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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Listen," Poetry hissed beside me.

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

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

sounded as if the shovel had struck something hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's go home," Dragonfly said.

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

"I'm not s–scared," Dragonfly said.

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

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As I said, the three of us started to climb through the rail fence to go to the hole in the ground and investigate what had been going on there. It took us only seconds to get through the fence. Poetry squeezed himself through first, since he is almost twice as big around as either Dragonfly or me. If he could get through, we knew we could, too.

I carried the flashlight, Dragonfly the string of seven fish, and Poetry carried himself. To get to the mound of earth, we had to wind our way around among chokecherry shrubs, wild rosebushes with reddish roses on them, mullein stalks, and different kinds of wildflowers such as blue vervain and especially ground ivy. I noticed it had a lot of dark purple flowers on it—the same color as the vervain. The ground ivy flower clusters were scattered among the heart-shaped leaves of the vine.

Soon we were there, and the three of us, in the form of a right-angle triangle, were standing around the hole. An imaginary line running from Poetry to me made the hypotenuse of the triangle, I thought, and another imaginary line running from Dragonfly to me would make the base.

There wasn't a thing to see in the hole

except a lot of fresh dirt. In fact, there wasn't a thing of any interest whatever to a guy like Poetry, who was the kind of boy who was always looking for a clue of some kind—and especially a mystery—to jump out at him the way a jack-in-the-box does when you press a spring.

The only thing that happened while we were standing half-scared in the silence, looking down into the hole and at the mound of yellowish-brown earth, was that all of a sudden a big beetle came zooming out of the darkness and landed *wham-ety-sizzle-ker-plop* against the side of my freckled face. It bounced off and landed upside down on the yellowish-brown earth, where it began wriggling and twisting and trying to get off its back and onto its six spiny-looking legs.

Anybody who knows anything about bugs and beetles knows that a june bug isn't a bug but is a beetle. It has two different names, one of them being a June beetle and the other a May beetle, depending upon whichever month of the year it flies around in the country where you live.

I was searching every corner of my mind to see if I could imagine that anything I was seeing was a clue to help us solve the new mystery that we had just discovered. Who in the world was the man, and why had he been here? Why had he gotten scared when he heard the bob-white and the turtledove?

I was also remembering that June beetles get awfully hungry at night, and they eat the

foliage of oak and willow and poplar trees. In the daytime they hide themselves in the soil of anybody's pasture or in the grass in the woods. June beetles are also crazy about lights at night. The very minute they see one, they make a beetle-line for it just like the beetle that right that second was struggling on its back on the mound of earth.

"Crazy old June beetle!" I said, and Poetry answered, "June *what?*"

"Crazy old June *beetle,*" I said, shining my flashlight directly on it and pushing the light up close to its brown body so that Poetry and Dragonfly could see what I was talking about.

Poetry in a disgusted voice said, "When are you going to get over that buggy idea of studying insects?"

I knew I might get over it almost anytime, as I generally do some new hobby that I pick up in the summer. But I didn't want anybody to make fun of the fun I was having studying insects. Dad and I were having more fun that summer than you could shake a stick at, catching different kinds of insects, especially beetles, which anybody knows have four wings. The two wings in front are not used for flying but are like a hard rainproof roof protecting its two flying wings. Those, when the beetle isn't flying, are all nicely folded up underneath like two colored umbrellas.

Little Jim was always collecting things, too, and he was to blame for inspiring me to start a collection of my own. That summer he was

looking up different kinds of wild flowers and writing their names in a notebook. But that week Dad and I were studying beetles.

Just that minute the big brown beetle I had my flashlight focused on wriggled itself off the clod of dirt and went *tumblety-sizzle* down the side of the mound and landed *ker-plop* in the grave itself.

"Poor little scarab beetle," I said to it. "I'll bet that right this very second one of your nearest relatives is in that great big yellow-stomached catfish I caught a half hour ago at the mouth of the branch."

Anybody knows that one of the best baits in the world to catch a catfish at night is a juicy grub worm, which is a little C-shaped larva that hatches out of the egg of an insect such as a June beetle.

"You'd be scared, too," Poetry said, "if you were flying around at night and saw a light in a cemetery accidentally and all of a sudden found yourself right in the bottom of a newly dug grave."

"Poetry," I said, "I didn't say *scared*. I said *scarab*." Then, feeling kind of proud of all the different things Dad and I had learned that week, I began to rattle off some of it to Poetry. "That's what kind of beetle it is," I said. "Only it doesn't eat dead stuff like some scarab beetles do. Its larvae eat the roots of nearly everything Dad plants in our new ground, but most scarabs eat dead things and worse stuff."

"Cut out the education!" Poetry said. "Who

cares about that? I suppose you think that's why he flew into this old cemetery in the first place. He was looking for something dead to eat. Maybe that's why he dived headfirst into the side of your face!"

"Cut it out, yourself," I said, feeling a little temper-fire starting in my mind.

Just then the June beetle unscrambled himself or herself, spread his shell-like front wings and his reddish-brown back wings and took off again, straight in the direction of my face. But I snapped off the flashlight quick and ducked my head, and he missed me and disappeared into the night, on his way, maybe, to the lighted window of somebody's house. If he should happen to see one somewhere, and if there should be a window open without a screen, some woman or girl would soon be screaming bloody murder for a man or boy to come and save her life.

"Turn your light on again, quick!" Dragonfly said. "Let's get out of here!" He quickly started to do it himself, but we stopped him.

We looked all around everywhere but still couldn't find a single clue to tell why whoever he was had been digging there.

"Hey!" Poetry exclaimed excitedly all of a sudden. "Here's a clear shoe print in the soft dirt!"

Then, as if he had seen a ghost, he almost screamed as he said, "It's a *woman's* high-heeled shoe!"

What on earth? I thought.

"But it was a m–m–man digging!" Dragonfly stammered.

"Then it was a woman dressed in overalls!" I said in the most excited voice I had heard myself use in a long time.

I stooped and shoved Dad's powerful flashlight down next to the neat little shoe print. "She had very small feet," I said.

Naturally, there wasn't anything extramysterious about a woman wearing overalls or jeans around Sugar Creek, especially when she was doing the kind of hard work that men have to do and some women have to do sometimes. But what would a woman be doing digging in an abandoned cemetery late at night?

"What on earth?" I said.

Not a one of us knew what to do or say next, so we decided to go over to the old maple tree. The minute we got there, Poetry ordered me to shine my light around the tree trunk while he studied the bark to see if any of it had been freshly knocked off.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"To see if a *human* bobwhite or a *human* turtledove was hiding up there among the branches as a sort of lookout for the woman. Those two bird whistles were warnings of some kind."

What he said made sense, but we couldn't stay all night, and our six parents would be wondering why we didn't come home—and also worrying. Any boy who has good sense doesn't like to do any dumb thing to make his parents worry any more than they would do

anyway. A parent is something a boy would have a hard time doing without, especially when it is time for breakfast or dinner or supper. Besides, who would give him a licking when he needed it, which every once in a while he probably does?

So we decided to go on home, get secret word to the rest of the gang—Big Jim, Circus, Little Jim, and Little Tom Till—to all meet us at the pine tree beside Sarah Paddler's tombstone tomorrow right after lunch. Then we could look to see if together we could find out what had been going on: why a limping woman in overalls was digging in an old abandoned cemetery, and who had given the bobwhite and turtledove calls and why.

"Let's go home and get some sleep," I said to Dragonfly and Poetry. We would go up the lane to the highway, following the old brown path that, twenty minutes ago, the car had followed.

Then what to my wondering ears should come, from back in the direction *of* the open grave and Sarah Paddler's tombstone, but a quail's sharp, clear call. *"Bob White! Bob White! Poor Bob White!"*

Dragonfly, who had been standing there under the tree with us, his teeth chattering, jumped as if a firecracker had exploded under him. He whirled into fast life, and a second later his spindly legs were flying like a June beetle's wings, carrying him up the lane toward the road that would lead us home.

As fast as two other firecrackers getting exploded from the explosion of the first one, Poetry and I dashed madly after him. The faster I ran, the more scared I got. We didn't stop until, panting and gasping for breath, we got to my house.

Well, at the very second we came panting into our yard and up to the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk about twenty feet from our back door, Dad came sauntering up from the direction of the barn. He was carrying a kerosene lantern and—would you believe it? —*a spade and a shovel!*

"Wh–what are you doing?" I said, still panting and a little mixed up in my mind.

"Oh, just digging around in the earth a little," Dad said in a lazy, yawning voice. "Been burying something or other."

Three boys looked at each other from three different directions and felt terribly disappointed, for it looked as if our mystery was going to explode right in front of our worried faces.

"Somebody die?" Poetry asked, trying to be mischievous at a time when he shouldn't have.

Dad said indifferently, "Just a couple of newborn pigs. Old Red Addie gave us a new family of eight tonight. Two of them didn't live, so I thought I'd bury them right away."

After our having been half scared to death, here our mystery was all solved, I thought. Or was it? How about the woman's shoe tracks and the mysterious birdcalls and the car?

Well, we divided our seven fish into three parts. Poetry took three sunfish, Dragonfly three, and I took the big catfish, which I myself had caught using the descendant—or else what might have been the ancestor—of a June beetle. That big, yellow-stomached catfish was as big as three sunfish. It was, in fact, as big as all six of the insignificant fish that Dragonfly and Poetry had pulled in after the fish had accidentally hooked themselves onto their merely worm-baited hooks and gotten themselves pulled in to shore.