be eighty-three dollars and thirty-three and one-third cents."

Little Jim chimed in then. "I wonder what was in her letter that made the woman so sad."

Poetry came back with another idea, which was, "When we get out there, I'll bet we'll find the missing body ourselves."

Big Jim, who had been lying on his stomach, rolled over, straightened to a sitting position, and with a puzzled expression on his face, asked, "Who said anything about a *body?* It just said the woman disappeared in a blizzard at midnight, New Year's Eve."

Poetry scowled. "But she had to have a body to disappear in, didn't she? Here, let me see the paper."

Big Jim handed him the *Avalanche,* and after Poetry had read awhile, he yawned and said to us, "Well, gang, we'll have to solve the mystery ourselves. A woman just doesn't go up in smoke or disappear into thin air!"

Big Jim must have felt a little irked at our barrel-shaped friend because he answered him, "Who said anything about thin air! She disappeared in air that was full of swirling snow!"

Poetry grinned back, looked at his wristwatch and quacked, "High altitude air is always thin." Then he added, "Time to go in swimming"—which it was.

Going in didn't seem as important as it had, though, because all our minds were probably out in the Rockies with a mystery running around in them. In less than a week we'd be out there for real, having a wonderful vacation. One of the first things I was going to do, I thought and said so, was to walk past the Wild Horse Tavern where the golden-haired woman

had been drinking the night she disappeared. After we had our tent pitched away back in the mountains somewhere along Maroon Creek or maybe on the Roaring Fork, we'd all put our heads together and see if we could help solve the mystery. Maybe we could solve it, and maybe we couldn't.