Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the hottest, laziest summer afternoons I'd ever seen or felt—especially ever *felt*—when the mystery of the howling dog in the Sugar Creek swamp began to write itself in my mind.

I was dozing in the dappled shade of the beechnut tree near the Black Widow Stump at the time. Poetry, my almost best friend, was sprawled out beside me. The two of us were waiting for the rest of the gang to come for one of the most important gang meetings we ever had.

Of course, I didn't have any idea *how* important our meeting was going to be or what exciting and even dangerous experiences we were going to stumble onto that afternoon, or I wouldn't have been so lazy and sleepy.

Up to now, every time I'd dozed off, my chubby mischievous-minded friend had said or done something to jar me out of my dream-world into the sizzling hot afternoon that was making me so sleepy in the first place.

As you maybe remember, the beechnut tree we were lying in the shade of is just west of the Black Widow Stump, where we have so many of our gang meetings. That stump was the most important stump in the whole Sugar Creek ter-

ritory, because that was where a black widow spider had bitten Circus's whiskey-drinking father before he got scared half to death and gave his stubborn heart to God to be saved from his sins.

Circus, as you maybe know, is the curly-haired acrobat of our gang, who has to live with six sisters. He has learned to imitate almost every bird and wild animal there is in the swamp along the creek and the bayou, and he's always surprising or entertaining us with a bird-song or a growl or grunt or howl or screech or bark or squall or chirp.

That stump is also just south of the leaning linden tree that overhangs the incline leading down to the bubbling spring where we get our favorite drinking water. And that is about the coolest place anybody can find anywhere to get away from a long hot summer.

"Please!" I grumbled to Poetry, who had just punched me awake for maybe the seventh time. "Why don't you cooperate? You're going to get yourself whammed on the jaw or some place if you get my temper all stirred up!"

"Cooperate!" his ducklike voice came back. "Why don't *you* cooperate? I'm trying to tell you that Sugar Creek territory is going to be in the news—is *already* in the news. Here, look at this in the *Hoosier Graphic!* Here's a picture of the hollow sycamore tree in our barnyard and our old white mother hog with her six little pigs!"

"I saw it this morning," I mumbled back

grumpily, "and it's nothing to brag about. Our old *red* mother hog raises her pig family in a modern hog motel, not in a hundred-year-old hollow sycamore tree in a barnyard with woodpeckers nesting in holes in its dead top. Last week our Red Addie had *seven* pigs, all of them with beautiful red hair like mine."

Saying that to Poetry, I sighed a saucy sigh in his direction, rolled over three or four times to the very edge of the shade, and tried once more to sail away into the lazy, hazy, wonderful world of sleep. Maybe this time Poetry would respect my wishes and let me alone until some of the rest of the gang got there, when I'd *have* to stay awake.

Now that I was farther away from my oversized friend, the weather didn't seem so hot. A lively little breeze came to life right then and began to rustle the glossy green leaves of the beech tree. Through my half-closed eyes I could see the leaves trembling and, with my lazy ears, hear them whispering like a huddle of girls in the schoolyard.

Maybe I ought to tell you that sometimes when I am alone in the woods or down along the bayou—or just moseying around looking for snails' shells or birds' nests or sitting on the bank of the creek waiting for a sleepy fish to make up its lazy mind to bite the nice, juicy blob of fishing worms on my hook—I listen to the rustling of the tree leaves all around overhead. And they *do* sound as if they are whispering—and sometimes even as though they are

clapping their hands, as it says in one of Mom's favorite Bible verses, "And all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

All alone like that, hearing the water rippling in Sugar Creek and the birds whooping it up in the trees overhead all around, I like to think I feel like the Indian boy Hiawatha in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem. Then I'm glad to be alive enough to enjoy being alive. It's as easy as eating blueberry pie to imagine the birds are Bill Collins's chickens, and the chipmunks, groundhogs, cottontails, raccoons, possums, and even the polecats are my brothers —Bill Collins being me, Theodore Collins's "first and worst son," which is sometimes Dad's way of describing me. Sometimes when he calls me that, it's a joke, and sometimes it isn't.

Ho-hum! Lying there beside Poetry that sweltering summer afternoon, sailing along like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in the poem in one of our schoolbooks, I was just beginning to drift farther and farther "into the sea of dew," when all of a temper-awakening sudden, Poetry let out a hissing sound like a tire losing its air and exclaimed loud enough to scare the living daylights out of me, *"Hear that?"*

Not having heard that or any other that, I groaned a grumpy growl and tried to yawn myself back into Wynken, Blynken, and Nod's sailboat to snooze off again.

"I mean it!" Poetry's voice exploded into my peace and quiet. "I heard a dog howling!" He rolled over several times to where I was

lying and bumped into my back. Then he sat up and shook me by the shoulders. "Wake up, Theodore Collins's first and worst son! I heard a dog howling!"

"A dog howling or a boy's brains rattling—if he has any?" I came back with.

Up to now it seemed that everything in nature had been cooperating with me, trying to help me get the nap I needed. There was the buzzing and droning of seven hundred or more honeybees gathering nectar from the thousands of creamy yellow, sweet-smelling flowers of the leaning linden tree. Every now and then a lonesome crow croaked a cracked-voiced caw from a tree somewhere in the woods. Down in the creek the friendly little riffle laughed gaily along, singing a singsong song, which is one of the most musical sounds a boy ever hears in Sugar Creek country. And the hot sun was scattering showers of heat all over everywhere, and . . .

Even though all nature was trying to help me, the nature of the roly-poly boy who was my almost best friend was *not* cooperating.

"Do you know what day this is?" he asked, and I didn't and didn't care and didn't answer him.

Then's when Poetry tickled my nose with what felt like the feathered flower of a bluegrass stem, which made me sneeze a sneeze that woke me all the way up.

"I don't care if it's day or night!" I growled.

I sighed a sizzling sigh at him and turned my face toward the bayou.

"The calendar"—Poetry answered his own question—"says that today is just one month since we buried Alexander the Coppersmith, and that gives us something to do today: go up to the haunted house cemetery and help Little Jim put a bouquet of wildflowers on Alexander's grave."

That might have interested me, but it actually only irked me a little more at my round-in-the-middle friend for trying too hard to get my attention.

I could have let my mind do what it had done so many times the past month—unroll the story of one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to anybody in Sugar Creek history. That, as you maybe know, happened just thirty days ago. A fierce-fanged wildcat as big as a mountain lion moved into the neighborhood, and my cousin Wally's copper-haired, city-bred mongrel, named Alexander the Coppersmith, had saved Little Jim's life. He had attacked the savage-tempered cat while it was flying through the air straight for Little Jim's throat.

You have to hand it to that nervous, nonsensical, half-hound, half-Airedale for being brave without knowing it and living a dog's life better than any dog I ever saw. He proved that day to be one of the biggest dog heroes in the county—maybe in the whole state—by diving headfirst into a fierce, fast, furious fight with

that wildcat. You can imagine what the battle looked and sounded like if you've ever seen and heard a neighborhood dog, who ought to know better, and our old black-and-white house cat in a tooth-and-claw, life-and-death struggle for the survival of the fightingest.

There was barking and yelping and hissing and scratching such as I'd never seen or heard before. I watched and cringed and yelled, "Attaboy!" to Alexander, while Little Jim beside me, saved by the battle, clung to my right arm as if he was holding onto a tree root on a cliff side to keep from falling over the edge.

"Sic 'im!" I yelled to Alexander, and he did sic 'im, more savage than ever, while Circus and Big Jim, Dragonfly and Wally, and even Little Jim also kept on rooting for that daring dog doing what was natural to him.

It was not only maybe the fiercest fang fight ever fought but also one of the shortest. All of a sudden, the battle came to a spine-tingling, heart-sickening, bone-breaking end. I saw it and didn't want to believe it but had to because it was happening right before my worried eyes. That copper-colored canine and tawny-furred feline, all of a barking, hissing, howling, eye-scratching, fur-flying sudden, started to roll over and over and over like two tangled-up tumbleweeds in a Western wind, right toward the edge of the ledge they had been fighting on. And over the edge and down they both went—down and down and down and down and *down!*

Even while they were still falling, my eyes leaped ahead of them to see where they were going to land. Maybe a hundred feet below was an outcropping of jagged rocks.

We buried Wally's brave little mongrel not far from where he fell in battle, in a sandy place we found on the bank of the fast-flowing canyon river. Never again would we see Alexander streaking like a flash of burnished copper down the road, giving chase to a passing car. Never again would we hear at night his high-pitched wailing as he ran with Circus's dad's hounds in full cry on the trail of a coon down along the bayou. Never again would I get to sit on our side porch under the ivy canopy and stroke his half-sad, half-glad head—when I could get him quiet enough to let me do it.

As the last bit of gravelly soil was shoveled onto his grave, I realized that at last he was a quiet dog and would never again get himself into any trouble for not thinking or planning in advance what he was going to do.

A day or two after the funeral, we had a second one for the same dog, because we got to worrying. What if there should be a flash flood some day or night? It might send a wall of water roaring down the canyon. It might wash Alexander's body out of its grave and carry it a mile or more downstream, where it would lie exposed to the weather and might be eaten by buzzards or some carnivorous four-legged animal that sometimes roamed the hills of Sugar Creek territory!

It was a sad day for all of us, especially for Wally, and extraspecially for Little Jim, whose life Alexander had saved. It was too sad for me to even write about it for you at the time. But we dug up his body and carried it in a gunnysack through the woods to Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery behind the haunted house where Old Tom himself had once lived. There we dug a deep hole in the southwest corner under an elderberry bush and buried him again.

And I will never forget the time the gang made a special trip to the cemetery to help Little Jim put up the grave marker his father had made out of a slab of birch wood. His mother, who is an artist as well as the best pianist in the whole neighborhood and is our church organist, had stenciled a sleeping dog on it and lettered what is called an *epitaph*, which Little Jim decided he wanted on it. It was:

ALEXANDER THE COPPERSMITH
Long may he live in our hearts.

There were tears in my eyes as I stood looking at the mound of yellow earth under one of the overhanging flower clusters of the elderberry shrub. That one cluster was so heavy, and hanging so low, it was like a ripe sunflower head, almost hiding the epitaph's last three words, "in our hearts." It seemed we had lost a member of the gang instead of a dog.

While we were all standing and thinking, I

took a quick look around at us. Standing nearest the marker, sort of leaning on his shovel, was Big Jim, our leader, his jaw set, his almost mustache like a shadow under his nose. Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of the gang, was holding his handkerchief to his nose, maybe to keep from sneezing. He was maybe allergic to the gunnysack we'd buried the dog in or to dog hairs or to some weed or wildflower around the place. Poetry's round face under his dark and shaggy eyebrows was very sober for a change. The very curly brown hair of Circus, our acrobat, was shining in the afternoon sun. And, last of all, there was Little Jim himself—last except for me, Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's first and *best* son. Right that minute anyway.

I wasn't the only one to have tears in my eyes, either. Little Jim gave his head a quick jerk, the way he nearly always does when there are tears in his eyes and he doesn't want anybody to know it. That quick shake of his high forehead shakes the tears out without his having to use his handkerchief. Not any boy I know would want anybody, especially any other boy, to see him cry.

We all turned away then, carrying Alexander "in our hearts," as it said on the epitaph. Not a one of us said anything for quite a while, but all of us were doing different things to make it seem we weren't as sad as we felt. Some of us were picking up rocks and throwing them at anything or nothing. Others were taking off on a fast run in some direction or other, leap-

ing up and catching hold of tree branches and chinning ourselves or skinning the cat—things like that.

And that was the last of Alexander the Coppersmith, the most wonderful, nonsensical dog hero there ever was. At least he was the most important dog that had ever lived and hunted and howled in Sugar Creek territory.

The last of him, that is, until a mystery dog began howling in the Sugar Creek swamp and along the bayou at night. And the howling and bawling and baying and squalling sounded exactly like the sounds Alexander the Coppersmith used to make when he ran pell-mell with a pack of hounds on the trail of a coon or fox or other varmint that lived in our neighborhood.

When you and your parents and your common sense all tell you there isn't any such thing as a ghost dog—that when an animal dies that is the last of his life on earth or anywhere else—and then all out of nowhere you hear the dog yourself after he is dead, you get a creepy feeling moving like cold chills up and down your spine.

Was Alexander alive or not? Before the week was over we were going to find out, in one of the strangest adventures that ever happened to the Sugar Creek Gang.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the finest summer mornings I had ever seen, I thought as I rolled over and out of bed, took a deep breath of fresh air, and looked out the open window of my upstairs room.

The June sun was already up, shooting long slants of light across the backyard and garden. Old Red Addie, our big red mother hog, was grunting around the front door of her apartment hog house at the south end of her pen. Fifteen or twenty of Mom's happy laying hens were already up and scratching near the garden gate, scratching and eating and singing and scratching and eating—gobbling down what Dad calls "grains, greens, grubs, and grits," which is the variety of food a good laying hen has to have to stay well and lay an egg a day.

I guess there's nothing in the world that looks finer to a boy than an outdoor morning when there is plenty of open space for the sunshine to fall in and when the sky itself is as clear and blue as the water in Sugar Creek looks on a clear day when you are looking down at it from the bridge.

In the field east of the barn, the corn was talking in a thousand voices, making a husky, rusty rustling sound, as it says in a certain poem we had to memorize in school.

I started shoving myself into my jeans to make a dash downstairs and see if Mom's pancakes and bacon would taste as good as they smelled. Suddenly, from somewhere beyond the twin pignut trees at the north end of the garden, there came a meadowlark's juicy-noted, half-wild, very musical, rippling song. It seemed to say, "Summer is coming and springtime is *here!*"

But a beautiful, wonderful outdoor summer was already here, having the time of its life making corn and beans and potatoes grow, making birds build nests to raise their baby birds in, spreading blankets of wildflowers all over Sugar Creek territory, and even making the fish bite.

Downstairs, Mom had the radio tuned to a favorite program whose theme song was "Every Day's a Wonderful Day."

Before I started to make my usual race for the head of the stairs, I happened to see our big *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* in the alcove by the bookcase. I decided to quickly look up a word—any word my eye happened to land on—which would be my word for the day. That was one of our family's fun games for the summer. Each person selected a new word from the dictionary, and all of us used it over and over again at different times during the day, just to get acquainted with it.

Already that summer I'd learned important words such as *leisure,* which Dad said was pronounced with a long *e,* but Mom said she liked

a short *e* better. It meant "spare time," which a boy hardly ever has enough of. I also learned a new meaning for the word *freeze,* which is what a gopher or chipmunk or groundhog does when it is startled or scared. It rears up on its haunches to study and think and wait until it seems safe for it to drop down to the ground and go on about its business.

I quickly ran my right forefinger and both eyes down a column of words under the letter *f* and stopped when I came to a word I thought was new. It was "flotsam." I didn't even dream what an important word it was going to be before the day was over—and especially before the summer came to its exciting and dangerous climax.

On the way downstairs I was saying over to myself the dictionary's definition of "flotsam," which was "goods cast or swept from a vessel into the sea and found floating."

Before I reached the bottom step, my imagination had me drifting along out in a boat in Sugar Creek. And one of the gang accidentally or on purpose was rocking the boat. Then the boat capsized, and all of us were getting spilled out into what my mind's eye saw was a wild, stormy, sealike creek. Our oars fell overboard, and the waves carried them away. Fishing tackle boxes, bait canteens, straw hats—everything was turned into flotsam.

That was as far as my shipwreck got right then because I was near enough to the kitchen

table to make a dive for my chair and start sawing away on a stack of pancakes.

For some reason, though, I didn't sit down right away. I got to go out to the barn first to help my father finish the chores, which meant the horses and cattle got to eat their breakfast before we did.

At the table, Mom's wonderful day was interrupted by Charlotte Ann's upsetting her bowl of cereal in her high chair tray, making flotsam out of it in several milk-spattered directions. Some of it landed on the island shore of Mom's brown linoleum floor. Mom scolded her gently.

"You won't believe it," I said to my family, as I denied myself wanting to sit still and let Mom mop up the mess, "but my word for the day is 'flotsam.'"

"I believe it," Mom said, trying to keep her excitement in her mind. "Every day's not only a wonderful day, but it nearly always has a lot of little upsets, and the main boat upsetters in this house are my two wonderful children. One of them not only rocks the boat and often upsets it but actually throws her goods overboard."

Dad, maybe trying to lighten our family boat a little, said, "There are three words that usually go together: 'flotsam,' 'jetsam,' and 'lagan.' Lagan, Son, if you ever look up its meaning, is goods cast to drift or sometimes sunk on purpose, but it's attached to a buoy to float, so that if anybody finds it, they will know it belongs to *somebody*."

Trying to be funny and maybe not being very, I managed to say, "Who would want to tie anything to a *boy?*"

"B-U-O-Y," Dad spelled and winked at Mom. Then he remarked to her, "Anything tied to a B-O-Y would be *really* sunk—some other father's boy, of course."

Well, we had a few minutes' talk about a Bible verse, which we try to do once a day at our house so that we would have an anchor to tie our minds to in case we had an upset of some kind. Then we left the table and moved out into the working part of the day, hoping it would be as wonderful *all* day as it had been up to now—which it had to be for a certain B-O-Y.

I say it *had* to be, because the six sets of parents of the Sugar Creek Gang were sending the whole gang on a special errand, which I will tell you about in a few minutes, just as soon as I can write that far.

"Here's a little flotsam," Mom said, stopping me as I was about to go outdoors. She handed me a little basket containing a warm package of something wrapped in transparent plastic. It smelled as if it had just come from the oven, which it had. "Be sure, now, to make the Fenwicks welcome. Remember your best manners; smile and offer to do anything you see needing to be done."

"I will," I said, enjoying the smell of the warm, freshly baked something or other.

And away I went, remembering my best manners even at home by shutting the screen

door quietly. I was quickly on my way down to the Black Widow Stump to meet the gang. As soon as the whole gang was there, we'd have a hurry-up meeting to decide different things. Then we'd all take whatever our different mothers had baked and go across the bridge and down the creek to the Maple Leaf, a brand-new cabin we had helped build on a wooded knoll across the creek from the mouth of the branch.

In the Maple Leaf, having moved in only yesterday, was a missionary couple. They were to be the very first missionaries to spend part of their furlough in it. Dr. John Fenwick and his wife, Elona, had spent a lot of years in Central America, and they had come home for a rest and to get a little change from the very hot, humid climate that far south.

John Fenwick was a medical doctor, we found out, and *his* doctor down in Costa Rica had ordered him home for a rest. He had the kind of heart trouble called "angina pectoris."

The Maple Leaf, maybe I ought to tell you, was built on property owned by Old Man Paddler, the kind, long-whiskered old man who lived up in the hills and was always doing kind things for people—especially for missionaries, whom he seemed to like almost better than he did boys.

The wooded knoll had been given to the Sugar Creek Church, and all the men of the church as well as a lot of other men in the neighborhood—and also the Sugar Creek Gang itself—had built the cabin for free. That had

seemed even more fun than swimming and diving in the old swimming hole or catching sunfish and goggle-eyes. It certainly was a lot more enjoyment than weeding the garden and helping clean out the barn.

Anyway, today was *the* day. As soon as we'd get our welcoming visit over, the rest of the whole morning would be ours to do with as we liked, our twelve parents had told us.

Mom's final orders about politeness having been tossed back into the history section of my mind, I was now on my way like a "barefoot boy with cheek of tan," as a poem by James Whitcomb Riley says. I sped across the yard to the walnut tree by the gate, gave the rope swing a fling toward the east, and leaped out of the way when its heavy board seat came swooshing back. It would have bowled me over if it had hit me.

I took a quick look around the base of the tree to see if there were any new ant lion larva traps, and there were—three new conical pits in the powdery sand. I knew that buried at the bottom of each pit—now seven all together—was a hairy larva, the hatched egg of a night-flying insect. Each larva would stay buried, all except its head, until an ant or other insect accidentally tumbled into its trap. And then, *wham! Flurry! Chop! Chop! Slurp! Slurp!* And the ant lion would have had its breakfast without having to work for it or wait for its mother to cook it.

Any boy who knows anything about an ant

lion knows that its mother is a damselfly and that she lays her eggs on the surface of sandy or dusty soil under a rocky ledge or close to a house or barn or tree. As soon as the wormlike babies are born, they dig those cone-shaped traps themselves and are ready for breakfast without having to dress or help their parents do the chores or wash dishes or baby-sit, since each ant lion is its own baby-sitter.

But also, an ant lion never knows how good it feels to plop-plop across a dusty road with its bare feet—which it doesn't have anyway—or go racing like the wind through the woods on the way to meet a gang of other ant lions its age and size.

I must have daydreamed several minutes too long at the walnut tree, because from the house I heard Mom yell, "Hurry up, Bill, and get gone! Charlotte Ann's on the warpath! She wants to go with you. So the sooner you're out of sight, the sooner you'll be out of her mind, and she'll be out of my hair!"

The worry in Mom's voice made me sing out across the grassy yard to her, "Every day's a wonderful day!"

"For B-O-Y-S!" she called back. "Now you hurry up. And tell the Fenwicks we're glad they're here and to let us know whenever there's anything we can do for them. Be sure to make them feel at home!"

And then away I did go, plop-plopping my bare feet in the dust all the way across the road. I hadn't any sooner swung up and over the rail

fence than I remembered that at that very place, a few yards from the elderberry bushes, I had had a fierce, fast fistfight with one of the orneriest boys that ever lived in the territory. That boy's name was Shorty Long. In spite of my having given him a licking, he was still one of the worst boys anywhere around.

The only peace the gang had from him was when his family was away spending their winter vacations in a warm climate somewhere, which they did every year.

I took a look at the arena where we'd had our battle and said, gritting my teeth, "Take that—and that—and *that!*" I swung my one free fist around a little, then came to myself and started on toward the Black Widow Stump, saying to myself as I ran—and quoting my father, who had given me a talking to about keeping my temper under control—"Tempers are given to us by the Lord, Son. You can use them or lose them. If you waste your good temper in an explosion, you feel *sick* afterward. Some people actually feel as weak as a sick cat."

"How," I had asked my lowered-eyebrowed father that day—he had his own temper under good control at the time—"how can a boy who has had his nose bashed in a battle *keep* from losing his temper?"

Dad's answer was as if I had thrown a hard snowball at him and he had dodged it. Here is part of what he told me: "Just keep your eye on your mother. A hundred times a day things go wrong around the house and farm that could

make her the saddest or maddest person in the world. Instead, she keeps her mind filled with thoughts of God and with Bible truth. She keeps her heart's radio tuned to heaven and—well, you just watch her, and you'll see!"

I *had* been watching my wonderful gray-brown-haired mother ever since, and little by little I was learning.

"But," I said to myself as I zip-zip-zipped and zag-zag-zagged my way along on the little brown path to the Black Widow Stump, "What do I do today if my worst enemy happens along and stirs my temper all up with something he says or does?"

Shorty Long, being the only boy in the neighborhood whose parents took winter vacations in warm climates, was very proud of himself and very uppity about things they saw and did in the places they visited.

I gave my shoulders a twisting shrug as if I was a bucking bronco in a rodeo. And right away, in my mind, I *was* a bucking bronco, and Shorty Long was a cowboy trying to ride me and couldn't. I was a trained Western pony, my mane blowing in the wind. Shorty Long was lying in the dust behind me as I leaped into a fast gallop toward what was maybe going to be one of the most wonderful days the gang would ever have.

Maybe.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It might have been a long, hot, boring summer for the three members of the Sugar Creek Gang that were left—and there were *only* three of us left, Poetry, Dragonfly, and me —if all of a sudden one of the most interesting, exciting, and dangerous experiences hadn't exploded like a Fourth of July firecracker right in front of our eyes.

That stormy, mysterious, dangerous, and upside-down experience came to life the first week after Big Jim, Circus, and Little Jim left Sugar Creek territory to be gone for two whole weeks. Big Jim and Circus were to work on Big Jim's uncle's farm in Tippecanoe County, and Little Jim would visit a cousin in Wisconsin.

The mystery started the week the new Bay Tree Inn Motor Court was finished and had what is called "open house." Our family as well as maybe everybody else's family in the neighborhood went to see it. Well, not *all* our family went—just Mom and Dad and me—because Charlotte Ann, my chubby little cute-nosed sister, had been left to be baby-sat at Dragonfly's house.

There wasn't anything Charlotte Ann would rather do, anyway, than be baby-sat by Dragonfly's mother, who nearly always gave her a new

toy. She also let her play house with a set of pink plastic dishes and do almost anything in the world she wanted to do that wasn't dangerous.

I never will forget what my mother said to my father when the three of us were alone in Unit 17 at the Bay Tree Inn. That neat little cottage had been named Cliff Cottage and had been built by the management for people who wanted to stay quite a ways away from the sounds and sights of tourists in the sixteen other units. It sort of hung on the rim of a sandstone cliff overlooking a deep ravine, the same ravine, in fact, through which flows the small stream the gang calls "the branch."

Except for Sugar Creek itself, we liked the branch better than any other stream in the county. You could follow its sometimes lazy, sometimes nervous and excited and noisy, way from its source all the way through Harm Groenwold's woods and pasture, then into and through Thompsons' woods to where it finally empties at the mouth of the branch, where most of the time the gang keeps its boat tied.

Poetry, who is always reading interesting things and thinking up different ideas to make people laugh, has said maybe a hundred times, "The branch can lie in bed all day and run all over the county at the same time."

And Dragonfly, who also has a keen mind, nearly always answers him with: "It doesn't just *lie* in bed, it *runs* in bed—and not just all day but all night and, like a certain friend of mine, it's also all wet."

Anyway, standing near the picture window of Cliff Cottage's air-conditioned living room, Mom looked out and across the footbridge that spanned the ravine and said, "You couldn't find anything more picturesque at Turkey Run State Park, or at The Shades, or even in Brown County."

Brown County was the beautiful hill country Mom had been born and brought up in and where she had been a schoolteacher and a secretary before Dad had found her and married her to make her a farmer's wife.

Dad was standing beside Mom with his left arm halfway around her. Looking out that same window, he remarked, "If anybody taking a walk out there on the overhanging porch, or across the footbridge, should accidentally lose his balance and topple over, he would land like a ton of bricks on the rocks below and break a lot of bones. It's a good thing they have that iron railing all the way across."

Mom's answer was: "Not a ton but only one hundred forty-seven pounds. And not of bricks but of a hot, tired, and worn-out housewife who would like to spend a few days' vacation here away from washing, ironing, cooking, looking after the chickens, answering the telephone, canning cherries, raspberries, corn, and beans, and keeping her patience with two noisy children."

I was standing behind my parents near the fireplace at the time. I had just come in to ask an important question that Poetry Thompson,

my almost best friend, who was just outside the door, wanted me to ask. It was a *very* important question—one of the most important questions I might ever ask.

Hearing Mom say she needed a vacation from her two noisy children, I accidentally on purpose cleared my throat.

She turned a startled face in my direction, grinned, and remarked, "My first and worst son excepted, of course."

Being called their "first and worst" son by my parents was their way of saying I was the only son they had and that they liked me. So I grinned back at my first and worst mother and answered, "Your first and *best* son agrees with you. You do deserve a vacation, and I know a way I can help raise money to help your first and worst *husband* pay for it."

That seemed a good way to get to do what my mind was all excited about getting permission to do—in fact, what Poetry and I already had our minds made up to do. And all that was needed was to get our parents to agree to it.

When for a minute neither my mother nor my father answered me, I managed to say, "Of course, if you wouldn't *want* the money, I could save it for a very badly needed two-week vacation for myself, just as soon as Big Jim and Circus and Little Jim get back. In fact, you could take *your* vacation right here in Cliff Cottage while the gang is having a north woods camping trip, which we haven't had for quite a few summers—if I can remember that far back."

Dad answered my suggestion by reminding me that six boys he knew had had a *winter* vacation not so long ago. "You *do* remember when the gang flew to Palm Tree Island, don't you?"

For a few seconds I let myself remember the gang's wonderful trip to the West Indies. First, our plane had sailed high out over small islands called the Florida Keys. As we'd looked down at them, Poetry had said that they looked like the "disjointed vertebrae of the backbone of the skeleton of a giant, hundred-mile-long dinosaur."

Then, after only a hundred or more or less minutes in the plane, we had landed at the Palacia airport. Palacia was the capital of Palm Tree Island. There we were welcomed by a missionary friend of Old Man Paddler's and by hundreds of excited, friendly, Spanish-speaking people.

It was while we were on that vacation on Palm Tree Island that we found Seneth Paddler's long-lost twin brother, Kenneth.

For another few seconds, while I was still standing by the fireplace in the Cliff Cottage living room, my mind's eye saw Kenneth Paddler, long-bearded and looking exactly like his brother, riding down one of Palacia's cobblestone streets in a small cart. He was driving a billy goat, an honest-to-goodness billy goat.

My father's voice broke into my memories of the gang's West Indies vacation as he leveled his gray green eyes at me. "Was there something special you wanted to say about how you

could earn a little extra money this summer to help make it possible for your hardworking father, who *never* gets a vacation, to go *with* your mother when she goes on *her* vacation?"

What on earth! I thought. Imagine a boy's *father* needing a vacation. "You mean you get tired of planting and plowing corn, feeding hogs, making speeches at Farm Bureau meetings, milking cows, and building fences? Or are you just tired of having to put up with a son you wouldn't *have* to put up with if you would send him off to camp somewhere—maybe in the north woods?"

"Good try." Dad grinned and added, "But I believe you were talking about your first and worst *parents'* vacation."

I came out then with what was on my mind, beginning with, "Do you like fried frogs legs?"

Mom whirled around from the picturesque view across the gully, looked at me with an exclamation point in her brown eyes, and asked, "What kind of question is that?"

Maybe I should have told you—for about a week at our house we had been having a lot of family fun pretending we were actors in a play, having listened to what is called a "mock trial" the week before at the Sugar Creek Literary Society.

Sometimes I was a lawyer and Mom was the jury. My smallish sister, Charlotte Ann, was being tried for such crimes as spilling her milk, pulling up a petunia instead of a weed, or leaving the screen door open and letting our old black-and-white cat in. Things like that. Nearly

always my father was the judge, and he would do what is called "pronounce sentence."

So when my brown-eyed mother asked me there in the Cliff Cottage, "What kind of question is that?" I could feel my father's gray green eyes boring into me from under his reddish brown brows, asking the same question.

"If it please the court," I began, "I am not the criminal in this case. I am the defense attorney, and my client is an honest boy."

For a minute I actually felt I *was* a lawyer, as Poetry's father had been in the mock trial. I swaggered over to the picture window that overlooked the limestone cliff on the other side and said, "See that little thread of water away down there at the bottom of the gully? That friendly little stream laughs and dances like an innocent barefoot boy through Harm Groenwold's woods and on through his pasture, through Thompsons' woods, and finally empties into Sugar Creek at the place known as the mouth of the branch, sacrificing its happy, carefree life to the larger, well-known creek shown on the map as Sugar Creek. Now, Your Honor, it so happens that the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang keep their boat tied there—"

In my mind I was back at the mock trial. It felt good being able to think on my feet, better than it does sometimes when I am alone in the woods yelling out Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to the trees and birds and frogs. I swung around then to my parents, who in my mind had just become the jury, and went on.

"Last night, while Leslie Thompson and his friend, William Jasper Collins, son of the famous Farm Bureau speaker, Theodore Collins, were sitting in their boat fishing for catfish, they noticed that over on the island among the willows and pickerel weeds maybe a hundred bullfrogs were having a Farm Bureau meeting, bellowing and croaking and having the time of their lives.

"In the frogs' meeting, one big shaggy-browed father frog stood up and bellowed: 'Fellow members of this convention, the Bay Tree Inn Dining Room has listed on its menu at a charge of ten dollars per dinner, chicken-fried Sugar Creek frogs legs. I have just learned that two of the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang have read that menu and have decided to go into business as the Sugar Creek Frogs Legs Supply Company. The Bay Tree Inn management has offered them fifty cents for every pair of frogs legs they bring in—a paltry sum, for legs as large as ours.'"

I stopped in my speech—it was a little hard to be my father and a bullfrog at the same time. But it did feel good to have my parents listening without interrupting, so I quickly went on, hurrying a little to get in what was on the frog speaker's mind. "'One of the boys of the gang, the first and worst son of Theodore Collins, wants to earn enough money to pay for his parents' vacation, and it is up to the citizens of Frogs Legs Island to stop him. If the boys *do* organize their company, they'll row their boat

over here every night, shine their flashlights all around, blinding us, and fill their gunnysacks with us, and we'll all be chicken fried.'

"The big, handsome bullfrog father finished his speech, let out a scared croak, and sank like a submarine into the shallow water. The maybe one hundred other frogs at the convention went *ker-plunk* under at the same time, because maybe Leslie Thompson or William Jasper Collins had thrown a rock over toward the island and scared them all half to death."

Right away I turned myself into the judge. I swung back from the picture window I had been looking out of and asked, "Lady and gentleman of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

The gentleman of the jury, who was also the foreman, answered, "We have, Your Honor. We find the defendant guilty!"

Quicker than a frog's croak, my father became the judge, sentencing me with lowered eyebrows and stern words. "You, first and worst son, are hereby sentenced to membership on the governing board of the Sugar Creek Frogs Legs Supply Company. When do you begin operations?"

From behind me, a boy's voice broke in to say, "Tonight, sir." It was the friendly, ducklike voice of Leslie Poetry Thompson, who had come in while the frog was making his speech and who maybe had been listening to the whole thing.

Mom broke up the meeting then, saying,

"We'd better hurry on home. The mail will be there in—" she interrupted herself to look at her wristwatch, then finished her sentence "—in another thirty minutes."

"What's the rush?" the judge and gentleman of the jury asked. "I thought maybe you'd like to run on into town and shop around for that vacation lounging robe you've been looking in the catalogs for."

The lady of the jury gave the gentleman of the jury a smallish frown and said, "Oh, you!"

Then Mom added, "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to take any vacation this year. Not while my boss is on his own vacation."

"Your *boss?* Is that what I am to you?" Dad asked.

It seemed a good time for Poetry and me to go outside and discuss plans for our first trip to Frogs Legs Island that very night.

I knew what Mom meant about her "boss" being on vacation. Old Man Paddler had finished the last chapter of the book he had been writing, and my mother was typing it for him. The old man wasn't on a vacation exactly. He was in California visiting his nephew, who was on *his* vacation and wanted his uncle to come out and go fishing with him in the Pacific Ocean for codfish off the coast of Santa Cruz and for mackerel off the barge near Santa Ana.

Mom had been working every day during her spare time to get the book finished before the old man would get back. He had been gone for more than a week.

Being secretary for Old Man Paddler meant also that she had to look after his mail, which our mail carrier, Joe Sanders, left in Theodore Collins's box every day instead of in the old man's box up in the hills.

Nearly every day there had been a letter, and sometimes quite a few, from people who had read the old man's first book, *The Possible Man in the Impossible Boy,* and wanted him to explain something or other. And sometimes there would be a letter from somebody with a heavy heart who wanted him to pray for him or her.

Nearly every day, also, there would be a letter from missionaries, thanking him for praying for them and for helping pay their missionary expenses.

Being a private secretary, Mom was supposed to open all the mail to see if there was anything important enough to have to be forwarded to California.

One thing, especially, Mom was supposed to watch for—any news from Palm Tree Island about Kenneth Paddler. Soon after the Sugar Creek Gang found him, he had disappeared again, and the missionaries didn't know where he was. He had written one letter to his brother, Seneth, saying he hoped to come back to Sugar Creek as soon as he felt able to. But then, just as many years before when he had had amnesia, he'd just disappeared.

Anyway, while Mom and Dad were still talking inside the Cliff Cottage living room, Poetry

and I took a walk across the narrow footbridge toward the other side of the ravine. We stopped about halfway across to look down at the very happy little branch, threading its way around among the rocks.

"Your big bullfrog father was right," Poetry remarked, leaning over the railing and focusing his eyes on the rocks the saucy little stream was tumbling around and over and through. "Anybody falling over the edge would *really* get hurt and—"

He stopped himself, exclaiming, "Listen!"

I didn't have to listen to hear what I was hearing, which was the sound of a motor way back in the woods somewhere. It sounded a little like an electric saw cutting down a tree or cutting a tree into fireplace wood.

We looked out into the dense woods and saw two motorcycles driving like crazy toward us along the path that bordered the branch. At the farther end of the bridge we were in the middle of, the riders slowed down, skidded to a stop, and looked across to where we were. It seemed that they weren't seeing us, though, but were looking past us to the large living room window of Cliff Cottage where Mom and Dad maybe still were.

They stopped only a few minutes, talking to each other, then both motors roared to life and took off back into the dense woods and up a steep hill. They dodged this way and that to miss trees and bushes and fallen logs, going in the direction of Harm Groenwold's apple

orchard, which we knew was on the other side. Then they disappeared.

"Did you see what I saw?" Poetry asked.

What we had both seen was a name in large letters printed on the back of each of their red leather jackets. It was SONS OF LUCIFER.

"Maybe that is the name of their motorcycle club," Poetry guessed.

But those two motorcycles racing through the woods didn't seem very important right that minute while Poetry and I were planning our first big business venture.

How was I to know that that very night, while we would be on Frogs Legs Island, the Sons of Lucifer would explode us into a very dangerous adventure?

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

If I hadn't been so proud of the prize watermelon I had grown from the packet of special seed Dad had ordered from the state experiment station, maybe I wouldn't have been so fighting mad when somebody sneaked into our garden that summer night and stole it.

I was not only proud of that beautiful, oblong, dark green melon, but I was going to save the seed for planting next year. I was, in fact, planning to go into the watermelon-raising business.

Dad and I had had the soil of our garden tested, and it was just right for melons, which means it was well-drained, well-ventilated, and with plenty of natural plant food. We would never have to worry about moisture in case there would ever be a dry summer, because we could carry water from the iron pitcher pump that was just inside the south fence. Our family had another pitcher pump not more than fifteen feet from the back door of our house. Both pumps got mixed up in the mystery of the stolen watermelon, which I'm going to tell you about right now.

Mom and I were down in the watermelon patch one hot day that summer, looking around a little, admiring my melon, and guess-

ing how many seeds she might have buried in her nice red inside.

"Let's give her a name," I said to Mom. The Collins family, which is ours, gives names to nearly every living thing around our farm anyway.

She answered, "All right. Let's call her Ida."

Mom caught hold of the pump handle and pumped it up and down quite a few fast, squeaking times to fill the pail I was holding under the spout.

"Why Ida?" I asked with a grunt, as the pail was getting heavier with every stroke of the pump handle.

Mom's answer sounded sensible. "Ida means 'thirsty.' I noticed it yesterday when I was looking through a book of names for babies."

I had never seen such a thirsty melon in all my life. Again and again, day after day, I carried water to her, pouring it into the circular trough I had made in the ground around the roots of the vine she was growing on. And always the next morning, the water would be gone. Knowing a watermelon is more than 92 percent water anyway, I knew if she kept on taking water like that, she'd get to be one of the fattest melons in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

Mom and I threaded our way through the open spaces between the vines, dodging a lot of smaller melons grown from ordinary seed, till we came to the little trough that circled Ida's vine. While I was emptying my pail of water into it, I said, "OK, Ida, my girl. That's

your name: *Ida Watermelon Collins*. How do you like it?"

I stooped, snapped my third finger several times against her fat green side, and called her by name again, saying, "By this time next year you'll be the mother of a hundred other melons. And year after next, you'll be the grandmother of more melons than you can shake a stick at."

I sighed a long, noisy, happy sigh, thinking about what a wonderful summer day it was and how good it felt to be alive—to be a boy and to live in a boy's world.

I carried another pail of water, poured it into Ida's trough, and then stopped to rest in the shade of the elderberry bushes near the fence. Dad and I had put up a brand-new woven wire fence there early in the spring, and at the top of it we had stretched two strands of barbed wire, making it dangerous for anybody to climb over the fence in a hurry. In fact, the only place anybody would be able to get over *really* fast would be at the stile we were going to build near the pitcher pump, halfway between the pump and the elderberry bushes.

We would *have* to get the stile built pretty soon, I thought. In another few weeks school would start, and I would want to do as I'd always done—go through or over the fence there to get to the lane, which was a shortcut to school.

I didn't have the slightest idea then that somebody would try to steal my melon or that

the stealing of it would plunge me into the exciting middle of one of the most dangerous mysteries there had ever been in the Sugar Creek territory. Most certainly I never dreamed that Ida Watermelon Collins would have a share in helping the Sugar Creek Gang capture a fugitive from justice, an actual runaway thief the police had been looking for for quite a while.

We found out about the thief one hot summer night about a week later, when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, stayed all night with me in his green tent, which my parents had let us pitch under the spreading branches of the plum tree in our yard.

Of course, everything didn't happen that very first night, but *one* of the most exciting and confusing things did. It wouldn't have happened, though, if we hadn't gotten out of our cots and started on a pajama-clad hike in the moonlight down through the woods to the spring—Poetry in his green-striped pajamas and I in my red-striped ones and Dragonfly in—

But I hadn't planned to tell you just yet that Dragonfly was with us that night—which he wasn't at first. Dragonfly is the spindle-legged, pop-eyed member of our gang. He is always showing up when we don't need him or want him and when we least expect him and is always getting us into trouble—or else we have to help get him *out* of trouble.

Now that I've mentioned Dragonfly and

hinted that he was the cause of some of our trouble—mine especially—I'd better tell you that he and I had the same kind of red-striped pajamas. Our mothers had seen the same ad in the *Sugar Creek Times* and had gone shopping the same afternoon in the same Sugar Creek Dry Goods Store and had seen the same bargains in boys' nightclothes—two pairs of red-striped pajamas being the only kind left when they got there.

Little Tom Till's mother—Tom was the newest member of our gang—had seen the ad about the sale, too, and his mother and mine had bought for their two red-haired, freckle-faced sons blue denim jeans exactly alike and maroon-and-gray-striped T-shirts exactly alike. When Tom and I were together anywhere, you could hardly tell us apart. So I looked like Little Tom Till in the daytime and like Dragonfly at night.

Poor Dragonfly! All the gang felt very sorry for him because he not only is very spindle-legged and pop-eyed, but in ragweed season—which it was at that time of the year—his crooked nose, which turns south at the end, is always sneezing, and also he gets asthma.

Before I get into the middle of the stolen watermelon story, I'd better explain that my wonderful grayish brown haired mother had been having what is called "insomnia" that summer. So Dad had arranged for her to sleep upstairs in our guest bedroom. That was the farthest away from the night noises of our

farm, especially the ones that came from the direction of the barn. Mom simply had to have her rest, or she wouldn't be able to keep on doing all the things a farm mother has to do every day all summer.

That guest room was also the farthest away from the tent under the plum tree—which Poetry and I decided maybe was another reason that Dad had put Mom upstairs.

Just one other thing I have to explain quick is that the reason Poetry was staying at my house for a week was that his parents were on a vacation in Canada and had left Poetry with us. He and I were going to have a vacation at the same time by sleeping in his tent in our yard.

It was a *very* hot late summer night, the time of year when the cicadas were as much a part of a Sugar Creek night as sunshine is part of the day. Cicadas are broad-headed, protruding-eyed insects, which some people call locusts and others call harvest flies. In the late summer evenings, they set the whole country half crazy with their whirring sounds from the trees, where thousands of them are like an orchestra with that many members, each member playing nothing but a drum.

I was lying on my hot cot just across the tent from Poetry in his own hot cot, each of us having tried about seven times to go to sleep, which Dad had ordered us to do about seventy times seven times that very night, barking out his orders from the back door or from the living-room window.

Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, was right in the middle of quoting one of his favorite poems, "The Village Blacksmith," speaking to an imaginary audience out in the barnyard, when Dad called to us again to keep still. His voice came bellowing out through the drumming of the cicadas, saying, "Bill Collins, if you boys don't stop talking and laughing and go to *sleep,* I'm coming out there and *put* you to sleep!"

A few seconds later, he added in a still-thundery voice, "I've told you boys for the last time! You're keeping Charlotte Ann awake—and you're liable to wake up your mother too!" When Dad says anything like that, I know he really means it, especially when he has already said it *that* many times.

I knew it was no time of night for my cute little brown-haired sister, Charlotte Ann, to be awake, and certainly my nice friendly-faced mother would need a lot of extra sleep, because tomorrow was Saturday and there would be the house to clean, pies and cookies to bake for Sunday, and a million chores a farm woman has to do every Saturday.

"Wonderful!" Poetry whispered across to me. "He won't tell us anymore. He's told us for the last time. We can laugh and talk now as much as we want to!"

"You don't know Dad," I said.

"I'm thirsty," he said. "Let's go get a drink." His voice came across the darkness like the voice of a duck with laryngitis.

Right away there was a squeaking of the springs of his cot as he rolled himself into a sitting position. He swung his feet out of bed and set them *ker-plop* on the canvas floor of the tent. I could see him sitting there like the shadow of a fat grizzly in the moonlight that filtered in through the plastic net window just above my cot.

A split second later, he was across the three feet of space between us and sitting on the edge of *my* cot, making it groan almost loud enough for Dad to hear.

"Let's go!" he said, using a businesslike tone.

I certainly didn't want to get up and go with him to get a drink. Besides, I knew that the very minute we started to pump the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk, not more than fifteen feet from our kitchen door, Dad would hear the pump pumping and the water splashing into the big iron kettle under the spout. He would come storming out, with or without words, and would start saying again something he had already said for the last time.

I yawned the laziest, longest yawn I could, sighed the longest, drawn-out sigh I could, and said to Poetry, "I'm too sleepy. You go and get a drink for *both* of us."

Then I sighed once more, turned over, and began to breathe heavily, as though I was sound asleep.

But Poetry couldn't be stopped by sighs and yawns. He shook me awake and said, "Come on, treat a guest with a little politeness, will you?"

He meant I had to wake up and get up and

go out with him to pump a noisy pump and run the risk of stirring up Dad's already stirred-up temper.

When I kept on breathing like a sleeping baby, Poetry said with a disgruntled grunt, "Give me one little reason why you won't help me get a drink!"

"One little reason?" I yawned up at his shadow. "I'll give you a *big* one—five feet eleven inches tall, one hundred seventy-two pounds, bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached—"

"You want me to die of thirst?" asked Poetry.

"Thirst or whatever you want to do it of. But hurry up and do it and get it over with, because I'm going to sleep."

That must have stirred up Poetry's own temper a little, because he said, "OK, pal, I'll go by myself!"

Quicker than a firefly's fleeting flash, he had zipped open the plastic screen door of the tent, whipped the canvas flap aside, and stepped out into the moonlight.

I was up and out and after him in a nervous hurry. I grabbed him by the sleeve of his green-striped pajamas.

But he wouldn't stay stopped. He growled at me and whispered, "If you try to stop me, I'll scream, and you'll be in trouble."

With that he started off on the run across the moonlit yard, not toward the pump but in a different direction—toward the front gate!—saying over his shoulder, "I'm going down to the *spring* to get a drink."

That idea was even crazier, I thought, than pumping the iron pitcher pump and waking up Dad.

But you might as well try to start a balky mule as try to stop Leslie Thompson from doing what he has made up his stubborn mind he is going to do. So a minute later, the two of us were hurrying past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox—Theodore Collins being Dad's name. Then we were across the gravel road, over the rail fence, and following the path made by barefoot boys' feet through the woods to the spring. Poetry used his flashlight every few seconds to light the way.

And that is where we ran into our mystery!

Zippety-zip-zip, swishety-swish-swish, clomp-clomp-clomp, dodge, swerve, gallop. It's nearly always one of the happiest times of my life when I am running down that little brown path to the spring, where the gang has nearly all its meetings and where so many interesting and exciting things have happened. Generally, my barefoot gallop through the woods is in the daytime, though, and I feel like a frisky young colt turned out to pasture. I had never run down that path in red-striped pajamas at night or when I was as sleepily disgruntled as I was right that minute for having to follow a not very bright barrel-shaped boy.

So when we had passed the Black Widow Stump and the linden tree and had dashed down the steep grade to the spring itself and found a dark green watermelon floating in the

cement pool that Dad had built there as a reservoir for the water, it was as easy as anything for me to get fighting angry at most anything or anybody.

A watermelon there could mean only one thing—especially when right beside it was a glass fruit jar with a pound of butter in it. It meant there were *campers* somewhere nearby. And campers in the Sugar Creek woods were something that which the Sugar Creek Gang would rather have most anything else. It meant our peace and quiet would be interrupted, that we would have to wear swimsuits when we went in swimming, and we couldn't yell and scream to each other the way we liked to do.

Poetry, who was on his haunches beside the spring, surprised me by saying, "Look! It's plugged! Let's see how ripe it is!"

Before I could have stopped him even if I had thought of trying to do it, he was working the extralarge rectangular plug out of the middle of the extralarge melon's long fat side.

It was one of the prettiest watermelons I had ever seen. In fact, it was as pretty as Ida Watermelon Collins herself.

Then Poetry had the plug out and was holding it up for me to see.

Somebody had bitten off what red there had been on the end of the plug, I noticed.

Then Poetry said, "Well, what do you know! This melon's not ripe. See, it's all white inside!"

That didn't make sense. This time of year, even a watermelon that wasn't more than *half*

ripe would be at least pink inside. My eyes flashed from the rectangular plug to the hole in the melon, and Poetry was right—it *was* white inside!

Then he said, "Oh, there's something *in* it! There's a ball of white *paper* or something stuffed inside it!"

I felt curiosity creeping up and down my spine and was all set for a mystery. Hardly realizing that I was trespassing on other people's property and most certainly not having a right to, even if the melon *was* in our spring, I quickly stooped and with nervous fingers pulled out the folded piece of paper. It was the kind that comes off a loaf of bread and which, at our house, I nearly always toss into the woodbox or the wastebasket unless Mom sees me first and stops me. Sometimes she wants to save the paper and use it for wrapping sandwiches for Dad's or my lunches, mine especially during the school year.

The melon *was* ripe, I noticed. The inside was a deep, dark red.

While my mind was still trying to think up a mystery, something started to happen. From up in the woods at the top of the incline there was the sound of running feet and laughing voices. There were flashlights and flickering shadows, and it sounded like a whole flock of people coming. *People!* Only these weren't boys' voices or men's voices but *girls'* voices. *Girls!* They were giggling and laughing and coming toward the base of the linden tree just above us. In

another brain-whirling second they would be where they could see us, and we'd be caught.

When you are wearing a pair of red-striped pajamas and your barrel-shaped friend is wearing a pair of green-striped pajamas, and it is night, and you hear a flock of girls running in your direction, and you are half scared of girls even in the daytime, you all of a sudden forget about a plugged watermelon floating in the nice, fresh, cool water of your spring, and you look for the quickest place you can find to hide yourself!

We couldn't make a dash up either side of the incline, because that's where the girls were. And we couldn't escape in the opposite direction, because there was a barbed-wire fence there, separating us from the creek. But we had to do *something!* If it had been a gang of boys coming, we could have stood our ground and fought if we had to. But not when it was a bevy of girls. They sounded like a flock of blackbirds getting ready to fly South for the winter, except that they weren't getting ready to fly south but *north,* which was in our direction.

"Quick!" Poetry with his faster-thinking mind cried to me. "Let's beat it!" He showed me what he wanted us to do by making a dive east toward the place where I knew we could get through a board fence and on the other side of which was a path. It wound through a forest of giant ragweeds leading to Dragonfly's dad's cornfield in the direction of the Sugar Creek Gang's swimming hole.

In another jiffy I would have followed Poetry through the fence, and we would have escaped being seen. But my right bare foot, which was standing on a thin layer of slime on the cement lip of the pool where the melon was, slipped out from under me, and I felt myself going down, *down*.

I couldn't stop myself. I struggled to regain my balance and couldn't. I couldn't even fall where my mixed-up mind told me would be a better place to fall than into the pool, which would have been in a mud puddle on the other side. Suddenly, *thuddety-whammety, slip-slop-splashety*, I was half sitting and half lying in the middle of the pool of ice-cold springwater, astride that long green watermelon like a boy astride a bucking bronco at a Sugar Creek rodeo!

From above and all around and from every direction, it seemed, there sounded the voices of happy-go-lucky girls with flashlights, probably coming to get the watermelon, or the butter in the glass jar, or maybe a pail of drinking water for their camp.

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It had been almost three months since I had gotten into an honest-to-goodness fight with anybody. In fact, I hadn't had a rough-and-tumble scrap with a boy my size since the middle of the summer, when the gang got into that fierce fist-fight on the slope of Strawberry Hill—the one that went down in Sugar Creek history as the famous Battle of Bumblebee Hill, which almost everybody knows about.

That well-known, nose-bashing battle was in the daytime, when I could see everything. That is, I could see until one of my eyes got socked by another red-haired, freckle-faced, fiery-tempered boy's dirty fist. That boy was Little Tom Till, who, with his parents and his big brother, had just moved into the territory.

At the top of Bumblebee Hill is the abandoned cemetery where Old Man Paddler's wife, Sarah, and his two boys are buried and where he himself expects to be buried someday. His tombstone is already up there with his name on it.

The fistfight I'm going to tell you about right now, though, happened at night when it was so foggy I could hardly see anything, anyway. So if I *had* gotten one of my eyes socked shut, it wouldn't have made much difference.

The battle was like being caught up in a whirlwind full of flying fists, with me—Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's only boy—right in the middle of it, getting whammed on the nose and chin and almost everywhere at the same time and getting the living daylights knocked out of me in the foggy moonlight.

It seemed I was being half killed there in our old apple orchard—which is where the fight actually started and also where I was when it ended. In fact, I was lying on my back looking up through the branches of a big Jonathan apple tree and wondering, *What on earth?* I hardly realized that I *was*. I was thankful that I still *was* on this earth, though, because I had been hit about a hundred times so hard it's a wonder I didn't get killed.

Don't think I am anybody's sissy, though, just because I got licked that night. I could have licked my weight in wildcats, I was so mad. But when what seemed like seventeen boys with two fierce fast-flying fists apiece started swarming all over me, what chance did I have to defend myself?

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who was with me at the time, was getting even more stuffings knocked out of him than I was, because he weighed almost half again as much as I did.

Before I was completely licked, I noticed that Poetry was on the ground with half the seventeen boys scrambling all over him. Their mouths were spilling filthy words that were as

dirty as a farmer's barnyard on a rainy spring day when the mud is six inches thick and the cows and pigs have been walking around in it.

Generally when I am in an exciting scrap in which I have to use my muscles on some other boy, I feel fine, even when I am getting hurt. But this time—well, how can you feel fine when a boy as big as the giant in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk grabs you from behind and whirls you around as though you were a feather and whams you onto the ground as easily as if you were a cottontail rabbit and then lands *ker-wham-bang* on top of you?

In a minute now, I'll get started telling you about that battle, how I got into it in the first place, and how I got out alive. But before I get that far in this story, I'll have to tell you something else, or you'll think the way my mom does sometimes when she looks at me with her half-worried brown eyes and says in her anxious, mother voice, "Bill Collins, how on earth do you get mixed up in so much trouble?"

Poetry and I wouldn't have had that fight at all if it hadn't been for Little Jim, the littlest member of our gang, putting a certain idea in my head just one day before Halloween. Also, I had been a little bit forgetful that afternoon and had overlooked doing something Dad told me to do—something *very* important.

Anyway, when anybody puts an idea in my mind like the one Little Jim put there, I nearly always have to do something about it. I just have to.

Dad, who is a sort of farmer-philosopher, has said maybe five hundred times in my life, "Sow an idea, and you reap an act; sow an act, and you reap a habit." I don't understand exactly what he means by that, but both Mom and Dad, probably the best parents in the whole Sugar Creek territory, are always trying to plant what they call "good ideas" in my mind, just as we plant potatoes and corn and beans in our garden. They are also always trying to pull other ideas *out* of my mind, the way I have to pull weeds out of our garden or cornfield.

We certainly have a lot of different weeds around our farm—jimsonweeds, for example. Those, when they are grown up, are tall and coarse and rank-smelling. They have pretty trumpet-shaped flowers but are very poisonous. Ragweeds are about the meanest weeds in our neighborhood and are the summertime cause of Dragonfly's hay fever—Dragonfly is the small, spindle-legged, crooked-nosed member of our gang. Then there's burdock, whose flowers turn into burrs and stick to any boy who brushes against them in the fall or late summer. We also have Canadian thistles, which swallow-tailed butterflies like the nectar of, and Queen Anne's lace, which is Dad's most hated weed, even though its heads are like lace and Mom thinks they are pretty. Queen Anne's lace has very stubborn roots. If you leave even one plant for a year, next year there is a whole family of them, and, as Dad says, "The summer after

that, a whole fieldful of them." They will even take over your whole farm if you let them.

I think Dad was afraid some crazy ideas would get started in my redheaded mind and take over his whole boy.

There was one boy in our neighborhood whose mind *had* been taken over, and that was Bob Till, who was Little Tom Till's big brother and lived on the other side of Sugar Creek. Their father never went to church and was always swearing and getting into trouble, often getting drunk and having to go to jail for a while. Big Bob's mother was the unhappiest mother in the whole Sugar Creek neighborhood. Bob had jimsonweed and ragweed and Queen Anne's lace and quack grass in about every corner of his mind, and his father had probably planted them there.

Anyway, I was telling you about the idea that Little Jim had accidentally sowed in my mind that sunshiny day before the moonlit fight in the orchard.

I was at the side of our front yard at the time, not far from the iron pitcher pump and between it and the plum tree, digging up Mom's old tulip bulbs and planting brand-new imported Holland bulbs in their place. The next spring we would have what would look like a long, straight rainbow starting about six feet from the pump and stretching in the direction of the plum tree.

One of the prettiest sights there ever was around our farm was Mom's tulip bed, which

last year, for some reason, hadn't done so well. Every spring, except last year, there were about fifty of them in a long, pretty row. Mom said that each one reminded her of a small child holding a tiny colored cup toward the sky for the sunshine and the rain to fall into.

As much as I didn't like to work sometimes, I was always glad to do something like what I was doing that nice warm Indian summer day. The sun was pouring out millions of sunbeams all over the place, and all kinds of different-shaped colored leaves from ash and maple and elm and other trees were saying good-bye to their tree parents, which had taken care of them all summer, and were falling down onto the ground where they would wait for winter to come and bury them in a white grave.

It certainly felt good digging up those spadefuls of nice, brown, still-warm sandy loam, scooping my hands into it, picking up and placing in a little pile all the old, small bulbs that Mom was going to throw away, and then putting in where they *had* been those nice, big, imported Holland bulbs. The new ones would sleep all winter, and then in the spring the sunny weather would pull them up through the soil, and they'd be one of the first flowers for us to enjoy.

That was another reason I was glad to do the work—one of the happiest sounds a boy ever hears is when his tired mother, who is working in the kitchen, all of a sudden looks up with a happy smile on her face and exclaims cheerfully, "Just look at those *beautiful* tulips!

Aren't they gorgeous?" The tulips are right where Mom can see them best through the screen of our back door, and that is what she says nearly a hundred times every spring.

I didn't even know Little Jim was coming over to our house that day until I heard his small voice behind me. Looking up from what I was doing, I saw his mouse-shaped face. He had one of the cutest grins in the whole territory, and for a minute I thought it looked like a possum's grin.

A possum, you know, is the only pouched mammal that lives around Sugar Creek. It is what is called a "marsupial." In fact, I had just learned from a book Dad gave me for my birthday that the possum is the only marsupial that lives in North America and is the only mammal in North America that has a little outside pocket in which it carries its babies. The mother possum carries as many as six or even twelve cute little, blind, helpless, hairless creatures in her pocket for about six weeks after they are born. After that, they climb out and crawl all over her grizzly gray-haired back.

Sometimes a mother possum will arch her tail up over her back, and those cute little possum children will hold onto it by their own strong tails, with their heads down and their front feet clinging to the hair of her back and sides as she goes around looking for food. Their food is most anything, such as birds or their eggs, minnows, frogs, fish, insects, or fruit.

One of the most interesting things about a

possum is that nearly always when you catch one, or when it knows it is about to be caught and is scared half to death, it will pretend to be completely dead. It will curl itself up into the smallest ball it can and lie very quiet with a sickly, simple-looking, sad smile on its pointy-nosed face, as much as to say, "My *body* is dead, but my *mind* is not, and I am very happy about it."

The only thing was, Little Jim's grin wasn't simple, but for a minute, because he has a mouse-shaped face that is also shaped like a possum's, he did make me think of the only North American marsupial there is.

"Hi there, red-haired, freckle-faced Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's only son!" he said mischievously.

"Hi, Little Jim Foote."

"What do you think you are trying to do there, anyway?" he asked me.

"I don't think—I just work. My mother does the thinking for me."

"I work like that, too, sometimes," he answered, and his grin looked even more like a possum's grin than a possum's does.

"What you all dressed up for?" I said, starting to work again.

"Going to church," he said.

"To church? This isn't Sunday."

"Mother's on the committee for the banquet, and Daddy's taking her over to help decorate."

"What banquet?" I asked.

"Don't you know? The father-and-son ban-

quet in the basement of the church. We get a free supper and get to see some movies about Old Man Paddler's missionary work up in Alaska."

"I know it," I said. "I just wanted to see if you did."

I must have had a sad tone in my voice, because he asked, "Aren't you glad? A free supper and everything!"

"But that's Halloween night," I answered, "and we won't get to wear masks or go trick or treating or anything!"

"Aw, who wants to do *that?*" Little Jim said scornfully, "That's little-kid stuff," as if he didn't care to believe that he was the only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who was little enough to be called a little kid. But maybe, like most any boy his age, he thought he was bigger than he was.

It had been two whole years since I had been as little as Little Jim was, which means I had lived through two more whole, wonderful Sugar Creek springs, two more great summers, two more autumns in which there were two sunshiny October Indian summers, and two more long, cold, snowy winters. That is twenty-four more months—more than seven hundred and thirty days—more than Little Jim had lived. And that made me a whole lot older than he was.

Also, I would *always* be two years older. I hadn't been a little kid for a long time.

So I answered Little Jim, "Yeah, I know, but when you're disguised in old clothes and wearing a mask, nobody is going to know who you are, and it's worth pretending to be a little guy

for all the candy and peanuts and popcorn and stuff you get!"

Then Little Jim surprised me by saying, "Maybe that's the idea. My mother says that if all the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang are at the banquet, they won't get blamed for any damage any other boys do to people's property."

And maybe Little Jim's mother was right. Nearly every Halloween I could remember, things had happened around Sugar Creek that nobody in his right mind, if he had one, would be guilty of doing. There were such doings as dragging shocks of corn out of cornfields and standing them up in the roads or in people's front yards, taking gates off hinges and letting cows and sheep and pigs run all over everywhere, setting the gates somewhere else, unfastening people's rowboats and letting them float down the creek, letting air out of automobile tires, upsetting small farm buildings . . .

And sometimes some of the things that were damaged cost the farmer or whoever else they were done to a lot of money to get them repaired. So maybe Little Jim's mother had a good idea. If the Sugar Creek Gang was at the banquet, eating a free supper and seeing a missionary movie, our parents and the sheriff and the town marshal wouldn't have to wonder if *we* were to blame for any expensive Halloween pranks.

All of a sudden, Little Jim said, "They're going to take up a special offering for the mis-

sionary speaker, and my father says I can give two dollars if I want to."

And that was one of the ideas that got planted in my mind and was part of the cause of the fight in the apple orchard.

Little Jim explained it to me—his dad was one of the members of Old Man Paddler's missionary board and knew ahead of time what they planned to do. The dinner for the fathers and sons was to be free, but after it was over there would be what our church called a "free-will offering" to pay for the dinner, and the money that was left over would be used to pay for preaching the gospel to the Indians and Eskimos and others who lived in Alaska.

"Mother is going to give five music lessons," Little Jim went on.

I knew that meant she would give ten whole dollars, because she received two dollars apiece for the piano lessons she taught. Little Jim got his lessons free, though, and he was one of the best players in the whole county.

"Circus wants to give three muskrats if he can catch them, but he has only caught one so far," he said.

I knew that meant that Circus, the acrobat of our gang, was going to try to give three dollars to the missionary offering at the banquet, since a muskrat fur was worth a dollar a pelt that fall.

Last year, Circus had had a trapline along Sugar Creek and the bayou and had caught thirteen muskrats and three possums. His

father, who hunted at night, had caught thirty-seven coons with his big long-eared, long-voiced hounds.

I tossed up another spadeful of dirt and said, "How come he's caught only one muskrat so far? I'll bet there are a dozen in the bayou right above the spring. I saw three yesterday myself."

Little Jim picked up a clod of dirt and threw it toward a blackbird that had just lit by our rosebush and was probably looking for a grub to eat. I had been digging around the rosebush that afternoon, heaping dirt high about its roots to get it ready for winter.

Little Jim acted as if he hadn't heard me, so I said to him again, "How come?"

He answered, "Maybe the muskrats are smarter this year than they were last year. They keep setting off his traps without getting caught."

Just that second a car honked out in front, and it was Little Jim's dad's car. It had stopped beside our mailbox.

"I have to go now," Little Jim said, and away he ran, past the rosebush toward our front gate by the walnut tree, whisking along as light as a feather, and for some reason reminding me not of an awkward, gray-haired possum, as he had a few minutes before, but of a happy little chestnut-colored chipmunk dashing from one stump to another along the bayou.

For quite a while after their car disappeared up the gravel road, I stood looking at

the long train of gray dust floating in the air, being carried by the wind across Dragonfly's dad's pasture toward Bumblebee Hill.

I was thinking how much easier it was for Little Jim's folks and for Little Jim himself to give a lot of money to missionary work than it was for some of the rest of the gang members, especially Circus, whose father hadn't been a Christian very long and hadn't been able to save any money. He had been an alcoholic before that, and most of the money he had made had been put into the Sugar Creek Bank by the owner of the Sugar Creek Tavern instead.

Then I got to thinking about Little Tom Till again, whose father was still an alcoholic, and how Little Tom had been invited to go to the banquet with Dad and me. I knew Tom wouldn't have anything to put in the offering basket when it came past his place at the table, and he might feel sad inside and ashamed and wish he hadn't come.

Then all of a sudden a cheerful idea popped into my mind, and it was: get Dad to hire Little Tom to help me with the chores tonight and maybe do some other work tomorrow morning and pay him for it. And Tom would be proud to put part of whatever he earned in the offering and also be glad he was alive.

Thinking that made me feel as happy as a cottontail rabbit hopping along the path that goes through our blackberry patch down in the

orchard. And before I knew it, I had finished putting in the last tulip bulb and covered all of them with eight inches of soft brown dirt. It certainly felt good to have strong muscles, and be in good health, and be able to work, and just be alive.

The more I thought about my idea, the better I felt. The only thing was, I didn't realize that my being especially friendly to Tom was going to be one of the things that would get me into trouble and into the middle of that fist-fight in our apple orchard.

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I'd been hoping and hoping all through that long, slow winter that when spring came the gang could happen onto a new kind of adventure, one in which I myself, red-haired, more-or-less-fiery-tempered Bill Collins, would get a chance to use my muscles and my presence of mind to save myself or somebody from danger.

It's not that there generally wasn't plenty of excitement around Sugar Creek, especially when the gang was together. We were able to stumble onto more topsy-turvy, hair-raising adventures than you could shake a stick at. But—well, who wants to have such ordinary experiences as getting his nose bashed in a fierce, fast fistfight? Or taking a wet pet lamb to school on a rainy, muddy day to see if it really *would* make the children laugh and play? Or killing an ordinary black bear at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill?

Besides, it was Little Jim, the littlest member of the Sugar Creek Gang, who had killed the mad old mother bear, and he had done it with Big Jim's rifle, which he accidentally had at the time. All I had gotten to do in that tense excitement, while Little Jim was being the hero, was to watch and cringe, feel scared half to death, scream, and a few other things any ordinary boy could have done.

What I really wanted to do sometime was to kill a bear myself, take a picture of it, and then have it mounted—or maybe have it made into a rug for our living-room floor like the one Old Man Paddler has on the floor of his old clapboard-roofed cabin in the Sugar Creek hills. He had killed it himself, as a boy, with an old-fashioned muzzle-loading gun.

"So you want to kill a bear yourself, do you?" Dad asked me one sunshiny spring day when there was a lot of farmwork to do and I couldn't even go fishing. We were sitting at our kitchen table at the time, eating lunch. Mom was at her place at the side of the table nearest the stove, and Dad was near the water pail behind him and also near both doors, one of which I would have to use if I wanted to go outdoors in a hurry to get in a little play before the afternoon's work would start.

I was sitting on the long wooden bench opposite Mom and against the south wall of the kitchen, and Charlotte Ann, my mischievous, cute little sister, was in her high chair between Mom and Dad, wiggling and squirming and eating with the best toddler table manners I ever saw.

"Yes sir," I replied in answer to Dad's question, making my answer short because I was at the same time trying to make short work of a piece of Mom's cherry pie. She had baked it that very morning, since most mothers hadn't anything exciting to do to get their pictures in the paper. They only did such ordinary things

as ironing and washing and patching a boy's and his father's clothes and cooking their food and keeping the house clean seven days a week and, in the summertime, making garden and setting hens and stuff like that.

And Dad said, not realizing how I felt at the time, "You wouldn't settle for some ordinary wild animal such as a wildcat or a timber wolf or even a moose?"

"Kids' stuff!" I said and frowned down into my plate, knowing that if I had had a mirror and had been looking into it, I would have seen not only my reddish hair and freckles and a pair of reddish brown eyebrows like my father's, but there would be a wrinkle in my forehead like the kind our leader, Big Jim, had when he frowned about something. And if I had looked close enough, I could actually have seen what, if it kept on growing, might become a mustache on my upper lip.

"How old are you now?" Dad asked.

Before I could answer, Mom answered, "The question is wrong. It should be, 'How *young* are you?'"

And then I *knew* there would have been a Big Jim frown on my forehead, because if there is anything a boy doesn't like more than he doesn't like anything else, it's for somebody—especially one of his parents—to remind him he is as young as he is.

"I'm just a child," I said, having that very minute made the last of the short work I was making out of her pie, "probably too young to

help with the dishes today—if I may be excused." I slid out of my place on the long bench as easily as pie, saying at the same time, "I'll be down at the barn if you need me for anything."

Dad's long arm, with a strong, calloused left hand on the end of it, stopped me by the overall suspenders before I could get to my feet and my feet could get me to the door. His voice helped a little as he said, "Not so fast, sir."

"I can do it slowly," I said. I stayed stopped, shutting my right eye and trying to push my upper lip out far enough to see it by looking straight down the left side of my nose.

"Should you make such a face?" Mom asked. It seemed from the tone of voice she had used that she was glad Dad had stopped me.

Because Dad and Mom and I liked each other extrawell most of the time, and were always trying to be funny to each other, and sometimes not being very, I said, "I didn't make it—I inherited it."

Mom was really quick on the trigger then. She tossed in a bright remark: "Poor boy! Your father shouldn't be blamed too much, though. He inherited his own red hair and complexion from *his* parents."

I felt myself grinning. "You're cute parents, but personally I think I look like a meadowlark's egg with a face on it which somebody tried to draw and didn't quite finish."

I was remembering a nestful of eggs I'd

seen once right after a mother meadowlark had exploded off it while I was running through the south pasture. Each egg was white with a lot of reddish brown freckles all over it.

It was Poetry, my barrel-shaped friend, who had given me the face idea. He had once said to me when he had been trying to count the freckles I had on only one side of my face, "You look like a meadowlark's egg with a half-finished face drawn on it by a boy who gets poor grades in art in school."

Dad was still holding onto my suspenders, and I didn't dare to go on outdoors for fear he would be left holding an empty pair of overalls at the kitchen table. He said, "I believe you're right, son. Now you can run along to the barn. You might like to get the posthole digger, take it up to the pignut trees, and run that corner posthole down another fifteen or so inches. We'll have to get the fence up as soon as we can —or even sooner. You know how Jersey Jill likes new clover—and how dangerous it is when she eats too much."

"Yes sir," I said, glad to dig postholes or most anything that I could use my muscles on rather than do something around the house. Whoever heard of a boy developing strong muscles or even growing a mustache faster by carrying a dish towel around somebody's kitchen?

On the way to the barn I stopped at the iron pitcher pump for a drink, skinned the cat twice at the grape arbor, and chinned myself

eight times to strengthen my biceps. Then I went on out to the barn, stopping twice more on the way.

One time was to speak to Old Addie, our red mother hog, who was grunting around the gate as if she wished she could have breakfast, dinner, and supper fifty times a day. Addie lived in a new apartment hog house over on the farther side of her pen, where nearly every spring she gave the Collins family seven or eight nice little red-haired piglets.

"Good afternoon," I said down to her. But she only grunted a disgusted reply as though it was still too early in the day to talk to anybody and she hadn't had her cup of coffee yet.

"Such a face," I said to her. "Should you be making such a face?"

And do you know what? She grunted out a nasal sort of answer that sounded like: "I didn't make it. I just inherited it." And because I had said it first in the kitchen as Dad was holding onto my overall suspenders, it sounded kind of funny.

The second time I stopped was when I reached the hole just below the north window of the barn, where Mixy, our black-and-white cat, goes in and out a hundred times a day and which she uses for a refuge when some neighbor's dog is chasing her. She must have heard me talking to Old Addie, because she came out stretching and yawning as if she had just awakened from a nap. Then she made a beeline for my overall legs. As I stood looking down at her,

she arched her back and rubbed herself past me two or three times.

"You're a nice cat," I said down to her. There was something nice about having old Mixy do that to me, making it seem she liked me a lot—and anybody likes to be liked, better than anything else.

Pretty soon I had the posthole digger out of the place where Dad kept it in the corner by the cabinet where he keeps his different stock medicines and tools and things for working around the barn.

Just as I reached for the digger, which was standing beside a shovel, I noticed that Dad had added a new book to his little farm library. He was always adding a book every now and then, anyway. This one was called *A Veterinary Handbook for the Average Farmer, or What to Do Before the Doctor Arrives.*

The big book was standing on the shelf beside a dozen others with long names such as *Farm Work Simplification* and *Soil Microbiology* and a few with ordinary titles such as *Vegetable Gardening, All About Field Crop Insects,* and one that sounded as if it ought to be on the shelf in our kitchen. That one was *How to Feed a Hungry Man.*

I quick leafed through the new book, just to see what Dad had been studying.

Sometimes when we were working together in the garden or in the cornfield, he would start to explain something to me, and I always liked to say, "Sure, that's right. Now you can go

to the head of the class." And then, before he could start to tell me anything else, I would tell him first and try to ask questions he couldn't answer, so that I could say, "Sorry, Theodore," calling him by his first name as if I was a teacher in our red-brick schoolhouse and he a boy in maybe the fifth grade.

It took me only what seemed six minutes to read a half chapter on what to do if your cow or calf gets what is called "bloat," which was where Dad had left a bookmark and maybe was where he had been reading last.

Then I quickly took up the posthole digger. It was the hinged type with long steel blades that could take a big ten-inch bite of dirt in its six-inch-diameter jaws. A man or boy using its five-foot-long handles could dig a fast hole most anywhere on the Theodore Collins farm.

Then I was out the barn door, stepping all around and over Mixy to keep her from getting smashed under my feet. And in a minute I was up by the pignut trees, working and sweating and feeling fine, with my powerful biceps lifting big bites of yellowish clay out of the posthole and piling them onto a yellow brown mound beside me.

Several blackbirds, thinking maybe I'd unearth a grub or a night crawler or something, came flying and walking around excitedly. But I wasn't interested—not much, anyway, until I happened to think what they were there for. For some reason that made me think what else night crawlers were good for, and all of a

sudden I remembered I hadn't gone fishing for almost two days. And the sun was shining down so warm and getting warmer every minute. In fact, it was getting *hotter* every minute. It would be a shame not to go fishing.

I hardly realized what happened after that, but in almost no time I had left the posthole digger down in the hole with a big bite of yellow clay in its jaws. I had gone to the barn and come back with the shovel and was over by the garden fence, not far from a pile of boards, digging up some of the nicest fishing worms that ever tempted a sunfish and was putting them into a tin can I found close by. The reason I hardly realized what I was doing was that in my mind I was already down at the mouth of the branch, where Poetry, my barrel-shaped friend, and I nearly always could catch quite a few fish.

I soon found out what I was doing, though, because suddenly out of nowhere there was a voice behind me saying, "I didn't want the posthole dug *there,* Son—over *here* where the fence is to go up. And you can't dig a posthole scratching around on the surface with a shovel!"

I felt my face turn as red as my hair, and with quick presence of mind I said, "Take a look in the hole over there. See if I haven't dug it deep enough. No use to dig it too deep and have to fill it up."

Dad picked up a clod of dirt and tossed it at several blackbirds, not because he didn't like them but because he was still a little like a boy that had to throw something at something

every time he saw something to throw something at.

Then he took a squint down into the hole my biceps had made and, taking the digger by its long ash handles, brought up a big yellow bite of clay and emptied it onto the top of the mound beside the hole. He absolutely surprised me by saying, "If you can wait till the bass season opens, I'll take two days off, and we'll run up to Little Wolf and catch some big ones. We really ought to get the fence up first, though, don't you think?"

It was hard to believe my ears, and it was also hard not to get to go down to the mouth of the branch right that very minute. But I knew Dad was right. I gave up and helped him finish setting the big corner post, but not till I had tried another idea that came to my mind, which was: "That's a long time to ask Mom to wait for a fish supper, when she likes sunfish and goggle-eyes just as much as she does bass. She could have fish for supper tonight if anybody would just say the word."

But Dad wouldn't say the word. And I could tell by the way I felt that it wouldn't be a good idea for me to say even one more word about it. So I started in strengthening my biceps again, using the posthole digger, while Dad got busy with a saw and hammer and nails, making a crossbar on the bottom end of the big cedar post we were going to set in the hole.

As soon as we had the hole finished and the crossbar on the post, we carefully eased the

heavy post in, piling big rocks onto the crossbar in the bottom of the hole and tamping gravel and hard clay all around the rocks. Finally we filled the hole all the way to the top, tamping it hard all the way.

It took us nearly all afternoon to get it all done, but it was fun. And Dad learned quite a few things he pretended he didn't know before about what to do before the doctor comes in case old Jersey Jill, our fawn-colored milk cow, ate too much dew-wet clover some morning on an empty stomach, and gas built up in her paunch, and she couldn't belch, and the gas got worse and worse, and she swelled up more and more, and her left flank bulged so badly it looked as if she was twice as big as she ought to be.

"That," Dad said after I'd told him, "is what to do *after* you've called the vet and while you're waiting for him to come, or if he can't come right away."

But it wasn't only fun. That information about cows was also something every farmer ought to know, because he could lose an expensive cow or heifer in just thirty minutes after she started to get the bloat, if something wasn't done to save her.

"But *this* that we're doing right now is what to do so you won't *have* to call the veterinarian," Dad explained. "A good fence will keep your cattle out until you're ready to let them in. And never, *never* let a hungry cow loose in a field of white clover or alfalfa or ladino clover

or even crimson clover when the dew is on it, or in any pasture with a high percentage of legumes. The very minute you see your cow or sheep beginning to bloat, get after her; make her keep moving, chase her up a hill—anything to make her belch."

"Right," I said to Dad. "You can go to the head of the class."

"You go," Dad said with a joke in his voice. "I've been there so often and stayed so long at a time that it would be nice for the rest of the class to have a chance."

I had the handle of the fence-stretcher in my hands at the time, strengthening my biceps by pulling on it and stretching the fence at the same time. I was wondering—if I had my shirt off—if anybody could see the muscles of my back working like big ropes under the skin as I'd seen Big Jim's do.

I answered Dad by saying, "I'm not so much interested in going to the head of the class as I am to the mouth of the branch."

I didn't look up when I said it but kept on making steady, rhythmic movements and feeling fine, not expecting my remark to do more than make Dad grunt like Old Addie and make a face like the kind a father shouldn't have to make too many times in one day.

He stopped all of a sudden, looked at his watch to see what time it was, and then at the sun in the west to see if his watch was right. He said, "If you think the night crawlers might be a little crowded in that small can, you could

empty a few of them out one at a time down where the branch empties into the creek. If you hurry, you can get back with enough sunfish for supper."

Suddenly my biceps felt as strong as they needed to, and I looked into Dad's gray green eyes under his shaggy brows to see if he meant it, and he honest-to-goodness did. Just to be sure, though, I said, "Shouldn't I gather the eggs first? Or help feed the horses and chickens and carry in another load of wood for Mom?"

"Orders are orders," Dad said. "I'm testing your obedience. Go on and go fishing."

I looked at my own watch and saw it was still only four o'clock. I'd have at least one hour to sit on the bank in the shade of the sycamores and watch my bobber run around in little circles and plop under. I'd have an hour to see the dragonflies flitting around, and listen to frogs piping and birds singing, and smell the nice, fresh spring weather that for several weeks had been making the whole county the most wonderful place in the world to be alive in.

"My mother has taught me always to obey my father," I said.

It wasn't more than three minutes before I was started on the way to my favorite sport, my cane fishing pole in one hand and the can of worms in the other, running a barefoot-boy race toward the house, where I had to phone Poetry to see if he could go with me.

I stormed into the house and was on our

party-line phone before Mom, who was upstairs doing something or other, realized what was going on.

Poetry's mother answered, and I quickly asked if I could talk to Poetry. It was very important, I told her.

"Sorry," she said, "but he's down at the creek somewhere. He's trying to catch a few fish for our supper."

"Thank you very much," I said politely and hung up quick.

Then I was outdoors and racing through the orchard toward Poetry's dad's woods and the mouth of the little branch that winds a sunshiny way through it to the place where it empties into Sugar Creek and where the sunfish always are, if there are any.

I might even run into some kind of exciting adventure before I get back, I thought as I flew along. When you are with mischievous, detective-minded Poetry, you never can tell when your innocent fun is going to turn into a hair-raising experience of some kind, as it has done quite a few times in my life.

Over the last fence and through the woods I went, feeling as fine as anything, better even than the way a certain poet whose poem we had had to memorize in school felt when he wrote, "I know a place where the sun is like gold, and the cherry blooms burst with snow, and down underneath is the loveliest nook where the four-leaf clovers grow."

I was smelling the sweet smell of wild plum

blossoms right that minute, and the sun glinting on the water of the riffle of the branch toward which I was racing was like live silver hurrying on its way to the creek. Poetry and I wouldn't need any four-leaf clovers to help us have good luck. I was sure of it as I dashed down the hill on one of about thirty-seven paths made by boys' bare feet that crossed and crisscrossed the countryside everywhere.

It certainly felt fine to be free from work for a while. But I never dreamed that, while Poetry and I were in the middle of some of the best luck we had ever had, we'd be interrupted by one of the most nonsensical experiences.

I didn't have any idea, either, that before sundown that day I'd get my temper all stirred up by the beginning of a series of adventures that would be different from any we had ever had—and that, before the summer was half through, I'd really need some of the information I had read in Dad's new book, which he had on the shelf of the tool cabinet by the north window of our barn, named *What to Do Before the Doctor Arrives.*