1

Our six sets of Sugar Creek parents expected us to have a very safe and sane winter vacation at the Snow Goose Lodge.

They expected it because our camp director was to be Barry Boyland, Old Man Paddler's nephew. Barry had taken us on two north woods summertime trips, and we'd not only come back alive but were, as they expressed it, "better boys than when we went."

We had gone South once in the winter, all the way down to the Mexican border. We'd gone up North twice in the summer, but never before had we spent a week in the north woods in the winter. Our folks seemed to think it would be good for us to have the experience of ice fishing, skiing, playing boys' games around an open fire in a fireplace, and learning a little more about woodcraft and other things it is worthwhile for a boy to know and do.

It's a good thing our parents didn't know in advance that a one-hundred-pound timber wolf would be hanging around the lodge most of the time we were there.

And my mother's grayish-brown hair would have turned completely gray overnight if she had known that the weather in the Paul Bunyan Playground was going to be so unseason-

ably warm that it would wake up the hibernating bears—and that we would have an adventure with an honest-to-goodness live bear before our wonderful week was over.

Our folks certainly didn't imagine that after nearly a week of unseasonably warm weather, while the bears were still out, not having found their new winter quarters, a wild blizzard would come sweeping in and we would be caught out in it a long way from the lodge, not able to tell directions or to find our way back.

It's a very good thing our parents didn't know.

Of course, none of the gang knew it either. All we knew was that somewhere in the wilds of the North, near a town called Squaw Lake, on the shore of a lake by the same name, there was a lodge called the Snow Goose, and we were going to have a one-week winter vacation there.

The Snow Goose Lodge, as you maybe already know, if you've read the story named *The Green Tent Mystery,* was owned by the Everards, people who spent part of one wonderful summer camping in a green tent in our own Sugar Creek territory.

What you don't know, and maybe ought to before you get to the most exciting part of this story, is that our camp director, Barry Boyland, was studying in a Minneapolis college, and the vacation was for his education as well as ours.

"He's writing an important paper on 'Wildlife in the Frozen North,'" Mom said at the supper table one evening before we went.

"And you boys are to help him while you're there," Dad said across the table from me.

Mom's kind of bright remark in answer was: "You are not to *be* the wildlife, understand, but only to help Barry learn all he can about it."

I knew from what they had said, and the way they said it, that I was expected to behave myself even better than usual.

What else you don't know—and maybe would like to—is that this year the Everards had gone to California for the winter. The Gang and Barry would be alone at Snow Goose, except for the time Ed Wimbish, an old trapper, would spend with us.

The day finally arrived for us to leave. After we'd said our last good-byes to our envious fathers and our half-worried mothers, we were on the big bus and gone. Barry would meet us at Minneapolis. Then we'd spend the night in a hotel to get acquainted with what it is like to stay in a big city hotel. We'd start early the next morning in Barry's station wagon for the Snow Goose.

After we had traveled maybe twenty-five miles on the bus, Big Jim, who was sitting in the seat beside me, drew a letter from an inside pocket and said, "I got this just before we left. It's from the Everards."

I read the letter and felt my spine tingling with the kind of feeling I always get when I'm beginning to be scared. When I'd finished it, I passed it back, saying, "Better not let Little Jim

and Dragonfly know about it. They're too little. They'd be s–scared."

There was no use keeping the secret from any of the other members of the gang, though. We'd all have to know sooner or later. So Big Jim let everybody read the letter, the scary part of which was:

> You won't need to be afraid of any of the wildlife you will see around the lodge. The bears are in hibernation, and the wolves are cowards and afraid of human beings. You'll probably not see even one wolf, unless it is Old Timber, which Mr. Wimbish will tell you about. We've never seen him ourselves. Ed calls him the ghost wolf because he always fades from sight a second after you see him—or so Ed says. But Ed exaggerates, and you can take some of what he says with several grains of salt.

"Sounds fishy to me," I said to Big Jim. I'd read stories about wolves, and in the stories they hadn't been afraid of human beings at all.

Poetry, who had brought his camera along, said, "I've always wanted a picture of a human ghost but could never get one. I'm going to try a ghost *wolf!*"

His tone of voice was light, but I knew from the way he looked at me that he was only talking that way to help keep Little Jim and Dragonfly from worrying.

When we got to Minneapolis, Barry met us and took us to the Hastings Hotel, where we

had two big double rooms with a bath between them and an extra cot in each room.

Dragonfly tried to make us laugh by trying a very old and very worn-out joke on us. He said, "How come we have to have a bathtub when we aren't going to stay till Saturday night?"

"Quiet!" Big Jim ordered. "I'm phoning Sugar Creek to tell them we're all here and all right."

Dragonfly tried another joke, saying, "But some of us are not all *there,*" which wasn't funny, either.

Soon Big Jim had his mother on the phone.

I was standing close by, looking out the window at a small snow-covered park with trees and shrubs scattered through it. My mind's eye was imagining Old Timber standing tall and savage-looking with his long tongue out, panting and looking up at us. Even though my thoughts were at Snow Goose Lodge, it was easy to hear what Big Jim was telling his mother and also to hear what her excited mother voice was saying to him. She could hardly believe we were there so soon.

Then all of a sudden there were what sounded like a dozen other mother voices on the party line, trying to give Big Jim special orders for their sons. Big Jim had a pencil in his hand and was grinning and writing. Then, all of a sudden he was holding out the phone to me, saying, "It's your mother. She wants to talk to you."

"Your compass, Bill," Mom said. "You left it

on the upstairs bureau. Be careful not to get lost in the woods. Better buy a new one if none of the other boys have any. You know you got lost up there once before—and also on Palm Tree Island."

It was good advice, although it worried me to have her worry about me.

"Don't worry," I said into the phone and maybe into the ears of five other mothers. "The sun shines up here too—the very same sun that shines down there—and we can tell directions by it anytime."

"Then be sure your watch is running and the time is right *all* the time," she ordered me. And I knew *she* knew the secret of telling directions on a sunshiny day if you had a watch and knew how to use a certain Scout trick. Mom was right, though. The watch had to be set correctly.

I guess a boy ought to be glad he has a mother to give him good advice, even if sometimes he doesn't need it because he already knows exactly what she is telling him.

While we were all getting our hair combed, our ties straight, our shoes touched up a little, and our coat collars brushed for dinner in the hotel, we tossed what we hoped were bright remarks at one another. Nobody got angry at anybody since it is a waste of good temper to lose it on a friend.

Nothing happened of any importance till after dinner, which at Sugar Creek we would have called supper.

I'd thought Barry seemed a little anxious

about something while we were in the dining room. He hardly noticed the pretty murals, except to tell us they were enlarged photographs in full color of actual cherry trees, with grass and dandelions underneath and a gravel road running past. They covered one whole wall of the dining room.

He kept looking around, and whenever what is called a "page" went through, calling out names of people wanted on the phone, he seemed to hope his own name would be called.

We hadn't any sooner gotten back to our rooms and settled down a little than the phone rang. I was closest to it and, in a mischievous mood, pretended a dignified voice and answered, saying, "Room 423, the Hastings Hotel. William Collins speaking."

I certainly felt foolish a second later when a woman's voice said, "May I speak to Barry, please—Mr. Boyland, I mean?"

I felt and heard myself gulp, then I answered, "Certainly. Just a moment."

I didn't have to call Barry, though. He had been sitting under a floor lamp on the other side of the room, reading a book called *Hunting in the Great Northwest* and taking notes with his green pen, maybe jotting down things he could quote in the important paper he was going to write for his college class.

Well, the very second the phone rang, he was out of his chair like a rabbit scared out of its hole. Almost before I could hand him the phone, he had it and was saying, "Hello!" in a

voice that sounded as if he was all alone with somebody he liked extrawell and was telling her something nobody else was supposed to hear.

Maybe it wasn't polite for me to listen, but how could I help it? It wouldn't have been polite for me to stop my ears, would it?

I couldn't tell what the woman's musical voice on the other end of the line was saying, but Barry's deep-voiced answers were like a boy's hand stroking a baby rabbit in the palm of his other hand. He was talking to her about his trip into the frozen North and asking her not to worry, that he'd be all right.

"Yes," Barry was saying to the person I imagined was his age and was pretty and could smile like our Sugar Creek teacher, Miss Lilly. "I'll be careful. I have six bodyguards, you know."

And then, all of a sudden, Barry was saying, "Yes. I think I can run over for a few minutes."

He put down the phone, turned back into the room, and said, with excitement in his eyes but with a very calm voice, "I'll have to be gone for an hour or so, boys. You can wait here, or you may go down to the basement game room for Ping-Pong—but mind you, no disturbance! Remember who you are."

"Your mother worried about you, too?" Little Jim asked, and I knew he was thinking that whoever called Barry was Barry's own mother, giving him last-minute instructions to take care of himself.

Barry looked at Little Jim with a faraway

expression in his eyes. Then he grinned and answered, "Every good mother worries a little."

Maybe I shouldn't have said what I did just then, but I might not have been able to help it even if I'd tried. This is what came out of my mind as I answered Little Jim, "His mother is maybe only about twenty years old."

Barry shot me a quick look with a grin in it and right away put in a phone call for a taxi. He got his heavy brown storm coat out of the closet, put it on, brushed a few flecks of dust off its dark-brown mouton collar, took another look in the mirror at his hair, ran his hand over his chin to see if he needed a shave, decided he didn't—or if he did, he wouldn't have time to give himself one—and a minute later was out the door and gone.

His idea that we might want to go to the game room in the basement was a good one. So pretty soon, Big Jim, who had charge of us, gave the order, and pretty soon after that we were in the basement playing noisy sets of the same kind of table tennis we sometimes played in Poetry's basement back home.

I watched for my chance to talk to Poetry alone for a few minutes, because I had something special on my mind. When he and I finished a game and handed our paddles to Dragonfly and Little Jim, we took the elevator to the hotel lobby.

We knew it wasn't supposed to be good for a boy to eat hard-to-digest candy before going to bed, so we bought the kind of candy bar we

liked best and hoped it wouldn't be hard to digest.

Poetry said, as he unwrapped his, "My jaw muscles haven't had any exercise since we were eating dinner beside the cherry trees."

"Supper," I said.

"Dinner," he countered and added, "the people back at Sugar Creek are behind the times!"

We were in two big leather-upholstered chairs behind a potted palm at the time. Ignoring what Poetry thought was a bright remark, I told him about the cheerful woman's voice I'd heard on the phone, asking for Barry. "She wasn't any more his mother than the man in the moon is a man," I said.

Poetry let out a low whistle, squinted his eyes, then said, "Poor Barry," and shook his head sadly.

"How come you say *that?*" I asked.

He sighed, took another bite of his bar, shook his head again sadly, and answered, "Life is more fun being a boy—without growing up and having a girl to worry about."

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes, while I thought about the happiness I'd seen in Barry's eyes when he was flying around the room getting his tie straight, his coat on, the dust off its lapels, and running his hand over his chin the way Dad does to see if he needs a shave.

There was a radio on in the hotel lobby, and somebody's voice was racing along very

fast, giving a news program. My mind was so busy thinking about Barry and wondering where he was and when he would be back that I hardly noticed the news announcement about the weather. It was something about "unseasonably warm weather in northern Minnesota continuing for another week." I could see, out the hotel's large picture window, the stars twinkling in an absolutely clear sky.

Poetry and I, behind our potted palm—pretending we were in a climate where palm trees grow naturally, such as at the very bottom of the United States where we had spent a whole week's winter vacation with Mom and Dad and Dragonfly's parents—sat munching away, talking dreamily about imaginary things:

"See those seagulls up there, tossing around in the hot summer air?" he asked.

I answered lazily, "Don't make me open my eyes. I'm too sleepy here on this sandy beach under this palm tree."

"All right, then. See those snow geese flying? See that beautiful white snow goose, with black wing tips and a pink beak, headed north to the lodge?"

I yawned lazily, my nine-o'clock-at-night imagination making me feel sleepy. "I don't know what Barry went after in such a hurry, but I wish he'd come back. It's my bedtime."

And that's when Barry came breezing into the lobby, and with him was a sparkling-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl in a dark green coat with wide fur sleeves and a fur collar. She was only

about five-and-a-half feet tall and was laughing, as also was Barry. They didn't seem to know there was anybody in the world except each other. He was carrying a four-foot-long gun case with a luggage-type handle.

I looked at Poetry in his chair, and the two of us stayed as low as we could under the fronds of the potted palm.

Barry set down the gun case, and the two of them went outside again into the cold night.

In a flash, Poetry and I were out of our tropical climate to see what was going on outside, if anything.

What we saw wasn't any of our business, but since it happened right in front of our astonished eyes, we almost had to see it.

"What do you know about that?" Poetry exclaimed in a disappointed voice. "Poor Barry!" —the same thing he had said when we were still up in our room.

For about a minute Barry and the girl stood at the door of a taxi, whose driver was waiting for her to get in. Then, all of a sudden, they gave each other a half-long kiss, as I'd accidentally seen Mom and Dad give each other quite a few times back home. Barry helped her into the cab then, closed the door, and stood watching while the driver steered out into the night traffic and was gone.

By the time Barry was back inside, Poetry and I were walking around the lobby, looking with let's-pretend indifference at the pictures

on the walls and at the many different kinds of candy bars at the hotel magazine stand.

Barry's voice behind us was certainly cheerful as he said, "You boys want a candy bar? Pick out your favorite. The treat's on me."

"No, thank you," Poetry said politely. "Candy at bedtime isn't good for a boy my size."

Just then, from the stairway leading to the basement game room came the rest of the gang, and there wasn't a one of *them* who thought a candy bar would be hard to digest before going to bed.

A little later we were all up the elevator and into our rooms, where Barry asked us, "Want to see what I went after?" He opened the gun case and took out one of the prettiest rifles I ever saw.

All our eyes lit up, Big Jim's and Circus's especially. "We may have to bring down a wolf, or maybe we can get a deer or two," Barry explained.

"Or a bear," Little Jim said with a grin, maybe remembering that he himself had once killed a fierce old mother bear back at Sugar Creek.

"This is what the phone call was about," Barry explained, looking at me out of the corner of his eye, which made me look around out of the corner of my eye at the other members of the gang. He was probably remembering I had said quite a while ago, after I'd heard the lady's musical voice on the phone—"His mother is maybe only twenty years old."

For a few seconds you could have heard a pine needle fall, everything was so extraquiet.

"You see," Barry added, "one of my classmates at college lives at Squaw Lake. She's a grandniece of Mr. and Mrs. Wimbish. When her own mother and father died, they sort of adopted her. This gun was her Christmas present to me. She had to order it from the East, so it was a little late getting here. Isn't it a beauty?"

I thought, as Barry talked, that it was indeed the prettiest repeater rifle I ever saw, with its crowned muzzle and raised-ramp front sight and gleaming walnut stock. Just looking at it made me tingle with anticipation at what an exciting and maybe even dangerous time we were going to have on our vacation.

My mind flew on ahead to the Snow Goose, so that I missed part of what Barry was telling us. I didn't come to until I heard him saying, ". . . so that's the way it is. Next June, just as soon as school is out up here, there'll be a wedding at the Snow Goose. You boys'll get to know her yourselves when she comes up the last of the week to bring the station wagon."

"The station wagon?" I exclaimed. "I thought *we* were going to ride up in it ourselves. I thought—"

"We *were* to have," Barry explained and started to untie his tie, getting ready to get ready for bed. "But I had to have the engine overhauled, and the mechanic ran into some serious trouble.

"Jeanne is letting us drive *her* car. Two of you," he added, as he slipped out of his shirt and I saw his powerful muscles like a nest of snakes under his tan skin, "two of you will have to ride the bus. There wouldn't be room in the car for all of us, along with all this luggage." He gestured around the room at our six different kinds of suitcases.

There was some friendly excitement for a while, as different ones of us begged Barry to let us ride the bus to Squaw Lake.

"It'll have to be two of the biggest ones of you," Barry decided.

"Biggest *tall* or biggest *around?*" Poetry asked hopefully.

That sort of settled it. Barry decided on Poetry for sure, and a little later, maybe because Poetry and I were such good friends, he picked me for the other one of the two.

Early in the morning we were off—Poetry and I on the bus, and the rest of the gang with Barry as soon as they could get the car serviced. As we pulled out of the gas station and headed out through the snowplowed streets toward the open country and the wild, frozen North, I was wondering how much sooner we would get to Squaw Lake than they would.

Poetry was wondering the same thing and said so. But he wasn't worried the least bit about what we would do to pass the time while we waited for them. Something else was on his mind. "Poor Barry! He's one of the finest woodsmen I know. He likes the out-of-doors,

and nature studies, and camping out. What'll he do, marrying a citified girl like that—you know—like that extrapretty, helpless-looking girl we saw back there in the hotel?"

I sighed and looked out the window at the cars and trucks we were threading our way through, then back at Poetry's face. "Yeah, poor Barry! Poor Sugar Creek Gang too! We'll lose our camp director!"

Neither of us said anything for a while. For a minute I felt pretty sad, but Poetry cheered me up by saying, "But both our fathers got married once, and it didn't hurt them—not much, anyway."

Hearing that, my thoughts took a flying leap out across the sky to Sugar Creek, and I thought about what a fine person Theodore Collins was. Also I seemed to see him and Mom sitting at the breakfast table that very minute without me. They were pretty nice people. Both of them, I thought.

Answering Poetry, I said, "Yeah, but my father married a good farm girl, who knew how to work and could bake pies and cakes and do all the other things a farmer's wife has to do."

"My mother too," Poetry said proudly. Then he shook his head once more and added, "But I'm afraid Barry's got a girl who'll have to be waited on, and who won't want to camp out, and will be too dainty to rough it like he likes to do."

But we couldn't worry our heads about it. We had a long ride and a wonderful winter

vacation ahead of us: ice fishing, running the trapline with Barry and Ed Wimbish, the old-timer trapper who, with his wife, Martha, once owned the Snow Goose but had sold it to the Everards.

Wildlife in the frozen North, that was what Barry was going up to study. How much wildlife would *we* see on our vacation? How *wild* would it be? And how *savage? Was* there an honest-to-goodness one-hundred-pound timber wolf hanging around the place, or was old Ed just an exaggerator as the Everards' letter had said?

We'd soon find out.

2

All the time our busload of people was roaring on into the North, I kept wondering how soon Barry's car had been serviced and whether, after they got started, they could drive fast enough to catch up with us—or if they'd have any trouble on the way.

Poetry asked me, as we ate a sandwich-and-milk lunch at a roadside cafe with all the other bus people, "What'll we do if the gang gets stuck in a drift and we have to spend the night—the first night—in the Snow Goose all by ourselves?"

Trying to be funny, I answered, "I don't know what *you'll* do, but I'll spend my night sleeping." My answer was smothered in a yawn. I certainly was drowsy, maybe from having had so little undisturbed sleep in the hotel last night.

I'd never been waked up so many times in one night in my whole life. First it had been Dragonfly, snoring like a saw cutting a rick of wood. Then it was Poetry, who was in the big double bed with me, rolling over in his sleep and threshing around with his arms and accidentally shoving me out onto the floor, where I landed with enough noise to wake up the rest of the gang and get several pillows thrown at me. Then it was the traffic outside in the street

and all the lights of the cars parading across the ceiling.

Worst of all, though, it seemed there was something heavy in my stomach, as if maybe it hadn't been a good thing to eat that candy bar just before going to bed.

On the bus again and gone again, Poetry and I took a lazy nap apiece. In fact, we took several of them, making the time go faster.

The farther we went, the higher the snowdrifts were on either side of the highway, and it seemed there were millions of pine and spruce and fir and leafless trees everywhere, forests and forests and forests of them. The snow in the bright sunlight made it look as if we were driving on a long white-gold ribbon that wound round and round through a forest that didn't have any end. It was easy to imagine that the trees had big, white, very heavy blankets thrown over them.

I was dreaming out at the flying countryside, still half-sleepy, when Poetry spoke up and said, "Look! See that!"

"See *what?*" I asked, not interested in seeing anything I had to open my eyes to look at.

"That lake!"

"What? *Where?*" That's all I had been seeing for hours, except for trees and more trees. Each lake looked like a Sugar Creek pasture covered with snow—not any water in sight and no ice either.

"Squaw Lake, I mean," Poetry yawned an answer to my yawned question.

I looked out the window and down the road through the bus's wide windshield, and there wasn't any sign of a lake.

"Here," Poetry explained, "on this map. It's only forty miles farther. We'll get there in less than an hour. The sun won't be down. We can go fishing and have fish ready for supper by the time the gang gets there."

The last forty miles were gone in only a little while, it seemed, and all of a sudden there was a screeching of bus brakes and a voice singing out, "Squaw Lake!"

We were off the bus, and it was gone in only a few minutes. Poetry and I were left standing in front of an oldish-looking store called "Wimbish Grocery." The weather was certainly mild, and it didn't feel nearly as cold as I thought it ought to be that far north.

"Hey!" Poetry exclaimed, with astonishment in his voice, looking all around at the same time. "Where's the town? Where's Squaw Lake?"

"Yeah! Where is it?" I asked, not seeing any.

"Oh, *there* it is!" he grunted. "Up there on the sign above the word 'Wimbish.'"

I looked and read, "Squaw Lake Post Office."

We looked at each other, wondering, *What on earth?*

"Where's the rest of the town?" I asked Poetry.

He looked all around, shading his eyes against the sun. "This is it. There isn't any rest of it."

And there wasn't, except for a few scattered houses, maybe six or seven, along what could have been Main Street if there had been one. Squaw Lake was only a grocery store that sold everything *inside* and gas *outside* at two red pumps.

As soon as we were inside, a heavyset lady with a smile as broad as her large, friendly face came waddling toward us, saying, "How do you do? What can I do for you?"

"We're part of the Sugar Creek Gang," Poetry's ducklike voice answered her ducklike waddle and her question.

"Well, I *am* glad to see you. The Everards told us all about you." She beamed at Poetry. "You just bring your luggage into the back. You may have to wait a spell. We've had a phone call from down the line, and the rest of your party is hung up with car trouble. You boys hungry?"

Before Poetry could say, "Certainly," as he always does in answer to a question like that, the phone rang somewhere in the store. The woman bustled her way down the narrow aisle between shelves of groceries and all kinds of stuff to the back of the store. Then I noticed the phone on the wall by a sign that read General Delivery.

I was worried about the rest of the gang. "What'll they do out on some country road in the cold with a broken-down car? What if they're miles and miles from a town?" I asked Poetry.

"Goose! *Snow* Goose!" he answered. "Where

do you think they telephoned from? A snowdrift?"

I sighed with relief, sorry I had been so dumb. "But what if they don't get here before night? Where'll *we* spend the night?"

"Snow Goose," he answered again.

While we'd been talking, the lady at the phone had been exclaiming and oh-ing and ah-ing, which was probably the same as saying, "What on earth?" She was also saying, "You don't say!" and "Oh, dear!" She would make a good Sugar Creek mother, I thought. I was wondering if the phone was a "party line" and how many Squaw Lake mothers were listening in.

Poetry brought my thoughts back to Squaw Lake by saying, "We'll have the time of our lives—just the two of us. We'll pretend we're hunters or explorers lost in the woods, and we'll accidentally happen onto an abandoned lodge in the forest and—"

He was interrupted by a little bell tinkling above the front door of the store. The door was whisked open, letting in a rush of cold air and a short, wiry, long-whiskered little old man. His movements were as nervous as a frisky dog's and as friendly as a puppy that comes wriggling all over the place up to you, wagging a friendly tail as much as to say, "Hi, everybody! I hope you like me as well as I like you."

The energetic little man didn't see us at first but took off his steamed-up glasses and called, "Marthy! Where are you? That sun's sure bright! Enough to blind a feller!"

From the telephone "Marthy" called back, saying, "Where've you been all afternoon?"

"Where've I *been?*" the little man said, cleaning his glasses with a tissue he had taken from a box on the counter. "I been out to the Snow Goose. I got the fire looked after and finished the road out to the fishing shanty. Seen anything of them Sugar Creek fellers?"

Marthy was still jabbering into the phone. I was hearing her say, "I never saw such weather for the middle of the winter—day after day after day of it. You never can tell. How's that? You don't say! Well, I swan."

Poetry beside me said, "*Not* swan! Snow Goose!"

The frisky little man had his glasses dry now and on again. He noticed Poetry and me for the first time and asked, "You the Sugar Creek boys that was a-coming up to stay at the Snow Goose?"

I felt a grin running up and down my spine, hearing the lively little man talk like that, because it was the way quite a few of the old-timers around Sugar Creek talked.

"I'm shore glad to see you young'uns," the bewhiskered, sawed-off, talkative man said, as soon as he found out we were two of the boys he'd been looking for.

Poetry grinned at me and I at him as he answered the little man in old-timer language. "The two of us young'uns came on the bus. The rest of the gang got hung up with car trouble down the road a piece and won't get here

for quite a spell. I reckon we'd better get on out to the Snow Goose and get supper ready for them."

I knew Poetry wasn't joking when he talked about getting supper. He was the best cook of the whole gang and could even bake pies.

I certainly didn't expect the little man to take us up on the idea, though. I'd supposed that we'd have to stay at the Wimbish Grocery and Post Office and Service Station till Barry and the rest arrived, however long it might be, depending on whatever was wrong with the car.

But the frisky little man said he had a little more to do to get the Snow Goose ready. He was the caretaker for the Everards while they were gone. And Marthy didn't see anything against letting us go along for the ride, and "maybe they could do a mite of chores theirselves."

In a short while the little man was driving us out onto the snowplowed, pine-bordered highway and down it toward the place where pretty soon we'd see the first Snow Goose sign showing us where to turn to go to the lodge.

Riding beside the bewhiskered old man in the rattling Jeep, Poetry not only watched the scenery with me but was busy with pencil and paper, writing or drawing something. "Just in case we have to make the trip all by ourselves someday," he said, "I'm drawing a map."

Every time we came to a big Snow Goose sign, Poetry would quickly draw one on his map. The sign painter had certainly done a good job, I thought. Each sign had a large fly-

ing white goose having black-tipped wings and a reddish-pink beak pointing the way.

Finally we swung into a narrow lane wide enough for only one car at a time and winding through high drifts. After about a hundred yards the Jeep came to an abrupt halt, and our driver came to the quickest life a man his size ever came to. "Look, boys! There in the evergreens! That's *him!* That's Old Timber! The *ghost* wolf!"

I looked straight ahead to where Mr. Wimbish was pointing. First, I saw a little wooden house standing on four large, perpendicular, bark-covered logs. Then, at the foot of a narrow ladder leading up to the door, was what looked like the biggest police dog I ever saw.

"The ornery critter'd like to get his teeth into that quarter of venison I cached up there yesterday," Ed Wimbish exclaimed.

I felt my heart beating excitedly as I remembered the "P.S." in the Everards' letter. I wished right that second that I had the hunting rifle Barry would have with him in the car when he came. The animal was long-nosed, pointy-eared, blackish-gray, and doglike with a gray face and whitish underparts and sides. He was standing erect, and the fur on his back bristled like a dog's at Sugar Creek when it's angry about something.

"Look at that, would you!" the little man exclaimed. "It's pretty nigh two feet long and bushy as a fox's tail!"

Then Ed Wimbish startled me by blowing a

long hard blast on his horn and yelling, "Go on! Get away from that there ladder! You can't climb up there nohow! Go on! Get goin'!" He honked the horn two more short sharp blasts.

For a second, even that far away, I thought I saw the fierce-looking wolf's eyes smolder with resentment. He looked like a stubborn boy who's been interrupted by one of his parents stopping him from doing something he wanted to do and ordering him to do something he *didn't* want to do.

Then that big savage-looking monster of a timber wolf bared his fangs with his lips curled and just glared at us, as much as to say, "I hate people that interfere with what is my own business!"

When our driver raced the engine and steered us on up the lane toward the cache house, Old Timber swung himself around, looking up just once toward the top of the ladder, then trotted away lazily, as if saying, "That deer meat is not fit for a fine wolf like me." He faded away into a row of new pine like a sullen gray shadow.

My heart was still racing with excitement and maybe with a little of what Mom or Dad would call fear, but which I hoped was just plain enjoyment mixed with a little worry.

"Old Timber's been a-coming back every winter for nigh onto seven years," Ed Wimbish said. "I've tried every way possible to trap him, but he's as wary as a fox. I coulda shot him a dozen times, but Marthy won't let me do it. She

wants his fur without a bullet hole in it, and she says she can't stand having him outsmart us. She says we'll get him by trap or we'll let him live. Marthy's stubborn thataway. That there's one request I want to make of you boys, and the rest of your club: don't ever shoot Old Timber! I've been having trouble with some of the farmers, and he's been shot at a half-dozen times by some of the new ranchers and hunters. But as soon as they learn how Marthy feels about it, they quit shootin'. I reckon one of these days or nights, though, Old Timber will go on a calf-killin' spree—or sheep—and he'll get a bullet."

I knew if Little Jim had been with us, or maybe Dragonfly, one of the first things he'd have said would be, "Will he eat people?" So I asked the question myself.

Old Ed answered, "Wolves around here find all they want to eat without botherin' human beings. There's plenty of deer and moose, and it's their nature to run away when approached by man. Notice how he turned tail when we got close to him?"

Right that minute our Jeep came to a jerky stop not far from a rustic lodge. A painting of a giant snow goose was above its entrance, along with large letters made from short logs of white birch, spelling out the words THE SNOW GOOSE.

Poetry and I swung into action, showing the little old-timer what good training we'd had at home. We helped him make up the beds

—I remembered exactly how I'd seen Mom do it and felt fine inside that I had learned to do it myself. Mom had seen to it that I did.

"This here's the thermostat," the trapper told us, touching it with his right forefinger. "You can have the temperature any degree you want by adjusting this. You won't need the fireplace, but it's fun to have it for roasting wieners and just to sit around with the lights off. The Everards kept it going every night. Marthy and me could look out across the lake from our house and see the flickerin' flames. Shore miss 'em a lot. But she always wanted to see Californy, so they up and left, come December."

Old Ed was gazing out across the lake toward the town of Squaw Lake, which, judging from the way it looked wasn't more than two miles away.

"It's further than four miles by the road we come on," he explained. "But in the summer, it's a shortcut to go by boat, shooting out past that neck of land that juts out and straight for our dock over there. Once in a while in the winter, when the road was blocked, me and Marthy used to snowshoe across."

Poetry's curiosity made him ask, "What's the row of evergreens doing out there in the middle of the lake? That's lake on both sides of them, isn't it?"

"That's the 'road' I was a-telling Marthy I was a-making all afternoon. I just got it finished afore I come into town to see if you'd come yet.

"That there row of evergreens runs all the

way out to the bobhouse—shanty, as I call it. See it away out there? That's where you catch the big'uns—great northern, muskies, and giant perch. The row of trees is just in case you get caught out there in a blizzard or a fog, or if you want to go out at night or come home after fishing late. You just follow the row of trees. Marthy and me pretty nigh froze once one winter when a blizzard come up while we was out there and couldn't find our way back."

My eyes followed the row of small evergreens out and out and out till they came to focus on the shanty he was talking about. I could hardly wait till we could get there and catch some of the "big'uns."

"But you can catch plenty of perch right out there, just a few feet from the second tree. Here's where the Everards keep the bait." Mr. Wimbish led us into a side room, lifted a trapdoor, and led us down an old stairway, lighting the way with his flashlight and saying as he went, "Don't know why they didn't run wires down here, but they didn't. You have to use a flashlight or a lantern or candle to see anything.

"Here's the bait box," he finished. "You'll find plenty of worms for all the perch you can catch."

"Perch?" I asked. And my tone of voice showed I thought perch were hardly worth sneezing at.

"Perch," Ed said, "is the mainstay of fishermen in the winter. Cold water doesn't bother

'em like it does bluegills and bass and crappies. Course, now and then you'll hook onto a big'un. A walleye or pickerel will bite anything, too, if you can coax 'em into it."

Back upstairs and outdoors again, old Ed, his whiskers bobbing with every word he said, pointed a long arm toward the lake. "That second tree there. That's where you'll do most of your fishing, I reckon. No use to go plumb out to the shanty in weather like this. Weather's not cold enough to need a fire or a wind shelter.

"The snow's pretty deep all around here, but it's crusted over, and you won't break through if you walk mostly in the sheltered places. That old sun's been a-bearin' down, though, last few days. Most a week now since there's been any real cold weather."

For some reason I thought then of the Everards' letter, saying Ed Wimbish himself was quite an exaggerator and to take what he said with several grains of salt. He might be a big exaggerator sometimes, I thought, but he certainly was a likeable old gentleman.

"Gotta run my trapline tomorry," he said. "Fact is, I gotta run down to the Rum River Crossin' afore dark and see if my marten traps have got anything in 'em."

Poetry and I were standing just outside the lodge door by the twin pines that sort of guarded the entrance, watching the little man buzz about, doing different things. "He's cute," Poetry's gooselike voice honked in my ear. "Look at the way he swings along."

I was watching old Ed's surefooted way of stepping. I also admired the rifle he was carrying. When he came to the cache, where he had gone to get the ladder, he stooped as if studying the tracks Old Timber had made. Then he squinted up at the heavy door and, turning around, motioned us to come out to where he was.

"I may decide to set a trap for him right here one of these days. If I do, I'll let you boys know exactly where. I wouldn't want to catch a boy. Man, look at the *size* of those tracks!"

Poetry was walking around, squinting up at the little house and studying the tracks made in the snow by the monster wolf. He had a very serious expression on his face. "I've read lots of stories about wolves, and they didn't always run away when they saw a man or boy. Sometimes they trailed 'em and—"

"Rubbish," Ed Wimbish scoffed. "Whoever wrote them stories never saw a wolf. Whoever wrote 'em maybe had read too many wolf stories by other writers who never saw a wolf, either, but had read stories by some other writer who never saw one. I've lived in these here parts for nigh onto twenty-seven years, and every wolf I ever saw was scared of me."

With that the old-timer sighed, swung his rifle into the crotch of his arm, and said, "I sure hope that Barry feller gets here tonight. If he wants to study honest-to-goodness wildlife, following the trapline with old Ed is a sure way to learn somethin'."

I knew who else would like to follow the line with him. In fact, I'd almost rather do that than catch a monster fish. Back at Sugar Creek, I'd followed Circus's trapline with him a few times, but about all he ever caught was muskrat in the fall and spring and a raccoon or a skunk now and then. Remembering that I'd always wanted to kill a bear, I asked, "Are there any bears around here?" I remembered what the Everards' letter had also said—that the bears would all be in hibernation this time of year.

"Bears?" Ed Wimbish exclaimed raspily. "That's the main reason we cache our meat up there—to keep the bears from getting it. Why, man, there's bears around here everywhere."