1

I was so angry because of the things I'd read in the crazy letter I had in my hand that, when Mom called me to hurry up and come into the house because one of the gang wanted to talk to me on the phone, I couldn't even be glad, the way I usually am. Nearly always when Mom yells for me to come to the phone, I am so pleased I just drop whatever I am doing and run like a Sugar Creek cottontail straight to the house, my heart pounding and my mind imagining all kinds of important things I'll probably hear.

But honestly, that letter was terrible. I took another glance at it and shoved in into my pocket—not that I'd have any trouble remembering it. I wouldn't. I'd probably never forget it as long as I lived—that is, if I lived very long, for that letter, written in the craziest handwriting I ever saw, said that I was a roughneck and that I was to beware! That means to look out for something or somebody. It also sounded as if whoever wrote it was terribly mad at me for something I had done or was supposed to have done.

It was a crazy time of the day to get a letter too—just before dark. And it hadn't been brought by our mail carrier either. He came

every morning either in his car or sometimes, in the winter, in a sleigh with bells jingling on his horse's harness. But the letter I held in my pocket had been shoved into our mailbox just a little while ago by some strange-looking man who had sneaked up out of the woods and put it into the box out beside the road, and then had hurried away into the woods again.

"Who is it?" I called to Mom when I reached our kitchen door, ready to dash through to the living room, where I'd make a dive across our nice new rug straight for the phone by the window.

"Wait a minute, Bill Collins!" Mom stopped me with her voice as if I'd been shot. I reached for the broom without even being told to and started sweeping the snow off my boots—I had walked in the deep snow in our yard because I had been reading the crazy letter and hadn't paid any attention to where I was walking.

"Is it Poetry?" I asked her, taking a last two or three quick swipes with the brown-strawed broom. I hoped it was Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the Sugar Creek Gang, who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one of them at the wrong time. Whenever I was mad or glad or had a secret, Poetry was the first one of our gang of seven boys I wanted to talk to.

Just as I was about to say "Hello" into the telephone, Mom said, "Not more than one minute, Bill. I'm expecting a long-distance call from Wally's father."

I'd forgotten all about my cousin Wally, who lived in the city and had a new baby sister. Mom was going there that night to stay for a few days or a week, and Dad and I were going to "batch it," which means we'd have to do our own cooking and even wash our own dishes while she was away.

We hardly ever had a long-distance phone call at our house, so whenever we did, it seemed very important. Just the same, I didn't like to hear her say for me not to talk too long. Mom and Dad were always saying that whenever one of the gang called me up or I called one of them, which means that we maybe did sometimes talk too long.

Anyway, I grabbed up the phone and said, "Hello!"

Sure enough, it was Poetry, my very best pal, and his ducklike voice on the other end of the line made me feel good all over.

"Hi, there, Bill!" the ducklike voice said. "This is Poetry. I've just made up a poem about our new teacher. Want to hear it?"

I did, and I didn't. As you maybe know, we got a new teacher in our one-room school right after Christmas vacation. His name was Mr. Black, and he was maybe forty years old and had some of his hair gone from the middle of the top of his head. We had all been pretty disappointed when we lost our pretty woman teacher, and none of us felt very glad about a change.

In fact, some of us hadn't behaved our-

selves very well that first day, and I especially had had trouble. On top of that, Dad and I'd had an interesting experience in our woodshed when I got home from school. So I had already made up my mind to be respectful to Mr. Black, the way any decent boy ought to be to his teacher.

I wanted to hear Poetry's poem, of course, but mostly I wanted to tell him about the letter I had in my pocket, which called the Sugar Creek Gang a bunch of roughnecks, which none of us boys was trying to be.

"What's the matter?" Poetry squawked. "Don't you want to hear my poem? What are you so quiet for?"

"I was just thinking," I said.

"About what?"

"Oh, just something," I told him.

"Not too long," Mom said behind me.

"I won't," I said to her.

"Won't what?" Poetry said.

"Won't talk very long. We're getting a long-distance call in a minute, so we can't talk too long."

"Want to hear my new poem?"

"Sure," I said, "but hurry up, because I have something very important to tell you."

I could just imagine how Poetry would gasp when he heard the crazy letter I had in my pocket.

If I hadn't had that experience with Dad in our woodshed, I think I would have laughed at Poetry's poem about our new teacher, which went like this:

"The Sugar Creek Gang had the
strangest of teachers
And 'Black' his name was called;
His round red face had the homeliest
features—
He was fat and forty and bald.

"The very first day . . ."

"Can't you hurry?" Mom said behind me. "We're expecting the call right this minute!"

"I've got to hurry," I interrupted Poetry. "We're expecting a long-distance call. My cousin Wally has got a new baby sister and—"

"Oh, all right then," Poetry said, "if you don't think my poem is important—"

"But it is," I said. "It's—why, it's even funny. But I have something even more important to quick tell you. It's about a letter which somebody just shoved into our—into our—" I suddenly sneezed because of the smell of the sulfur that was in the room after Mom had lit a match. I always sneezed when somebody lit a match near me.

"I hope you don't have a cold," Poetry said, "because you're supposed to come over to my house and sleep tonight. That's why I called you up. Mother says for you to stay at our house while your mother is away at your cousin Wally's house."

Well, that sounded good. So in spite of the fact that I wanted to tell Poetry about the letter in my pocket and also Poetry wanted to finish

his poem about our new teacher, Mr. Black, and also mainly because Mom wanted me to stop talking, I turned and asked her, "Can I stay at Poetry's house tonight?"

"Certainly," she said. "I've already planned that for you. Now, will you hang up?"

"I've got to hang up," I said to Poetry, "but I'll be over just as soon as I can. Mom says I can."

"Bring the letter with you," he said, "and bring your father's big long flashlight. There's something very important we have to do tonight."

Boy, oh, boy, when Poetry said to bring Dad's flashlight and that there was something very important we had to do, my imagination started to fly in every direction. Poetry and I had had some of the most exciting experiences at night when I had my dad's long flashlight with me. Once we'd caught a bank robber who was digging for treasure down by the old sycamore tree not far from Poetry's house.

"Sure I'll bring the flashlight," I said, "and the letter too. It's the craziest letter I ever read. It says I'm a roughneck and that all the Sugar Creek Gang are roughnecks and—"

"Hey—" Poetry cut in, saying real saucily to somebody, "Hang up! This line is busy!"

Maybe I'd better explain to you that we had what is called a "party line," and about a half dozen families all used it but had different rings. Anybody who wanted to could listen to anybody he wanted to, just by lifting up his own

telephone receiver. But that is called *eavesdropping* and is considered very impolite and a breach of etiquette and everything.

I knew what Poetry meant, for I'd heard the sound myself. Somebody somewhere had lifted a telephone receiver and was listening to us.

And then Mom came across the room to where I was and said very politely into our telephone, "Hello, Poetry. We'll bring Bill over in the car after a while. He'll have to hang up now because we're waiting for a long-distance call."

I pushed the phone receiver up to Mom's ear, so we could both hear Poetry talk back.

"Surely, Mrs. Collins," he said politely. "I'm sorry I talked so long."

"You boys be good and don't get into any more mischief," Mom said pleasantly.

"We won't, Mrs. Collins," Poetry promised. "And I hope you have a very nice trip. Tell Wally I said hello."

"I will," Mom said. "Will you call your mother to the phone? I've something important to tell her."

"Surely," Poetry said. "So long, Bill. I'll be seeing you pretty soon."

"He's a nice boy," Mom said to me, and I knew by the way she said it that she wasn't angry at me for using what is called a little friendly sarcasm a while ago. That is the easiest way not to have any trouble in a family—if nobody takes anybody too seriously, Dad says.

Boy, oh, boy! I thought. I darted out of our

living room toward the kitchen and was going upstairs to pack my pajamas into my small brown suitcase, when Mom called, "Your pajamas are all ready, Bill, there by the radio."

Then she started talking to Poetry's mom, saying different things, which I didn't pay much attention to, such as "We're very sorry, Lita." Lita was Poetry's mom's first name. "You know how much we'd like to be there. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time. But maybe we can come over for an evening after I get back . . . New babies just don't wait for neighborhood get-togethers! We know you'll all have a wonderful time . . . Yes, that's right . . . Well, look after my boy, and help him keep out of mischief."

It wasn't exactly necessary for my mom to say that, but I didn't get mad at her for saying it because I was already as mad as I could get at whoever had written the crazy note about the gang and me.

I had started to pick up my suitcase by the radio, and Mom was just finishing what she was saying to Poetry's mom when I heard her say, "I've pinned your brooch to Bill's pajamas. It certainly is beautiful. I wish I had one like it. Maybe when I'm in the city, I can look around in the stores a bit . . . Oh, that's all right, Lita . . . No, I wouldn't think of it. I might lose it, and then how would I feel? No, I'll just send it along with Bill. We'll bring him over right away . . . Sorry . . . No . . . Well, good-bye . . . What? . . . Oh, yes . . ."

I wasn't paying much attention, except to hear that she was sending something along with me in my suitcase for Mrs. Thompson. I was in a hurry to get to Poetry's house, so I said, "We're waiting for a long-distance call, Mom. Can't you hang up now and—"

Almost right away she hung up, and also almost right away after that the phone rang again, and it was Wally's dad.

After *that*, we all dived into whatever had to be done before Mom and Dad could get going. They actually left the dishes unwashed for a change. Dad adjusted the oil burner in the big stove in our front room, and in almost no time we were all in the car on our way down the already dark road toward Poetry's house.

"I'll be driving back late tonight or else early tomorrow," Dad said, "so you won't need to bother about doing chores. You just go straight to school from Poetry's house in the morning."

"Poetry's mother will fix your lunch for you," Mom said to me.

I was in the backseat of our two-door sedan, with Mom's luggage and my small suitcase beside me. Mom and Charlotte Ann, my little one-year-old baby sister, were in front so they could keep warm near the heater.

It was a beautiful night. Big lazy flakes of snow were falling, and the headlights of the car certainly were pretty as they shone down the road. The snowflakes seemed to come from somewhere out in the dark, dropping down

into the light of the headlights and then disappearing again, sort of like fireflies in the summer along Sugar Creek.

I had Dad's flashlight and was switching it on and off, shooting it out through the back window at the trees in the woods and toward Sugar Creek.

Pretty soon we came to the little lane that leads to Poetry's house.

"You don't need to turn in," I said. "I can walk the rest of the way."

"Maybe we *had* better go right on," Dad said. "You have the flashlight . . ."

"Sure," I said. "I'll just follow the lane." I had on my boots, and it'd only take me a few minutes to get there, I thought. And my suitcase wasn't heavy.

I could see the light in Poetry's front window. They'd fixed up their basement into a nice recreation room, so he and I would play Ping-Pong and maybe checkers and do a lot of interesting things before it would be time to go to bed. And I'd be sure to show him the crazy letter I had in my pocket.

Thinking of that reminded me that I hadn't shown the letter to my parents yet, and I knew I should before they went away. In fact, I had been thinking all along the way that I had better show it to them before they went to Wally's house, so I spoke up. "Want to read the letter I just found in our mailbox?"

"A letter?" Mom said.

We were still stopped at the gate to Poetry's lane.

"If it won't take too long," she said. "We're a long distance from Wally's house right now, and they wanted us to hurry."

"Here it is," I said and started to hand it over the front seat to Mom, snapping on the ceiling light at the same time.

"It's too dark to read without my glasses," she said. "You read it to us with the flashlight."

This is what I read to them:

> Dear William Collins:
>
> Your son better treat my boy decent or I'll shake the living daylights out of him. It's a pity a family cant move into a naborhood without a gang of ruffnecks beating up on his boy. I don't know if you are the ones who took my wife to church last night or not, but somebody did while I was away from home and you cant believe a thing she says about me. You mind your own business and I'll mind mine. My wife has enuff high and mity ideas without going to some fancy church to get more. If she would obey her husband like the Bible says, it would do her some good to read the Bible, but she don't. Your boy is the worst ruffneck in the whole Sugar Creek Gang of ruffnecks, so beware.

When I finished reading, both my parents were very quiet, while Charlotte Ann babbled

and wiggled and tried to stand up in Mom's lap and look at me. She was also trying to get her hands on the flashlight and the letter, which I wouldn't let her do.

Then, because Dad was a very good Christian and since talking about prayer or the Bible and things like that was as natural for him as for a boy to talk about slingshots and marbles, he said. "We'll pray for whoever wrote it, and maybe the Lord will change his heart."

But Mom was bothered about that part of the letter that called the Sugar Creek Gang a bunch of roughnecks—and especially the part that called me the worst roughneck in the whole gang. She said, "Are you sure you and Shorty Long haven't been having trouble? Are you sure you have been treating him like a new boy in the neighborhood *ought* to be treated?"

As you maybe know, Shorty hadn't lived long in our neighborhood, and he and I hadn't been getting along at all. We'd had a fight the very first time we met and had had another one that very day. But he had started both of them.

"Of course that letter is from his father," Dad said.

"Answer me," Mom said.

But at that moment Charlotte Ann managed to squirm far enough out of Mom's arms to reach over the front seat and get hold of the letter I had in my hand. She held onto it like a bulldog holding onto another dog's throat—or like a snapping turtle holding onto a barefoot boy's big toe.

"Let loose!" I said to Charlotte Ann. "This letter is very important." I pried her soft little hand loose, which she didn't like very well. She started to cry, so I didn't have a chance to answer Mom.

"Answer me," Mom said again, getting in her words while Charlotte Ann was taking in a breath right before her next howl. *Such an unearthly noise to make in the night*, I thought. *You'd think we were a bunch of kidnappers or something.*

I answered Mom, though. "Shorty Long and I have had trouble, but I'm trying to act like I ought to." When I said that, it seemed to me I'd been giving Shorty Long just what a new boy deserved, especially one who needed a good licking by somebody who was big enough to do it. I had proved I was that very day.

Then Dad, who is always giving me good commonsense advice—which is sometimes hard for me to take but good for me—said, "Remember, every boy has a soul, Bill, and that he needs a Savior, and sometimes a boy needs a friend, too, before he will become a Christian."

"Yes sir," I said, and I knew he was right, although I wasn't in a mood right that minute to admit it.

"Well," Mom said, "we'd better be going on." Her voice suddenly was very kind and not a bit worried as she said, "I'll drop you men a card every day I'm gone. Be sure to keep the dishes washed at least once a day, and remember to sweep off the snow before coming into the house on my nice new living room rug."

I knew Mom was talking to me mostly, because Dad hardly ever needed to be reminded about using the broom on his boots, Mom having already trained him to do it.

I reached over and shook hands with Dad, gave Mom a short kiss, and was about to give Charlotte Ann one when she grabbed hold of my cap and pulled it off, which made me wonder whatever makes baby sisters so ill-mannered anyway.

I got my cap again and was ready to go when Mom said, "There's something in your suitcase for Mrs. Thompson. She knows about it, so be sure to remember to give it to her."

"I will," I said, hardly hearing her, because that didn't seem half as important as the letter I was going to show to Poetry when I got there.

We all said good-bye, I slipped out of the car, and a jiffy later they were gone. Their lights were like a big snowplow pushing back the dark for their car to follow it through. And there I was alone at the side of the road, with the big lazy snowflakes falling all around me and upon me and all of a sudden feeling lonesome.

Then I turned, shining the flashlight around in a circle at the trees in the woods on one side of Poetry's lane and at the bent and twisted cornstalks of the cornfield on the other side. I started down the lane toward Poetry's house, wondering why he hadn't put on his boots and warm clothes and come out to meet me at the gate.

I had the letter and my little suitcase in one hand and the flashlight in the other. I could hardly wait till I got to Poetry's house.

All of a sudden I heard a weird sound out in the woods not far from me. It sounded like a screech owl, and it went *shay-shay-shay-a-a-a.* It scared me stiff and made me want to run. But it was almost an eighth of a mile up the lane yet before I would get to Poetry's house. There really wasn't any sense in my being scared. I'd heard screech owls many a time at night, and they weren't dangerous. Dad says they are the farmers' friends. They eat mice and cutworms and things.

But for some reason, I *was* scared. The woods beside which I was walking was the same woods out of which that strange-looking man in old work clothes had come walking to put that letter in our mailbox. And even though I had the flashlight and could see where I was going, I kept remembering the first and last sentences in the letter, which were: "Your son better treat my boy decent, or I'll shake the living daylights out of him. . . . Your boy is the worst ruffneck in the whole Sugar Creek Gang of ruffnecks, so beware."

The owl let out another moaning, quavering wail. *Shay-shay-shay-a-a-a.* And I actually felt my hair trying to stand on end under my winter cap. That old screech owl must have been in the tree right above me, for it sounded terribly close.

Then, just like that, things began to hap-

pen. A gray shadow shot out from behind an evergreen and made a dash for me. Before I could even scream, which I couldn't have done anyway since I was so scared, somebody's strong hand twisted me around and around and gave me a big shove headfirst into a snowdrift.

2

It certainly was no fun lying upside down in a snowdrift and being scared half to death at the same time. I still had Dad's flashlight in my hand, which he always had urged me to be very careful not to lose, but the letter I'd had in my other hand was gone.

While I was trying to untangle myself from myself and scramble out of the snowdrift, somebody yelled down at me fiercely, "You little redheaded runt! Let that be a lesson to you to be careful what you tell people over the phone!"

How'd he know I was redheaded? I wondered. Then I felt how cold my head was and knew my cap was off. I also remembered the sound of somebody picking up a telephone receiver and listening to what Poetry and I were saying.

A lot of voices began yelling from the direction of Poetry's house just then, and it sounded like the whole Sugar Creek Gang. I tell you that was a welcome sound. I didn't have time to wonder why all the gang was there, but I was glad they were coming. I could see a lantern swaying, and at the same time there were different-pitched voices hollering all kinds of things, and I knew it must be the whole gang—or most of it.

The guy who had shoved me into the ditch

must have been scared himself, for quick as a flash he dodged behind the evergreen tree and then ran lickety-split through the snow. I heard the sound of his feet crunching through the underbrush of the woods, and then I couldn't hear him any longer because the gang was making so much noise as they hurried up Poetry's lane to meet me.

I surely was glad to see the gang and also glad that the big bully, whoever he was, was gone. For the first time I noticed I had a pain in my jaw, which meant I must have been hit by his fist or else had got hurt on a tree root or something when I fell into the snowdrift.

I must have lost control for a minute, for when the gang came crunching and yelling up to me in the falling snow, I was actually crying. I was trying not to and hating myself for doing it, because a boy hates to be caught crying by anybody, since people might think he is a sissy or a coward, which I *wasn't*. I was mad at myself for doing it, but for half a minute I couldn't help myself.

So I blurted out to the gang. "Let's get him . . . after him, gang! The dirty crook! He stole my letter and knocked the living daylights out of me, and now he's running away. Come on. Let's get him!"

"Get who?" . . . "What?" . . . "Where is he?" . . . "Who are you talking about?" . . . "'S'matter Bill?" . . . "What you crying about?" . . . "Where's your cap?" . . . "What are you all covered with snow for?"

The gang was firing questions at me like snowballs, and I couldn't answer a one of them because I was still mad. But now that the gang was there, I felt very brave at the same time. I wanted to run after the bully and catch him and have all of us to beat up on him, whoever he was.

Right that minute, I couldn't any more answer all the gang's questions than fly, but, as I said, I felt very brave all of a sudden, and if I had had the bully there, whoever he was, I could have knocked the living daylights out of *him* all by myself. They certainly were a great gang, the best gang a boy ever belonged to, I thought, anywhere in the whole world.

"Here's your cap." Little Jim's voice sounded like a mouse's voice that was very polite. I could see his small, kind face in the light of Poetry's kerosene lantern, and it had that innocent lamblike look that it nearly always has, even when he is being mischievous.

"Thanks, Little Jim," I said, liking him even better than I sometimes do, because he is always doing things like that for me. He is always doing things for his parents, too, without being told, which my mom thinks is the main reason Little Jim is a great guy. Maybe it is.

I shook the snow off and out of my cap and put it on again, not putting the ear flaps down though, because I was pretty hot. Boys nearly always do that to their caps whenever they've gotten warmed up on a cold day or night.

The gang was chattering and chattering and asking excited questions, and I was trying to answer. Big Jim is our leader and the only one of us that has anything on his upper lip that looks like a mustache. And even it doesn't look like one but looks more like the down you see on a little baby pigeon when you look at it in its nest.

All of a sudden Big Jim said, "Quiet, everybody. Let him talk!"

I told them the whole story, all about my cousin Wally, who lived in the city, having a new baby sister. And that Mom had to be taken there by my dad. And that while we were getting ready to go, I'd seen somebody sneak up through the woods from across the road and put something in our mailbox. And how, when I'd gotten it and read it, I saw it was addressed to William Collins, Sr. And . . .

Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang was standing and shivering beside Poetry, the barrel-shaped member. He was sort of leaning up against him on the side of Poetry that was the other side from which way the wind was blowing. He said, "But—but you aren't William Collins, Senior. That letter was written to your dad."

"Sure," Circus, our monkey-faced acrobat, said, "Dads are seniors, and their kids are juniors."

"Not always," Poetry squawked. "Not when nearly all the children in the home are girls." He was being a little bit sarcastic, because Cir-

cus had six sisters and not even one brother to make life easier for him.

Circus looked around as though he was looking for a tree to climb. That was what he'd nearly always rather do than anything else when he had a chance. But there wasn't any tree small enough, so he started catching snowflakes, reaching out and grabbing them and pretending to make a little pile of them in one of his kind of dirty hands.

"Anyway," I began again, "the letter was crazy, and lots of the words were misspelled. It said the Sugar Creek Gang was a bunch of roughnecks, and that I was the worst roughneck of the whole gang and—"

"You aren't!" Dragonfly piped up. "Poetry is." He shouldn't have said that, because it wasn't any time to be funny. But Dragonfly didn't always know when it was or wasn't time to be funny, since he couldn't help being funny nearly all the time anyway.

I ignored his remark, as did most of the others, and went on with my exciting story, waving my turned-on flashlight around in a circle and saying, "Anyway it sounded like he thought my dad's name was William instead of Theodore, which it is, but the letter said we had to treat his son decently and not beat up on him and—"

"It was Shorty Long's dad who wrote the letter then," Little Jim said.

That sounded right, because the gang, and especially Bill Collins, had had a fight with him

that very day, and I'd had one with him about two weeks before, not long after Shorty Long's family had moved into our neighborhood.

I told the rest of what had happened as fast as I could, with different ones of the gang interrupting me every other minute to ask questions. But pretty soon I had the whole thing told—how I'd talked to Poetry on the phone and that somebody had been listening in when I told him about the crazy misspelled letter.

"I heard *two* telephones go up and down," Poetry said, "not just one. There must have been two neighbors listening."

"I heard *three,*" Circus said as he stopped catching snowflakes.

"What!" I said. "Were you listening too?"

"Sure, I wanted to call you up and tell you something important, and so I lifted the receiver to see if the line was busy. You and Poetry were already talking. So while you were talking and I was listening, I heard three different telephone receivers go up. And whoever the people were, they were listening to you."

"Maybe one of them was mine," Dragonfly said. "I was going to call you up about something important and—"

"Quiet!" Big Jim ordered. "Let's have the whole story. Go ahead, Bill."

I went ahead and said, "Then when I'd said good-bye to my folks right there by the gate and they had started on down the road on the way to Wally's house, a screech owl let out a ter-

rible wail and scared me half to death. And then, while I was getting over being scared, somebody shot out from behind that fir tree and grabbed the letter out of my hand and shoved me into the ditch. He said, "You little redheaded runt! Let that be a lesson to you to be careful about what you tell people over the telephone!"

"Then it was Shorty Long's dad who was listening in and who wanted the letter back again!" Circus said.

Little Jim said, "I don't think the Longs have any phone, because Mom tried to call there last Saturday to ask Mrs. Long to go to church with us. The telephone was discon—discon—"

"Disconnected," Dragonfly said, and Little Jim said, "Yeah, disconnected."

"Maybe they had it connected again," Circus said, pretending to eat all the snowflakes he had caught. "Maybe they paid their bill."

Circus probably was the only one of the Sugar Creek Gang to know what that might mean, because his dad used to get drunk before he became a Christian. Then they sometimes couldn't pay their telephone bill for a long time and had to have their phone disconnected.

Big Jim spoke then, and in the light of Poetry's lantern, which was smoking a little, I could see that he was thinking about something very seriously. He said, "It couldn't have

been Mr. Long listening in on your line. He's not on *your* line. He's on *ours*."

Well, that was that.

Anyway, I was rattling on again, telling them that, whoever it was, he had heard the gang coming and had made a dash for the fir tree, and that I'd heard him running through the woods only a few minutes ago. Telling the gang that and still being mad and also very brave (because the gang was with me), I began to feel my blood getting hot, and I said, "Let's follow his tracks and see where he went. Let's find out who it is!"

And Poetry, who is interested in being a detective someday and is always talking about clues and things, said, "If we had the letter, it would be a good clue."

"We'll have to hurry," Big Jim said, "or this snow will cover up all his tracks," which it would in even just a little while.

"Let's run up to the house and tell my folks we're going to take a walk," Poetry said. "We can leave Bill's suitcase there and—"

Suitcase! I'd forgotten all about it. Something in my mind started whirling. *Where is my suitcase? Why—why—*

"Hey!" I yelled. "Where is my suitcase? Hey! Why, it's gone. It's—that guy must have taken it with him. And it's got my brand-new pair of pajamas in it!"