

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, I'd better get busy telling you about

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

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

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

“Certainly,” Dad said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bears don’t have tails,” Poetry yelled to Circus.

“Neither do cows jump over moons,” Circus yelled back.

That started Poetry off:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

We all stopped dead in our tracks, and Little Jim's face turned white. I guess he was still thinking about the man that had been buried by a bear, because he had been walking close to Big Jim and holding his stick tighter than anything.

Dragonfly was down on his hands and knees peering through the foliage of a swamp rosebush. Just then we heard a crashing and a snapping of underbrush as if something as big as an elephant was running away, and I could feel a prickly sensation under my straw hat as if my red hair was trying to stand up on end and couldn't because of my hat being on too tight.

Of course I knew that bears hardly ever attacked anybody unless they were very hungry. *But this one might be hungry*, I thought. I got my binoculars up to my eyes real quick but couldn't see anything except a lot of trees and briars and sedge and little ponds of water.

Suddenly I gasped! I'd *seen* it! It was black and hairy and all covered with mud, and it was breaking its way through the swamp as though it was almost as scared as Little Jim—or maybe Bill Collins.

Knowing bears don't generally attack people, and being able to *feel* it, are two different

things. I was actually shaking all over, and for a minute we were all so scared we couldn't talk. I looked around quick to see if we were all there and all right, and we were. Circus was already halfway up an elm sapling, not because he was afraid but because he wanted to see where the bear, or whatever it was, was going.

Pretty soon we all found our voices again, but we didn't sound like a lot of scolding blackbirds, and we didn't look like the notes on Little Jim's music, although I couldn't help but wish we had wings. We sounded more like ghosts whispering to each other in a haunted house in low frightened voices. That is, all except Dragonfly. He had a grin on his face about the size of a jack-o'-lantern, and he looked as if he knew something important.

"Aw!" he said loftily. "What are you so scared for? It wasn't anything but somebody's old hog wallowing in the mud. Come on, I'll show you!"

Well, I'd seen something black and hairy and muddy running through the undergrowth, and it had looked like one of my dad's big black hogs. Yet, I remembered that black bears hunt out swampy places in the hot weather, and I still believed it *might* have been a bear. I could see, however, that it wouldn't do to say so, or they'd make fun of me, and besides I didn't want to frighten Little Jim again.

I reached up and picked a green cluster of winged seeds from the ash tree and started chewing one of them. Then I broke off two or

three yellow-green leaves, which were about nine inches long, each one having seven or nine leaflets, and, taking off my hat, I tucked them inside the crown so my head would keep cool when we got out in the sun again.

Big Jim looked at his watch, and, because it was four o'clock, we decided we'd better go swimming again before we went home. That was another one of Big Jim's rules: we all had to help our folks with the chores, and we had to do it cheerfully. Besides, we had to get them done good and early all this week and next because the churches in town and our church, which was out in the country in a beautiful shady grove, were having what is called a Good News Crusade, and most of us boys went every night.

Little Jim's mother, being the best pianist in the whole county, played the piano at the meetings. There was a big brown tent pitched right in the park in our town, with long board benches that had comfortable backs. There was a big platform for the choir, a grand piano, and everything. But I'll tell you more about that a little later, because something very important happened there.

On the way to the swimming hole, Poetry and I walked together. The rest of the gang had gone on ahead.

He had a mysterious look on his face, and he began to quote a verse from "Christmas Secrets," which goes:

“The air is full of mystery
And secrets are a-wing;
And if you happen on one,
Don’t tell a single thing.”

“Do you think it was a hog?” he asked, his squawky voice more squawky than usual.

“I don’t know,” I said, beginning to feel my spine tingling again.

“I think it was a bear,” Poetry said.

The way he said it made me stop and look at him. “It was somebody’s black hog,” I said, half hoping it wasn’t. I even turned around quick to see if maybe there was a bear behind us, but there wasn’t.

Just then Poetry shoved his hand deep into his overalls pocket and pulled out a dirty bit of something that looked half like hair and half like fur. “Bears shed in the summer, don’t they?” he asked. He had that mysterious, detectivelike look on his face.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“I picked it up back there in the mud—and here’s some more. I found this caught on a rosebush.”

Well, it looked like the real thing, all right, but we didn’t say anything about it to the rest of the gang.

I got home in plenty of time to help Dad with the chores. After I’d gathered the eggs, he sent me down the lane to the pasture for the cows.

“Don’t forget to shut the gate,” he said.

And then he said something that almost made me jump out of my shoes—that is, if I hadn't been barefoot. He said, "Several of our pigs are missing, and it looks like somebody's been a little careless about shutting gates."

"*What!*" I said, staring at him and remembering suddenly that the book I'd read had said that bears like pork better than anything else, and that they sometimes raided farms or barnyards and stole little pigs.

Dad looked back at me kind of hard. I guess he must have thought I was trying to deny the fact that I sometimes forgot to shut the gate. He started to say something, then changed his mind and walked away.

I hurried down the lane after the cows, thinking all the way and saying to myself, "Bears like pork. Bears are crazy about pork. Bears steal little pigs."

Believe me, I shut the gate good and tight when I left it. I wanted in the worst way to tell Dad what I'd seen down in the old swamp, but I didn't dare because Poetry had made me promise I wouldn't.

My next chore was feeding the horses, so I climbed up in the haymow and, with my favorite pitchfork, began to throw down big bunches of sweet-smelling alfalfa hay.

For a month I'd been having a strange feeling every time I was in our haymow, because away up in a corner, tucked in a crack in a log, was my black leather New Testament. You know, I think every boy's parents ought to buy a

neat little New Testament or Bible for him, not a cheap one but a leatherbound one that a boy can be proud of and that won't wear out so quick—that is, if he reads it every day the way he's supposed to. Even poor parents can afford to do that, if they really want to and save their money a little at a time.

You see, Little Jim wasn't the only Christian in the Sugar Creek Gang. Poetry had been one a long time, and Big Jim too. And I'd been one just about a month. In fact, just two days after Charlotte Ann was born, I was "born again," which is an expression the Bible uses for becoming a Christian. It's a wonderful thing—the most important thing in the world, in fact, because if you aren't born again, you'll never go to heaven when you die.

The reason I'd left my New Testament in the crack in the log was to sort of remind God that I was praying for Circus's dad that he'd be born again. I'd made up my mind to leave my New Testament there until Circus's dad became a Christian. Every day I climbed up there and read it and talked to Jesus, which is the same as praying. Maybe some boys would be afraid to talk to Him like that, but why should they be, when Jesus is the best Friend a boy ever had, and came all the way down here from heaven to save us, and was a boy Himself once!

Well, when I'd thrown down all the hay I was supposed to, I climbed away up into the corner again. And because my dad might wonder why I was staying so long, I didn't take time

to read. I just dropped down on my knees, shut my eyes, and told Jesus several important things, kind of like a boy telling his best friend something. I don't remember what I said, but I know I felt very sorry for Circus for not having Christian parents and because his dad spent so much money for beer and whiskey that the children didn't have enough to eat and couldn't buy decent clothes.

Circus's dad had been in the hospital too, and still didn't feel very well, although he was able to work some.

"Bill!" my dad called up the ladder.

"Coming!" I said and hurried back down and fed the horses.