

# 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Big Jim and Little Jim weren't brothers but

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

“Hi, Little Jim,” I said, and he said, “Hi, Bill.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Let’s go out and get him,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He and Big Jim’s daddy are up at the other end of the bayou piling up sacks of sand,”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2

**I**tell you, it's a funny feeling, riding on the top of a hog house in flood waters. I guess we weren't moving nearly as fast as we thought we were, but we *were* moving around in little circles, doing whatever the water wanted us to.

If we hadn't been so scared, it would have been funny, because coming right along behind us was Little Jim's mom's big washtub with that little white-faced, blue-and-white kitten sitting in it and looking even more scared than we felt.

Well, I'd heard of boys tying tin cans to a cat's tail, but I'd never heard of a washtub with a cat in it being tied to a boy's leg. For some reason it didn't seem very funny at the time, especially when I saw Little Jim's face and thought, *What if we do drown! What if we never see our parents again or any of the gang!*

And all the time we were drifting out across the field, getting nearer and nearer to the main part of Sugar Creek, where he was madder than a nestful of bumblebees. We weren't drifting straight toward the bridge, though, but toward the road, which was up on a high embankment. It looked as if we would bump into the bank first and then follow the current along the edge until it got to the bridge.

And there, unless something stopped us, the fierce brown current would grab us and whirl us under the bridge. We'd come out on the other side, right in the worst part of the creek, and go lickety-sizzle straight toward the big island down below the bridge, where there were some tall trees. Maybe we'd bump into one of them and be stopped and could catch hold of a branch and climb up into a tree.

"Look!" Little Jim cried. "There's somebody running down the road!"

Sure enough there was, and it was Circus, our acrobat. He was running and yelling and waving his arms and trying to get to the place where we were going to hit the bank before we did. I guess a million thoughts started wrestling around in my head.

And then I saw a telephone pole at the foot of the embankment, and I knew what Circus was hollering about. And then there he was out in the water, swimming toward that telephone pole. It was a race between him and us, but he got there first and wrapped his legs around the pole just the way he does around a tree when he's climbing one.

And just that second we went racing past, with the cat in the tub swishing along behind us.

You should have seen Circus's right foot shoot out like an octopus's tentacle grabbing for a man. Quicker'n a flash he'd wrapped it around the rope that was fastened to the tub on one end and to my leg on the other.

Before I knew what was happening, I was jerked loose from the roof of the hog house and from Little Jim and was out in the water.

As long as Circus was holding onto the rope with his foot, I knew that if I could get to the telephone pole we'd be saved. But it all happened so suddenly that I went under. I came up sputtering and trying to swim.

Just as I caught hold of the rope with one hand, I looked back, and there was Little Jim lying on his stomach on the flat roof of the hog house, drifting swiftly toward the bridge and toward the maddest part of old Sugar Creek. I could see his face, still as white as a piece of typewriter paper.

He waved an awkward right arm toward us and yelled in a trembly voice, "*Good-bye!*" Then he turned around and grabbed hold of the roof with both hands and was whirled away.

I tell you, it didn't feel very good to know that I was being rescued and that my best friend might not be. All I could see for a minute, while pulling myself by the rope toward the telephone pole, was Little Jim's sad face. And there kept ringing in my ears the words he'd said a little while before that—"It's better for us to d-drown than it would be for Little Tom Till or Big B-Bob, 'cause they're not saved!"

And I made up my mind right that minute that it was the silliest thing in the world for anybody in the world not to repent of his sins and let Jesus save him, because you could never tell what minute something might go wrong and



you'd have to die. It's crazy not to be ready. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world!

Even while I was thinking that, and Circus and I were working our way back to the steep bank that led up to the road—saving the kitten at the same time—I kept wondering if it was too late to help Little Jim. *Maybe, I thought, if we could get up to the road and make a dash for the bridge, we could get there in time to reach down and catch Little Jim by the arms and pull him up.* The water was pretty high there, and if he would stand up, we could reach him easily.

Quicker than it takes to tell, we were up the bank. I untied the tow rope, and then, leaving the tub and the cat, we were running *squash, squash, kerslosh* down the road in our wet clothes toward the bridge. I was feeling like a boy does in a dream when some wild animal is after him. He can't run fast enough to get away, and then pretty soon he wakes up and finds out it isn't so. And after he gets over being scared, he is happy again. But I knew that this wasn't any dream, and I'd have given anything in the world, *anything*, to save Little Jim's life.

And it's a good thing Circus's parents were poor. If they hadn't been, Circus would probably have been wearing boots like the rest of the kids in the neighborhood, and he couldn't have run so fast. You should have seen him run! Lickety-sizzle, like a flash of lightning, he went down that road, leaving me far behind, his feet throwing sand and gravel behind him the way a horse's hooves do when it's galloping.

Panting, gasping, half crying, crazy old tears getting into my eyes, I stumbled on after Circus, not having sense enough to take off my boots so I could run faster. Watching him, I couldn't help but think of a football game, with the quarterback carrying the ball through a whole tangled-up mess of players toward the goal.

Except that Circus wasn't carrying a football but something a million times better. He was carrying the grandest heart a guy ever had, a heart that was full of honest-to-goodness love for Little Jim. I'll bet if the angels that the Bible says are looking after boys and girls were watching Circus streaking down the road to save Little Jim's life, they felt proud of him and felt like screaming for him to hurry up. Only I don't suppose angels ever scream.

You know, the Bible says in one place, where it's talking about children, "Their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven." Jesus said that Himself, and He ought to know, because He was in heaven before He came down to earth to be our Savior. He'd seen maybe a million angels up there.

Just that minute I stumbled over a rock in the road and went sprawling. When I got up and started toward the bridge again, I heard somebody yelling for me to hurry, which I did, not even much feeling the bruised place on my right hand where the skin was all scratched off the knuckles of two fingers from the gravel where I'd fallen.

In a minute I was there, but I couldn't see

anybody, not even Circus. Away out in the swiftest part of the creek, heaving and whirling, was the hog house, *and nobody was on it!*

“Hurry up! Quick, Bill!” I heard Circus yelling from down below somewhere.

And I tell you, I hurried, looking all the time and yet afraid to look below for fear I’d see both Little Jim and Circus down there in the water. As quick as my old waterlogged boots would let me, I was where I’d heard Circus’s voice.

And there, with his legs wrapped around one of the steel beams that stretched from one support of the bridge to another, was Circus, hanging head down and with his arms around Little Jim, holding onto him for dear life.

And Little Jim was holding onto Circus and swaying back and forth. His feet were almost touching the water, which was all foam-covered and full of cornstalks and slabs of ice.

And even while I looked, out of the corner of my eye I saw the hog house bump into a tree downstream and whirl around and turn over on its side.

In a tenth of a jiffy I was helping Little Jim climb up Circus’s body to the bridge floor, where he was safe. And then I started to help Circus, whose face was very red from hanging down like that, and his legs were trembling as if they couldn’t have held on another minute. I braced my feet against the iron girders, and with Little Jim helping a little, but not much because he was weak from being so scared, I

gave Circus just enough of a pull to help him up to safety too.

The very minute he knew he was safe, he just flopped onto the floor of the bridge the way an athlete does after he's run in a terrible race, and he gasped and panted and his breast heaved up and down.

But Little Jim was safe, and so was I. And good old Circus was safe too. We were all trembling and weak but very happy.

I thought I heard Circus say something under his breath about "lifted me."

"What'd you say, Circus?" I asked.

And he said, "Nothing," but after a while, when we were on the way back to Little Jim's house, I heard Circus singing. He had a beautiful voice for a boy, and Little Jim's mom had been giving him voice lessons free, and he liked to sing church hymns very much. He even sang in church sometimes, when they wanted him to. And what do you suppose Circus was singing? I wouldn't let him know I noticed, or he might have stopped—a boy nearly always starts to feel bashful when he knows somebody is listening to him. But this is the chorus of the song:

Love lifted me, love lifted me,  
When nothing else could help,  
    Love lifted me;  
Love lifted me, love lifted me,  
When nothing else could help,  
    Love lifted me.

So away we went, I with my high rubber boots going *splash, swish, kerslosh* through the puddles in the road. Circus, even though his shoes were very wet, was dodging all the big ones because his mother had taught him not to walk in mud puddles.

And Little Jim was still dry, because he hadn't even gotten his feet wet. He could hardly wait until we got back to where his kitten was—and it was still there, sitting down beside the wash-tub, looking lonesome.

You should have seen Little Jim scoop up that little white-faced kitty and hug it. Circus and I carried the washtub between us on the way to Little Jim's house, and pretty soon Little Jim decided to let the kitten ride in it. He walked happily along behind us, looking up at Circus as if he thought he was the most wonderful person in the world for saving his life, which I guess he was.

It didn't make any difference that Circus's parents were poor and that he couldn't afford a haircut as often as the rest of the gang. And sometimes his mother had to patch even the patches on his overalls. Circus was all right on the *inside*, which is more important than being rich and at the same time being mean or stingy or keeping your heart's door jammed tight shut against the most important Person in the whole universe.

Well, that's the most interesting part of the flood story, so I'll get busy now and tell you about our camping trip up north, which we

took in a trailer that Old Man Paddler bought for his nephew to live in—and to give us a vacation in.

It was when our parents heard about Little Jim's and my crazy boat ride that afternoon that they decided we couldn't go out in real boats when we were up north unless we wore life preservers. And it's a good thing we did, because—

But I'll tell you about that when I get to it, and about a little Indian boy whose name was Snow-in-the-Face, and the railroad car Poetry and I discovered away out in the deep woods up there, and a lot of other exciting things.